

The End of Liturgical Reform as We Know It: Creative Retrieval as a New Paradigm

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Prayer book reform was always one of the most significant and defining features of Reform Judaism in both Europe and America. While some reforms of the liturgy were driven by practical concerns, such as abbreviating the service or removing passages that were deemed to be inconsistent with the practice of most Reform Jews, most major reforms of traditional Jewish liturgy were ideologically based. Liturgical reform overwhelmingly was grounded in the notion that our prayers should be consistent with our theology. Reforms of this type are reflected in the deletion of phrases that reference a return to Zion, the resurrection of the dead, and the desire to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem (and even phrases recalling that we once *did* offer sacrifices there). As Jakob Petuchowski wrote, "Prayer, it was argued, demands absolute honesty; and the corollary was understood to imply that the prayerbook can contain only such statements as are factually correct, literally true, and historically verifiable."¹

Such criteria seem out of place in twenty-first-century religious life. Does our prayer book really need to be consistent with our theology? Must we believe literally the words we recite? Is our prayer book intended to be a catechism of Jewish belief? A new generation's answers to these questions may differ sharply from those who wrote or edited *The Union Prayer Book*, *Gates of Prayer*, and even *Mishkan T'filah*.

Our Reform forbearers had a posture of certainty, both about what God is and what God is not, about what God can do and what God cannot. In contrast, our theological perspective tends

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to be marked by great uncertainty. We are suspect of almost all absolute truth claims, including those that emanate from our own denominational camp. For many of us, contemporary Jewish theology is less about what we know with certainty to be true and much more about religious ways of organizing and conceiving the world. If medieval and modern Jewish theology were prose, ours is a theology of poetry. So, the expectation that any prayer book, itself an anthology of texts reflecting multiple theological positions, must be in line with our own contemporary theology now seems inappropriate, unachievable, and outdated.

In addition, our comfort with “text study” and its centrality in our religious lives has changed dramatically, and such changes impact directly on how we relate to the words of the prayer book. For the past twenty years, there has been a renaissance of Jewish learning that has impacted the entire American Jewish community, including our Reform Movement. The phrase “lifelong learning” has become standard. There are increased opportunities for serious text study in our synagogues, on retreats, and at institutions solely devoted to Jewish learning. Events like Limmud have proliferated to most major cities, and numerous online offerings are available to anyone with a computer.

There is today, inside and outside of Reform synagogues, a strong interest and deep love for primary Jewish texts and the rich and varied conversations that emerge from a meaningful encounter with them. Among these primary Jewish texts are surely the classic siddur and the classic *machzor*. Widespread positive experiences with text study have resulted in an appreciation even for texts that are difficult and challenging in light of contemporary attitudes. Increasingly, twenty-first-century American Jews value opportunities to confront such texts directly and to play a role in trying to derive relevance and meaning from them. The history of reforming the prayer book embraced an approach that assumed that laity would be put off by such texts or simply would not know what to do with them. Such passivity regarding the texts was part of a wider context for Reform worship in which worshipers were largely observers in a service that was mostly read to them by their rabbis. In contrast, today’s Reform Jews would privilege interpretation over revision. They would want to struggle with, and make meaning from, the classic words themselves, rather than have it done for them by others.

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Influenced, consciously or not, by the postmodern turn and deconstruction, contemporary Jews are comfortable reading on several levels simultaneously. They intuit that reading is a generative process and are less concerned about authorial intention: “And so one can state that the meaning of a text—if it is a great text—not just occasionally but always escapes its author: that is why understanding is not simply a reproductive attitude but is always a productive one.”²

Contemporary American Jews know that the words of the siddur and the *machzor* are poetry and metaphor. They could not conceive of taking its words literally. More than reforming its words, they would desire the tools to help them appreciate the multi-vocality of the text, with commentary that speaks to the intellect as well as to the soul. While it might be argued that study and worship are entirely different modes, learning as a spiritual practice and meaningful prayer experiences share much in common.

In many ways, then, the age of liturgical reform as previously understood and implemented is over. The guiding principle of a twenty-first-century Reform prayer book must now be the notion of “creative retrieval.” I first encountered this term in this journal by our colleague, Herbert Bronstein. He defined it as “the retrieval from our own traditional sources and our own roots, from the design of our own liturgy, of meaningful elements relevant to our own time.”³ In the same article, he also borrowed the term “ressourcement” from the *Nouvelle Theologie*, a mid-twentieth-century school of Catholic theology. “Ressourcement” refers to a return to the sources, in their case to Scriptures and writings of the church fathers. Creative retrieval or *ressourcement* represents an approach to Reform liturgy that is committed to mine the classic words of our sources to see how they might be used or transformed for our own context. Applying this approach to the writing and editing of a prayer book would require each prayer book to begin with the classic text itself as the primary referent and touchstone. Yes, the liturgical decisions of previous generations of Reform Jews may be noteworthy, but each generation needs for its own response to come directly from the inherited texts of our tradition. The sacred task of shaping Reform liturgy must never be seen as creating a prayer experience from scratch, any more than it is our task to write a new Torah or a new Talmud. A commitment to the project of creative retrieval means that the class prayer book

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is seen not as the “Orthodox” prayer book, but as our own, to draw from, to explain, and to adapt.

While such an approach may seem somewhat radical in Reform Judaism, similar ideas were expressed over a century ago in the Reform synagogue by Rabbi Judah L. Magnes. In a Passover sermon delivered in Manhattan’s Temple Emanu-El in 1910, Magnes urged the abandonment of the *Union Prayer Book*:

Far be it from me to underestimate the struggles endured in the creation of this book of prayer and the benefits that a modernized, uniform service has conferred upon numerous congregations. But I cannot be blind to the fact that the Union Prayer Book, as at present constituted, has done its work and has lived out its day. The one prayer book that can ever be the Book of Common Prayer for the Jewish people is the traditional Jewish prayer book, hallowed by the sufferings and the hopes and the religious yearnings of countless generations of our ancestors.⁴

Creative retrieval requires of us a shift from a “hermeneutic of suspicion” to a “hermeneutic of embrace.” We are well aware that the prayer book is a compilation over many centuries. We know that it is the work of human beings who in many cases were responding to the issues of their time. At the same time, a hermeneutic of embrace urges us to see the classic siddur and *machzor* as the poetry of the Jewish People. A hermeneutic of embrace begins with a love for the classic liturgy and a firm belief that it can be mined for contemporary meaning and relevance. A hermeneutic of embrace is rooted in the idea that the classic text has a great deal to teach us and that our primary task is to realize how it might be reframed, explained, or translated in such a way as to allow it to live in our Reform synagogues.

Of course, there will be parts of the liturgy that will cause pain or offend and that even the most robust commentary will not be able to rescue. In these cases, the best choice may indeed be to remove it from our prayers. But such instances are few and far between, and liturgical reforms such as these represent a miniscule number of changes Reform has made to the prayer book. As Richard Rubenstein wrote in 1966:

Our attitude in approaching the liturgy ought to be one of extreme conservatism, not for the sake of conservatism, but rather because the harm we can do by making the wrong decision af-

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fects the continuity of Jewish history and of Jewish religious sentiment itself. There is nothing necessarily sacred about any given liturgical form. What is impressive, however, is the extent to which both conscious and unconscious themes tend to intersect creatively in any liturgical mode.⁵

A hermeneutic of embrace rejects claims that “we Reform Jews don’t say this,” or that “this is the authoritative Reform *nusach*.” Such closed determinism has no place in a twenty-first-century approach to liberal liturgy. Equally important, a hermeneutic of embrace shifts the burden of proof away from the classic prayer needing to argue its worthiness for inclusion, to we who must defend why a prayer was not included, why we changed the words, or why we chose to translate it metaphorically. A hermeneutic of embrace argues against apologizing for wanting to restore the traditional text if it can be restored in ways that allow it to inspire, to teach, and or elicit creative interpretations.

Finally, a hermeneutic of embrace raises the bar for the work of liberal liturgy. It is much easier to delete and to change than to explain, to “translate” (understood narrowly and broadly), or to use in new ways. The growing phenomenon of groups reviving *piyut* through song and study, here and in Israel, and the number of new recordings of medieval *piyutim* by contemporary Israeli musicians present us with paradigms of allowing old texts to live and flourish in new ways.

A hermeneutic of embrace with respect to liturgy urges us to expand our understanding of prayer as *avodah*. Most commonly, we explain that prayer is *avodah* because it is a form of service, *avodah sh'balev* (service of the heart). However, the understanding of *avodah* as “work” might be apt as well when we consider the interpretive labor required of us when trying our best to bridge the gap between the inherited words of the classic siddur and our contemporary lives. It is hard work to make meaning from these words.⁶ Simultaneously, such work is a privilege, a blessing, and an opportunity for connection and continuity.

Notes

1. Jakob J. Petuchowski, *Prayerbook Reform in Europe: The Liturgy of European Liberal and Reform Judaism* (New York: World Union for Progressive Judaism, 1968), 353.

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2. Marc-Alain Ouaknin, *The Burnt Book: Reading the Talmud* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 59.
3. Herbert Bronstein, "Yom Kippur Worship: A Missing Center?" *CCAR Journal* (Summer 2004): 7–15.
4. Arthur A. Goren, ed., *Dissenter in Zion: From the Writings of Judah L. Magnes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 113.
5. Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* (Indianapolis: 1966), 108.
6. This notion of *avodah* as "work" as it relates to the interpretative process of making meaning from the words of the siddur is that of Dr. Elie Holzer, assistant professor of education at Bar Ilan University.