

Introduction To Mishkan T'filah

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By Rabbi Stuart Gershon

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The most significant feature of Mishkan T'filah is that just about every single prayer is given a two-page spread...if you are oriented toward Jewish tradition, you focus on the right side of the page. If you are oriented toward contemporary Jewish spirituality, you focus on the left side of the page ... is this format really necessary? This format is a mirror image of who we are as the Reform movement of Judaism in the early 21st century. The right hand side of the page speaks to tradition and community. The left hand side of the page speaks to creativity and individuality. If that crazy combination is not Reform Judaism as we know it today, what is?

Good evening and Shabbat Shalom. Tonight, the format of our prayer service is different. Rather than share a teaching with you at the end of our prayer service, I am going to offer it now, before we pray.

Why so? Because tonight we pray for the very first time at our Shabbat evening service with Mishkan T'filah, the new prayerbook of the Reform movement, as our *siddur*, our prayerbook. Tonight, all of us, together, are making history. And I say that without exaggeration. What you now have in your hands is the first Reform prayerbook in 32 years, only the fourth in the history of Reform Judaism since its founding in the United States in the early 19th century.

This prayerbook is the result of a process that began back in the early 1980's. It was not put together by rabbis and cantors alone. It is the product of a huge collaboration between rabbis and cantors and the laity of the Reform movement, piloted in 300 Reform congregations in North America. As Rabbi Larry Hoffman observes this is the people's prayerbook.

Every prayerbook is a response to both the ideological and demographic currents of the times. This prayerbook is no different. Theologically, our movement is all over the map. Some Reform Jews believe very strongly in God. Others do not. Among those who do believe, some think of God as a being, like a person who one can talk to. Others think of God as an impersonal force, embedded in the laws of nature. All this diversity of belief and non-belief is reflected in this prayerbook.

Demographically, our movement is also all over the map. Some in our community know Hebrew well and strongly advocate for Hebrew literacy. Others have no Hebrew background. This is reflected in our new prayerbook as well. For those who do not know Hebrew, all the Hebrew prayers come with English transliteration on the very same page.

For those who think knowledge of the Hebrew language is an important part of being a Reform Jew, the title of this prayerbook is in Hebrew: *Mishkan T'filah*, "a sanctuary for prayer." And

this prayerbook, unlike some previous Reform prayerbooks, opens like a Hebrew book, from right to left.

Now, let me briefly show you a few of the innovative features of our new prayerbook. To begin with, this prayerbook is very aesthetically pleasing. The typeface is very handsome, with the use of two colors. Please open to page 152-153. There you see the prayer known as the *Shema*. And you notice immediately the use of enlarged text to convey the point that this is no ordinary prayer, but the high point of our prayers tonight.

In the margins, you see a guidepost to the prayers. In blue it shows you the names of the prayers that are on-deck. In black, it shows you the name of the prayer we are praying at the moment. But the most significant feature of Mishkan T'filah is that just about every single prayer is given a two-page spread - two pages for one prayer. For example, please turn to page 148.

The right hand side of the page is grounded in the fixed tradition. There you will find on the top the traditional Hebrew prayer. Immediately below that is a poetic but exact translation of the Hebrew. The left hand side of the page is dedicated to contemporary 21st century religious expression. There you will find at the top a creative, modern interpretation of the traditional prayer. Immediately below that is an alternative prayer, poem, or meditation, reflecting one of the diverse theological points of view I mentioned earlier, intended to stimulate personal reflection. If neither the traditional prayer nor even its modern interpretation engage you, then hopefully, the alternative reading will do the trick.

To sum it all up, if you are oriented toward Jewish tradition, you focus on the right side of the page. If you are oriented toward contemporary Jewish spirituality, you focus on the left side of the page.

The purpose of this innovative format is simply but elegantly this: while we as a community may be praying from the vantage point of tradition or modernity, from the right or the left, you as an individual prayer, informed of how this prayerbook works, can follow your own heart. If the community is praying from the left, you can be praying from the right. If the community is praying from the right, you can be praying from the left. But since we are still one community, we all turn the page to the next prayer together. During our service that will begin momentarily, I encourage you to experiment with this new approach.

Now, some of you may asking yourselves: is this format really necessary?

Here is one possible answer to your question: this format is a mirror image of who we are as the Reform movement of Judaism in the early 21st century. The right hand side of the page speaks to tradition and community. The left hand side of the page speaks to creativity and individuality. If that crazy combination is not Reform Judaism as we know it today, what is?

So now, let us all make history together. For the very first time in the history of Temple Sinai, we use on this Friday night Mishkan T'filah as our *siddur*, our prayerbook.