A Tribute to Daily Minyan: From the Other Side of the Mehitsa

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I first started going to daily minyan for one selfish reason. I simply wanted to be with my husband. Three days after getting married, we were in our new home, and my husband awoke early for minyan. He was getting up, so I got up too. I certainly wasn't ready to be apart from him, so I accompanied him to the synagogue. It was my first early morning weekday minyan. Prior to our marriage, it never occurred to me to attend daily minyan in a synagogue. Why on earth would I schlep to a synagogue for morning services when I could say Shaharit at home amidst the whirlwind of bathing, blow-drying, breakfast, and then the mad dash to work?

That was 11 months ago. Surprisingly, I quickly became hooked. I continued to attend daily minyan, going morning and evening almost every single day. The biggest surprise of all, however, was witnessing the quiet beauty that exists when men pray together on a regular basis. This beauty continues to unfold before me and perpetually takes my breath away: I was totally unprepared. Unfortunately, words are hopelessly inadequate tools for capturing the intricacies and undulations of the beauty of daily minyan. The ability to appreciate the wonderment comes only from experiencing the subtleties of daily minyan, from glimpsing the deep relationships that exist with God. Given the limitations of language, I will still do my best to relate what daily minyan feels like at Shearith Israel. Keep in mind, my perspective is from the other side of the *mehitsa*, where I have the wonderful freedom to inhale all of it.

I am blessed to belong to Congregation Shearith Israel, also known as the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York. Founded in 1654, we are the first and oldest Jewish Congregation in North America. I am infinitely blessed to be married to the rabbi of the community. I am also a member of the community, something that brings me immeasurable pride and delight. My understanding of daily minyan is limited my experiences at Shearith Israel. I hope, however, that every member of every daily minyan team feels so passionately about their home synagogue and the people with whom they pray. My husband refers to the daily minyan team as the "spiritual backbone of Shearith Israel." Not only are they the backbone; they are the heart, the soul, the spirit, and the sense of humor too. These men believe in regular communal

prayer, and their commitment to it is inspiring. These are the men who brave snow, rain, heat, and power outages to make minyan. These men will give up the Superbowl or take a cab straight from the early arrival gate at the airport to make sure they pray in a minyan. These are the men who believe it is important for every person saying *kaddish* to be able to do so in a minyan, whether it is a member of Shearith Israel or someone who walks in only once to honor the memory of a loved one. These men will stay on a Sunday morning to ensure that a couple from another country can fulfill their dream of getting married according to Jewish Law. These men will become worried if a "regular" misses just once, because everyone notices and everyone matters. These are the first people who knew I was pregnant because I stopped attending morning minyan, and they got concerned. They all figured out what was up, and smiled without saying a word, because that is just how they are.

Many people talk about spirituality as if it is the latest fashion or diet craze. Like true style and good nutrition, spirituality is not something that just comes and goes. It is a constant pursuit. It is lived every single day. It is in every breath, in every blink. Often times it is so subtle that many easily miss it or mistake it for something else. Just as it is easy to walk into a fancy store and spend a lot of money on something the salesperson says is the hot new item of the season, so too it is easy to find a "spiritual" workshop or retreat and have a powerful experience. The expensive outfit will be the wrong color next season and, if not internalized and integrated into daily life, the intense spiritual experience remains a distant memory, a snapshot posted on a wall next to a concert ticket.

We recently returned from a visit to Israel. We went to the Kotel a couple of times for Minha. I am always amazed at the scene at the Kotel. Here is a religious treasure, a jewel in the crown of the Jewish people and an important religious site for people of many other religions too. People are having mind-blowing spiritual experiences left and right. Women are crying, pleading, kissing the wall, posing for pictures, stuffing notes into every nook and cranny, taking photos of others praying. It is indeed beautiful, but I wonder how lasting this experience will be for many. Will it leave these visitors changed? Will it foster a new relationship with God? Will it lead to a commitment to prayer? A commitment to community? What happens when everyone goes home?

As one woman at the Kotel backed into me and then another ran over my foot with her stroller without acknowledging my presence, I was discouraged. How can each individual have such a "spiritual" experience while totally disregarding those around them? I longed for daily minyan, I ached for community.

One of the many things I love so much about Judaism is that religion does not happen in a vacuum. From the revelation at Sinai to the daily prayer services, it is about community. We have the siddur to formalize the prayer services and to allow for everyone to pray together. Certainly we can talk with God whenever we want, but when it comes to weekday Shaharit, Minha, and Arvit, we recite what is written and that links all of us. During Shabbat and the Haggim, we are connected by the words we all say, words written long ago by brilliant rabbis who understood the importance of bringing people together to thank God for our infinite blessings. We recite the same words our ancestors recited. Not only do we link to those in the room with us, but we are bound to those that stood before us and to those who will one day stand after we are long gone. Daily minyan exemplifies community.

Spirituality is a daily pursuit. It is not found in one visit to a holy site. It is not an amulet you buy in some far-off town. It is not practiced alone on a mountain top. It is a relationship based on commitment and trust and vulnerability. It is letting

others see you during prayer, whether you are crying, or trying not to space out, or lost in the siddur, or in the deepest recesses of standing before the Almighty, thanking God for countless blessing and praying that your children will be healthy or that God will protect the loved one you just lost. Spirituality is waking up early in the morning or rushing to minyan after a long and tiring day to pray as a community because people depend on you and because you are part of something bigger than yourself. Daily minyan exemplifies spirituality.

Now that my husband and I know we are expecting twins, I realize that my days of regular attendance at daily minyan are numbered. I am grateful beyond words to have such reasons to keep me from being able to attend minyan, but I will miss praying daily with my community. I will miss being part of the daily minyan team. My debt of gratitude to them will never be paid. They provide to the Shearith Israel community the most important thing of all: the ability for people to pray in a minyan. Yes, we have many wonderful programs. We have amazing classes and lovely celebrations. Yes, the beauty of our historic building is without parallel. Yet, none of this matters if someone can't come and pray in a minyan. The daily minyan team is the axis on which the whole community of Shearith Israel spins. It is the foundation on which all else rests. I wish more people would be part of this special team, because there is plenty of space for everyone. The more people praying together, devoted to the tefillot, the stronger the backbone and the stronger the community. All anyone has to do is show up. I am so happy I followed my husband to Shaharit after we got married. It is one of the best gifts he has given me.