

**The New Can Have Meaning, Too**  
**Erev Rosh Hashanah 5777-The Valley Temple**  
**Rabbi Sanford Kopnick**

Rena was a person who met a rabbi, and decided it was time to return to her synagogue. Rena decided years before that there were better ways to connect with her spiritual side. She loved crystals, and felt that the magical power in the crystal better suited her. Time passed, and through no fault of her own, meeting that rabbi provided her with the additional impetus to join her family for a Shabbat service. Once she returned to her sanctuary, she was flooded with memories of her youth, and along with some of the memories that kept her away for more than twenty years, she was outraged because she didn't recognize the service. Since she had been in her synagogue, the movement went from the Union Prayer Book to the Gates of Prayer. Even though her memories were filled with the monotony of the same prayers, the same songs, and the same everything, she was surprised that she felt so unfamiliar with what she understood to be her heritage.

The next time Rena saw the rabbi, she told him that she would not be returning anytime soon. The good news was that the baggage that had kept her away for so many years was gone. However, she said that she really resented that the service felt so unfamiliar. "Why did we need a new book," she said, "and what was wrong with the melodies I grew up with?"

The rabbi's response was that this is Reform Judaism...an active and dynamic approach. So while it was always the goal of the movement to continue to be recognizable, the worship service was allowed to be influenced by both modern considerations, and new emphases. The rabbi politely asked, "Were we supposed to wait 20 years for you to find your way back?"

Rena's story is indicative of one of the greatest challenges in Jewish prayer. Many find that even if they know how to read Hebrew, they can't know Hebrew well enough to translate straight from the prayer book. They know a few melodies, but when the music changes, it is harder to participate. And when, God forbid, the English changes, a prayer is added, or everyone seems to know some ritual that others may not, these folks frequently feel isolated, alienated, or uncomfortable. What has become familiar, even if that familiarity hasn't been visited in 20 years, is still comforting. And while, intellectually, the case is easily made that new melodies or new prayers add meaning and refresh our prayer experience, some see the service of their youth as macaroni and cheese—comfort food for the soul.

Tonight, you hold in your hands the first of two volumes dedicated to our High Holy Day worship. You and I started talking about this a year ago. There have been classes, discussions, and bulletin articles dedicated to making this moment positive. But two goals of Jewish prayer vie for our attention this night: How do we balance the opportunity for new interpretations of our tradition with the value and comfort of fixed prayers that have been so important to the Jewish prayer experience?

Many of you join me here on a weekly or few times a month or monthly basis throughout the year. For you who do this, you understand that the routine of Jewish prayer (also called *Keva*) is a strong value. It is tied to our concept of community which is reflected in the idea of a *minyan*. A minyan, or prayer-quorum, insists that the service be fully conducted in the presence of ten people at dependable

times. Traditional worship also values that certain prayers are said, regardless if we mean what we are saying. To that end, our movement reformed the prayer book a few hundred years ago, and keeps reforming it, in order to not have throwaway prayers. Rather than only valuing the presence of 10 souls, our movement sought, and seeks, to create communities of prayer that find what is being said to be meaningful, too.

Historically, we found that when someone had more to say, or a new prayer to offer because it made sense or spoke to someone's soul, it was added—generally without taking a prayer away. We see this in our own service with the *Misheberach* prayer for healing. We added a few minutes to our service, because we didn't remove a prayer to compensate for the new one. This thoughtful addition is part of the term we call *Kavanah*. *Kavanah* is when we are intentional about praying and seek meaning in the words—not just meaning in making sure the words are uttered. Our new prayer book seeks to give us new ways of connecting with ancient ideas. The great 20<sup>th</sup> Century theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel suggests that *Kavanah* is the awareness of God rather than the awareness of the reason for a commandment.” (Heschel 137) When we feel commanded to do something, our soul can fill up with the satisfaction and emotion of doing as God asks us.

However, what about those who need to find meaning in the words, not just the meaning that comes from making God happy? How do we make it so that these people find meaningful prayer throughout the service, rather than only at silent prayer and the *Misheberach*? Even those who say *Kaddish* at a *yahrtzeit* find more meaning in the task than in the actual words they say.

In listening to the editors of this book, it is clear that they sought to balance our new High Holy Day prayer book

between those who regularly attend and those who are new to Jewish prayer. They sought to create solitary moments while among the community. They also had ideas of how to be authentic to the themes of the High Holy Days and to Jewish worship, while understanding that they had to have their eyes to the future. They tried to bridge the personal with the communal (Goldberg 277). That is a lot for any book to try to accomplish, and that is why there is so much here—and why we'll be skipping around.

Last year, a member of a different Cincinnati Reform congregation came to our Yom Kippur morning service. One of his Valley friends asked him what he was doing here, and his response was, "I heard you guys hadn't changed to the new prayer book and wanted to use it again." I have to tell you, I could have lived without hearing this.

Our goal this year is to respect the fact that those who find meaning in the familiar may have a hard year getting used to our new books. The routine is easier. But having choices about the way we conceptualize God, the harshness of the liturgy regarding our sins, the role of fate and deed regarding what to expect in the coming year, the challenge of reflection and real atonement, all of this can be enhanced with fresh words. That there are so many choices is indicative of our movement's awareness that congregations have different values, and a more nuanced liturgy could open some spiritual doors that a book written for 1970s and 1980s Jews couldn't have contemplated.

While little is legislated, one change that we all will make is in the *Mourner's Kaddish* for each service. A line has been added to be more universal and more inclusive. I confess that I am worried about it. The *Oseh Shalom* concluding verse adds the phrase, “*v'al kol yoshvei teiveil.*” The familiar melody of *Oseh Shalom* doesn't work with the new words, and yet—I think

we are all more likely comfortable asking God to cause peace to descend *al kol yoshvei teiveil*-- upon the entire world rather than just *al kol Yisrael* on the Jewish People. Making a change like this is tantamount to changing God's words on Sinai, or expecting that those who find the comfort that boxed macaroni and cheese brings will have to appreciate a cheese pasta dish using only the finest cheeses and pasta made fresh that day. It may taste better, but it doesn't yet bring comfort. Yet, you and I know that in time, we appreciate the healthier or fresher ingredients, and can be persuaded to refine our tastes.

So let's ground ourselves. First, while much about the prayer book will seem new or unfamiliar, almost all of the music is the same as last year, with only a few exceptions. Second, I am hoping that the choices we made will not create a longer worship experience. Third, remember that the absence of something familiar need not feel like *disrespect*. Rather, it could be considered *an opportunity* to find a new way in to our High Holy Day themes of self-reflection and atonement. The old prayer book would list our sins in alphabetical order and then summarize it by saying "our sins are an alphabet of woe." I couldn't say it without laughing at how silly it sounded, and I finally skipped it. I'm sure we'll find some odd phrases in this book, too—but so far, I've loved some of the alternative interpretations and have been grateful for some of the choices, and I hope you will be, too. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the Rosh Hashanah reception remains under the care of Clare Deutsch and Sue Bortz, and therefore, will be as great as ever.

I am pretty sure that the other congregations are all using this new prayer book, so defecting may not do you any good. Rather, give yourself the chance to interact with this book. Know that in arriving at this day, a lot of preparation went into trying to balance what was familiar with what has the potential to be meaningful. If you come across a reading or passage that you like, but was not included, send me a note or e-mail to let me know. Please don't text me, and certainly don't tell me at the *oneg*...because what happens at the *oneg*, stays at the *oneg*.

When Rena went to her rabbi outraged that things had changed in her absence, it was understandable—yet, waiting for her return would have alienated so many others. That said, I am grateful that we are Reform Jews, who are always seeking meaning in what we say as a balance to the spiritual link created by simply and routinely uttering the words. Please remember that our opportunity here tonight is to rise in holiness as we seek insight into the year we close with an eye toward reflection, repentance, and learning how to grow. Let's give this new prayer book the chance to help us.

*L'shanah Tovah!*

#### Sources

Goldberg, Edwin. *Machzor, Challenge and Change*, vol. 2. CCAR Press, 2014.

Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *Man's Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism*. Scribner, 1954