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Communing while commuting

By VIVA HAMMER
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Today I begin a new job and once again I'm davening on the train. I had not planned it like this. The morning was precisely choreographed to include exercise, chat with children, a gulp of breakfast – and final anointment with *shaitel*. All this left time only for the parade of blessings that open the prayer service, no more. So I'm on the Washington Metro greeting my Maker.

The *sidur* I hold before me is a cherished fellow-traveler. I bought it with my mother one frigid Sunday when I was working the maiden job of my American career. My mother had joined me from Australia and we spent the winter exploring New York together. One project was to find a *sidur* to suit my peripatetic needs: little and light, with prayers for the whole year in *nusah sefard*, the hassidic service bequeathed me by my father.

Having a shopping goal meant we were not just aimless tourists wandering around the city. We were making common purpose with throngs of other Jews: fulfilling dreams by spending cash. Every Brooklyn bookstore we saw, we entered; there were many. Thirteenth, Sixteenth, Eighteenth Avenue, all disappointed us. The day had started cold, but the temperature dropped as the quest advanced. This was a novel experience for Australians: At these latitudes, the progress of the sun over the distant horizon brought no comfort.

Long after lunch we ended our hunt, having found nothing. It was preposterous. I wasn't looking for a women's *tallit* or an animal-rights Hagada! If Brooklyn did not contain my *sidur*, did it exist? Our route home passed through the Lower East Side of Manhattan, *rosh pina* of American Jewry. The afternoon had ended in its youth and the temperature was double digits below freezing.

While buying some pastries for dinner, my mother noticed a bookstore opposite and stepped over to it. I pulled her back. “What’s the chance they’ll have what Brooklyn doesn’t?” I demanded, too weary for another failed attempt. “What does it cost to ask?” my mother retorted. “In life, you keep on trying until you find what you’re looking for!”

The bookstore had been in business longer than my mother’s and my combined ages and reeked of decaying paper. Every plane, vertical and horizontal, was filled with the printed word. We asked, and the man produced the very item I was looking for, the one I now hold before me. “Buy two,” my mother said: wisdom of the ages.

I have prayed all my life, through periods of piety and atheism and humdrum. But I understand little of what I say. The psalms and supplications are beautiful, no doubt, but my mind was never at peace enough to meditate on them, being filled variously with baccalaureate exams, tax policy, screaming children and snarling bosses. The sages set up an impossible ideal for prayer: that we utter the words with *kavana* – purpose, mindfulness. Those of us who can parse the complex poetry are fortunate if there’s energy left to consider its meaning.

The Talmud concedes that daveners who cannot achieve *kavana* should still mouth the words. Such prayer is second-best; but second is my best. Every day I gallop through the familiar tropes the way I tussle with the other routines in my life, reassured by their steadfastness. I have done so hanging on to metal poles or pinioned by the throng of passengers in subways, in telephone booths as the sun sets and cowering in the library of my Jewish school, afraid of being discovered as a girl who prayed.

Those hastily thrummed-out words have not been entirely in vain, though. Like the tramp through Brooklyn that freezing Sunday, they are a prelude. In moments of great need – of despair or desire or thanksgiving – the verses my lips have let loose 50,000 times come back into my mouth. As if from some external source they arrive, the form long-familiar, but the meaning freshly-picked. The mindless blatherings of prayer foisted on me daily by obligation have created the possibility for exalted encounter at the appointed hour.

The rabbis require mindful prayer thrice daily. Such a goal is for angels. It is neither possible, nor necessary for human beings – and certainly not for working parents. I step into the train, find a snug spot between the benches and the driver’s cabin, open my palm-sized *siddur*, and begin, *Hoydu laHashem kiru bishmoy hoydi ’u b’amim aliloysov*, Give thanks unto the Lord, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the people.

Davening before the mixed multitude of Washington commuters, I reckon I have fulfilled all three of the verse’s prescriptions. Not an ecstatic encounter, but not a bad beginning for an ordinary Monday morning.

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