

PREPARING AN *IYYUN TEFILLAH*

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- What is the purpose of an *Iyyun Tefillah*:

- 1) To give every congregant something that will help make the recitation of prayers a more meaningful experience; and,
- 2) To help unify under one thematic umbrella our shared worship.

- What is an *Iyyun Tefillah*?

An *Iyyun Tefillah* (more than one are *Iyyunay Tefillah*) is an introduction to a prayer in the service, or a brief perspective on a current event or the Torah portion. It literally means something akin to, "directing prayer." Here at Woodlands, we especially value a connection (a thematic or aesthetic tie) between all the thoughts expressed from the beginning to the end of the service. Each *iiyun* builds on the one preceding it, and sets the stage for those to follow. For us, this gives meaning to our *tefillah* that goes beyond the simple recitation of prayers. For preparing *Iyyunay Tefillah*, you can use readings from the *siddur* (weekly prayerbook), a theme from this week's *parashah* (Torah reading), a theme from current events, a speaker, or a topic important to you. They are completely optional, but using them can help bring the service together in a meaningful way. Don't be afraid to use humor; it's an important part of life, and can be a valuable tool in elevating the spirit in prayer.

- How long is an *Iyyun Tefillah*?

250 words or less.

- How do I prepare an *Iyyun Tefillah*?

- 1) In 250 words or less, combine the theme of the evening's service with the theme of the prayer you're introducing, and share an idea about what that might mean for each of us.
- 2) Theme for the evening: This may be the subject of the D'var Torah or sermon. It might be the topic being presented by a special guest. It may be an event taking place during the service (e.g., Board of Trustees installation, Welcoming New Members, etc). Or it may simply be the theme selected by the service leader(s).
- 3) Theme(s) of the Prayer. Read the text of the prayer you are to introduce, examining the simple meaning of the text as well as the deeper, metaphorical messages. These bullet-points might help:

- Each prayer has many facets that can be explored. Here are some thoughts to get you going.
- PRAYER means SELF-ASSESSMENT! It has two purposes: 1) To get us in touch with ourselves; 2) To teach us what's important in the world.
- PEOPLE DON'T PRAY FOR THINGS THAT AREN'T IMPORTANT TO THEM! In Judaism, we are commanded to pray. We are commanded to stop and look into ourselves, to consider what is really important in life.
- THE BIG CHALLENGE!! Prayer is full of code-words (like the word "prayer"). Code-words are words which we might think mean one specific thing. The truth, however, is they mean what we want them to mean.

- Our CHALLENGE: Don't accept someone else's understanding of a code-word ... if their understanding makes the word useless to us. WE MUST FIND OUR OWN MEANING IN CODE-WORDS! Here are some of them: Prayer, God, Praising God, and Miracles.
- For additional information, ask your synagogue's Jewish professionals for book suggestions.

• What materials can service as the basis for an *Iyyun Tefillah*?

Using any and all available resources (see below), select one and combine it with the service's theme and one facet of the assigned prayer ... to make one clear, concise, and meaningful statement. Resources available to you (and certainly not limited to this list):

- Personal experience
- Poem
- Jewish story
- Hasidic story or teaching (e.g., from Buber's *Tales of the Hasidim*)
- Quotation (brief)
- News or magazine item
- Excerpt from a book or other article
- Biblical/Talmudic reference
- Midrash
- Insights of your own creation are great too
- Humorous story
- Poignant story
- Historical reference

How do I present my *Iyyun*?

- *Iyyunim* may be written out in their entirety or as bullet-points.
- Come up to the *bimah* just prior to the prayer you're introducing.
- Speak clearly (not too fast, not too slow) and with modulated tones (be interested in your words so that you're interesting to listen to).

EXAMPLES OF IYYUNEI TEFILLAH

Introduction to *Barekhu* ... using a humorous published story

Before the train pulls out of Penn Station, a passenger asks the conductor to make sure he gets off the train in Huntington. He then closes his eyes for the hour's ride. At Stonybrook, half an hour past Huntington, the man, still on the train, realizes what has happened and gives the conductor a real tongue-lashing before disembarking. Another conductor sees the entire exchange and says to the first, "Wow, have you ever seen anyone so angry?" Says the first conductor, "Yep. The guy I just threw off the train in Huntington."

To change the world, one could say, "The important thing is to try." But we don't really want things to be worse off for our efforts. Nevertheless, the *Barekhu* is calling our stop ... change is needed ... so let's not just act, but let's use our heads and try to get it right.

Introduction to *Mee Khamokha* ... using a contemporary Jewish text

In *Shirat HaYam*, the “Song of the Sea” in Exodus 15, we encounter the original appearance of *Mee Khamokha*. So reaching *Mee Khamokha* during service is somewhat significant, and worthy of a moment of reflection. Let me then take advantage of this moment to say: (whispered) “It may never have happened!” I know an HUC rabbinical student who lost a bi-weekly pulpit for making that comment. But scholars, fearless in their pursuit of historical accuracy, are more and more convinced this stuff has been made up. And that can be a very disappointing thing to hear.

But listen to the words of Rabbi David Wolpe: “The Torah is not a book we turn to for historical accuracy, but rather for truth. The story of the Exodus lives in us.”

Whether or not there was an Exodus ... whether or not there was an Egyptian enslavement ... whether or not any of our sacred stories took place as described in Torah ... does not change one iota the fact that these stories are sacred. They are still thousands of years old. They are still the texts our ancestors have always loved, and always studied. And they still retain the power to affect us, to challenge us, and to shape kind of people we choose to be. *Mee Khamokha* is the song that was sung after a sea broke open wide and an entire people moved from danger into safety. Is not that story being told all the time? Is not that song being sung in every age?

It is the “Song of the Sea.” It is ours. We will love it, we will respect it, and we will learn from it ... forever.

Introduction to *V'shamru* ... using a personal anecdote

My son Jonah didn't much like services. It was difficult for him to sit still too long for anything. As an 11th grader, he was here for the 12th grade Graduation service ... which was especially tough because, most of the time, he sat while the 12th graders did their thing. That's why, sitting up here on the bimah, I was amazed to see him thoroughly immersed in ... well, in something. It couldn't have been text-messaging or playing a game ... there wasn't enough movement. It couldn't have been the service itself, could it? Nope. At the end of the evening, I noticed that he'd left his service on his chair. When I picked it up, I saw something I'd never seen before. Hands. He'd been drawing hands! Throughout the evening, he'd been selecting different ways to hold his booklet in his hand ... and then drew the picture of him holding it.

Now, as a rabbi (and as his father), I could have been upset that (yet again) he paid little attention to our service. Or, as a father (and as a rabbi), I could have noticed (for the first time) that he's really good at that! I decided on the latter.

Shabbat is gorgeous. It's a gorgeous time ... and a gorgeous spiritual place. It reminds me just how blessed I am ... to be part of such a beautiful world. Like a couple of drawings reminded me just how blessed I am ... to have such a beautiful son.

“It is a sign forever between Me and the people of Israel, for in six days God made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day God rested and was refreshed.”