

Entering the *Mishkan*

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5767

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Our tradition teaches that the sound of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah is intended to send a loud, clear message to us all: “Awake you sleepers, from your sleep! Rouse yourselves, you slumberers, out of your slumber!” As many of you know, I became a father 16 days ago...so this is for you, Rabbi Jay. If I should doze off in the next several minutes...give this a good loud blast.

Of course, the *shofar* is intended to rouse our inner selves, not simply serve as auditory caffeine. And, while Michele and I may be lacking physical rest, we feel like our spirits need little reawakening this year. One’s soul can not possibly slumber when God’s presence feels so very close...when so many prayers seem to have been answered. On this holy day which celebrates all things new: the birthday of the world, a new year, and the limitless possibilities for personal renewal, I can not help but consider all of the special beginnings in my life. In just the past six months, I’ve been ordained as a rabbi, begun my relationship with an amazing congregation, Michele and I have returned to our favorite city in the country, and we moved into our first home. And, of course, the most inspiring new blessing of all...welcoming our daughter, Mia, into the world. *Modim Anachnu Lach*, for all of these hallowed beginnings, our family offers thanks.

But feeling the nearness of God is comparatively easy in the hospital delivery room, under the wedding *huppah*, or indeed, even at a graveside. On this day, the *shofar’s* blast seeks to jar us from the lethargy and lassitude of our routine and remind us that God can be present in our day-to-day existences. This too is the role of **prayer** in the lives of Jews, to infuse all of our days with holiness...not major life cycle moments alone. In 5767, our temple community will collectively experience a new birth in this realm...the arrival of our Reform Movement’s latest prayer book, *Mishkan Tefilah*.

This is not an insignificant moment in the histories of our movement and of our congregation. In Hebrew, the word for prayer book is “*siddur*,” from the same root as the Passover *sefer*, both connoting “order.” The *siddur* is just that, the fixed arrangement of our tradition’s prayers before the Holy One. It is a diary of Jewish history, spirituality, and theology, and it is arguably the single most important work in a Jewish library. In the words of Joseph Hertz, Britain’s former Chief Rabbi, “No other volume has penetrated the Jewish home as has the *siddur*, or has exercised and continues to exercise, so profound an influence on the life, character, and outlook of the Jewish people...”¹ A shift in our movement’s *siddur* is worthy of our attention as this new book has the potential to shape our community’s prayer life, our means of connecting to God, for decades to come.

¹ *A Treasury of Thoughts on Jewish Prayer*, ed. Sidney Greenberg, Jason Aronson Press, 1989, p. 176

We should begin this exploration by asking why it is that a religious community would ever desire a new setting for its classical liturgy. My professor, Rabbi Larry Hoffman, likes to link people's prayer book needs to economic history.² He notes that, "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 worshipper... In that classical mode of prayer, Reform worship rarely varied...Reform rabbis stood at the front and read at everyone else."

Hoffman points out a shift after World War II when America entered a service economy. Congregants, accustomed to goods and services that were increasingly personalized to their tastes, craved a worship experience that gave voice to their particular philosophies, theologies, and aesthetics. In response, the Reform Movement adopted our blue *Gates of Prayer* in the 1970's. This *siddur* included TEN different services for Friday nights, allowing each congregation to select the worship experience that best met its needs.

And today, we inhabit what Hoffman calls "an experience economy." We frequent particular stores, restaurants, or malls, not just for the products they sell but for the overall experience we have while in their space. One need spend only a few moments in Starbucks, Barnes and Noble, or The Sharper Image to be aware of how much thought has been put into the environment. Who greets us at the door? What type of music is playing? What kind of seating is available and how is it arranged?

In a spiritual context, Beth Shalom considered many of these same questions when creating this extraordinary new sanctuary last year. Our synagogue's leaders knew that a beautiful, versatile, and uplifting worship space was a prerequisite to elevating our spirits in prayer. The new *siddur* will help us to take the next step on this journey, providing a liturgical script by which we can craft the most meaningful, evocative, and inspirational worship experiences. The prayer book's role in this process is intimated by its title, *Mishkan Tefilah*. In our Torah, the *Mishkan* is a portable tabernacle which the people Israel carry with them through the wilderness. It is the place which enables God to dwell among them. Our new prayer book is a *Mishkan Tefilah*, a sanctuary of prayer, a starting point, a home base, from which our souls can reach inward and outward towards the Divine.

But why a new *siddur* now? Experience economy notwithstanding, what's the urgency for our movement? It has been a decade's worth of Reform Jews voicing our opinions, our discontent, and our spiritual needs, which has forged *Mishkan Tefilah*. Several desires have been paramount and will be reflected in the new prayer book:

² "Reform Judaism," Summer 2006, [The Prayer Book of the People: A Conversation with Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman](#), by Aron Hirt-Manheimer

Transliteration of Hebrew prayers is a must so that all synagogue worshippers, regardless of Hebrew fluency, can have access to the sacred text. On a related note, accurate, not solely poetic, translations of the Hebrew prayers are a necessary addition so that each of us can know the meaning of the words we pray in Hebrew. Only then can we embrace or wrestle with those words. Additionally, Reform Jews have made it clear that a multiplicity of God views ought to be shared in a single prayer service so that each worshipper can expect to find some pieces of liturgy that resonate with his or her personal beliefs. And finally, a new Reform *siddur* must, and will, present a thoughtful response to the feminist critique, avoiding the temptation to ascribe gender to the Holy One, and providing Hebrew options for both male and female worshippers. *Mishkan Tefilah* seeks to respond to each of these challenges, and more.

One more word on the need for a new prayer book in our movement. When I grew up in NEFTY, our Reform Youth Group organization, we used to play a game at regional events. One of us would begin an English reading from *Gates of Prayer*... “May the time not be distant, O God, when Your name shall be worshipped in all the earth...” the rest of us would have to join in... “when unbelief shall disappear and error be no more. Fervently we pray...,” and the winner was the person who could recite the entire prayer from memory without pause. Only in NEFTY is that a cool activity.

On one hand...how wonderful that we had attended services at our respective synagogues often enough to possess that skill. Likewise, our antics illustrated the power of a movement-wide prayer book...we were all unified in our Reform prayer experience. On the other hand, our mischievous game also revealed one of the challenges that comes with familiarity in prayer. We risk the possibility that the words become stale, rote, and dare I say, potentially meaningless. Simply by exploring *Mishkan Tefilah* together, by experiencing our service anew, we may reawaken ourselves to the sacred power of opening our hearts in prayer.

Some thoughts on delving into the new *siddur* from one of my Rabbinical role models, Rabbi Jack Stern: “We are not told to take this book and choose everything, and there will be prayers in this book...that may have more or less meaning to some than to others. Not to choose everything but to explore everything, at least to experience its meaning, to try to understand, to try to feel, to try to connect, perchance to try to pray. Not to reject the old simply because it is old, and not to dismiss the new simply because it is new.”³

Rabbi Stern wisely perceives the reticence felt by members of the community. Like any significant life change, moving from a prayer book that has become comfortable is a daunting challenge for many of us. We find shelter and peace in its well-known passages. We are reassured by our familiarity with its flow. We're hesitant to let it go.

³ [The Right Not to Remain Silent](#), Jack Stern, iUniverse, Inc., New York, 2006, p. 109

And yet, it should be noted that Rabbi Stern preached these words at Westchester Reform Temple on Rosh Hashanah 5740, 27 years ago this very day. He was urging his congregation to engage the newly published *Gates of Prayer* and to bid farewell to its cherished *Union Prayer Book*. I hope that we too will “explore everything” our new *siddur* offers, “to try to understand, to try to feel, to try to connect, perchance to try to actually pray.”

This is no small task for many of us. New *siddur* aside, prayer itself has so many inherent challenges. For those without knowledge of Hebrew, the language barrier can get in the way. For others, the texts themselves seem antiquated... “These aren’t my prayers! Why should I recite these words?” For still others among us, our struggles with God – our questions, our anger, our beliefs, our lack of beliefs – cause us to feel inauthentic speaking the language of classical liturgy.

But these obstacles need not prevent us from continuing our search for the Divine, driven by a profound longing to glimpse the mysteries that lie beyond our limited comprehension. In the words of Rabbi David Wolpe, “No one invents a new language each time he speaks, and no Jew need begin to pray from scratch. [Our *siddur*] is a reservoir of prayers, petitions, and ideas from which to draw in our conversation with God.”⁴ To these words we add our own, asking healing for those we love, offering thanks for the gifts in our lives, pleading for strength, insight, courage, and peace. The ancient phrases begin to intertwine with those in our hearts, and together we continue our people’s search for truth, our mission to create a better world, and our quest for God.

Like forging any new relationship, finding a meaningful way of communicating with God, whatever one’s theology, is a demanding process. It is not purely cognitive. Wolpe again...“Though God can be found, God cannot be proved. God cannot be intellectually demonstrated [in any way that is likely to persuade or dissuade one from this relationship]...God enters people’s lives not by proof but by presence.”⁵ We get hints of nearness.

On our first visit to the doctor when Michele was pregnant, we heard only the baby’s heartbeat. On the next visit we saw the ultrasound pictures...blurry...fuzzy...and breathtaking. Then the first kicks, we could feel her now. Each new experience only added to our confidence that she really was in there...that she would soon be with us.

So too in getting to know God...not through thunderous overtures or in awesome supernatural events. At first, we may hear the “still small voice” that whispered to Elijah in the desert. Then we get a shadowy glimpse of God’s handiwork in this world... Perhaps, through our patient preparations and searches, **the Presence**

⁴ *Why Be Jewish*, David Wolpe, Henry Hold and Company, New York, 1995, p. 71

⁵ Wolpe, p. 66

is felt......like holding one's newborn for the first time, and we know that life will never quite be the same.

In honor of both the new *siddur* and the new year, I call upon each of us to spend some time deepening our relationships with God and with prayer in 5767. We can't long ignore these central pillars of our faith as we move about in the world. While we become familiar with our new *siddur*, let's each seize this opportunity to engage with its words in fresh, authentic, and inspirational ways. Our congregation has passed through the Gates of Prayer. Now we are all invited to enter the *Mishkan* and to find a spiritual home within.

Our clergy, educators, and lay leaders will serve as guides over the hurdles that impede our path to this goal. The new *siddur*, just like any *siddur*, makes little sense without some basic knowledge of the structure, themes, and flow of a typical Jewish prayer service. In order to help deepen understanding of Jewish worship, I will be offering an extended adult education class beginning in November. Over eleven sessions, we will mine the *siddur* for deeper comprehension of our prayers' historical, symbolic, spiritual, and personal meanings with room to grow for total beginners and for more experienced worshippers alike.

Israeli poet, Chaim Nachman Bialik once taught that "reading poetry in translation is like kissing through a veil." As our prayers are, themselves, exquisite poetry, the same might be said of our liturgy. Any translation will have its drawbacks, and thus, one who is able to comprehend our *siddur* in the original Hebrew will have greater access to our tradition's spiritual wellspring. Starting in just a couple of weeks, our community will offer year-long adult Hebrew classes for both beginning and advanced students.

Finally, Rabbi Morris Adler writes that, "prayer, to be a vital and transforming force in our life, cannot be an occasional mood, a moment's thought, a passing response, or a fugitive insight. It must be given permanence in our normal outlook and in our habitual behavior."⁶ Prayer is not likely to "work" for us unless we experience it and practice it, on a fairly regular basis. To that end, Temple Beth Shalom will continue its longstanding policy of offering lots and lots of services, and we hope that you will join us.

And by the way, Judaism requires ten people to hold a prayer service for a reason. Blessings recited on our own or with our families are beautiful, but they are no substitute for the experience of communal prayer. The path to relationship with God is neither logical nor orderly, but it is made navigable for us by the Jews of generations past, and by those who surround us in worship today. Please accept our invitation to come add your prayerful voice to those of your friends and neighbors.

⁶ Greenberg, p. 3

In the year ahead, May our prayers probe the most profound depths of our souls and may they soar to the loftiest heights.

May our new *siddur*, like the shofar's blast, awaken our spirits to new relationships with family, community, and God.

And May the blessings of our liturgy and the blessings of our lives inspire us to enter the *Mishkan* with open hearts so that God might, indeed, dwell among us.
Amen.