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Prayer-Book and Self Revelation to God in Judaism

“Prayer may not save us, but it makes us worthy of being saved.”¹ For the Jews, the Bible is the record of God’s revelation to Israel, while the Siddur—the prayer-book—is a record of Israel’s self-revelation to God. The Siddur is not only a hand-book for Jewish prayer, it is also a faithful record of Jewish ideals, hopes, and anxieties during the many centuries of its growth. The Siddur may be regarded as both the Jewish book of common prayer, as well as the spiritual history of the Jewish people.²

For the Orthodox Jew the Siddur is holy. One may perhaps add a new prayer or hymn, but one can never substantially change what has been sanctified by earlier generations. The Orthodox Siddur has been virtually unchanged since the spread of printed prayer-books in the 16th century. Because the prayer-book reflects the values and concepts of the Jewish religion so profoundly, any Jewish group that wished to change the style or substance of Judaism has always sought to modify the Siddur. “Throughout time new prayer-books made their appearance, each purporting to introduce prospective worshippers to some new aspect of Jewish lore. Each represented a relative popularization of a religious system whose original and highly abstruse formulation was being converted into prayer-book format for the use of the general community. Thus, Kabbalistic prayers whose mystical implications required volumes to define in detail, were issued in prayer-book form with but a few summary lines or paragraphs. Philosophical doctrines which could be grasped fully only by the most acute intellect, were summarized in poetic form for communal prayer. Reform prayer-books, which the outsider may mistakenly judge to be mere dilutions of the medieval Siddur which preceded them, were in

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1. Abraham J. Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom* (Philadelphia: J. P. S. 1966), p. 256.
 2. Abraham Millgram, *Jewish Worship* (Philadelphia: J. P. S. 1971), p. 5. This book is an excellent introduction to the traditional Jewish liturgy.

reality shorthand accounts of a Jewish world-view that took decades to be explicated. It is significant that no major Jewish movement, no schismatic sect of importance, contented itself with abstract theorizing. Maimonides wrote philosophy, but also a prayer-book. Sixteenth century Lurianic Kabbala spawned its own mystical prayer-book; and it was worship patterns that divided eighteenth century Chassidim from their opponents. The appearance of a prayer-book is tantamount to the dissemination of learning previously restricted to scholars, to the community at large.³⁷

Thus, when in the middle of the 18th century, the Hassidic movement adopted the Lurianic Siddur (Spanish/Palestinian) in place of the Ashkenazy Siddur (Polish/German) it led to bitter denunciations and attacks from their Orthodox opponents. So too when the Reform movement began in Germany, one of the first things that it did was to produce a new prayer-book (Hamburg 1818). By tracing the successive modifications of the prayer-book, and looking at current liturgy, we can see how Reform Jews perceive the relationship between being Jewish and spiritual demands.

All Reform prayer-books respond to four fundamental goals: First is the use of the vernacular during the service. While the Orthodox had permitted the translation of Hebrew prayers to be printed in the book even before the rise of the Reform movement, the service itself was entirely in Hebrew. In Reform prayer-books, while the ratio of Hebrew to vernacular has varied, the vernacular has always been used as part of the service, usually the greater part of the service. For this reason most Reform prayer-books open from the left (as do European books) and not from the right (as do Hebrew books). The use of the vernacular is universal among Reform Congregations outside of Israel (in Israel Hebrew is the vernacular) and, in fact, English translations in the Siddur are normative in Conservative and Orthodox Congregations in England and North America, although they are sparingly used in Conservative services, and rarely or not at all in Orthodox services.

3. Lawrence Hoffman editor, *Gates of Understanding* (New York: C. C. A. R. 1977), p. 132. Also, Lawrence Hoffman, *The Canonization of the Synagogue Service* (Notre Dame: U. of N. D., 1979).

The second Reform goal was to shorten the service. Over the centuries, especially during the Middle Ages, additional prayers and poems were added, and many optional readings and prayers became fixed and, therefore, required by tradition. By eliminating the originally optional material, and shortening the scriptural reading, the Shabbat morning service was reduced from over 4 hours, to less than 2 hours. The Conservative movement retained almost all the traditional material in the Siddur, but individual congregations frequently skip some of the optional poems and readings. The Orthodox preserve everything.

The third and most controversial goal was intellectual consistency. Reform Judaism was a very rational approach to Jewish life. The prayers, it was thought, must reflect today's highest ideals and values. Thus, all prayers referring to the restoration in the Messianic Age, of the sacrificial cult in the Temple in Jerusalem, were dropped. Indeed, Messianic references in general were rationalized, and the emphasis on the Messiah was shifted to the developing Messianic Age. This suited perfectly the 19th century's intellectual concepts of progress and evolution. The denial of traditional concepts of redemption, and the national restoration in the Land of Israel, was severely attacked. The Conservative movement retained all of these ideas, although in 1946 they did make a slight change in the prayer that speaks of animal sacrifice. The traditional prayer reads, "May it be Your will, Oh Lord, Our God of our Fathers, to lead us up in joy to our land, and to plant us within our borders, where *we will prepare* for You the required sacrificial offerings". The new prayer-book changed that part to read, "where *our fathers prepared* for You the required sacrificial offerings." Thus a future activity is changed to an historical reference.

The fourth goal of Reform Judaism was to create new rituals, prayers and liturgy that would express the Jewish religious spirit's current needs and experiences. This was the least controversial goal, since adding to tradition is traditional, but it is the most difficult because it is easier to prune old dried up branches than it is to produce new species of flowers on the tree. The most successful modern ritual innovations have been confirmation, introduced by the Reform movement in Germany in 1810 and now universal in Reform, and found in most Conservative Congregations; and Bat Mitzvah, introduced

in 1922 in New York City, and now almost universal in Reform and Conservative Congregations.⁴

On the other hand, most of the prayers written in the 19th century to express "modern" spirituality have not survived into the late 20th century. Generally their style was too ornate for our "modern" idiom, and often their content seems anachronistic. Indeed, there is a growing feeling that Hebrew prayers should be retained precisely for their historical roots and constancy, while the vernacular prayers can be revised in each generation, in each new edition of the prayer-book. An example of a prayer that is still potent, and has been used in the last four editions of the American Reform Prayer-book is the "Grant us peace", as follows:

Grant us peace, Thy most precious gift, O Thou eternal source of peace, and enable Israel to be its messenger unto the peoples of the earth. Bless our country that it may ever be a stronghold of peace, and its advocate in the council of nations. May contentment reign within its borders, health and happiness within its homes. Strengthen the bonds of friendship and fellowship between all the inhabitants of our lands. Plant virtue in every soul, and may the love of Thy name hallow every home and every heart. Praised be Thou, O Lord, Giver of peace. (1895)

Two changes have occurred in this prayer over 90 years: "between all the inhabitants of our land" became "among the inhabitants of all lands" (1940) and the language changed from Thy to Your (1975).

However, most creative prayers undergo either much more evolution, or else extinction. Thus in the afternoon service of the Day of Atonement a 3 and 1/3 page reading (1922 edition) becomes 2 pages in the 1945 edition, and less than 1 page in the 1978 edition. The 1922 reading reflects clearly the Social Gospel approach which was widespread among liberal Protestants in the early decades of the 20th century. The following excerpts show how both style and content undergo change.

The world of commerce and industry is filled with threatening suspicions and antagonisms. Great plenty and abject poverty, limitless power and utter weakness exist side by side. These disparities are forcing themselves upon the attention of men and

4. Sylvan Schwartzman, *Reform Judaism-Then and Now* (New York : U. A. H. C. 1971).

women as they have never done before. Everywhere earnest minds are seeking to know whether these inequalities are justified and permanent, or whether a way may not be found that shall lead to more contentment and greater mutual respect and confidence the world over.

In seeking a solution to these problems we, the children of Israel, should hold foremost in our minds the belief of our fathers, that human life is of the utmost value and that all duties and responsibilities have for their purpose the safe-guarding of the life of man and the furtherance of his nature as a child of God. To Israel, man has always been the centre of our obligations. We have been taught for ages that whatever does not serve to make our neighbour happy and confident and whatever does not dispose him to become kindly and trustful and helpful cannot receive the sanction of God and of His moral law. If our world is torn by great divisions and suspicions due to what is believed to be an unfair and unjust distribution of the world's goods, we cannot and must not regard such a condition as inevitable and normal (1922, p 314)

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Hence great plenty and abject poverty, limitless power and utter weakness, exist side by side. We are thankful that good and wise men are troubled by the manner in which the earth's increase is shared; that they are unwilling to accept these inequalities as justified and permanent and are seeking a way to enable all men to share more securely and abundantly of Thy beneficence.

We, of the household of Israel, have been taught that the wrongs done to our fellowmen can be righted only if we think of all men as Thy children. When we are conscious of Thee as our common Father, we grow sensitive to the indignities and injustices visited upon our fellowmen. We realize that whatever does not serve to make our neighbour contented and trustful cannot receive Thy blessing and the sanction of Thy law. No law emanating from Thy will can be invoked to justify any conditions that deny men opportunities and cause them sorrow and suffering. (1945, p 300)

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Lord, Your earth yields enough to satisfy the needs of every living creature, but human greed thwarts Your purposes, and countless of Your children go hungry and naked. Great plenty and abject poverty, unrestrained power and utter helplessness exist side by side.

We are taught that all people are Your children, whatever their belief, whatever their shade of skin. You have ordained one law for rich and poor, one law for woman, child, and man. And we today, like those who came before us, are summoned to right the ancient wrongs in obedience to Your holy word: (1978, p 469).

The remaining part of this essay will focus on current liturgy and what it says about Reform Jewish spirituality. Rather than use the movement's official High Holiday Prayer-book, (1978) which was edited by a committee, we will use prayer-books edited for specific congregations. The effect of the invention of printing in the 15th century, was to freeze literary variety, since the prayer-books which were printed in their tens of thousands, represented only the major rites, and swamped the local variations. But the new technology of photo offset printing, and the mimeograph which had preceded it, stimulated local congregations to produce for themselves, and for all kinds of special occasions, unique services. The 1960s and the 1970s were periods of tremendous liturgical ferment. Youth services, Civil Rights services, Anti-War services, all of them accompanied by folk songs of jazz music, were found in most Reform Congregations and many Conservative ones, at least a few times each year. The apogee of this type of service was "a contemporary High Holiday Service for teenagers and . . ." by Rabbi Sidney Greenberg and Allan Sugarman (1970). This prayer-book not only features modern poetry (i.e. Cummings), music (The Beatles) and pictures, but is bound in loose-leaf, so that new readings could be added at any time, on any subject.

In the last few years there has been a reaction against overly relevant material, which turns out to have a short life span. The number of mimeograph creative youth services has declined, as young people have become more interested in tradition. On the other hand, it has become more common to prepare a customized version of the traditional service for a Bar of Bat Mitzvah ceremony. Several congregations, especially in California, have printed their own prayer-book

(soft cover) for the High Holidays.⁵ The following excerpts come from *Tikun Nefashot—Revival of the Spirit—* a 1983 High Holiday Prayer-book in use by several congregations in Los Angeles and edited by Rabbi Allen Maller.

Most of the liturgy in *Tikun Nefashot* comes from the creative service of the 1960s and 1970s. For Example, the following prayer (page 74) was taken from a Texas congregation that found it in the service of an east-coast congregation. The original author is no longer known and the prayer has been rewritten at least twice. Both the process of spreading from area to area, and the variety of versions in different areas, replicates the pattern of growth of the traditional Siddur that took place during the first to the twelfth century. The italics indicate the congregation's part in this responsive reading (the previous version was not arranged this way).

I am confused.
 Is it our times, our world, our society?
 Or is it, dear God only me?
 There are times when I feel pulled apart.
 I have so many responsibilities—
 My work, my family, my friends, myself—
 And there is only so much of me to give.
 Have I given my family enough of myself,
 Or have I too often asked them to be the ones to wait?

*I feel pulled out,
 Stretched, pressured.
 Perhaps this is good,
 For I find myself now reaching
 Farther to touch the needs of others.
 Should I repent when I know I have given so much
 of myself to those I love?*

5. Examples of Congregational prayer-books are:

Inscribe Us for Life—A Rosh Hashanah Prayer-book, edited by Herbert Morris, Congregation Beth Israel - Judea, San Francisco, 1971. *A High Holy Day Prayer-book*, edited by Aisenman, Silverman and Zeldin, Stephen S. Wise Temple, Los Angeles, 1973. *A Jewish Prayer-book for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur*, edited by Seymour Prystowsky, Congregation Or Ami, Philadelphia, undated; and an untitled prayer-book edited by Steven Jacobs, Temple Judea, Los Angeles, 1980.

I have tried to be concerned,
Compassionate, understanding, loving,
Yet in my heart I know there could be more,
More of me to give.

*May these qualities be strengthened in me,
And may my love for my family be increased.
For their hurts are my hurts,*

*their simchas are my joys,
their growth is my growth,
their wisdom is my knowledge.*

O heavenly Father,
Bless my family,
Keep them wise and strong.
If I have failed,
Then let me know the purpose of that failure.
My hopes and dreams are in front of me,
You are in me.
Help me to find my way. Help me to become a mensch.

The above reading is very psychologically oriented and rather humanistic in its tone. Indeed, one of the strengths of Tikun Nefashot is its emphasis on the psychology of the High Holy Days—the New Year and the Day of Atonement—in addition to the theology. A prayer written by the editor specifically refers to some of the modern anxieties (divorce, loneliness, hospitalization) and finds comfort in the community's (rather than just God's) intervention.

We sit together as a congregation, united at this hour because we are Jews. In the coming year we will go our separate ways. Many of us will celebrate simchas. Others will suffer reversals. Some will be hospitalized, others divorced, and a few will no longer be here when next Rosh Hashanah comes again. If we are to survive as human beings, we must not face our troubles alone. We need faith in God, and the support of our relatives and friends. We need others; and others will need us. In this congregation are fellow Jews who share with us the cycle of life. From birth to death we are part of one community; kindred souls. Each of us will have opportunities in the next year to share both simchas and sorrows. Oh God, give us courage to give of ourselves to people sitting among us now,

who will someday be in need. No one knows today who will need comfort tomorrow. May we be ready to reach out, whether we be needed, or be in need. May we say, as did the first Jew, when called upon: "Hineyni—here I am".

This prayer is followed by a page which describes a Reform concept of God as found in process and relationships. Two separate anonymous prayers have been combined and revised. Note the editor's mixture of universalistic and particularistic images, as well as the use of Hebrew words within the English prayer.⁶

Many invisible things fill our days,
Music and love and laughter;

*Many intangible things affect us,
Words and anger and prejudice.*

Adonai is invisible and intangible
A God of moods and relationships.

*Within us, He is the spirit of Tsadakah
Beyond us, He is the guide of Mitzvah.*

Pray to Him with an invisible, intangible prayer.
He will answer you with a flaming sunset
And the touch of a baby's cheek.

*Each day is a new day
A new opportunity to feel a part of God,
A joyous expression.*

The divine feeling of God within should be transmitted to all those around us. Carried within us—in everything we do.

*The touch of God is a chain reaction
From one human being to another,
from one Jew to another,
A loving touch from me to you.*

Adonai, we know perfection is beyond us, but if we stumble, let it be on steps leading upward.

We are weak, and the task seems hopeless until we remember that we are not alone.

6. Beginning in the 1970s the Reform Movement in America began to offer prayer-books that opened from right to left (Hebrew style) in addition to left to right. Sales indicate that about 30-40% of congregations prefer the Hebrew style.

If the Jewish people could survive all the many attempts to destroy us.

If we who survived the Holocaust can rebuild and defend a resurrected Jewish State.

We will endure, we will prevail. We shall see the soul restored to joy, the hand returned to strength, the will regain its force.

*We bless God for giving us hope, and praise
God for seeing the good in life.*

Most of the creative liturgy is written by rabbis. Some of it however, is drawn from published poets; both Jewish and non-Jewish. Thus, Tikun Nefashot uses adaptations from such non-Jews as Michael Quoist (I Went Out Lord . . .), Edna St Vincent Millay (I am not resigned . . .), Eugene O'Neill (Why am I afraid . . .), and Kenneth Patton (Each year should be . . .) as well as Hebrew poets, Chaim Bialik (Of steel and iron . . .), Saul Tschernickovsky (We believe in tomorrow . . .), and Aaron Zeitlin (Praise me . . .). The growing impact of the Holocaust on Jewish thinking is also evident in the liturgy. The traditional Siddur always had a section devoted to martyrology on the Day of Atonement. All recent Reform and Conservative High Holiday Prayer-Books have added material about the Holocaust to this section. Hillel Bavli's poem is used in more than one prayer-book:

Warsaw, Jewish girls, stripped of everything by the Gestapo, are commanded to prepare themselves for the pleasure of Nazi soldiers. Rather than submit to this, they follow the path of martyrs who preceded them: they pour out their hearts in a final prayer and they swallow poison.

We have cleansed our bodies and purified our souls.
And now we are at peace.
Death holds no terror; we go to meet it.
We have served our God while alive;
We know how to hallow Him in death.
A deep covenant binds all ninety-three of us:
Together we studied God's Torah; together we shall die.
We have chanted Psalms, and are comforted.
We have confessed our sins, and are strengthened.
We are prepared to take our leave.
Let us unclean come to afflict us; we fear them not.

We shall drink the poison and die, innocent and pure,
as befits the daughters of Jacob.

To our mother Sarah we pray: "Here we are!

We have met the test of Isaac's Binding!

Pray with us for the people of Israel."

Compassionate Father!

Have mercy for Your people, who love You.

For there is no more mercy in man . . .

"Zog nicht keynmol", the song of the Jewish partisans, appears in several prayer-books (both in Yiddish and in English) as part of the memorial service for the six million murdered Jews.

The twin themes of failure, sin and guilt on the one hand, and hope, trust and faith on the other, run throughout the High Holiday Prayer-book. Thus, in the concluding parts of the martyrology section of Tikun Nefashot is found one of the most popular prayers from the creative liturgy movement by Rabbi Jack Riemer. It has been used numerous services on social justice or anti-war theme.

We cannot expect You alone to end all wars, For You have meant for us to seek and find our own path of peace.

*We cannot expect You alone to end starvation and ignorance,
For You have given us the tools with which to feed and edu-
cate ourselves—if only we would use them wisely.*

We cannot expect You alone to end starvation and ignorance,
For You have given us eyes to see the good in all people if we would but open them.

*We cannot expect You alone to end all prejudice and
conformity,
For You have given us the minds to outwit these evils—
if only we would give full vent to these efforts.
Surely we cannot expect You alone to end the nagging
tensions and frustrations of our daily lives.
For You have revealed the way to bring serenity to our
lives through genuine love and faith—if we would but choose
that path.*

We can pray for the kind of faith that will never let us despair and acquiesce to evil. We can pray that we have the courage to say

"I believe in the sun when it is not shining.
I believe in God even when He is silent."

(Inscribed on the wall of a cellar in Cologne where Jews hid from the Nazis).

In the same fashion the entire service for the Day of atonement concludes on a note of Messianic Redemption with an original prayer by Rabbi Maller and a well-known poem of Saul Tschernickovsky.

The news always seems to be bad
Because we take the good for granted.

Accidents, crimes and wars are news
While safety, honesty and peace go unreported.

For every sin that is publicized
There are 100 mitsvot that are unannounced.

O Lord we need to see life in perspective
*Bizarre and shocking acts are news
precisely because they are abnormal.*

We need to pay attention not to what is new
But what is permanent.

We must never abandon our faith in humanity
Or our hope for the future.

We do not know when the Messiah will come
*But if we each do something in the next year to improve
the world around us*

We will hasten the coming of the day when:

*"They shall beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning knives;*

*Nation shall not lift sword against nation
nor learn war anymore;*

*Each man shall dwell under his own vine,
and each under his own fig-tree,
undisturbed.*

*All people will walk, each in the name of its god
and we will walk in the name of Adonai, our God
for ever." (Micah 4:3-5)*

Judaism does not teach that it is the only way to the one universal truth. We do not believe that in the end of days all peoples and nations will flow to us and we will all be one. Harmony, not conformity is our goal. Pluralism, not universalism is our message. Let each people walk in the name of its god. We will walk in the name of Adonai, our God for ever:

We believe in tomorrow. We believe that we have the power to make tomorrow different from today. We believe that poverty need not be permanent and that nations need not learn war anymore. We believe in people, despite all that we know about them. We believe in the coming of the Messianic Age when there will be a time of peace, a time of justice, and a time of contentment for all who live on earth. We believe that we can have a share in bringing the Messianic Age closer by the way in which we live in the next year. The world may smile at our dreams—but no matter, we still believe. We as Jews, persist in our belief that the human being was created not for evil, but for good, not a curse, but a precious blessing.

A unifying theme found in the above readings is the contradictory aspects of the human condition. On the one hand, we have human weakness, failure and sin; on the other hand we have the striving to act responsively, and with God's help to improve both our personal attitudes and relationships, as well as the collective condition of the society around us. While Judaism has always taught that redemption is the result of a partnership between mankind and God, the strong emphasis on personal self-improvement and human social responsibility is primarily found in Reform Judaism. In the last two decades the personal themes have become as important as the social themes in many prayer-books. The introspective approach this entails is the result of recent developments in popular psychology which indicate a convergence of religious, psychological and mystical concepts into a new spiritual approach and openness. To this modern "New Age" thinking is added for Jews, the impact of Holocaust and the rebirth of the State of Israel, as messianic events that foreshadow the universal threat and redemption which has long been awaited by messianic thinkers. This latter theme is just beginning to appear, and in the opinion of this author, it will grow in the decades to come.

Glossary :

- Siddur** — *Order of prayers - prayer-book*
Kabbalah — *Jewish mysticism*
Shabbat — *Seventh day of the week, Friday sundown to Saturday sundown*
Bar Mitzvah — *a ceremony of induction to adult congregational life*
Bat Mitzvah — *the same but for a girl*
Simcha — *joy*
Mensch — *a decent human being (Yiddish)*
Tsadakah — *charity/righteousness*
Mitsvah — *Divine commandment — Jewish responsibility*
Torah — *Hebrew Bible especially first five books of Moses*
Adonai — *name of God used in place of the real name Yhvh.*