

SUPPLEMENT

A Tribute To Rabbi Isaiah Wohlgemuth, זצ"ל, creator of the course in Beurei Hatefila at Maimonides School, Brookline, MA, who passed away this week.

In His Own Words

Pages 8-10 of the Introduction to his book, A Guide to Jewish Prayer

Some thirty years ago the principal of Maimonides School in Boston, Rabbi Moses J. Cohen, זצ"ל, asked me to develop and teach a course on prayer. We called it Be'urei Hatefilah, or "Explanations of the Prayers." It was to be taught from eighth to twelfth grades. For the senior class I outlined a special program that was a comprehensive review of the entire course. The students were also asked to present a term paper on a subject of their choice.

It is amazing how often former students, sometimes those who graduated more than a generation ago, come to me to discuss a detail they remember from the course. Some made it a ritual to go over their notes with their families. They often assure me that of all their religious studies, Be'urei Hatefilah was the one that helped them the most in life. It made the hours spent in shul more meaningful, and helped them establish a more intimate relationship with the Almighty.

Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik (the Rav), זצ"ל, enthusiastically endorsed the course and stated that no student could graduate from Maimonides School without passing it. The Rav encouraged me to discuss with him any problems that might arise in teaching this course. I took ample advantage of his invitation to consult him. I usually asked him questions in the morning when I had the privilege to drive him to and from shul. The Rav's interpretations thus became a major part of my understanding of prayer.

Why was the Rav so interested in Be'urei Hatefilah? Most likely it was because his soul thirsted for closeness to G-d, ה', (Hashem). On one occasion, when he resumed teaching his classes at Maimonides after serious abdominal surgery, he expressed his frustration with many of our brothers and sisters who go into surgery without a last minute appeal to G-d to crown the effort of the surgeon with success.

"It is the gentiles," the doctors told him, "who muster all their feelings to get G-d's assistance in their difficult ordeal."

“What a disgrace!” the Rav explained. “We Jews, who taught the world to pray, have forgotten this art. For this reason,” he explained, “I shall dedicate my Saturday evening classes to relearning the true meaning of prayer.” It was indeed a year of great discoveries and spiritual heights.

The Rav often visited the classes in religious subjects. The Rav did not attend these classes to criticize the instructors but rather to determine the academic standing of that particular class. One day I prepared a test for my senior students, and the Rav entered the class to listen to the lesson. I quickly explained the situation to him. “Just give me a copy of the test,” the Rav said, and left the room. A few weeks later he called me and said, “By the way, I gave your test to my senior Rabbinical students. None of them could answer all the questions. It is a good course.”

Naturally, I read and studied all books and sources on prayer that were available to me. The German Jewish movement, the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, consistently dealt with this crucial subject. The study of prayer started in Germany in the nineteenth century as a result of the development of the Reform and Conservative movements, which started during this period. As these movements appeared on the stage of Jewish history, they promoted the study of prayer. On the one hand, Reform and Conservative Jews wanted to show that our prayers were not always a part of our heritage; what was not original could be eliminated. They disliked long prayers, as well as prayers in Hebrew; they preferred sermons. Thus they attempted to demonstrate that their reforms were legitimate.

On the other hand, the Orthodox college tried to show that every element of the traditional prayer service was essential, that we have no right to institute changes or omissions. Great scholars appeared in Germany to grapple with this subject. We no longer know the first names of these men, but their family names were Berliner, Landshut and Sachs; they were all strictly Orthodox. One of the last scholars in Germany was the late Dr. Ismar Elbogen. Although he was a Reform scholar, he was always fair and thorough when he transmitted the Orthodox point of view. His contributions were based on the works of many scholars and are now available in an excellent Hebrew translation, **התפילה בישראל** (Hatefilah B’Yisrael)³. Rav Soloveitchik said to me, “Read his books. Study his books. He is very traditional in his approach. He is very clever and he made very valuable contributions to the study of prayer.” Yitzhak Baer was another early German-Jewish Orthodox scholar. His classic commentary on the prayers, **עבודת ישראל** (Avodas Yisroel), is an important work.

This book, *A Guide to Jewish Prayer*, is an outgrowth of my Be’urei Hatefilah course and is meant to be a companion volume to the Siddur, or prayer book. The systematic reading of this volume, and an occasional review of it, should keep the meaning of the prayers fresh in the mind of the reader.

It is now available in English through the Jewish Publication Society.

3.