

Cantor Michael Weisser



Shabbat Shalom*: What is prayer for you?

Cantor Weisser: It's different things at different times. Sometimes, prayer seems like a conversation with God. Sometimes it seems like I'm filing my thoughts away for delivery to God at a later time. But it's always very powerful. I think it's a highly personal activity that really doesn't have very much to do with formal worship, although formal worship can lead to a state

of mind where prayer might be possible. So I think a conversation with God is the main way I think about prayer.

Shabbat Shalom: You mentioned that prayer is a highly personal form of interaction with God. I was wondering then, what does prayer mean for the Jewish community?

Weisser: I think most people in the Jewish community think of the worship service as a prayer service. I think most people in the Jewish community pray outside of

the Synagogue as well, at different times. But my take on it is that the liturgical form that we've developed for our Jewish services has been designed to bring us to a point in that formal worship where we can spend some time silently alone with God. I think that's the time when most Jewish people, in the context of the service anyway, are involved in prayer. And I think that prayer is so personal that it would be pretty impossible for me to define what goes on in somebody else's mind

Cantor Michael Weisser has served Congregation B'nai Jeshurun, a Reform Jewish congregation in Lincoln, Nebraska since 1988. He previously served congregations in Tennessee, California, Ohio, Florida, and North Carolina. He is a graduate of the Hebrew Union College, the Seminary of Reform Judaism, and currently teaches courses in Judaism at Nebraska Wesleyan University.

In 1991 Cantor Weisser and his wife Julie gained international recognition for their work with the Nebraska Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan—a man who threatened them but later, once exposed to their unconditional love, renounced his racist ways and adopted the Jewish faith.

Cantor Weisser has received many awards including Ecumenical Person of the Year from the Nebraska Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church.

when they're engaged in prayer. Although I would guess that most people think of it as communication with God in some form.

Shabbat Shalom: As a Cantor in a Reform Jewish community, what do you feel is the difference between prayer in the Reform community and prayer in a Conservative or Orthodox community?

Weisser: I don't really think there would be a difference. I think that the differences that exist between Reform and Conservative and Orthodox Judaism ex-

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ist more in the area of ritual observance rather than in theology or such ideas as prayer. I don't really think there is much of a difference.

Shabbat Shalom: You mentioned earlier about the liturgical forms of prayer in the synagogue services. I was wondering what sort of value you see in the recited prayer as opposed to spontaneous and personal prayer.

Weisser: I think they both have a value—a great value. The way our worship services are set up is a very ancient format that we've created over the centuries. The service begins with some readings and poems and Psalms—perhaps a song. That part is designed to take us off the street and into a more sacred kind of time, if you will. Once that occurs, the service begins with a sort of theology lesson, centered around the phrase in Deuteronomy "Hear, O Israel. The Lord is our God. The Lord is one." Rounding that are three paragraphs that talk about

the God of Nature; the God of Love, who expresses Love through the giving of commandments; and the God of redemption. And then at the end of that section, we move into a sort of formal, almost petitionary section (although on the Sabbath, we don't really do any personal petitions during our worship, because that would be asking God to work on the Sabbath). And so we have a prayer or reading about our connection to our ancestors followed by something about what we believe in terms of God's abilities and powers, an acknowledgment that God is holy; an acknowledgment that the Sabbath is holy; a request that our prayers be accepted; a prayer of thanksgiving that our prayers have been accepted; and then finally a benediction which asks for universal peace among all people. And then we come to a time of silent prayer. So the liturgy in that format keeps building, building, building—and it's a very powerful thing. They may be liturgical readings and the set prayers, but we have the opportunity at the conclusion of that cycle of readings, even though we're in a crowd of people, to be alone with God, and be involved in personal, silent prayer, which is also very powerful. And I think the two, in that setting, complement one another.

Shabbat Shalom: When do you feel most driven to prayer, personally?

Weisser: I make a practice of habitual daily prayer. I spend some time morning, afternoon, and evening in prayer every day. I don't really feel *driven* to do that, but I feel that my life would be a little emptier if I didn't do it. But there are times when I'm feeling in need of communion with God. Sometimes in times of trouble and sometimes in times of great joy I feel driven to say words of praise.

I hardly ever petition God anymore, but I do praise God and I do feel driven to do so at certain times. I felt that way this morning. I was asked to officiate ceremonially at the circumcision of a brand new baby. And I looked at that new life and I said "God is present in this room." And I just felt compelled to say a prayer of thanksgiving. So, it's times like that when I'm driven to pray.

Shabbat Shalom: What is your purpose for praying?

Weisser: My purpose for praying is to help me get in tune with what God would have me do. I begin my morning, afternoon, and evening prayers with those words: "God, what would you have me do?" And I think about that and I ask God for wisdom and understanding and knowledge in helping me to understand the things I do in my life and to perhaps do them better for more benefit for more people. My reason for prayer is for me to be in tune with what God wants.

Shabbat Shalom: Where is God when you pray?

Weisser: That's a great question. Where is God? Well, I believe that we experience God within ourselves during prayer. I don't know if you're familiar with the term *Shekinah*. I think the Holy *Shekinah* is analogous to what Christians call the Holy Spirit. The Holy *Shekinah* is the indwelling presence of God in the Jewish way of thinking. It's the presence of God that dwells within us. And I think that in order to even think

about approaching God, we have to get deep within ourselves in order to experience God's presence. Because God's presence is so beyond our understanding. The part of it that we can apprehend and understand is, in my view,

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within. And so I think God is inside when I'm praying.

Shabbat Shalom: What is your favorite prayer in the Bible? And what is your favorite prayer in Jewish tradition?

Weisser: I think I'm very, very fond of Psalm 121. "I lift my eyes to the mountains. From whence shall come my help?" A beautiful Psalm. And I think it's a

prayer that I love a lot. I'm also very in tune with another Psalm—Psalm 23. I love that Psalm very much. There is a prayer in the Jewish liturgy: "*Shalom rav al Israel amka . . .*" Place great peace on your people Israel forever. And it goes on to seek peace. And I think it means the kind of peace that's wholeness and completeness for all people everywhere. That moves me a lot. There's an English rendering of that in the old reform prayer book that I like very much: "Grant us peace, thy most precious gift, O thou eternal source of Peace." Those kinds of prayers, I think, are my favorites. But I don't have a specific favorite.

Shabbat Shalom: The three prayers you mentioned seem to be prayers of help, comfort, and peace. Would you expand on why you chose those?

Weisser: They speak to me about a lot of different needs. In English, Peace means simply the absence of war, if we are thinking about "world peace." In Hebrew, however, Peace—the word *Shalom*—means more than that. It's a state of harmony—a lack of tension between individuals or groups or nations. And so when I say prayers that have to do with peace, I'm not really thinking about simply the absence of war, but peace that allows me, a Jew, to love you, a Seventh-day Adventist, and to look at our differences and to love those

differences because they help us to define who we are. And so I think Peace covers a multitude of areas in our lives, not merely a lack of conflict. And I think that's why

I'm attracted to those. And I'm also attracted to such things as Psalm 121 because most of the time we just kind of stumble through life. And it's really good to know that we have a source of

help right there, ready at all times, anytime we ask. I think that's why those are attractive to me.

Shabbat Shalom: How do world events impact your prayer life?

Weisser: World events impact my prayer life because I ask God to help us to understand how to solve these problems. A great part of Jewish religion has to do with a concept known as *tikkun olam*, which means the correction of the world. So it's very important in Judaism that we not only look out for ourselves, but that we look out for others. And when there are crises in the world, we need to find ways to try to help ease those situations or reverse them or make them better. As long as there's a single person living under a bridge in a cardboard box, we haven't done our job. We read about things like that, we read about the terrible ethnic cleansing that went on and still goes on in central Europe. We read about the tragedy of mass hunger in certain parts of Africa, and the only thing that we can do as individuals is to try to understand those problems and then ask God to help us find ways to solve

them. So I think it impacts our prayer life in that way.

Shabbat Shalom: Is it still possible to pray in a modern, secularized world?

Weisser: You bet. I think it's not only possible, but it's imperative. All we have to do is look at the history of people who have not relied on help from God, and have made all their decisions on their own without seeking wisdom and knowledge from God. And look at how history has gone when people do that. If we were to stop before we make major decisions and say, "God, how would you have me handle this? God, give me some wisdom. God, help me to understand the situation better," I think we would end up making better decisions. Therefore our world would be more har-


monious. So I think it's imperative that we pray in a modern, secular world, because we need all the help we can get. And we've done a really lousy job of it when we've tried to act on our own.

Shabbat Shalom: Do you have a personal prayer experience, or an event in your life where prayer has made a big difference?

Weisser: Yes. I'll tell you one. Back when I lived in North Carolina I used to go out to the woods with my dog Ishtov every night. One night I took a walk and went into the woods on a very beautiful night. The moon was just less than a half-moon. It was very quiet out, but I could hear rustlings in the woods, like a small animal running around or something. I felt very strongly that I was in God's creation, and that creation and I were somehow in harmony at that moment. So I

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stopped in the darkness and I looked up in the sky. I was having some doubts about whether or not I wanted to continue in the work that I was doing, being a cantor—that maybe I should do something different. So I looked up and I just said right out loud, “So God, are you real?” I don’t know if you’ve ever done anything like that. But I said “Are you real?” And almost as an answer to that question, the clouds looked as if they came from both directions and covered the moon. And then they went back to where they were and let me see the moon again. I could rationalize that away and say the clouds were at different altitudes and one cloud went one way and the other cloud went the other way and it just looked like that. But the timing of it was so exquisite that I felt that God had given me a sign of his presence and his reality at a moment when I was having some doubts. And so I looked back up there and said, “So I know you’re real. What do you want me to do?” And I was specifically referring to whether I should stay in this work or not. And I heard—or felt—these words deep inside myself. They weren’t really like words, but more like feelings that translated out into words. And all it said was, “Teach them to pray.” And it was so powerful that I stood in that spot for a good long time and I remember thinking of the words of the Psalmist, “The Lord is near to all who call upon him, to all who call upon him

in truth.” So I guess I must have called upon him in truth. At least that’s the only way I can understand it when I called out, “Are you real?” and I really wanted to know. And so I think God let me know. I’ll never forget that moment. That was a very powerful moment in my life.

Shabbat Shalom: What have you done, specifically, in your ministry to fulfill that calling to teach others to pray?

Weisser: Shortly after that experience, I moved to Lincoln, Nebraska and became a cantor here at the South Street Temple. I found a temple that was in disarray and was probably about ready to close up. It had had years of troubles. So the first thing I did was to talk about prayer, and talk about the necessity for prayer. And I extended the time of silent prayer from the typical fifteen or twenty seconds to as much

as two or three minutes, which is really a long time in the middle of the service. And I’ve been talking about and evolving my ideas about what’s really important in Jewish religion; since then, it all centers around God and prayer. So I think I’ve been following the command in my work here. Part of that has led me to some things that I think

are quite wonderful and quite unique in synagogue life. We have a synagogue where people of every faith feel welcome. There’s not a Sabbath that goes by when we don’t have Adventists or other Christians who come and visit here and worship with us on the Sabbath. No-

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body tries to convert them; they feel comfortable. They worship in the words of our liturgy, but we all understand that they may be invoking the image of Jesus in their hearts. It doesn’t bother us, and we know it helps them. We have a very open synagogue where everybody feels like they can pray and be together with all types of people and love one another. And I really think that it’s a result of this emphasis on prayer and allowing God into our lives that allows us to do that and not worry so much about labels.

Shabbat Shalom: I’ve visited the South Street Temple a number of times, and one of the things that kept me coming back was the fact that the silent prayer time was so long. And I really felt like that was a good time to dedicate yourself to God, something that you may not have made two or three minutes for during the rest of the day. I thought it was very unique.

Weisser: I think the congregation here has really gotten used to it, too. Even the smallest children can handle that. You would think that they’d be fidgeting or moving, but they aren’t. During that silent time they’re praying. And the presence and the power of that group of people all praying together, but alone in the same room—is so powerful. It’s like the air is electrified. And I very strongly feel a divine presence in that room when that’s happening.

Shabbat Shalom: Thank you very much for giving us the opportunity to interview you on this topic.

Weisser: It was my pleasure.

*Interview conducted by Jay Perry.