

© 2009 Arnold E. Resnicoff. An earlier version of this article appeared in the Winter 1987 issue of the *Military Chaplains' Review*.

Prayers that Hurt Public Prayer in Interfaith Settings

Rabbi Arnold E. Resnicoff

In the Mekong Delta, it was a Protestant chaplain, Lester “Les” Westling, Jr., who reached out to me as my chaplain, when I was a young and very frightened line officer. He helped me grow as a Jew, and he helped me find courage in my faith. Ultimately, he helped me decide to become a rabbi--and later, after rabbinical school, to return to the Navy as a chaplain myself. With his help, I discovered my love for my Jewish faith; through his help, I was touched by his faith, and by the Christian love he witnessed through his words, his actions, and his care.

Years later, when I served as a chaplain during the terrorist truck bomb attack in Beirut, my skullcap, my *kippa*, was covered in blood after I used it to wipe the face of a wounded Marine, and so I discarded it somewhere amidst the rubble and the misery of that terrible day. There, it was a Catholic chaplain—George “Pooch” Pucciarelli—who saw me without my head covered, and cut a circle of cloth from his own Marine camouflage cap to take its place. For others, this *kippa* was a symbol of my Jewish faith; for me, his action transformed this one into a symbol of his Christian love.

The Talmud tells the story of a Jew who bought a camel from an Arab, only to discover a precious gem hidden in the saddle, of which neither the seller nor the buyer had been aware. When the Jew returned it, the Arab’s reaction was one of respect and appreciation for the Jewish faith, for it must be praiseworthy, he said, to teach a man such honest ways.

Colleagues like Les and Pooch helped me to understand the lesson of this Talmudic story: it does not require words to witness one’s faith; it takes love. Perhaps this is the Jewish version of the teaching of the Christian saint, Francis of Assisi, who taught his disciples to “preach the gospel everywhere,” but to use words only “where necessary.” Words can help, but more often, as the saying goes, actions speak louder.

Knowing What Hurts

Another story from rabbinical tradition tells of two long-time friends. “Do you love me?” one friend asks the other. “Of course,” his friend responds. “Do you know what hurts me?” “No, what hurts?”

“How can you say you love me if you don't know what hurts me?”

When my father died, one fellow chaplain wrote to me to accept the resurrection of Jesus, because, without that acceptance, the death of a loved one must seem truly hopeless. Thankfully, many other chaplains reached out to comfort me, not to convert me. I remember my senior chaplain, a Baptist minister – someone for whom the expression “a big bear of a man” was a perfect description – was eating at the Officers

Club when he learned the news of my father's death. He left his meal uneaten, came back to the chapel, and without saying a word, he hugged me, and in that hug I understood his hopes and his prayers that my pain might be eased. For me, there was no question whether it was the note or the hug that helped; whether it was that note or that hug that was "the Christian thing to do"; whether it was that note or that hug – the words or the action – that more truly "witnessed" the love within the Christian faith.

At the 1980 Navy Chaplain Corps worship service, the chaplain coordinating the conference for our base began by stressing the need for us to work together as a team during the new decade which was dawning. Inviting us to join together for a moment of prayer, he ended that very prayer in the name of the Trinity. I could not add my "Amen." I felt out of place, excluded-- as if I were not part of the group. Hadn't I just been invited to pray with my fellow chaplains? I genuinely *wanted* to be a part of this prayer, as we faced the future together—and it saddened me that I could not.

Few chaplains would be so insensitive as to write me to say there can be no basis for comfort within Judaism, but there are many who send me the message that there can be no basis for common prayer. We may work together, but we cannot face God together, as servants or as children, not even for a moment. There are times, of course, when the slight is unintentional, and the chaplain simply *does not realize that inviting me to join in prayer and then using words which I cannot say is the same as inviting me for dinner and serving food I cannot eat.*

There are other chaplains, of course, who do understand there are words and expressions which exclude non-Christians, but – even regretting the situation -- they think they have no choice. They see the question of public prayer on an academic plane, and base their choice of words on theological considerations or "requirements," or they see the question as a question of rights: *their* "rights" to pray according to their religious traditions.

For me, however, the question of sharing a moment of prayer is not an abstract intellectual question about theological requirements or religious rights, it is about theological possibilities, and religious responsibilities – *to others*. It is not a question of "interfaith relations," a phrase which brings to mind a meeting of religious bodies, as much as it is a challenge to find ways to craft actions that show care for human beings.

And so, when I raise the issue of prayer in an interfaith setting, as I do in this article, it is an attempt to share human feelings among friends. It is an effort to let others know *what hurts*. And then, it is an attempt to begin a conversation about choices we might have.

Public Prayer

Prayers in our own religious services or ceremonies should never be a question, and neither the government nor the military should set limits or establish guidelines. The only question is the issue of public prayer in interfaith settings – especially official programs and ceremonies where men and women of many faiths, and those who hold no faith, are in attendance.

There is a fundamental question for some chaplains as to whether it is appropriate for chaplains to participate in such "civil ceremonies" (in contrast to religious ceremonies) at

all. For some, prayers made appropriate to civil occasions “water down” the true faith and open up the dangers of “civil religion.”

My feeling is that such a danger is overshadowed by the far greater danger of the purely secular world: that it will be a place which welcomes no religion at all. A word of prayer at a civil or secular occasion can be a reminder that faith is not rightly relegated merely to the synagogue, a church, a temple, or a mosque. And, to use a good Catholic expression, it is an opportunity not for evangelization, but for *pre-evangelization*: a word of faith and hope that perhaps can make the ground a little more fertile for acts of faith that might come later. As the Rev. Jerry Falwell once said to me (and I’ll mention my meeting with him again, later in this article), *evangelization – witnessing – is not a sprint, but a marathon*. It is essential to take a longer view of what we might accomplish with faith.

For me, this distinction between evangelization and pre-evangelization is linked to another distinction: between religion and faith. One of my teachers in rabbinical school was Abraham Joshua Heschel, who wrote the book (among many others), *God in Search of Man*. In that work, he says that many people define religion as an “approach to God,” but he wrote that they are wrong. God reaches out to us first. God seeks us first. Understanding and accepting that premise, that truth, is *faith*. Then, coming together as a community to respond to that faith, based on our particular community’s history and culture, is *religion*. And so, he wrote, religion is not an *approach to God*; it is a *response to God*. With our prayer, we have the opportunity to open our listeners to the idea of faith – and the power of faith, to see the particular event in which we participate within a larger perspective: even, possibly, within a larger plan. We can remind them that our religions might differ, but the basic idea of faith (expressed in another of Rabbi Heschel’s titles, *Man is Not Alone*) is something that we can share.

Today, there is another reason, I think, that a word of prayer – inclusive prayer – is not only appropriate, but even crucial. Today, regrettable as it is, much of the “witnessing” of faith that we see in the world are the battles and wars of religious groups killing others. For so many men and women today, religion seems to be part of the problem, not part of the solution. I will never forget a column by Maureen Dowd, after 9-11, when she said that someone had written on the wall of a building near the Pentagon, “Please, God, protect us from those who believe in you.”

When I was asked to write a report on my time in Beirut, including the time of the 1983 suicide truck bomb attack, I wrote about one time when we were crouching down in the bunkers during a mortar attack. I remember looking around at the other men with me, and I made a simple comment. I said that we Americans probably had the only “interfaith foxholes” in the whole Mid-East. There were Muslim foxholes, Jewish foxholes for the Israelis, Christian foxholes for the Christian Phalangists, and so on – but only we, we Americans, had interfaith foxholes. I made the comment then, and I have repeated it many times since, that *if the world had more interfaith foxholes, maybe we would have less need for foxholes altogether*.

When chaplains are invited to offer a word of prayer at a civil ceremony, it is an opportunity to remind those who attend of the healing power of prayer – the way prayer can bring us together, not tear us apart. It is an opportunity to remind our listeners of our unique American experiment in interfaith cooperation: interfaith foxholes, for a military and a nation, where we can stand shoulder to shoulder with those of other

faiths, or no faiths, defending ourselves against the terrors and the evil that threaten us all.

A time for a word of prayer in an interfaith setting is not a time to profess our particular faith or evangelize for our specific religion. It is not a time to reinforce the notion that those who are religious today are concerned only for their religion, and their rights within that religion. It is a time for us to struggle – all chaplains – to find a way to offer words that bring us together, and stress the values, the hopes, and even the dreams, that we share. We can stress our shared humanity through a moment of awareness of the Presence of something larger than ourselves. It is an opportunity for *shared faith*.

Biblical precedents

The writers of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were careful to choose words – such as “the Creator” (eg, “endowed by our Creator”) – which were inclusive, rather than representing any one religion or faith group. But, we need not begin with the founders of America to understand that there are times – and ways -- to speak of God in general terms.

Millennia before the founding fathers celebrated this truth, it was the Biblical prophet Malachi who saw the cruelty of warfare in his time and cried out, “Have we not all one Father? Did not one God create us all?” (Malachi 2:10). His fear was not that he might water down God’s word or forget the different cultic responsibilities of Jews and non-Jews. His concern was to remind the world of God’s existence and the way that God’s care binds all humanity together. In today’s world, still torn by strife, it is no “danger” to share this prophetic message and no “cop-out” to follow this example. Instead, affirming that all humanity has a common, loving Creator is a challenge worthy of all our faiths, and all of us as chaplains.

The pages of every newspaper reveals how religion is abused so as to tear people apart. Through a moment of prayer we can remind a cynical world that faith can and must be used to bring people together. When entire faith groups are excluded from our prayers, then a chance to face God together is lost. An opportunity to touch men and women of all faiths has become an occasion to relate to our faith group alone. Without prayer which *includes all* people of faith, we forsake an opportunity to teach that despite differences we must work together for the common good. In contrast, exclusive prayers offered in interfaith settings remains a harsh reminder of how separate we stand.

Each of us wears the cross, tablets, crescent or prayer wheel to identify our faith tradition – and in the future, there will be more symbols, for more faiths. But in public prayer we have the opportunity to communicate the fact that our faiths teach us to care for others--all others. Whatever a public prayer should be, it should never be cruel or uncaring.

One of the most “general” prayers in the Bible is *Psalms 117*, the Bible’s shortest book:

O praise the Lord, all you nations;
Praise Him all you peoples;
For His love for us is great;
And the truth of the Lord endures forever. Hallelujah.

Would such an inspirational prayer water down our faith?

Rights and Responsibilities

Does not each of us have the right to pray as he or she pleases? No power can ever deny us the right, or the ability, to pray. As has been written regarding the question of prayer in public schools, there will always be students praying so long as there are teachers handing out tests! We can offer prayers from our hearts at any time: private prayers between us and our Creator. In our discussions of prayer, we must be careful to distinguish between the “right to pray,” and the opportunity (and the gift) we might receive from the military – from the government – to offer a *public* prayer in a non-religious setting.

And, just as we maintain the right for private, personal prayer, we have the right to pray according to our traditions in our own worship services or religious ceremonies. It is only in the very limited area of public prayer before interfaith groups, a relatively modern phenomenon, that the question of balancing the “right” of the speaker against the “right” of the listeners comes to the fore. For me, when we discuss this issue, it is helpful to remember a basic difference between the “law of the land,” at least in the West, and the “law of the Bible.” The former considers a situation from the point of view of *rights*, while the latter is more concerned with *responsibilities*.

When we accept the invitation or the assignment to participate in a public ceremony by offering a word of prayer, we understand that we are making a contract of sorts. Analogously we do not agree to participate in a wedding and then use the ceremony as the occasion to speak against the union. It seems to me, if there is a right involved, it is not the right to word the prayers as we please, but a right to be exercised much *before* the occasion: the right to decline to participate. *It is the right of the chaplain who cannot in good conscience offer a “general” prayer to decline, in the same way that we may choose not to participate in baptisms, weddings, or funerals.* And, since this decision is based upon genuine religious convictions, there should be no negative consequences for the chaplain declining to participate.

In 2005, when I worked with the Air Force as a Special Assistant to the Secretary and Chief of Staff, we tried to make this idea one of the guiding principles for our position on prayer in civil ceremonies. While some thought the easiest solution would be to ban all prayers at public ceremonies – and the possibility to make that the military “law of the land” is always out there -- we chose instead to adopt a policy much more complex and nuanced. We said that the military should never tell a chaplain how to pray. On the other hand, the military had both the right and the responsibility to craft the elements of the ceremony, including the inclusion of a prayer, so long as that prayer was “inclusive” or “non-denominational.” No chaplain should be forced to give such a prayer, and should always have the right to decline to participate in such a ceremony.

However, if we as chaplains *accept* the invitation, then we have a responsibility to understand what our mission is. We must understand that we have been asked to add a reminder of the holy, and challenged to touch and inspire those present through a moment of shared prayer. We have not been asked to preach, nor to confess our personal faith. We have a responsibility to our conscience and our faith, but we also have a responsibility to those before whom we stand. Neither can be ignored.

Practical Considerations

At the most practical level, it is well for us to remember that participation in a civil ceremony may be only a small part of our ministry, but it often lays the groundwork for much of what follows.

There is a story of a young sailor who hesitated to speak to the chaplain when he saw that the chaplain's faith was different from his own. "Chaplain" he stammered, "I hope you won't try to change my faith."

"Don't worry, friend," the chaplain answered, "but together perhaps we can understand how our faith can change *us*."

Parents still send their children off to the military with the reminder that if problems arise they are to go "see the chaplain." What a wonderful basis for ministry. Because we are "religious," our people trust that we must care about others. Often our civilian counterparts do not enjoy such good publicity. In religious history, we learn from the prophets the need to consistently demand justice—and so it is appropriate that chaplains are sought out when the military system seems unfair. We are men and women of faith, and so we are approached when others feel loneliness or pain or seek reason for hope.

When we offer public prayer, we are often being "sized up" by men and women who may one day need us. When our prayers disappoint the listeners, they may still give us another chance—or even come to us for advice! But when our prayers hurt those who hear us, we may simply never hear from them. In my line-officer days I know that I would never approach a chaplain whose prayer denied my existence. When I try to teach Jewish sailors that they should approach "their" ship's chaplain for help, I often know they will not. "He doesn't care about me," they tell me. "You should hear his evening prayer..."

On the other hand, we should not underestimate the healing impact of inclusive prayers. We might think it is a neutral act to offer a general prayer, but it is not. It is recognized by many as a positive action: a careful and inclusive word of prayer is an act of love.

Christian Theological Considerations

For many Christians, the New Testament gives a scriptural basis for "general" prayers. They point to Jesus' prayer as an example. When asked how to pray, Jesus began, "Our Father, who art in heaven . . ." (Matthew 6:9 and Luke 11:2). For another illustration of "general" prayers, they point to the words of Stephen recorded in Acts 7:60, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge." Or "God, be merciful to me, a sinner," written in Luke 18:13. Many of the New Testament epistles end with prayers offered in the name of Jesus, but in the Epistle to the Hebrews there is a simple prayer we might emulate today when ending an invocation or benediction, "Grace be with you all, Amen" (Hebrews 13:25).

There are verses in the New Testament, however, which some Christians understand to teach that the Christian faith requires prayer to be offered in Jesus' name. "Whatever you shall ask of the Father in my name, He will give it to you" (John 16:23-26). This

verse is sometimes translated a different way: “Whatsoever you shall ask of the Father, in my name He will give it to you.” This rendering seems to teach something quite different, but even keeping the first reading, how does this verse apply to the subject at hand?

For some Christians, the idea of praying with a phrase as “In His Name,” “In Your Name,” or “In the name of the Lord,” allows them to remain true to the verse and yet open enough to allow others to embrace the prayer as well.

Others, as they explain themselves to me, accept the Trinitarian understanding that where one person of the trinity is present, all are present. A prayer to the Father, or to God’s Holy Spirit, invokes Jesus as well. And for still other Christians, any prayer rooted in the love and faith of Christianity is in fact a prayer asked “in Jesus’ name,” regardless of what specific words are used. The word, “name,” in this context means more than a title, it means being or essence. Praying in His name means praying as His representative, praying as a person filled with His Love. (One chaplain explained to me that all his prayers were “in the name of Jesus,” just as all police officers operated in “the name of the law” – but neither they, nor he, had to say that in words every time they opened their mouths!)

Finally for those who would interpret the verse most strictly, I offer a “rabbinical” answer in terms of the struggle we share—the challenge to remain true to our faiths and yet offer something which can bring us together in faith, even for just a moment. If the verse means that prayers asking for something must be offered in the name of Jesus, is it not acceptable to offer prayers which are not petitions in a different manner?

Can we not touch or inspire persons of all faiths through a word or prayer of praise? (“Whoever offers praise glorifies me” Psalm 50:23.) Can we not offer a word of thanksgiving? (“This is the day the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.” Psalm 118:24) Christians can heed Paul’s advice in Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:19 to offer psalms and hymns, or drawing from the Roman Catholic Bible, Christians can follow the example of Ben Sirach and bear witness to God’s presence through the glory of His world: “Behold the rainbow, then bless its maker” (Ecclesiasticus 43:12).

For some Christians sharing the proclamation that “Jesus is Lord” becomes the proof of faith. “No one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit” (I Corinthians 12:3). Speaking these words becomes a way of invoking the presence of the Holy Spirit and therefore an important part of Christian prayer. But if we see the opportunity to offer prayer in a public setting, before men and women of all faiths, as a challenge or privilege and not a right, then the struggle must be to *find other ways* to proclaim our faith and other ways to make the moment holy.

My contention is that there are other ways for us all. We can search for other verses in the New Testament: “When we cry Abba! Father! It is the Spirit Himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.” (Romans 8:15f) But with or without specific verses we know we witness for our faith when it fills us with love enough to care about each other.

If it is a choice between an imperfect prayer or an action which will divide us at the very moment devoted to bringing us together, then let us opt for the caring word and trust that God will understand. “The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought; but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words”

(Romans 8:26). From the thirteenth chapter of I Corinthians, we learn that love is better than prayer . . . even better than prophecy.

Jewish Theological Considerations

In some ways it may be easier for a Jewish chaplain who is invited to participate in public prayer to offer an inclusive or general prayer. There are many verses in the Hebrew Scriptures which seem to assure us there is no special formula for prayer. From the shortest prayer in the Bible (Numbers 12:13—five Hebrew words) to the longest (Deuteronomy 9:25—one that lasted forty days and forty nights), we understand prayer as a cry from the heart. “The Lord is near to all who call upon Him” (Psalm 145), and so the exact words are less important than the act of prayer itself. After all, God hears us even when we do not use words at all. He hears and heeds the pain of slaves (Genesis 3:7) and the sighs of prisoners (Psalms 79:11).

In a beautiful discussion in the Talmud, the rabbis offer the story of the woodcutter who, lost in the woods, knows he will not make it to the congregation in time for evening prayers. “Lord,” he prays, “I am not an educated man. I do not know the prayers by heart. But, I know the alphabet, and I will recite it. Please rearrange the letters to form the prayers you know exist in my heart.”

This is not to say that the wording of public prayer is not a potential problem or challenge for the Jewish chaplain. Many of the prayers I regularly offer within Jewish settings would simply be inappropriate for interfaith groups. A widespread myth has it that Jewish chaplains are not asked to modify their prayers and so it is “unfair” to expect such action on the part of Christians. The fact is that rabbis, like the Christian clergy with whom we serve, must choose words carefully in interfaith groups. If the prayers offered by Jewish chaplains seem “acceptable” then perhaps we tread more softly—for we, like other minorities, know the pain of being ignored.

Although I pray in the synagogue that we not lose faith in the coming of the Messiah—in all the millennia of our yearning he has not yet arrived—I would not offer these words in a non-Jewish setting. If I pray for strength to reject false messiahs—false in Jewish terms—I would never do so before an interfaith group. Words which refer to the horrors of the holocaust, or the hopes of Zionism, or the State of Israel come as naturally to my lips during synagogue prayer as a reference to the Trinity might come to those of a Christian colleague, but references to the Holocaust, Zionism, or the State of Israel are seldom appropriate in non-Jewish settings, at least not without extra words to expressly explain their relevance or to show sensitivity to the needs and cares of all those present.

Some rabbis believe we cannot compose our own prayers in public, but that we are restricted to those handed down to us from the past. When these rabbis are asked to offer public prayer, they often choose to read lessons instead of offer prayer. Today it is also important for us to recognize that there are other questions of sensitivity which challenge us to be sensitive to the feelings of those gathered for prayer. An immediate example is language which does not recognize racial integrity or which excludes or wounds women.

Language that Hurts

The intention of the prayer is crucial, and some maintain that the intention is all that is important, not the impact of the words on the hearers. If the intention is not to hurt, then it is unimportant what we do to address any problem in the minds of the hearers.

Neither life nor prayer is that simple. Once we know an action or a word hurts a neighbor, it is not merely a question of right and wrong alone. It is now a question of causing “accidental” pain or consciously trying *not* to do so. In recent years we have made significant progress in becoming more racially and gender sensitive in our language. Unfortunately, when it comes to being religiously inclusive in public settings, we have a weaker track record.

Certainly we sometimes misuse language innocently. For example, following the initial advertising of the manufacturer, I always used the phrase “flesh colored Band-Aids,” until a Black friend pointed out that the Band-Aids were not the color of his flesh. Language changes—and so does our awareness of the way the language we use might help or hurt others. Once we know what hurts, we must change our words, and our ways.

Finding a Way

The faith and the conscience of some chaplains allow them to choose words for public prayers that easily touch us all. Other chaplains, who are unwilling or unable to change the exclusivity of their prayers, choose not to participate in an interfaith prayer setting.

When I was the USEUCOM chaplain, one of my responsibilities was to host the annual International Chiefs of Chaplains conference. There, we had chaplains who had literally never prayed in a group that included others of different faiths, and “American” ideas of interfaith prayer would have been too foreign for them to comprehend – or literally “lost in the translation,” when our multi-language translators tried to explain.

And so in that setting – a setting of religious leaders – we came up with a different approach to final prayers to end the conference. We didn’t attempt to craft a shared prayer, but instead we invited all who were in attendance to offer a prayer for peace based on their specific traditions. And in the midst of incense, Gregorian chanting, and prayers in Latin, in Hebrew, and in Greek, no one felt uncomfortable simply hearing prayers for peace from such a plethora of religious traditions.

However, this approach would not work in a public ceremony where only one prayer is offered – and even in a conference of chaplains, it might be ultimately unsatisfying for those of us who still want that moment of prayer that is truly shared: that prayer that brings us together, and allows us to make the prayer our own, through that powerful word, “amen.”

For those of us who do value that moment, and yet struggle with the challenge of how to choose words that recognize the tension between the responsibilities to one’s own faith traditions, and the responsibility to those we serve, the following ideas are offered as suggestions – and perhaps as discussion starters for further conversation:

In Your Name. Phrases such as “For you name’s sake.” and “For the glory of your name,” are found throughout the Bible; Psalm 79 uses both. Another simple, scriptural ending for prayers can be taken from Psalm 72: “Blessed be His glorious name forever.”

Invitational Ending. As a variation of the silent ending, I have sometimes offered a prayer and ended with the invitation for all persons present to complete the prayer using the words of their own faith and of their tradition. After a few moments, I conclude with the words, “And may we say, Amen.”

Shared Images. When Abraham prayed with Melchizedek (Genesis 14) this non-Jewish priest offered a prayer to “the most high God, the possessor of heaven and earth.” One modern rabbinical commentary points out that this may be the first example of persons of different faiths searching for a “shared image” in order to join together in prayer. The story may be an appropriate basis for our prayer, “in the Lord’s name,” which may allow everyone with a theistic belief system to say amen, even if the words take on different meanings within the different traditions. The Bible offers many shared images. So we may pray together to God as savior, redeemer, shepherd, creator, and king. Even the image of the Holy Spirit possesses a Jewish meaning. It comes from the Jewish idea of *ruah ha-kodesh*.

The Lord’s Prayer. Is the Lord’s Prayer appropriate for interfaith expression? Although it is based on Jewish prayers, this prayer has become the Christian prayer par excellence. In the past Jewish scholars have generally taught that Jews should not recite it, especially because scholars recognize that its title comes not from the idea that it is a prayer “to the Lord,” but that it represents the words of prayer that came from Jesus, who was recognized as the Lord. (Of course, many faith groups, including Catholics, refer to this prayer as the “Our Father,” not the “Lord’s Prayer” – which would take away one difficulty for Jews.) Perhaps today we Jews (and here I speak to my faith community) should re-examine the situation. If this prayer were offered by someone attempting to find common ground for prayer, should we Jews not respond through our participation?

Biblical Readings. We may simply offer appropriate words from the Bible as our contribution to the public ceremony. As a benediction, the priestly blessing recorded in Numbers 6 is often appropriate and welcomed by those in attendance.

Parables. Some rabbis offer a teaching, a *d’var Torah*, a Word of Torah, rather than a prayer. Could we not offer a parable or story which shares a biblical image or scriptural hope? When using the holy books of the Jewish and Christian traditions, my feeling is that we should not restrict ourselves to those we have in common. Many Christians have respectfully led devotions based on Christian New Testament readings which have included me completely. “From this story in the New Testament, which is a part of the Christian Bible, we can all learn an important message . . .”

Personal Prayers. While most of this article deals with public prayer offered aloud—a prayer to which each listener can add a personal amen—there is another approach. The possibility exists for a chaplain to see his or her participation as an opportunity to offer a simple, personal prayer, perhaps asking others to do the same, in silence. I should think that such a prayer would require an introduction: “I thank you for the opportunity to

offer a personal prayer from my tradition; it is my hope that something I say may touch you so that you may pray for a moment as well.”

Another alternative, linked to this idea, was one I offered in the original form of this article – but I no longer think it is a workable solution. The idea came from my experience with a Christian chaplain who earnestly struggled with the matter for months. He made two small but significant changes in his manner of offering public prayer. When he began, he no longer said, “Let us pray.” When he ended, he did not say, “In Christ’s name *we pray*.” Instead he said, “In Christ’s name *I pray*.” The problem is that I have heard Christians offering some prayers in this way, even during Presidential inaugurations, and although I understood what they were doing, almost none of my friends (at least, my Jewish friends) recognized the nuanced words of that moment of prayer. And so, instead of this approach, I strongly prefer the next alternative I will mention: the “interfaith ending.”

Interfaith Endings. It is possible to use an ending which is both particular and universal. For example, “We who are Christians offer this prayer in the name of Jesus; but all of us—regardless of our individual religions—offer it in the name of the Almighty God, Creator of Heaven and Earth.” It has been my experience that those who hear a chaplain end a prayer like this have nothing but praise for him or for her, striking a balance between a tradition of one faith group, and outreach to all.

The words of my mouth, and the meditations of my heart. Finally, I offer the approach that I think might be the most powerful – and the easiest – of all. Psalm 19 speaks of prayer as “the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart.” God hears both. Could we not offer our prayer in an inclusive way – with the words of our mouths, saying something like, “In His name we pray” – and then continue with a silent prayer – the meditations of our heart – continuing, “and that name is....”

Earlier, I mentioned the meeting I had with the Rev Jerry Falwell, which took place in September 2005, when I was working with the Air Force. When I brought up the possibility of this approach – “the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart” – he positively beamed! He told me that he didn’t know how anyone could object to such an approach, where one’s words were expressing love for God – and one’s actions were expressing, and witnessing, love for God’s creatures. He told me that at his college, at Liberty University, students who were going into education were taught that there would be a difference in the “rules of the road” for those who were going into Christian education, and those who were going into public schools and institutions. And, again, he told me what he taught his students: faith – including the element of faith that we might call evangelism, or witness -- is not a sprint; it is a marathon.

Praying Together

The word, “amen,” means “it is true,” or “may it be so.” According to Jewish tradition, adopted by Christianity, saying amen is the equivalent of reciting the entire prayer (Talmud, Berakhot 53b). Because of this, the Talmud cautions Jews not to say amen to prayers of non-Jews, unless they have heard the entire prayer (Berakhot 51b). Prayer

should always be taken seriously, and we must be able to make it our own before saying amen.

At the same time, the idea of joining another human being in prayer was seen as an action filled with power and hope. Setting aside our differences and praying together “opens the gates of Paradise” (Talmud, Shabbat 119b). Through a play on words, the Talmud sees hidden meaning in a Biblical verse, Isaiah 26:2. Although it is ordinarily read as, “open ye the gates (of paradise) that the righteous nation which keepeth truth may enter in,” a slight change in the vowel marks of the Hebrew renders it, “Open ye the gates of righteousness, that the righteous nation which says amen may enter it!”

In 1984 a civilian minister served as one of the visiting scholars at the annual Navy Chaplain Corps Professional Development Conference. He led us in prayer as part of his presentation, but his prayer was worded in such a way as not to include me. One of my colleagues, a Christian chaplain, approached him after the session, and told the speaker that he was unable to pray because of the anguish he had felt for me. His thoughts were on me because he recognized that I was excluded. During the next session of the conference, the speaker related the conversation to the group. He told us he had learned to think of prayer in a different light: that prayer was not only an expression of love for our God, but was also, at least at times, an act of love for God’s creatures. He was deeply touched that there could be such love among chaplains of different faiths. Not just *words* of love, but love.

That chaplain has faith, I thought to myself, but shares it with love. *He knows what hurts, and he cares.*

Rabbi Arnold E. Resnicoff is a combat veteran who served as a line officer in the Mekong Delta, and was one of the small group of Vietnam Veterans who fought for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in DC, delivering the closing prayer at its dedication. Following his 1976 ordination from rabbinical school, he returned to the Navy as a Chaplain, leading a distinguished career which culminated in his retirement in the grade of captain. He is a respected consultant on interfaith values and inter-religious affairs. From June 2005 to June 2006, he served as Special Assistant (for Values and Vision) to the Secretary and Chief-of-Staff of the U.S. Air Force, with the equivalent military rank of Brigadier General. He has participated in numerous historic meetings of religious leaders, and received many awards, including the Defense Superior Service Medal and the Chapel of Four Chaplains Hall of Heroes Gold Medallion. Two of the many prayers he has delivered at national and international events are included in the 2008 book, “The Treasury of American Prayer,” published by Doubleday. The text of the report the White House asked him to write after the 1983 Beirut suicide truck bomb attack – a report that was read by President Ronald Reagan as the keynote address to the “Baptist Fundamentalism ‘84” conference, led by the Rev. Jerry Falwell -- is available on his website: www.resnicoff.net.