

I recently returned from the conference of the South West Association of Reform Rabbis in Galveston. At that gathering Joel Hoffman, a biblical scholar who we have had the pleasure of hosting at our congregation as a scholar in residence, asked what at first seemed like an outrageous and shocking question – Is prayer something Jews will be doing in 100 years? Of course it is, might be our response. How can we possibly imagine Judaism without prayer? And, for my part, I agree that it is hard to imagine what Judaism would look like without it.

But the context of his question is important. He was speaking about revolutions of Jewish history starting with the revolution of rabbinic Judaism after the destruction of the Temple. How many people 100 years before the destruction of the Temple could have conceived that sacrifice would no longer be the primary way of worshiping G-d and be replaced by prayer. What came after was very different but we are still here, going strong 2000 years later. Hoffman argued that we are currently in another revolution of Jewish life and that prayer could go the same way or at least look very different in 100 years than it does today.

Two other sessions at the conference shed light on this and larger questions involved. Amy Asin from URJ talked about the idea that we should “Start with Why” based on the work of Simon Sinek. We are often overly concerned about the “what” of things e.g. specific tunes, and prayers etc. But the real question is why. Why do we do this and why are we doing it this way? Rabbi Mike Commins, author of Making Prayer Real provided an answer for the “why” of prayer. Prayer has two why’s – gratitude and yearning.

These two “why’s” are eternal. The “what” of prayer may change but we will always be looking to express our gratitude and yearning, whether through prayer or otherwise. We know this already in that different streams of Judaism and different congregations pray differently. Each expression reflects both gratitude and yearning in different ways for different communities.

The larger picture, returning to Hoffman’s initial talk, is that like the rabbis of the “Rabbinic period” we are also innovators in a period of great change. That can be scary. We want to hold on to what has been because that is what we know and what gives us structure and makes us comfortable. We are naturally and understandably anxious about all that may be lost

But imagine that in 100 years or 1000 years Jews will look back on our time as we do the time of the Rabbis of the Talmud. We look back then and think how amazing it would have been to be part of things at a time when Judaism as we know it was being formed. In Judaism and in the world in general we are in a period of change and transition. And we are part of it. That can be scary but it can and should also be an amazing opportunity. What an amazing time to be alive, when we get to be part of creating the future of Judaism and how it will look for generations to come.

Rabbi Ilan Emanuel