

# PEDAGOGY OF T'FILLAH

## CONCEPT PAPER



### BACKGROUND AND GOALS

It is the belief of M<sup>2</sup> that educators who think deeply about the art of Jewish education benefit not only themselves and their own craft, but also inspire and elevate the entire field of Jewish education.

M<sup>2</sup>'s Jewish Pedagogy Fellowships have been developed to give senior Jewish educators a forum in which to engage in a rigorous, research-based exploration resulting in the development of new Jewish pedagogies that are inspired by, grounded in, or an interpretation of a Jewish text, ritual, custom, or tradition and that address core issues of *T'fillah* education.

The Pedagogies of T'fillah Research Fellowship will serve the field of Jewish education by aspiring to the following goals:

1. To provide an enriching and stimulating cohort experience for senior educators that both supports and challenges their deeper thinking through research, peer review, and a writing process.
2. To elevate the level of conversation around *t'fillah* to go beyond the *content* and to address *how the methods and practices of teaching* can be grounded in Jewish tradition.
3. To invite educators into the *beit midrash* to be inspired and stimulated by the results of the Fellowship.
4. To begin to create a library of Jewish pedagogies that will propel the practice of *t'fillah* forward and allow other educators to use and adapt these resources to their particular educational settings.



M<sup>2</sup> is proud to partner with The Hadar Institute.

Jewish pedagogies emerge from seldom-articulated worldviews about compelling needs in the world, deeply held values that inform a vision of how those needs might be addressed, and the role of education as a strategy for moving toward that vision.

Let's define our terms:

- \* **A pedagogy** is a set of educational practices that is a manifestation of a certain educational worldview.
- \* An **educational worldview** is a set of beliefs about fundamental aspects of reality that ground and influence all one's perceiving, thinking, knowing, and doing about how humans learn, grow, and flourish.

In order to develop a Jewish pedagogy, we must first explore our educational worldview, and for the sake of this fellowship, our worldview specifically in regard to Jewish peoplehood. We can do this by considering a series of questions:

- What pains us when we contemplate the state of *t'fillah*?
- What are the Jewish values and beliefs that inform how we prioritize those particular needs among all the other issues in the Jewish world?
- What might be possible to do to address those needs? And how can education be used as a tool to address them?

From here we can ask, what is a Jewish pedagogy? We are suggesting that:

- \* **A Jewish Pedagogy** is a set of educational practices reflective of an educational worldview that is inspired by, grounded in, or an interpretation of a Jewish text, ritual, custom, or tradition.

We are all familiar with the educational phenomenon that takes a value or practice from another culture, whether it be secular humanism or spiritual traditions of the East, and slaps on a Hebrew word or Jewish phrase to present it as Jewish. Our aim here is different. We are seeking pedagogies that either emerge entirely from Jewish tradition or are significantly shaped and informed by it. For example, while chant is a tool used in many religious traditions, what would a Jewish practice around *niggun* (wordless melody) look like as a way to create a more joyful prayer experience? How can we use *niggun* within communal prayers to uplift the liturgy and help bring the community together?

*How do we know that ten people who pray, the Divine Presence is with them? As it is stated: "God stands in the congregation of God," (Talmud Bavli Berakhot 6a)*

וּמִיָּן לַעֲשֶׂרָה שְׂמֵת פְּלִין שְׁשִׁינָה  
עִמָּהֶם – שְׁנֵאמַר: "אֱלֹהִים נֹצֵב  
בְּעֵדַת אֵל"

Prayer is a profound and central aspect of Jewish life that has withstood the test of time, yet it remains inaccessible for many of our learners. In the wake of the events of October 7th, there is a surge in people searching for ways to find meaning and comfort, both alone and within community. Prayer has the potential to provide us with strength and resilience, helping to navigate feelings of isolation and loneliness.

For the sake of this project, we have identified three distinct challenges regarding Jewish prayer: a sense of disconnection to our Jewish liturgy, the search for personal meaning-making, and the tension between *keva* (fixed form and language of prayer) and *kavana* (personal meaning and intention). To address these challenges, we are inviting master educators to develop pedagogies aimed at tackling these issues. We hope that exploring these challenges will help increase meaningfulness, participation, and personal agency in our prayer communities.

## A. SPIRITUAL DISCONNECTION

Despite its historical significance and evolution, many individuals feel estranged from Jewish prayer. The Jewish texts or rituals may seem distant or irrelevant to contemporary lives. Many feel that these texts do not speak to them. By deepening our understanding of the texts and the rich tradition behind them, we can help individuals gain confidence and find personal meaning and relevance in prayer, transforming it into a source of spiritual connection and resilience. How do we forge pathways that bridge ancient wisdom with contemporary hearts, unveiling prayer's enduring power to offer solace and strength in both joy and sorrow?

## B. THE SPACE BETWEEN KEVA AND KAVANA

Jewish prayer has evolved over time, from Temple ritual rites to modern worship, yet its essence—imbued with presence, gratitude, connection to God, and community—remains unchanged. How do we give our learners ownership over the history, choreography and fixed nature of prayer? How do we integrate our individual needs and desires with the rituals and structures that have been passed down to us? How do we welcome spontaneous prayer alongside planned and deliberate prayer?



## C. INDIVIDUAL VS COMMUNAL NEEDS

Judaism offers a distinctive perspective on prayer, emphasizing the importance of relying on the community. When we come together in prayer, we create a space for God to dwell and for sanctity to take place. This perspective, expressed in the teaching of Talmud Berakhot, invites us to consider that when a community prays together, God joins them. Praying alone holds significant value, but praying as part of a community, or *minyan*, is seen as even more powerful. But how does this happen? Is it automatic, or do people need to come together with specific intentions? And what role do the words we say together play in this sacred process?

The Pedagogy of T'fillah Research Fellowship is looking to investigate how one can foster deep connections between individuals and the communal aspect of *t'fillah*, balancing the fixed elements of prayer (*keva*) with personal intention and mindfulness (*kavanah*) and finding meaning and connection in the liturgy itself. Prayer requires this harmony, as the structured words of the liturgy serve as vessels to be filled with personal meaning and spiritual fervor. Emphasizing both personal and communal dynamics, Jewish prayer supports individuals and builds a sense of unity within the community.

We invite proposals for pedagogies that can help communities address one or more of the challenges listed above. Here are some directions that an educator could consider to foster a meaningful communal prayer experience and to help cultivate confidence and agency with traditional liturgy:

- **In-Depth Exploration of a Specific T'fillah:** Exploring the history, meaning, and nuances of a particular prayer can help individuals connect more deeply with its words and gain confidence in prayer.
- **Embodying a Stance of T'fillah:** Encouraging the community to adopt specific attitudes, such as gratitude or loving-kindness, during prayer can enhance the spiritual experience.
- **Scaffolding Active Participation:** Providing the *kahal* (congregation) with tools to engage actively in the prayer process can make communal prayer more dynamic and inclusive.
- **Navigating Personal and Communal Dynamics:** Teaching individuals how to balance their personal spiritual needs with the communal nature of prayer, by, for example, identifying moments for praying individually while together, can give individuals agency within the communal context and within the traditional forms of *t'fillah*.

By integrating these approaches and others, communities can sculpt a prayer experience that honors both ancient traditions and contemporary spiritual needs, ensuring that prayer remains a powerful and relevant practice.



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## THE ROLE OF GENERAL PHILOSOPHY AND CULTURE

The development of a Jewish pedagogy is inspired by, grounded on, or an interpretation of a Jewish text, ritual, custom, or tradition. To further articulate the educational implications of the Jewish pedagogy, general philosophy and cultural studies are helpful in exploring and developing some of the themes that emerge. This can help anchor the pedagogy in other disciplines, adding layers of expertise, theoretical and practical implications, and interfaces with the larger world.

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## WHAT ARE WE EXCLUDING?

For the purpose of this initiative and in keeping with the definition of Jewish pedagogy articulated above, the following are examples that would not qualify, for our purpose, as a Jewish pedagogy.

- \* Taking an idea or concept from secular educational thought and giving it a Jewish label. For example, developing a pedagogy of differentiated instruction based on the verse "*Chanoch l'naar al pi darko*" (educate a child according to their ways) or giving a Jewish name to Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction;
- \* In keeping with our goals of opening up the *beit midrash* to Jewish educators and beginning to develop a library of pedagogy resources, a pedagogy cannot be restricted to one particular setting or context. It is a set of adaptable practices, not a lesson plan or a curriculum.

