

We are about to recite the Bar'chu, the call to prayer. You might be saying to yourself, "wait, call to prayer? Haven't we been praying?" One of the topics we discussed in our class was the structure of the service. As part of that discussion, Rabbi Rachel explained that we start with Pesukei dezimra, or verses of praise, as a warm-up for the heart of the service: the Sh'ma, the Amidah, and the Torah service. The Bar'chu represents a transition in the service from the individual warm-up we are each doing in Pesukei dezimra to the core of the prayer service, when we join our voices together as a community in prayer.

Jewish tradition encourages prayer in community. To recite Bar'chu, Kaddish, the Kedushah, and to read from the Torah all requires an assembly of ten Jewish adults. This derives from Psalm 82 which proclaims that "God stands in the congregation of God." Edah, the Hebrew word for congregation used by the psalmist, was used in a different place in the Tanakh, in the story of the 10 spies who reported to Moses on the land of Canaan, so a congregation of God came to mean a congregation of at least 10 people. There is something incredibly beautiful about the idea that, while any individual can pray to God, it is the act of joining our voices together with others in prayer that makes a place for the Shechinah, God's indwelling presence.

As someone who is not yet Jewish, this class represented a step in my journey that enabled me to transition from seeing myself merely as an individual who is interested in Judaism to seeing myself as part of the Jewish people. I'll share two brief highlights representative of this transition.

When I went to my first Kavana Minyan, I was befuddled. I was praying in a language I didn't understand, I spent a lot of my time just trying to figure out where my page was (shout out to Ken for the amazing page guide), and it felt like everyone was just kind of doing their own thing. A couple of months ago, I came to Minyan and I don't know if it was the beautiful sunshine or if I just woke up on the right side of the bed, but by the time we arrived at the Bar'chu, it felt like everyone was locked in, including me. Our individual voices joined together collectively as we prayed and, for the first time, I could feel the rhythm of the service and experienced the service not as an outsider, but as a member of that chorus of voices joining in prayer.

The other key experience for me was at Purim when Kavana partnered with Moishe house to host a reading of Megillat Esther. As someone who grew up Christian, I never had the sense that the stories I read in the Bible were about my people. There were great stories but I hadn't looked at them as part of my heritage. As I listened to the reading of the Megillah, I realized that the mitzvot we were engaging in for Purim had their roots in the very story we were reading. Here we were, thousands of years since Esther and Mordechai outsmarted Haman and saved the Jewish people and we were reading about it and, not just reading about it, but joining together to act on that story. With Passover, it is the same. The story of the Exodus is going to be told around tables all over the world as it has been throughout Jewish history. We are not told simply to tell the story but to actually see ourselves as if we are slaves who were saved from Mitzraim. Jews don't just read the Tanakh, they engage with it, wrestle with it, and bring it to life.

Realizing this for the first time at Purim was the moment that I truly understood the words of Ruth, in response to Naomi's urgings that she abandon her: "Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God."

When asked what part of the service I wanted to speak at today, I struggled to find a part of the service that I felt comfortable participating in as a Jewish adjacent person. Reading from the Torah felt like a ritual experience that I wanted to wait on until I had actually converted. When Rabbi Sydney suggested the Bar'chu, it clicked for me immediately. Coming into the course, I was an individual filled with questions and curiosity but didn't yet feel a deep connection to Judaism. Having completed the class, I now find myself, not an individual but a member of this community ready to join with you in the call to prayer.