

SYNAGOGUE SKILLS: HANDS ON AND BEYOND

THE SYNAGOGUE AND PRAYER SERVICE

Torah lays out religion based on one Temple located in Jerusalem and a system of daily, weekly, monthly communal sacrifices as well as personal offerings.

Even in the earliest times, there was tension between a religion that could only be practiced in one place and Jews living far away. Some tried to build lesser temples but by the time of King Josiah of Judah in the seventh century BCE, the exclusivity of the Temple is firmly established.

A new institution began to arise. There were places where it was clearly understood that no sacrifices could or would be offered. No one knows for certain when the synagogue and its alternate form of practice began. One plausible suggestion ties it to the Babylonian exile when the Temple had been destroyed. We have archeological and literary evidence for synagogues as early as the third century BCE in the diaspora and the first century BCE in Israel.

The earliest descriptions of synagogues suggest that they were places of study and where knowledge of the Torah was disseminated. An inscription on the floor of a first-century synagogue in Jerusalem describes itself as a place “for reading the law and studying the commandments, and as a hostel with chambers and water installations to provide for the needs of travelers from abroad.”

According to Reuven Hammer, “Even at the beginning, the synagogue was a revolutionary institution.” It:

- ❖ Provided for communal worship divorced from sacrifice
- ❖ Could be anywhere; did not have to be in a special or sacred spot.
- ❖ Did not have to be run by special sanctified clergy.
- ❖ Did not have to be built in any particular way or in any particular architectural shape.
- ❖ Birth, ancestry and socioeconomic status played no role in determining who could serve in the synagogue or who could lead it.
- ❖ Did not even need to be in a building; activities could be conducted in the open with no building.
- ❖ Activities could be conducted in any building including homes.
- ❖ Required no altar or particular cultic objects with the exception of the sacred scroll of the Torah.

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STRUCTURE OF THE SERVICE

Structure is everything. Novels don't look like poetry, but both are literary genres; someone familiar with one might at least make some sense of the other. Waltzes differ from marches, but both are examples of music. A person who knows only literature, however, would have no idea what to make of musical scores; and vice versa. So what is liturgy? Its written contents look like literature, but people "act it out," so it is really a subdivision of drama. That makes the prayer book into a kind of dramatic script. Only liturgical experts buy a prayer book to "read it," and when they do, they are like drama critics, imagining how the play will be "staged," at which time it becomes the act of prayer. To differentiate the act of prayer from the contents of the act (also called "the prayers"), we call the former just "prayer" – in the singular, without the article "a" or "the." (Another word for it is worship.)

But prayer is a particular kind of drama. . . . In prayer, we play ourselves; we are expected to internalize the lines of the script as really our own and play them out in life itself—taking the prophets seriously, for instance, and therefore committing to the act of worship of God and to God's will.

Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, "Introduction to the Liturgy," My People's Prayerbook, volume 10: Shabbat Morning Shacharit and Musaf, p. 3.

Rating Rituals by Type and Style

1. Rituals may be empty (ritualizations) or full (actual rituals).
2. Culminating ritual moments vary in emotional tone.
3. The culminating emotive state may be experienced privately or demonstrated publicly.
4. Ritual scripts may be inherited or newly created; they may be open or closed.
5. Style matters. Worship styles vary; some of them get in our way.
 - a. Three styles that get in the way: Minimalist, Rigid and Obligatory.
 - i. Minimalist style uses ritual sparingly and with suspicion.
 - ii. Rigid style arises from the fear that tradition, habit and precedent prevent even minimal change.
 - iii. Obligatory style sees ritual only as what we have to do out of mere obligation.

Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, *The Art of Public Prayer: Not for Clergy Only*