

# The Way We Pray

Compiled by the Mishkon Communications Committee

**M**ISHKON TEPHILO IS ONE OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA'S OLDEST SYNAGOGUES. A LARGE PART OF WHAT RENDERS US DISTINCT IS THAT OUR CONGREGATION COMPRISES MEN AND WOMEN FROM ALMOST EVERY PART OF THE WORLD; THEIR INDIVIDUAL JEWISH ROOTS REFLECT THE VAST HISTORIC PANOPLY OF THE JEWISH EXPERIENCE. A SAMPLE:

Past President **Bessie Novos** grew up in Johannesburg, South Africa, and learned to daven with her family at the Great Synagogue, a wealthy Orthodox congregation on Wolmarans Street where her brothers celebrated their b'nai mitzvot. "This was the 1930s and '40s — girls were not allowed to go to cheder," she recalls. "My family didn't believe in that. To this day, I don't read much Hebrew." Nevertheless, she says, services in the Great Synagogue weren't so different from Mishkon. "A shul is a shul," she declares.

**Dr. Jeff Gornbein** grew up in Buffalo, New York. His father's business failed when Jeff was 11, and the family moved to Los Angeles. "We were staying with my aunt in Canoga Park, and my parents thought I was lonely and bored, so they wangled me a scholarship to Camp Ramah in Ojai," he recalls. "That's where I learned to daven — and that's also where the first girl under age 50 kissed me." Not until much later in his life, however, did Gornbein begin serious study of Hebrew and prayer. "Rabbi Naomi Levy [predecessor of Rabbi Dan Shevitz] taught me Torah trope, and more recently Rabbi Dan taught me to lain. And this summer, I went to the Conservative Yeshiva in Israel."

**Melissa Tarsky** learned Hebrew and Jewish prayer in London, Ontario. "It was the smallest community in Canada that could support a Hebrew Day School," she recalls. "There were never more than 15 kids in my class — usually fewer. There were two synagogues in the area, and both the rabbis taught there, as well as a few Israeli Hebrew teachers."

"My earliest memories," recalls Past President **Judy Gordon**, "are from the early 1940s, accompanying my mother's father to a tiny Lubavitcher shtetle — *not* Chabad — in Paterson, New Jersey. I grew up among adults who spoke in ways that made it impossible to separate prayer from ordinary speech. For example, someone would say, 'I'll be home soon, God willing,' or 'This is wonderful challah, praise God.' Life and prayer — it was all the same."

**Matt Marko**, Mishkon's baal Torah, studied Hebrew at the University of Florida and lived for a time in Israel but, outside of what he needed for his bar mitzvah at a Reform temple in his hometown of Newburgh, NY, knew little of prayer or Torah. "I went to Hebrew School one day a week, and the rabbi who taught me my bar mitzvah Haftarah gave me a cassette tape to listen to." Even while living on a Kibbutz, however, he remained "devoutly secular." He says, "I had no interest in prayer or religion." All this changed when Marko moved to Los Angeles and gave up his acting career for woodworking. He joined Mishkon. "When Rabbi Dan learned that I knew Hebrew, he suggested that I learn how to read Torah. It came quickly because I knew the language and I was comfortable performing." Marko now teaches Torah reading at Mishkon.

**Natasha Speer** grew up in Moscow. "When I was a child, there was no place for Jews to pray — atheism was the state religion. But every summer, we visited a family that lived in a Jewish settlement near Kharkov [now in Ukraine]. During World War II, a man from that family saved my grandfather's life. The synagogue there was my only exposure to Judaism." After emigrating to Los Angeles, she was introduced to another family friend, **Eric Speer**. When they decided to marry, Natasha was surprised to discover that she would have to convert to Judaism. "Russia is patriarchal," she explains. "I always assumed that, if my father was Jewish, then so was I." While Natasha was studying for her conversion, she and Eric met Rabbi Shevitz and decided to join Mishkon. "So this is where I really learned about Jewish prayer," says Natasha. "In Russia, with its Eastern Orthodox roots, I was taught that prayer was always about asking God for something,

and I never felt quite worthy. So imagine my joy to learn that Jewish prayer is very different — it's about praising God and celebrating life and good deeds."

**Marvin Wolf** grew up on Chicago's Southside. "Both my parents were orphaned, and neither had a Jewish education; four days a week, they sent me, clutching a silver dollar to pay the rebbe, to an after-school Orthodox cheder. I learned aleph bet from a rebbe with a number tattooed down his forearm and a tangled beard that reeked of tobacco and schnapps. My bar mitzvah party was 11 relatives, herring, mămăligă, sour cream, borscht and shots of Four Roses." After graduation from high school, he joined the U.S. Army. "Jewish chaplains accommodate everyone from ultra-Orthodox to barely Reform, so wherever I went during my 13 years in uniform, services turned out as virtually Conservative — the middle way. I attended Shabbat services as often as I could, but the first time I ever felt a real connection to God was at a Pesach seder in a leaky fire-base tent with seven Jews meeting one another for the first time and a Reserve chaplain who'd volunteered for Vietnam, Rabbi Harry Schreiner of Morristown, New Jersey."

Ever since **Carol Felixson** was a teenager at Camp Hess Kramer, a Malibu overnight camp sponsored by Wilshire Boulevard Temple, she has associated her relationship with the Divine with the outdoors. "Besides hiking, swimming, crafts, sports and cook-outs, we celebrated Shabbat in the camp's outdoor chapel, where our Siddurim were dog-eared pamphlets in Hebrew and English, with hand-drawn illustrations. As a cantor led us in prayer, song and meditation, my heart opened. My attention vacillated between words, stories, and prayer as I focused on an ark hewn from logs and decorated with a mosaic of colorful stones," she recalls. She remembers sunlight streaming down through trees, chirping birds and quarreling squirrels and the intoxicating odors of earth and vegetation. "At Mishkon, these outdoor worship experiences translate to a very different but equally powerful sort of prayer. As my understanding of *tephila* and ritual deepens, so too do I feel its

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greater impact. Davening at Mishkon is time I grant to myself: my anchor, my inspiration, and my joy.”

**N**o one’s been a Mishkon member longer than **Elaine Fischell**, who learned to pray with her mother and grandmother when they lived on the East Coast. “We discovered Mishkon when my mother, sister and I moved to California in 1934,” she recalls. To celebrate High Holidays, the family walked from San Vicente and Lincoln to what was then a tiny shul on Hampton Drive. Elaine attended Santa Monica High School classes in tents after the 1933 earthquake damaged the building. “I was one of only six Jewish students,” she recalls. When her mother died, Mishkon president **Dennis Gura** paid her a condolence call. “Even though he hadn’t known my mother, he said that he came because she was part of our community; I’ve had warm feelings for Mishkon ever since. That feeling of community is so important.”

**Jane Luna-Rieger** grew up in a Catholic family in Texas; she later became a Methodist. “My Methodist minister became exasperated with my questions and implied that Judaism might be a better fit for me because it welcomed questioning,” she recalls. “Some of my Texas public-school teachers were Jewish, and when I moved to New York, I met many Jewish people. When I met my husband, I decided to convert. A rabbi had me recite the Sh’ma, then said I was Jewish. But when it came time for my son’s bar mitzvah, I had to formally convert. At the Bet Din, I talked about the “Song of Songs” and shared that I liked the idea that there was no original sin — the rabbis laughed. At first, I found Jewish prayer overly formal; it felt like God had been squeezed out. Then I took a class and found a book, *Service of the Heart*, from which I learned the structure of prayer. I’m still learning how to pray; I look at parts of the Siddur, but my prayers don’t necessarily follow any book.”

“Asking how I learned to pray is like asking how I learned to breathe: You just do it,” declares **Catherine Nelson**, who grew up in a very religious Catholic family. “Prayer was part of the landscape. I liked it a lot,” she recalls. “Then I changed from Catholic to not Catholic to Jewish, and found home. The

mechanics were a challenge: I had to learn a new alphabet, for example. But there was nothing different about the notion of prayer, its purpose or ethos. In *formal* prayer, we have services and a text our community has used for millennia. And we have *personal* prayer, in which we address God as individuals. Both can happen at the same time, and both take practice.”

**M**ort Schrag grew up in Brooklyn where his parents enrolled him in a Yeshiva. “Learning to pray went with the territory,” he recalls. “And over the years, my interpretation of that has gone up and down. In high school, I was rather distant from synagogue life. I went with my parents to services because I had to. In college in Ohio, I felt a lack of Jewishness around me; that caused me to tune in to my Jewishness. I helped organize the Oberlin Jewish Congregation for college students and taught Sunday School,” he explains.

Later, when Mort was in the Army, “there was no Jewish chaplain at Camp Pickett, Virginia. Once a month a rabbi came from Richmond. I became a chaplain’s assistant and used my Jewish education to lead services; that pulled me much closer to ritual. But while prayer was still part of my Jewish life, it wasn’t my central focus. That’s still true: I’m not such a big prayer person. “

When **Phyllis Sorter** found herself a divorced, single mother who had just bought a house, quit her job and decided to start law school, she felt that her life was hanging by a thread. “I found it easy to pray,” she recalls. “I had a sort of “Tevye” relationship with God — I felt a real connection. That period of my life was when prayer became a reality for me. Then, as life became more secure, prayer became more challenging.” In her 20s, she connected with the Reform version of prayer. “When I joined Mishkon, I became familiar with the Conservative version and increased my synagogue skills. Lately, I’ve come to admire Muslim prayer: They get into it physically as well as mentally. That’s my new thing: combining prayer with yoga.”

**Dr. Jerry Helman** went to a “shtetl” shul in his Detroit neighborhood but dropped out when Rabbi Lawson’s “nasty discipline” became too much. A tutor helped prepare him for his bar mitzvah; the family switched synagogues. “Getting married and having a family focused my spiritual life,” he says. The wealth of Jewish intellect found in Los Angeles opened doors to opportunities: “Saying kaddish for my father at Sinai Temple got me into a spiritual community where I had the honor of laining with the chief rabbi of Baghdad.” One Shabbat Helman met Dr. Shlomo Bardin at the Brandeis-Bardin Institute. Bardin died a week later and Helman had the honor of helping to celebrate Bardin’s life at a memorial service.

**P**eter Kunstler says he’s “a product of a mixed marriage: Dad was Ashkenazi and Mom Sephardic. Aside from Sunday school in Pleasantville, N.Y, I had no formal Jewish education. We didn’t attend Yom Kippur services, but my mother insisted that we stay home from school.”

At 15, he moved with his family to Antwerp, where his Istanbul-born maternal great-grandfather was president of a Sephardic congregation that dubbed him “commander of the faithful.” Nevertheless, young Peter was not obliged to attend services. “My grandfather’s house had been bombed during the war; like many in Belgium, my family felt that belief in God hadn’t protected them, and they couldn’t recapture their Jewish feelings.” When he moved to Brussels, however, he found a congregation of Americans and Belgians. “I started fasting on Yom Kippur and attended services,” he recalls. “In 1968, when my father died, I devised a prayer and recited it nightly.”

When he moved to Los Angeles in 1980, Peter began attending services and took a UCLA class with Chaim Seidler-Feller. **Meyer Shwarzstein** and **Susan Kahn** suggested that he try Mishkon, and over time, he became a regular. “What I know about prayer, ritual and Judaism comes from Mishkon,” he says. “I learn something new every time. I now enjoy reading Jewish subjects. And I still say a prayer before going to sleep.”