

Mishkan T'filah:
Some reflections on
its need and purpose

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Abstract: *Mishkan T'filah teaches us that the meaning of the prayer experience is not to be found in tradition or creativity alone, nor in community or individuality alone, nor in Hebrew or English alone -- but in the beauty of their combination. Mishkan T'filah reminds us that it is far more fun to go on the journey of life together rather than alone, that belonging to, and praying with, community confers special gifts which we all need as we go about our daily lives: inspiration and hope, strength and resilience, comfort and peace.*

Just three weeks ago, we began to use *MishkanT'filah*, the first new Reform prayerbook in 32 years, as Temple Sinai's prayerbook, as our *siddur*.

On that Friday night I talked briefly about the rationale behind this prayerbook and more about its innovative features. Tonight I would like to do the reverse. So let's talk about: why this prayerbook? What's the need? What's the purpose? Why now?

Mishkan T'filah is the fourth prayerbook in the history of American Reform Judaism. As my colleague Rabbi Herbert Bronstein has observed, every prayerbook is published to meet a challenge and to solve a problem.

The purposes of a new prayerbook are to stem the tide of diminishing worship attendance, to promote a sense of unity within a movement, to recapture relevance when intellectual currents within and without a Jewish community have made the previous prayerbook seem irrelevant or even alienating. Not only does this aptly describe our current condition, this was the case prior to the publication of the first Reform prayerbook, *Minhag America*, in 1857, the Union Prayerbook in 1895, and Gates of Prayer in 1975.

You should know that the impetus to move forward with the gargantuan project of writing of a new *siddur* for the Reform movement did not come from Rabbis and Cantors, but from Reform Jewish laity, from you!

In 1994, the Reform movement received a grant from the Lilly foundation to conduct a nationwide survey of Reform Jews to determine what they wanted in a new prayerbook.

The survey found that Reform Jews strongly wanted in their prayerbook English transliteration, new metaphors for God, less masculine and hierarchical God language, relevant and compelling English prayer, and faithful translation.

The findings of the Lilly survey were a surprise to everyone, both clergy and laity alike. Because our Reform Rabbinic leadership became convinced in 1994 that the people wanted a new prayerbook is the reason why this prayerbook is in your hands tonight.

But what was so wrong with Gates of Prayer? Within a decade of its publication, there arose a disconnect over both the content and the form of Reform Jewish worship. In the area of content, the Reform Jewish world had changed dramatically. The newly feminist-minded now wanted gender-neutral language. The non-Jewish husbands and wives of interfaith couples now flocking to Reform Judaism wanted English transliteration of all the prayers.

In the area of form, classical Reform's penchant for passive, staid, formal, and unemotional worship ran headlong into New Age American spirituality. All of a sudden, Reform Jews now wanted emotion and informality within the worship setting, they wanted to sing, to participate actively, and they didn't want to pray responsively.

So what you have learned here tonight is that every prayerbook is a product of the ideological and demographic currents of its time. A prayerbook is a mirror through which we see ourselves.

Looking at *Mishkan T'filah*, what do we see? We see that Reform Judaism in America is an astoundingly diverse community. Theologically, we are all over the spectrum. 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 one can talk to. Others think of God as an impersonal force, embedded in the laws of nature.

Demographically, we are also all over the spectrum. Most of us are born Jews. Some of us are Jews by choice. Some in our community belong to other faith traditions. Some of us were raised as Orthodox Jews, others as classic Reform Jews. Some of us received an intensive Jewish education. Others got no Jewish upbringing or Hebrew background at all.

Our Reform Judaism is a very big tent. In order for a prayerbook to be acceptable to everyone, all this diversity would have to be represented within it. A new Reform prayerbook would require a fine balance between tradition and innovation, the individual and the community, Hebrew and English.

How does *Mishkan T'filah* try to realize this complicated balance? As we have already experienced tonight, every prayer is given a two-page spread. Two pages for one prayer. The right hand side of the page is grounded in the fixed tradition. On the top you will find the traditional Hebrew prayer. Immediately below is a poetic but exact translation of the Hebrew.

The left hand side of the page is dedicated to contemporary 21st century Jewish spiritual expression, giving voice to many diverse theological beliefs all within the same service. On the top you will find a creative, modern interpretation of the traditional prayer; immediately below is an alternative prayer, poem, or meditation intended to stimulate personal reflection. Thus, 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.

Why should this innovative format be important to you?

This format is a mirror image of who we are as the Reform movement of Judaism in the early 21st century. As individuals we are oftentimes not on the same spiritual page with one another. *Mishkan T'filah* allows each of us to remain individuals even within the context of community. While the community may be praying from the vantage point of tradition or modernity, from the right or the left, you as an individual can follow your own heart. If the community is praying from the left, you can pray from the right. If the community is praying from the right, you can pray from the left.

However, what is so crucially important for you to appreciate about the format of *Mishkan T'filah* is this: we still turn the page together, both literally and symbolically. We are a community above all! In the words of our American national seal, *E pluribus unum*: "out of the many, one."

Mishkan T'filah teaches us that the meaning of the prayer experience is not to be found in tradition or creativity alone, nor in community or individuality alone, nor in Hebrew or English alone -- but in the beauty of their combination. *Mishkan T'filah* reminds us that it is far more fun to go on the journey of life together rather than alone, that belonging to and praying with community confers special gifts which we all need as we go about our daily lives: inspiration and hope, strength and resilience, comfort and peace.