

Pray and Mean It will be an occasional listserv – every 1 to 2 weeks. If you wish to be on the list, please let me know by sending me an e-mail to CantorJC@aol.com asking to be placed on the listserv Pray and Mean It. It is helpful to have your full name and your e-mail address.

Thanks and best wishes – Cantor Jack Chomsky, Congregation Tifereth Israel, Columbus Ohio 11/15/06

Pray and Mean It 2

This is the 2nd installment in this series.

We began our project by focusing on the opening b'rachah of Birkot Hashachar, the introductory blessings of the daily service.

If the idea of this project is that each layer is somehow sufficient, but that we hope to add additional layers, we surely need to get elements of the Sh'ma and the Amidah into our ritual right away.

So let's go to Sh'ma. This prayer is different from most of the liturgy in that it is itself an excerpt from the Torah. Most of our prayers are later compositions. Too many people think of Sh'ma as just the opening *Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad* (D'varim/Deuteronomy 6.4). Sh'ma really refers to a number of Torah passages recited twice daily: D'varim/Deuteronomy 6.4-9 and 11.13-21 as well as Bamidar/Numbers 15.37-41.

For the purpose of today's discussion, I'd like to focus on D'varim/Deuteronomy 6.5-9 – "V'ahavta." (I'm skipping "Sh'ma Yisrael" – something that people have written whole books about. . . to be talked about another time.)

וְאֶהְבֶּתָּ אֵת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ. כָּכֹל לְבָבְךָ וּכְכֹל נַפְשְׁךָ וּכְכֹל מְאֹדְךָ.
וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מְצַוְּךָ הַיּוֹם עַל לְבָבְךָ.
וְשִׁנַּנְתָּם לְבָנֶיךָ וְדַבַּרְתָּ בָם בְּשִׁבְתְּךָ בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבְלֶכְתְּךָ בַדֶּרֶךְ
וּבְשֹׁכְבְךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ. וְקִשְׂרָתָם לְאוֹת עַל יָדְךָ וְהָיוּ לְטַטְפֹּת בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ.
וּבְתִבְתָּם עַל מְזוֹזֹת בֵּיתְךָ וּבְשַׁעְרֶיךָ.

V'ahavta et Adonai Elohecha b'chol l'vavcha uv'chol nafsh'cha uv'chol m'odecha. V'hayu had'varim ha-eleh asher anochi m'tzav'cha hayom al l'vavecha. V'shinantam l'vanecha v'dibarta bam b'shivt'cha b'veitecha uv'lecht'cha vaderech uv'shob'cha uv'kumecha. Uk'shartam l'ot al yadecha v'hayu l'totafot bein einecha. Uch'tavtam al m'zuzot beitecha uvish'arecha.

And You shall love Adonai your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might. And these words, which I command you today, you shall take to heart. Teach them, diligently, to your children, and recite them at home and away, night and day. Bind them as a sign upon your hand, and as a reminder above your eyes. Inscribe them upon the doorposts of your homes and upon your gates.

Someone about 50 to 60 years ago had a great idea, or so it seemed at the time. Let's chant the words of the V'ahavta out loud! This will a) teach people the words and b) introduce them to the chant of Torah (because the chant that is used is a form of Torah cantillation, since the text is a Torah text and more and more siddurim include the tropes – the cantillation markings).

The problem with this great idea is that chanting the V'ahavta according to Torah cantillation is the *only* way that many people are exposed to the text. They have managed to learn the text almost hypnotically but may have become disconnected from its meaning.

One of the great joys of personal prayer is rolling the words around on your tongue in your own way. I encourage you to do this with all the prayers. Say these words – but *not* with the familiar melodies. Make up a different melody – or say it *without* a melody but with feeling for the meaning of the words (if you can follow it) or even just the “taste” of the words in your mouth. *B'chol l'avcha uv'chol nafsh'cha uv'chol m'odecha. . .* There's something about the rhythm of the text that is very pleasing – and the rhyming: *l'avcha. . nafsh'cha. . m'odecha.* The rhyming doesn't happen in the English, and, although merely a function of Hebrew grammar, provides an emotional connection through our breath and lips.

When I immerse myself in the meaning and feeling of the *V'ahavta* text, I see that it begins with love – *and you shall love.* We Jews don't get much credit for Love in our tradition, but if you keep your eyes and ears and heart open, you'll see that love is hugely important every day in our prayers.

You shall *love* Adonai your God *with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.* Well, the Hebrew doesn't exactly say “might.” It says *uv'chol m'odecha.* If you know a little Hebrew, you'll recognize the word *m'od* as one that means “very.” So what the passage says is that you should love God with your very-ness, which (to me at least) is very different than your might. Might conjures up visions of armies and clenched fists, whereas this phrase *should* point us in the direction of loving God with our totality, with our enthusiasm. (I have taken to translating it as “with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your ALL!”)

And these words should be in your hearts *hayom* – usually translated as “this day.” But again, if you know just a little Hebrew, you'll think of *hayom* as “today.” Somehow that strikes me as much more personal: these words shall be in my heart TODAY. (And this is something that we say twice each day.)

And then we say that we shall teach them (the *mitzvot* or commandments) to our children and speak of them sitting in our house *and* when we're out in the world. And we should make a sign of them on our hand and a reminder between our eyes. This, of course, refers to the *tefillin* that we wear each day when it's not Shabbat. The *tefillin* themselves contain this passage (and others) written on parchment inside the boxes – a physical observance of this *mitzvah* (commandment). And we should write them on our *mezuzahs*.

I'm afraid that many people say this passage quite often but don't connect to its meaning – because of chanting it every time according to the Torah cantillation, a melody that has become so familiar that we are in danger of ignoring the meaning of the words that we are reciting!

Coming back to the idea of this project, if we were to recite this text *with meaning* once (or, as mandated by our tradition, twice) daily, it could be quite transformative. It connects us to love, to enthusiasm, to immediacy, to teaching, to home and work, to tefillin and to the mezuzah. Wow!

If you wish to respond, you may e-mail me at CantorJC@aol.com.