

God and Mrs. Cooperman

Mrs. Cooperman, the elderly widow who attended my father's synagogue in Baltimore, was every rabbi's ideal congregant: she never spoke during services, she davened meticulously, caressing every word, she listened avidly to the rabbi's sermons, gave charity generously, observed Shabbat and kashrut, and honored those who studied Torah.

There was only one problem. Other than her ability to read Hebrew, she was completely unlettered and unlearned. That is why, in fact, she never skipped a word of davening: she was unable to distinguish between prayers that are recited on a regular Shabbat and those which are recited only when Shabbat coincides with Rosh Hodesh, or Yom Tov, or Hanuka. The net result was that on every single Shabbat of the year she recited every single prayer on every single page of the service.

My mother, who always sat next to her, would gently remind her, "This you don't have say today because today is not Rosh Hodesh."

Mrs. Cooperman would smile: "I ask you, what is so terrible if I do say it? If it isn't Rosh Hodesh today, soon it will be. So it really makes no difference."

We three pre-teen brothers, growing up in our father's shul, were more than a little amused by Mrs. Cooperman. After all, we were already studying Humash and Rashi and knew a little bit of Shulhan Arukh, and we found it absurd that an old lady could not make distinctions between Shabbat and Yom Tov. The mere thought of Mrs. Cooperman reading the *shemone esrei* or the *birkat hamazon* straight through without distinguishing one section from the next was enough to brighten up the dullest of days.

One year, Rosh Hodesh Tevet happened to coincide with the Shabbat of Hanuka. During the davening we recited *ya-ale veyavo* and *al hanissim*, and *hallel*, and at the *birkat hamazon* after our meal we omitted nothing, reciting everything from beginning to end: the *al hanissim* for Hanuka, the *retze* for Shabbat and the *ya-ale veyavo* for Rosh Hodesh. Suddenly it dawned on us that this was the one time that Mrs. Cooperman was right: on this one Shabbat of the year you simply opened up the *siddur* and kept going, reciting everything, omitting practically nothing. "Today is her day," we laughed, and from that moment and forevermore the wondrous

conflation of Shabbat, Hanuka and Rosh Hodesh became known among us as Mrs. Cooperman's Shabbat. That such a Shabbat occurs just once every few years only intensified the wicked anticipation of the recurrence of that magical moment in time.

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Many Hanukas, many Roshe Hodashim, many Mrs-Cooperman-Shabbatot have flown by since then. Mrs. Cooperman is no longer among the living, nor are her favorite rabbi and rebbetzin. We have passed her story down to our children and grandchildren, and whenever that special Shabbat occurs I still call my brothers across continents and oceans to remember the light-hearted mirth she unwittingly created for us when we were young.

This past Hanuka provided us once again with one of her enchanted Shabbatot. We recited all the prayers consecutively: *ya-aleh veyavo* for Rosh Hodesh, *al hanisim* for Hanuka, the entire *hal-lel*, and we read from three different *sifre Torah*. We passed over nothing: quintessential, vintage Cooperman.

But while we still chuckle at the memories which her name evokes, our laughter is of a different kind now. She no longer provokes the giggles of mischievous young boys, but rather smiles of appreciation and illumination. Now we realize that while she may have been ignorant of the subtleties and nuances of Torah learning, she possessed something that we utterly lacked then, and probably still lack now: devotion, surrender, and child-like innocence before the Presence of God.

We were too young to understand that in the torrent of words she poured out before the Creator every Shabbat morning there lay a key ingredient of worship. She didn't know the translation of those words, but in a much deeper sense she understood their meaning. She brought to her praying a total submission of the self before the Presence of God, a love for her Creator so consuming that she could not bear to pass over a single word of His holy *siddur*.

She worshiped God not from knowledge or intellect, but from an inner spirit that transcends the mind. She did not know the proofs for the existence of God, but she needed none, for God was not an abstraction but a reality. She had no idea of the philosophical underpinnings of prayers, but when she said *barukh ata*, she knew

she was talking to her personal Creator and that He was listening. She did not know the subtle differences between faith and trust and belief, and her prayer calendar was a seamless web which did not distinguish between one kind of holiness and the next, and she thanked God for the miracle of the Hanuka oil every Shabbat, and ushered in the new moon every week of the year, but she loved God, and her greatest joy was to engage in conversation with Him.

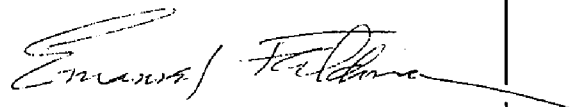
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It occurs to me that in our restless society, when a synagogue's worth is often measured by the rapidity with which it runs through its Shabbat service, and when insufficient velocity of prayer is considered sufficient cause to break away and begin a *shtiebel* of one's own; when omitting a *tahanun* prayer is a cause for joy at a Minyan, and we are irritated by a *ba-al tefilla* who keeps us in Shul five extra minutes; when our pray-ers are often a robotic, mechanical service of the lips, in unhappy fulfillment of the *mitzvat anashim melumada* of Isaiah 29:13 — in such a hurried time, the picture of a Mrs. Cooperman lovingly whispering every word of prayer is a striking counterpoint. Yes, her davening was halakhically out of joint. Certainly God is addressed differently on a Shabbat-Hanuka than on a normative Shabbat. Granted, our relationship to God is different on Pesah than it is on Rosh Hodesh, and we may not arrogate to our transient moods the right to transform different approaches to God into one happy mishmash of words—which is why we don't recite *hallel* every day of the year. And while we certainly may approach God at any time with any words of our own, the words of the *siddur* are sacred because, stemming from the Men of the Great Assembly, they reflect the changing divine-human connectedness of different religious seasons of the year that may not be shifted and molded according to our momentary whims.

But when Mrs. Cooperman appeared before her Maker Who is not constrained by the mortal boundaries and limitations of clocks and calendars, and for Whom Time is an indivisible entity, I like to think that perhaps He did not look with disfavor upon the seamless, timeless universe of His loyal servant Mrs Cooperman.

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As for us, we continue to daven halakhically, paying careful attention to the appearance of three stars, calculating precisely the time of *p'lag haMincha* and *alot hashahar* and *z'man keriat shema*, and occasionally even feeling a sense of *kavanna* and sanctity in our prayers. But whether we succeed in emulating the way Mrs. Cooperman caressed the words, whether we genuinely surrender ourselves before our Maker, whether we worship Him in child-like innocence and fervor, only God knows.



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