

Reflections on Sichat Rabbanim by Zvi Altman

In the mountain community of Franklin NC, contact with large Jewish institutions and communities is quite limited. As the main religious leader of Mountain Synagogue, and often the public face of the Jewish community in Western NC, I have felt quite alone. I did not realize just how starved I was for – and here I can't choose a more appropriate word – Jewish conversation. Key to it all, of course, is the special soul and genius of Rabbi Steve Sager. The Sichat Rabbanim Learning Partnership has allowed me to pursue an issue of deep interest to me personally and also as the leader of this small Jewish community – namely, the issue of the vitality of prayer.

As someone who leads worship services in the synagogue, I have worked to find ways to make the prayers and liturgy more meaningful and alive. Often we make mention of the importance of the Amidah within the service, yet I think it has meaning only for a handful of my congregants at best. I shared with Rabbi Sager my desire to probe the deeper meaning of the Amidah blessings, to tease out their underlying essence and spiritual significance. Ultimately I wanted to find a way to present this to my congregation so that they could have a richer and deeper experience of the Amidah, as well as a deeper experience of Jewish prayer more generally.

Rabbi Sager and I initially began our studies with the Amidah in mind, but soon widened our focus to consider prayer life in general and what we have come to call “beracha consciousness.” Our learning has focused on the Mishnah of Berachot, but ranges to other pieces of rabbinic literature, as well as modern commentary and poetry. There is no way that I could have regular access to such materials and to such conversations were it not for our Learning Partnership.

To say that this ancient and contemporary material comes alive is to trivialize the level of excitement, novelty and discovery that attends our study. Our study together embodies a remarkable freshness and vitality. Rabbi Sager is a master teacher in part because he is still a master learner, still deeply curious and engaged in the problems and questions that we discuss.

I have been able to make good use of the insights into the Mishnah and related materials that I learn weekly with Rabbi Sager. To be able to give examples directly from ancient sources of ways that legendary rabbis and scholars approached the very questions that we ponder today is deeply satisfying. It enriches beyond measure the discussions that take place in my community. It is both validating and empowering when people learn that the issues they ponder today, the questions that trouble them, also troubled the Rabbis and scholars of ancient times and that these same questions engage creative and artistic attention in the Jewish world, today. It is thrilling when they come to see their own questioning as part of long tradition – a Jewish tradition – of questioning and answering, and questioning again; to realize that they themselves are engaged in a discussion – a sicha – that has continued among Jews for thousands of years.

In our regular learning, Rabbi Sager and I also talk about our own lives and experiences, especially those that involve engagement with Jewish traditions, life transitions, and how prayer life fits into all of this. One set of connections found its way into a eulogy that I was preparing for the funeral of a congregant. I was able to invoke a deeper sense of meaning for the family and the community who gathered at the cemetery, and this was a direct outcome of the ongoing sicha with Rabbi Sager. At every turn I realize how this Learning Partnership influences my life as a learner, a teacher and a leader.

As a Sichat Rabbanim Learning Partner, I regularly familiarize myself with the Sicha web site and use it in my community to initiate discussions after services and during Chavurah meetings. This material – the blog post and usually an associated text and poem – provides a wonderful framework for stimulating discussion. Without fail, whenever I have done this, my congregants eagerly engage with the topic and a rich discussion ensues that typically lasts well beyond our planned time. People are stimulated and involved – in the topic – in Judaism. The response is enthusiastic and wonderful to experience. We did this at a recent Chavurah and we had several guests from California who commented that they had never experienced a Chavurah like this one and had never participated in this kind of discussion before.

My Sichat Rabbanim learning offers benefits even beyond my own community of Franklin, NC. I am planning to initiate some sichot, conversations, when I next visit Huntsville, Alabama, as I do about twice a year to visit family. There is a small Jewish community that occasionally asks me to teach. I am developing not only a coherent theme, but also a method and approach that can effectively engage small groups in the hope that these groups can continue to carry on the conversation.

I look forward to the other aspects of our Sichat Rabbanim Learning Partnership based on a year of studying classical sources about the nature and use of prayer. I visualize a multi-session program that explores prayer: What is it? Why do we pray or not pray? What makes prayer effective, or ineffective? What is the difference between personal and communal prayer? How do we move personal prayer into community and communal prayer into our personal lives?

The culminating program for my learning should be a local Shabbaton. I believe that Mountain Synagogue is too small to be the sole basis of such a gathering. Perhaps we could arrange our Shabbaton in collaboration with other small communities in Georgia or NC. I look forward to a visit by Rabbi Sager to our community so that we can celebrate our learning and its place in the community.