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Dancing with the Torah

BARRY COHEN

Editor

When I was trained to lead worship in rabbinical school, instructors urged students to remain steady and in control. Expressing emotion - while not forbidden - was suggested only to liven a responsive reading or stress an idea in a sermon.

During the past 10 years, except for a Purim celebration or a Simchat Torah service, I cannot remember the last time I expressed emotion sincerely, from the heart, in a worship service.

Perhaps this is one of the ironies of being a rabbi. Even when I worship as a congregant, I still relate to prayer from the perspective of a prayer leader.

But I recently took part in a worship service when the prayer leaders were not hesitant to express deep emotion - at the Council for Jews with Special Needs' adult b'nai mitzvah, Jan. 19 at Temple Chai in Phoenix.

Waves of emotion flooded from the bema, as the six participants expressed excitement and joy, coupled with focus on their assigned roles.

I hope I will be able to match the level of kavanah they expressed. The goal of kavanah is placing worship in the proper context. Reading from a prayer book is not necessarily prayer. Sitting in a sanctuary with congregants is not necessarily worship.

Prayer and worship are attempts to gain an audience with God. The intent to create such an audience results in kavanah.

The b'nai mitzvah students expressed the many ways to create such a prayer setting.

We heard their kavanah through their singing. We felt it when they led English prayers. We experienced it when they read "Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai echad. Hear, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one." They made every effort, with focussed sincerity, to get every word right.

The kavanah reached an even higher level with the Torah service. Usually this part of the worship service is solemn and formal. The Torah is removed and held firmly. During the hakaffah (processional), the Torah-carrier usually keeps his or her feet balanced and walks through the congregation with an even pace to ensure that as many people as possible can express their respect for the Torah.

On the morning of Jan. 19, something much more improvisational, creative and emotional took place.

During the hakaffah, they danced with the Torah.

This joyous expression tapped into one of the oldest traditions our people know. We read when King David returned the Ark of the Covenant to the Jerusalem: "David and all the House of Israel danced before the Lord to (the sound of) all kinds of cypress wood (instruments), with lyres, harps, timbrels, sistrums and cymbals." (II Samuel 6:5)

That morning, the Torah was the symbol of the Ark, and their dance communicated their happiness, their thankfulness, their excitement.

The kavanah produced was contagious.

Toward the end of the service, I turned to the left and saw my wife Jennifer crying. Neither of us had brought any tissue, unprepared for the emotion that would fill our hearts and the sanctuary. Just a few moments later, Rabbi Bill Berk shared his personal reactions, and his voice broke, as if he were overcome by emotion, too.

I immediately had a moment of clarity - an appreciation, an awareness - of what the b'nai mitzvah students had accomplished. And I began to cry as well.

A tradition teaches that the tears of humanity can break through the very gates of the heavens. During that service, the gates of heaven were surely opened. I can only believe that God accepted our offering - our happiness, our thankfulness, our nachas - with love.