LAWRENCE HOFFMAN

by JONATHAN VATNER

Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman knows how to end Yom Kippur in style – and with an impact. After dusk has settled, the lights in the synagogue go out and children file in, each holding a candle that's lit from the *havdalah* candle. The children and their parents – who stand by to ensure that no one starts a conflagration – proceed to the front of the synagogue, set the candles on a table, then gather around and watch the brilliant cluster of fire.

"Remember we said that Rosh Hashanah was the birthday of the world?" Hoffman asks.

"Yeah!" say the children.

"What do you do on birthdays?"

"We have birthday cake!"

"That's right," replies Hoffman. "We're not going to have one

yet because the adults are still fasting. But what do you put on a birthday cake?"

"Candles!" they shout in unison.

"Well, we've got candles. And what do you do with the candles?"

"You make a wish and blow them out!"

So, Hoffman asks, what do you wish for in the next year?

"Peace," some kids say. "A better world," say others. "That my big sister treats me better!" someone shouts.

Then Hoffman asks the adults what they want in the coming year. Their wishes aren't so very different from those of the children.

The room is dark, except for the cluster of fire in the front, the havdalah candle towering above the others. Hoffman gives the signal and with gusts of breath all the candles flicker out except for the havdalah candle. The group makes havdalah and says the final prayers of Yom Kippur. Then the shofar is blown, and the worshippers, many of them crying, sing *shehecheyanu*.

Hoffman doesn't have a pulpit. The scene just described occurred at the *chavurah* he cofounded near Rye, New York, where he has lived since 1973. His *Ne'ilah* service, the end of Yom Kippur, is a telling example of his renowned talent at fashioning ritual. His study of and ideas about ritual have impacted a generation of Reform rabbis – and by extension, their congregations. Observe a Reform service in America and Hoffman's influence will be clearly discernable.

But Hoffman hasn't limited his focus to ritual. Through his efforts as a rabbi, a professor and a prolific author, he has played a significant role in changing the meaning of three words – liturgy, ritual and synagogue – for the Reform movement.

In speaking of Hoffman's legacy, former student Elyse Frishman, rabbi at the Barnert Temple in Franklin Lakes, New Jersey and co-editor of the newest Reform *siddur* (daily prayer book), *Mishkan T'filah*, says, "While he will certainly be known as a professor

of liturgy, he's far broader than that. I think he will be seen as a pivotal thinker of our time." She continues, "He is a genius…He is a brilliant scholar and an eclectic student. He is also an extraordinarily innovative thinker."

"When they write the history on synagogues at the turn of the century, Hoffman's thinking will factor as the major influence," says Daniel Freelander, also a former student of Hoffman's and now vice president of the Union for Reform Judaism.

Many people know Hoffman as a professor who also happens to be a Reform rabbi, but he considers himself a rabbi first and foremost; his students at Hebrew Union College in New York City are his congregants. "I got my PhD but I don't have the certificate," he says. "I threw it out. I didn't care. But I have my *smicha* (rabbinic ordination) on my wall."

Before Hoffman came along, a liturgy professor was a historian, studying the way the prayer book has evolved. Hoffman's influence has played a role in expanding the study of liturgy so that it now encompasses not just the history of prayer but the study of worship. Previously, rituals – the ways in which liturgy is carried out in the synagogue – were not studied separately from liturgy. When Hoffman's teachings took hold, the field of Jewish ritual studies opened up; as a consequence, changes are occurring in the way Reform synagogues function.

In reflecting on his interests, Hoffman notes, "The history [of prayer] is an interesting thing, but it's not going to change people's lives." And changing lives is what Hoffman is after.

Much of Hoffman's focus has been to understand ritual and adapt it so that it has meaning for today's worshipers. Frishman describes him teaching "not the *what* but the *why* of liturgy."

All elements of the service, Hoffman says, should be fashioned to bring the congregants in and allow spirituality to coalesce. For example, the physical space needs to be set up to create intimacy between the rabbi and congregants. The music should fit the mood that each prayer is supposed to set. And congregants should have

something concrete to focus on during rituals, such as an upraised Kiddush cup or a havdalah candle.

These concepts were practically heresy when Hoffman introduced them. At the time, the Reform service was very much standardized elaborate theater, and many old-guard rabbis, including some of Hoffman's teachers, were displeased with the liberties they felt he was taking. Today, Hoffman's approach is evident in many Reform synagogues, and students and colleagues praise his ability to create rituals that work.

Hoffman's focus extends to the very nature of the synagogue itself. Concerned that synagogues had become shops that sold religious services rather than vital spiritual centers, he cofounded Synagogue 2000 (now Synagogue 3000) in 1994, a nonprofit initiative dedicated to making synagogues vibrant centers for Jewish life. "Synagogues have to engage congregants," Hoffman explains.

The establishment has recognized the value of his ideas, and he has received multiple awards including the Berakah Award in 2004 from the North American Academy of Liturgy for lifetime achievement. The previous year, he was given the Barbara and Stephen Friedman Chair in Liturgy, Worship, and Ritual at Hebrew Union College, a position essentially created for him.

Hoffman is a fluent teacher, in his element when in front of people. He covers his topics thoroughly and with animation, introducing stories when appropriate and bantering with students as they call out questions. When he's done lecturing, he pulls a chair close to the students and sits to take questions. After his classes, most students linger for further discussion. No one seems to want to leave his presence; nor does he want to leave theirs.

"There are lots of smart people and lots of great speakers," says Ron Wolfson, a Conservative educator based in Los Angeles, who cofounded Synagogue 2000 with Hoffman. "But it's rare to find someone who combines a scintillating speaking style, superb scholarship and concern for human beings in one package. On top of that he's pretty funny."

Hoffman is also a prolific author and has written or edited over twenty-five books, with more on the way. His most known works include *Beyond the Text: A Holistic Approach to Liturgy* (1989), which looks at Jewish liturgy as a study of both text and worship; *The Art of Public Prayer: Not for Clergy Only* (1988), a textbook for directing meaningful rituals; and *Covenant of Blood: Circumcision and Gender in Rabbinic Judaism* (1995), a historical study of circumcision. He has also edited *Minhag Ami: My People's Prayer Book*, a ten-volume series that illuminates individual prayers in the daily and Shabbat services. *Israel: A Spiritual Travel Guide: A Companion for the Modern Jewish Pilgrim* (1998) explains what makes Israel's historical sites meaningful, and offers suggestions for prayer while at each one.

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Hoffman was born in 1942 outside Toronto, in a town on the outskirts of a small city where cows grazed not far from his backyard and nobody bothered locking their doors. His father, a podiatrist, was deeply committed to Judaism. Beginning when Hoffman was four years old, his father taught him, along with the six other Jewish children his age in town, how to read Hebrew.

His parents created what Hoffman describes as "a warm and loving Jewish home, with candles and Kiddush every Friday night and festive dinners for Shabbat and holidays." Both his parents worked on Shabbat, but they dropped him off at the synagogue on their way to work. They instilled a love of Judaism, and Hoffman thought about becoming a rabbi from a very young age.

He attended Hebrew Union College in New York for his smicha. His father died in Hoffman's fourth year of rabbinical school, and his grief-stricken mother soon after. Years later, Hoffman learned from aunts and uncles that his father had very much wanted to be a rabbi but, like many who grew up during the Depression, never had the chance to pursue his dream. "Recognizing that he had bequeathed to me nothing less than his own calling – which by then had become my own – I became ever more committed to it," says Hoffman.

He went on to earn a PhD from Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. For his course of study he picked liturgy, a field so new that he was one of the first ever to receive a doctorate specifically in it alone.

Armed with his degrees, Hoffman expected to become a small-town rabbi. That, however, did not happen. "I never imagined that life would've thrown me so many opportunities," he says. "I got lucky."

His first big break happened in 1973. Just as he was looking for a pulpit, HUC in New York City offered him a position as an assistant professor. He gladly accepted, eager for the chance to teach. And though he had no desire to work in a big city, he found that New York suited him, and he's been there ever since.

At HUC, he taught the history of Jewish liturgy in the traditional manner, by examining the history of prayer. Reviews were mixed. "I wasn't terribly enamored with what he had to offer us," admits Frishman. What she didn't know was that Hoffman found the purely historical approach to prayer wanting as well. The content was fascinating, but it lacked the human element. He began experimenting with a new idea: that liturgy could be best understood through the lens of ritual; that is, prayers are powerful because of how people recite them.

Part of his inspiration came from time spent studying with Christian scholars. The Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, or Vatican II, was in its heyday, and Catholics were examining ways to update their liturgy and rituals. Hoffman joined a new organization called the North American Academy of Liturgy. When he joined, he was the only Jew. Years later, he became its president.

Though Hoffman has always been deeply rooted in the Jewish faith, he has spent much of his life in a world of Christians. In high school, most of Hoffman's friends were Lutheran. Given the dearth of Jews his age, he gravitated to the children of teachers from the Lutheran seminary because they were serious about religion. Not long after he took the position at HUC, the University of Notre Dame

invited him to lecture, and shortly thereafter to become a summer lecturer. At Notre Dame, he found that learning with Catholic scholars helped him define what he believed as a Jew.

"They'd ask you questions you had never thought of before," he says. "It sharpened my own sense of identity no end, because I had to figure out why I was different, how I was different, and how to express it."

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Armed with new ideas about ritual, in 1976 Hoffman began teaching a class at HUC called Rite and Ritual. Frishman attended the class and this time, she was impressed. "In that class he revealed himself to be an anthropologist," she recalls. "He is constantly looking for something new to unveil, and he doesn't do it for the sake of novelty. He does it for the sake of figuring out why a ritual has been around for as long as it has, and why it continues to be important to us."

His students and colleagues praise him for his ability to invent rituals that work. "Larry is extraordinarily gifted at composing on-the-spot prayers. He does it with a respect for traditional forms, but he is also very creative," says Wolfson. He adds, with a note of humor, "You haven't been married until you've been married by Larry Hoffman."

A few years after that first wave of students graduated, in the summer of 1984, Rabbi Daniel G. Zemel, now the senior rabbi at Temple Micah in Washington, D.C., was back at HUC for a seminar that proved a bit dull. He and a friend of his, also a rabbi, crept out of the classroom and went to find Hoffman. They chatted, and came up with the idea of forming an alumni study group with others from those first Rite and Ritual classes. More than twenty years later, that group of sixteen students, many now leaders of the Reform movement, still meets four times a year. The group has meant a great deal both to Hoffman and his former students.

Hoffman explains that the group stretches the boundaries of Jewish knowledge by integrating areas of study into an understanding of the world. At first, the group continued its study of anthropol-

ogy, beyond what they learned in Rite and Ritual. Since then, they have studied many other topics, ranging from art to quantum physics. "It's a very, very special group," says Zemel. "I cannot imagine my rabbinate without it."

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Hoffman and Ron Wolfson began discussing the challenges facing synagogues the first time they spoke, in 1993. They met for coffee at a friend's urging, and spent three hours in deep conversation: Reform synagogues were losing vitality, weren't addressing the needs of contemporary Jews, were too inwardly focused and not involved in outreach, and were "pediatric," as Hoffman puts it. Families joined for the Hebrew school and the Bar or Bat Mitzvah and then stopped showing up. One of the greatest challenges, they felt, was the shift from Judaism as an ethnicity to Judaism as a chosen religion. More than ever, Jews must choose Judaism, and the synagogue must facilitate that choice. Their conversation became the seed for Synagogue 2000, a national organization dedicated to revitalizing synagogue life for all denominations. In cofounding Synagogue 2000, Hoffman also initiated a third area of career concentration, and one he feels has the potential to impact the Jewish world even more than his contributions to the study and practice of ritual.

"We have to change the nature of our conversations about Jewish community," says Hoffman. "They can't be ethnic conversations anymore. They have to be conversations about why be a Jew – honest conversations."

He elaborates, "You want synagogues to be moral and spiritual centers. We lack morality in this country, terribly, and everybody knows it. We've become a mean country. We've cut back on all the help for the poor, and we've got people living in the streets and poverty among children. Everybody knows that. And I think most Jews want to help." It's up to the synagogue, he says, to help them help the world. Hoffman also believes the synagogue must play a role in creating a welcoming spiritual atmosphere for prayer.

Synagogue 3000, as the organization is now known, in work-

ing collaboratively with synagogues to promote transformation and empower congregations, has already had a profound effect. Freelander estimates that more than half of the nine hundred Reform synagogues he works with through the Union for Reform Judaism have become more dynamic in the last decade, with a broader offering of activities, more exciting rituals and more participatory congregations.

Both Hoffman and Wolfson have extended their impact by writing on the topic. Each published books about Synagogue 3000 in 2006 – Hoffman wrote *Rethinking Synagogues* and Wolfson contributed *The Spirituality of Welcoming*. "The single greatest success is that we've changed the nature of the conversation," Hoffman says. "When we started, almost nobody was doing this work. People are now talking about the sacred. People are now saying services don't have to be boring; they can be compelling."

And yet, despite his accomplishments, despite having changed the Jewish world in many ways, Hoffman underplays his impact.

"Traditional Jewish life would say that our transcendent purpose as Jews is to bring about *tikkun olam*, to bring about the messianic age," he says. "I've reached the conclusion that the amount of good that I can do in terms of bringing about the Messiah is so tiny that it seems to me if it's going to happen, we may work for a million years, but God's going to have to do something someday or other. The most important thing that we as Jews can do is to use the gifts that God has given us to help the people around us. So I've influenced, I think, the people who are around me."

The people around him have influenced him as well, including his three adult children, Joel, Rob and Shira – especially Shira, who suffers from severe epilepsy. The fact that God did nothing to prevent this illness has caused Hoffman to struggle with his conception of God.

"There's plenty of evidence in the Talmud that we see God suffering with us rather than entering to heal all of us. The rabbis are perfectly aware of this. They were the ones who put Job in the Bible, after all. The question of Job is: Why do the good people suf-

fer? And God doesn't answer him. God avoids it. But one of Job's friends comes to visit him and says, 'You must have sinned. Obviously God wouldn't let bad things happen to good people, so what did you do wrong?' And the only thing God says at the end of this story, He says to Job, 'By the way,' He says, 'Your friend who said you must've sinned? He's wrong. I don't work that way.'"

Hoffman explains, "I believe with Maimonides that we can't ever do justice in describing God…I don't like even saying, 'I believe in God' or 'I don't believe in God'; I think that's not a Jewish question. A Jewish question is, is there such a thing as the 'God-ly' – a reality of God in the world – and how can I act God-ly? When I say 'God heals,' what I mean is, I should try to be a healer, and therefore to concentrate on the God-ly…

"So my concern is not drawing a detailed picture of God. My concern is not expecting too much of God, because you'll be disappointed. The way I have come to imagine it is, there are three key aspects of God in traditional theology. One is that God is omniscient, God knows everything. Two, God is omnipotent, God can do everything. Three, God is beneficent, God is all good. Now, I don't think you get to keep all three. I think you have to give up on one.

"I give up on God's all-power," he says. "I think God created the universe, and in doing so had to create a natural world, and in creating a natural world, God had to create the laws of nature and set us free now to learn them. God doesn't change the laws of nature. That's the way it is, folks."

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Clearly, Hoffman isn't content to sit back and accept the accolades that come his way. At a point in his career when many people slow down, he's looking forward to starting an institute for synagogue studies, to elucidate what makes synagogues unique and to serve as an incubator for ideas that will change them for the better. "Imagine if we had a hundred people studying this, instead of one or two!" he says.

And then there's the world at large, a source of constant con-

cern. When questioned as to what he worries about, Hoffman, after denying he's much of a worrier, begins to list concern after concern, a litany of them. He fears that there aren't enough good people in the world, that some of his students graduate without being qualified, that Israel's wars will never end, that people don't think deeply enough. Then there's the frustration that so many people want to limit freedom and turn the clock back to the "good old days," which Hoffman calls "old but not necessarily good."

And there's more. "I worry when I hear the news," he says. "Almost always, I worry when I hear the news about what the world's coming to. But I try my best to work on a one-to-one basis. That's the only thing in my power to do."