

Fear and Leyening at Kol Nefesh

By Meira Ben-Gad

Based on Meira's leyening tips, revised for Kol HaKehila, RH 2013

At Kol Nefesh, we are justly proud of the quality of our services. We have an amazing number of people with the skills and knowledge to serve as Shlichei Tsibbur (prayer leaders), to officiate at the Bimah, to leyen (read from the Torah), and to read the Haftarah – and those numbers are constantly growing, as individual members put in the time and effort needed to learn new parts of the service and new skills. Even more outstanding is the way that we engage in a continual collective effort to improve what we do. Over recent years, Chazan Jacky has led KN's Shlichei Tsibbur in an initiative to deepen our connection to the liturgy and nusach (traditional melodies), with the aim of ensuring a richer, more meaningful prayer experience for the community. At the same time, Rabbi Joel has led us in learning how all those present at a service can derive meaning from the liturgical texts, and can heighten the energy in a service by joining in as active participants, humming and singing along with the prayer leader. The result has been noticeable. Our Shabbat services, previously somewhat inconsistent, are now nearly always smooth-flowing and uplifting, especially when we have a good crowd for Psukei D'Zimra and the early part of Shaharit.

One area where we remain somewhat weak is our Torah reading. The Torah scroll offers a text with no punctuation, no vowels, no cantillation marks... Is it any wonder that time-pressed members, despite their best intentions, often end up chanting from the Chumash instead of the scroll? Yet just as we have put in the hard work to improve our prayer services, we can do the same for our Torah reading. Led by Chazan Jacky and Rabbi Joel, the members of the Tfilla Pelach are now launching an initiative to do just that.

As part of this initiative, I've written up a few ideas that might be useful for some members who know how to leyen but have trouble learning their leyening well enough to do it smoothly from the scroll. Tips 1 through 3 involve the process. Tips 4 and 5 involve organizing your time. Tip 6 is for the really desperate.

1. The key to leyening smoothly from the left-hand side of the tikun (i.e., from the scroll) is being able to leyen smoothly from the right. And when I say smoothly, I mean smoothly! Before you even look at the left-hand column, you should be able to chant your portion from the right-hand side with no hesitations or stumbles. (If your Hebrew is weak you may need to start by reading the section through a few times before you begin chanting it.) You'll know you're ready to move on to the left-hand column when you find yourself leyening on autopilot – i.e., when you find yourself chanting the last few verses and have no idea how you got there, because you've been daydreaming.
2. Understanding what you're reading is crucial! That doesn't mean you need to go sign up for a Hebrew immersion course. What it does mean is that if your Hebrew is weak, you should read through the English translation until you're familiar with it, and until you can recognize at least a few key words in the Hebrew (names are excellent for this purpose, but if there are no names in your reading, pick a few words that will be meaningful to you). Why is this important? If you don't understand what you're reading, you might as well be chanting nonsense syllables. It is much easier to remember something that has meaning, or that at least is connected to a reference point in your mind.
3. When you're learning from the left, consolidate as you go. Learn one verse at a time, but don't move on to the next verse until you can leyen smoothly to that point (on the left) from the beginning.

4. Leyening is in large part memorization. And memorization takes two kinds of time: working time and down time. The brain can only absorb so much in one go. Twenty or thirty minutes a day for two weeks is far more efficient than 6 hours over two days. So start early!! You'll have to work out your own rule of thumb, but a good place to start might be 2 or 3 days per verse. In other words, if you are due to leyen 10 verses, give yourself 20 to 30 days to learn them. If your Hebrew is good and your memory is sharp, you may find that 1 day per verse is sufficient; if your Hebrew or memory are weak, you may need 4 days per verse or more. And remember – start by ensuring that you can read the whole thing smoothly on the right, as described above. You will be astonished at how quickly you can memorize a passage on the left if the right-hand column is well-established in your head.
5. Every leyener is familiar with the phenomenon: you can do it 100 percent at home, then you get to shul, and boom – it's gone. So you have to know your leyening 1000 percent, not 100 percent. The way to do this is to imagine that you have to know it not by Shabbat, but by sometime the previous week (I like Wednesday myself). Figure out when to start preparing by counting back however many days you need (using the heuristic described in Tip 4) from that Wednesday (or whatever day you choose). Don't cheat – make yourself have it down pat from the left-hand column by Wednesday. Then you'll have the rest of the week to really internalize it. Chant it through 3, 4, 5, 6 times (mainly on the left, but also once or twice on the right) on Thursday and Friday. By Shabbat, it should be so boring you think you might scream if you have to read it one more time. Congratulations – now you know it.
6. There may come a time when you feel overwhelmed by what you've taken on. Don't despair. I wouldn't recommend this on a regular basis, but if you're in dire straits, stop working from the beginning toward the end, and start working from the end toward the beginning. Learn your last verse, then the verse before that, then the verse before that. (Remember to consolidate as you go along.) When you feel ready, go back to the beginning again. Magically, the amount you have to learn will suddenly be that much shorter!

Finally, if you really do feel that you've taken on too much, there is a way out. Most sections of the weekly reading can be split into two shorter parts. Indeed, the minimum number of verses required for any chunk of leyening is only three! So if your section is too long for you, let Allan and me know, and we can split the section at a point that's comfortable for you.

Good luck, and enjoy your leyening! 🍀