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Home / Summer 2006 /

The Prayer Book of the People

A conversation with Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman on the making of Mishkan T'filah—A Reform Siddur, the Movement's innovative new prayer book.

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The 2006 release of *Mishkan T'filah--A Reform Siddur* marks a historic turning: from exclusive rabbinic authorship to broad involvement of Reform Jews throughout North America; from linear to open services; and much more. To better understand this innovative prayer book, *Reform Judaism* editor Aron Hirt-Manheimer interviewed Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, the Barbara and Stephen Friedman Professor of Liturgy, Worship, and Ritual at HUC-JIR, who served on the planning committees for both the new prayer book and its predecessor, *Gates of Prayer*.



You have been involved in developing Reform prayer books for some time. Has the process changed?

Yes. Creating the Reform Movement's newest prayer book, *Mishkan T'filah* (2006), was a far more thorough, lengthy, and democratic process than ever before. We began with an extensive survey of our congregations, funded by an Eli Lilly grant and organized by Rabbi Peter Knobel and Dan Schechter. A preliminary committee then responded with recommendations to the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), after which several potential editors submitted proposals as to how best to crystallize these recommendations in practice. Then an editorial committee consisting of lay leaders, rabbis, cantors, and liturgists discussed every issue in detail, while field-testing each *siddur* draft at Union for Reform Judaism biennials and CCAR conventions and in nearly 300 congregations throughout North America. We also received hundreds of additional comments from lay people, rabbis, and cantors--and we listened to every suggestion. At the end, a publishing committee composed of Rabbis Peter Knobel, Bernard Mehlman, Elliot Stevens, Elaine Zecher, prayer book editor Elyse Frishman, Debbie Smilow, and me oversaw the final document, discussing global issues not yet settled, attending to prayer book design, guaranteeing true translations rather than paraphrases, and reviewing English alternatives--sometimes replacing them, sometimes supplementing them in consultation with specialists in Jewish literature, poetry, linguistics, and liturgy. Talk about inclusivity! Each stage of the process factored in issues of gender, age, theology, generation, academic expertise, and style--the intangible issue of *how* people like to pray. This is truly a prayer book by and for the people.

With all this input, Rabbi Elyse Frishman conceived of a brilliant layout device whereby every facing two-page spread would contain a traditional prayer (with translation and transliteration) on the right, and alternative English readings on that prayer's theme on the left. Any given facing page might include (besides the traditional offering) a feminist voice, a classical Reform perspective, advocacy for social justice, personal reflections, and so forth.

The result is a set of double-page spreads with contents that vary enormously in register and in rhetoric. Some worshipers appreciate evocative poetry; others are drawn to prayers with evident cognitive or philosophical messages. Every double page has enough variety to allow each individual worshiper to find a "home" there. People may recite or sing along with the larger community in whatever options the prayer leader chooses, or elect instead to meditate on an alternative passage. But the left- and the right-side pages always conclude with the same traditional Hebrew line, which is called the *chatimah*. So when you get to that line, no matter what you're reading, you know to turn the page and keep up with the service.

IF YOUR
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FIND OUT
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What does the making of *Mishkan T'filah* tell us about the times we live in?

I like to link prayer books to economic history. Throughout the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, our economy was primarily industrial, with standardized goods (like the Model T Ford) made in factories. The mirror liturgical image was the 1895 *Union Prayer Book*, which standardized prayer with little regard for the individual worshiper. In that classical mode of prayer, Reform worship rarely varied. Wherever you went--New York, Chicago or Muncie, Indiana--Reform rabbis stood at the front and read at everyone else. Long paragraphs were given to the rabbi; the congregation got one-line responsive readings. But how much individuality can you express if all you get is a one-liner?

After World War II, we entered a service economy, where people expected to be served in a customized manner. Many Jews eventually stopped attending synagogue regularly, but came reliably for life-cycle events, which they treated as customized services. When they no longer felt the need for synagogue services, they quit.

Today we inhabit what's called an experience economy. Consumers shop at malls not just to buy what they want, but to have a buying "experience"--greeters at the door, music in the background, and other kinds of entertainment.

Gates of Prayer expressed a service economy. It offered ten different service selections to satisfy individualized theological tastes, but only one could be used at any given Shabbat prayer experience. *Mishkan T'filah*, too, provides options, but it does so on each page, not in separate services. On any double-page spread, individual voices on the left-hand page personalize the experience, while the traditional text on the right-hand page creates a community of worshipers. So *Mishkan T'filah* provides for a communal experience while allowing for individuality in prayer.

As part of the experience economy, *Mishkan T'filah* is less text than pretext for a worship experience where the act of prayer matters more than the fixed words it uses. No *siddur* of the past understood that prayer books are not so much books as they are scripts for the experience of worship.

The full title of the new prayer book is *Mishkan T'filah--A Reform Siddur*. Why was "Reform" added to the title of a CCAR prayer book for the first time?

We debated the English title at some length. Some people preferred *Siddur for Prayer*, but we elected to affirm this prayer book as Reform, even though we believe any Jew could use it. By using "*Siddur*" in the title instead of just "Reform Prayer Book," we are making the statement that our Movement is comfortable with the age-old vocabulary of our people. The word "Reform" modifies that language with a recognition that Reform Judaism has a point of view and, having been practiced for almost 200 years, is itself a valid tradition.

When you say that the new *siddur* reflects the Reform "point of view," what viewpoints come to mind?

The *siddur* reflects our Movement's historical commitment to the vernacular (not just the original Hebrew or Aramaic), to originating new prayers that address new times, to a theology that we can take seriously, to elevated aesthetics (especially music)--and, in more recent times, to egalitarianism.

But I want to emphasize two other aspects of *Mishkan T'filah*. The first is its integrity regarding content. We didn't include some traditionalist prayers that, in all good conscience, Reform Jews cannot say. For example, in traditionalist *siddurim*, the *Shema* includes not just the *Shema Yisrael* and *V'ahavta*, but two more paragraphs which American Reform prayer books have omitted ever since the 1890s. With the trend toward recapturing abandoned traditions, we were urged to reinstate the last two paragraphs. But the third paragraph links Divine reward and punishment to human merit and sin--an implicit suggestion that sickness or suffering may be God's retaliation, something Reform Jews reject. So *Mishkan T'filah* continues the Reform tradition of omitting this paragraph, even as we have readopted the second paragraph.

Second, *Mishkan T'filah* values inclusivity. Reform Jews like to ask "Who's in?," not "Who's out?" We know, for example, that some people have doubts about God. So, hoping to welcome them "in," we offer

prayer and poetry that speak to the human condition without referencing God. We also include voices from classical Reform thought--like those of Leo Baeck and Lily Montague.

How does *Mishkan T'filah's* design and layout differ from previous Reform prayer books?

The aesthetic has changed. In addition to adding a second color (blue), each page has been uniquely designed. The best example is the *Shema*. To express visually our belief in the *Shema* as the central doctrine of our faith, the Hebrew text of that single line, *Shema Yisra'el*..., is enlarged and stretched across both pages. You look at it and say, "This is really central."

Also, *Mishkan T'filah* addresses questions Reform worshipers may have about the prayers they're reading. So at the bottom of the page, we provide historical and spiritual interpretations of the liturgy, as well as explanations of traditional body movements associated with particular prayers--not behavioral dictates but alternatives that derive from tradition.

Another unique design feature lets worshipers know where they are in the order of the service. The margins of each page list the sequence of prayers with the name of the prayer at hand highlighted typographically. Ritual depends on familiarity with structure--bringing in a birthday cake "works," for example, because everyone knows the candles will be blown out afterward. In prayer, too, knowing the flow of the service enhances every moment of it.

How do these innovations change the rabbi and cantor's role in the service?

People no longer want to be "talked to" or "sung at." So service leaders will have to work at engaging worshipers, especially in the music. Also, it will take some time for rabbis and cantors to get used to selecting from options on each double page. Prayer leaders will now need to prepare for the service in advance as a worship team, rather than walking independently onto the pulpit to read lines or sing music. *Mishkan T'filah* does include one linear Shabbat service for those more comfortable with the *Gates of Prayer* approach, but we expect that linear services will be used less and less as people are increasingly drawn to the spiritual possibilities of services framed around choices on facing pages.

How does the new prayer book reflect our Movement's commitment to social justice?

Gates of Prayer, published in 1975, appeared at a time of heightened fear for Israel's survival and concern for the plight of Soviet Jews. So it tilted toward particularism. *Mishkan T'filah* remains fiercely proud of peoplehood, but it reasserts what classical Reform Jews called "the mission of Israel," which is the whole point of peoplehood: to be engaged with God in transforming society. It thereby marks a return to a universalistic call to social justice. And while *Gates of Prayer* had a single service that focused on social justice--you could go to synagogue your whole life without ever encountering it--*Mishkan T'filah* has prayers for social justice everywhere. The Jewish prayer experience should not only evoke a Jewish response to God, but also a Jewish response to bettering God's world. If cries from without are not heard within, prayers from within are not heard on high.

Does this *siddur* address the issue of masculine and feminine God language in a way that is likely to resonate with 21st century Reform Jews?

Yes, I think so. Our goal was not to describe God as male or female, but to use evocative language that lends the possibility of seeing God as either, or as both. We address God, for example, as "Teacher of Torah"; we plead with God to "help us be sensitive." Implicitly, then, God appears as both male and female, but explicitly the language is universal.

How does this translation differ from those of our previous prayer books?

Some Reform prayer books were exact translations of the Hebrew. In the 1850s, for example, our Movement's founder, Isaac Mayer Wise, wrote *Minhag America*. If he wanted to say something in English, he changed the Hebrew to accord with it. In *Gates of Prayer*, some passages were exact translations but others were not. *Mishkan T'filah* returned to Wise's standard of exact translations on every right-hand page, relegating creative expressions of the prayer's theme to the opposite page.

Transliteration of all the Hebrew is also provided on every page--another innovation?

Yes. The *Union Prayer Book* contained no transliteration at all. In *Gates of Prayer*, transliteration could only be found at the back of the book. Nowadays, while we as a Movement have increasingly advocated Hebrew literacy in recognition of Hebrew as our people's historic language, we have also urged that prayer be open also to people who cannot read the original. If *Mishkan T'filah* is a prayer book for all the people, then we shouldn't lock out those who can't read Hebrew.

A minority of rabbis opposed our decision to transliterate all the Hebrew in *Mishkan T'filah*, believing it will be a disincentive for Jews to learn Hebrew. In respectful response to them (though disagreeing with them), our committee decided to publish an alternative *siddur* version without transliteration.

The *Union Prayer Book* opened only from left to right. *Gates of Prayer* came in two versions, one opening from right to left and one from left to right. Why does the new prayer book open only from right to left?

While proudly universalistic, *Mishkan T'filah* reflects the growing importance of Hebrew and commitment to *Am Yisrael* (Jewish peoplehood) in our Movement; therefore, it opens in the traditional manner of a Hebrew book, from right to left.

How important is it to our Movement that a single prayer book becomes widely adopted by Reform congregations?

It's very important. Some people think that we live in a post-denominational age--that denominations just don't matter anymore. I disagree. More than ever, in this age of choice, Jews have to decide what kind of Jews they are. People who say they are "just Jewish" have not yet processed their Judaism beyond its bare essentials. Mature and full Jewish identity requires choices, and choices imply denominations. And the prayer book is the gateway to Jewish identity; more than anything else, how we pray defines what kind of Jew we are. I grew up in an Orthodox *shul*, and while I can still appreciate traditionalist services, I find the Orthodox prayer book unreflective of the Jew I have chosen to be. I chose Reform Judaism because of what it stands for, and we as a Movement have to make that message clear to ourselves and to others. If we have a plethora of prayer books, we will end up with a plethora of definitions of what Reform Judaism stands for; and although it is true that Reform encompasses a great variety of things, it is also true that if we are all things, we are nothing. *Mishkan T'filah* encourages individualism, but defines the community in which that individualism is possible. If you regularly attend the service and someone asks you, "What makes you a Reform Jew?," you'll be able to answer the question.

Had Isaac Mayer Wise been one of the readers during the market research phase of *Mishkan T'filah*, what do you think he would have told the committee?

Isaac Mayer Wise was a remarkable leader because he respected change. When his *Minhag America* was rejected as the basis for the *Union Prayer Book*, he accepted the fact that his prayer book had been intended for Jews of the 1850s and '60s, but not the 1890s. Wise would have applauded *Mishkan T'filah* as the proper expression of Jewish identity not for the 1890s and not even for the 1990s, but for the 2000s and beyond.

"Entering the Tent"

To assist congregations in making the transition to *Mishkan T'filah* (MT), the Joint Commission on Worship, Music and Religious Living (a partnership of the American Conference of Cantors, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, and the Union for Reform Judaism) has created a website, www.urj.org/mishkan, which covers the following topics:

I. Understanding Mishkan T'filah

- Why the Reform Movement needs a new prayer book, and why now
- *Mishkan T'filah*'s structure, page layout, transliteration, and citations
- The theological and liturgical differences between MT and *Gates of Prayer*
- Guidelines to determine whether and when purchasing *Mishkan T'filah* is right for your congregation

II. Leading Worship with Mishkan T'filah

- Working with model service outlines, addressing "stage direction" issues, and more
- Using *MT* to teach Reform theology and liturgy to adults and young people
- Lay-Led Worship: Helping non-clergy and bar and bat mitzvah students lead worship with the new prayer book