

The Difference a Prayer Book Makes

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The year was 1975. Change was in the air. Within a relatively short period of time, the civil rights and women's liberation movements had brought swift departures from long-standing injustices. A human being had taken those historic first steps on the moon in 1969, a feat that would have been unimaginable a decade earlier. Change seemed rather natural in 1975.

Still, some folks were uncomfortable when the item that was changing was the prayer book. The Temple is a second home. Change makes some folks feel less at home. The *Union Prayer Book* was, for so many, an old friend. That prayer book, which many of you had held in your hands for decades, was small, and so easy to handle; its language, magnificently poetic.

Who could argue, though, that the time had come for a new prayer book? The *Union Prayer Book* had been around for a very long time. Even the "newly revised" edition, which was only slightly changed from the earlier version, was published in 1948. *UPB*, as it is affectionately known, did not take into account the two most significant events in twentieth century Jewish life, namely the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel. Its replacement, *Gates of Prayer* was adopted nearly universally and very quickly.

Less than fifteen years after it came into print, though, *Gates of Prayer* was already on its way to obsolescence. The first issue to arise was that *Gates of Prayer* used masculine pronouns to refer to God. Most rabbis, and growing numbers of lay people, saw this language as quite an anachronism, as early as the mid-1980s. By 1989, the Union for Reform Judaism's Biennial Convention featured a new prayer booklet, an adaptation of *Gates of Prayer* without the gender-specific words.

Soon, a committee was appointed to develop a permanent, new prayer book for Reform Judaism. I recall well a comment made to me by my Rabbi from Houston, Samuel Karff, in 1991, shortly after he completed his term as President of the Central Conference of Reform Rabbis. He believed that *Gates of Prayer* had been in print too briefly for a new prayer book to be considered. Indeed, he regarded the appointment of a group to develop a new prayer book so soon as a *shandah*, a disgrace. He predicted that rabbis would be seen as foisting a new prayer book upon their congregations before that new-book scent had worn off of *Gates of Prayer*.

Meanwhile, many congregations began creating and adopting their own prayer books. A small minority, clinging strongly to the Classical Reform heritage, continued to pray from the 1940's *Union Prayer Book*. The advantage of either of these courses was that each synagogue could pray in its own unique style. The disadvantage is found when we contemplate the first name of the prayer book we are using tonight: *Union*. The original idea that led to the creation of this prayer book and its predecessors was that Reform congregations throughout North America ought to be united by a common prayer book. Many of us continue to believe that all Reform Jews should be able to worship from the same prayer book, or books, granting us comfort and familiarity as we move from one Reform Temple to another, or at least as we visit one another. By the middle of the last decade, though, Congregation B'nai Israel was among minority of Reform congregations still worshipping from the big light blue prayer book that nobody ever really loved.

As Rabbi Karff had originally hoped, the committee charged with developing a new prayer book for Reform Judaism moved slowly, very slowly. From that initial conversation in 1991, more than fifteen years passed before the publication of *Mishkan T'fillah*. Hundreds of congregations, including our own,

engaged in pilot studies of *Mishkan T'fillah*, eliciting a range of responses, a diversity of opinion that has continued since that prayer book was officially adopted. Many regular worshipers find the deepest meaning in *Mishkan T'filah*, while others find it foreign and difficult to use.

In some ways, the transition to *Mishkan T'filah* was more difficult than that mid-1970s switch to *Gates of Prayer*, not only here in Little Rock, but throughout our Reform Movement. We live in an era vastly different from the 1970s. Many people feel that the world is changing far too fast. We yearn to hold on to the familiar. Especially in our synagogue home, we hope that we will always feel comfortable, never foreign or out of date. *Mishkan T'filah* is creative and prayerful. It is also very different.

Tonight, we dedicate a new prayer book – indeed, a new *Union Prayer Book* – with great joy, and I dare say without the anxiety that greeted the embrace of either of those last two prayer books. This time, we are not leaving a prayer book behind. Those who love *Mishkan T'filah* are not saying “good-bye” to the volume that best sanctifies their own religious lives. Next week, and the week after that, we plan to worship from *Mishkan T'filah*; then again from tonight’s prayer book on the first Friday in June.

Congregation B’nai Israel is a founding member of the Union for Reform Judaism and is a mainstream Reform Temple. Therefore, we would not discard *Mishkan T'filah*, which is, after all, the current “union” prayer book, albeit by another name. Our Rabbis of old taught, *al tifros min hatzibbur*, “Do not separate yourself from the community.” These words remind us that we do not want to be apart from the Reform Jewish world throughout North America, in which Congregation B’nai Israel has played an historic role since 1866.

Moreover, let me be clear: Adopting *UPB – Sinai Edition* alongside *Mishkan T'filah* does not separate us from our Reform Jewish community. Arguably, learning to love two prayer books, far from bigamy, deepens our connection to the full Reform Jewish world in 2014.

Gates of Prayer aimed – and ultimately, failed – to be a prayer book for all Reform Jews. With ten different Friday night services in one volume, few if any were meaningful for anyone. Indeed, if we have learned anything since 1975, it is that embracing diversity requires much more than tolerance. If we are to be one nation, or one synagogue family, we need not merely accept the fact that everyone is different; we must celebrate the distinctiveness of each person’s contribution to a magnificent community.

In 2014, we no longer assume that every Jew is of European origin, or was born Jewish, or is part of a traditional family. Why, then, would we imagine that every Reform Jew would resonate to the same religious poetry, adore the same style of music, or share a preference for the language of Jewish prayer?

Tonight, as we accept Mac’s magnificent gift to our congregation, we give thanks for the men and women of Chicago Sinai Congregation, and of the Society for Classical Reform Judaism, above all Rabbi Howard Berman, who developed this new-old prayer book. They have created a work of beauty, a pleasure to hold in our hands, retaining the best of the 1948 *Union Prayer Book* and its predecessors, and even a dash here and there from *Gates of Prayer* and *Mishkan T'filah*. You see, *UPB – Sinai Edition* is not a throw-back. Its editors have updated the language, dispensing with Victorian English and gender-specific language. The prayer book does not legislate against the use of Hebrew – the old *UPB* didn’t either, for that matter – as it facilitates Hebrew prayer by including transliteration, just like *Mishkan T'filah*.

Some in our congregation will strongly prefer this prayer book. We don't have to turn the page after every prayer and find our place on the next page. The book opens English-style, left to right. To those who missed the *Union Prayer Book* for more than a quarter century, this prayer book feels like home.

Others will still prefer *Mishkan T'filah*. The dynamic possibilities of each page inspire. The connection to our broader Jewish tradition is clear. For those who have celebrated the evolution of contemporary Reform Judaism, *Mishkan T'filah* feels like home.

Many of us may love each prayer book equally, albeit in different ways, much like one loves two children, equally. For all of us, this Sanctuary, Congregation B'nai Israel, is our home. Just as a home-cooked meal doesn't always mean that our favorite food will be served on any given night, one service will be more to an individual's taste than another. Still, every service can feel like home.

Every week, we can pray in English, and in Hebrew, whichever prayer book is in our hands. Every week, with our magnificent volunteer musicians, our worship will come to life with music that emanates from the Classical Reform tradition, from the modern Reform camp movement, and from a variety of other authentically Jewish musical styles. Every week, our worship can and should stir the soul and challenge the mind. Every week, the heart should leave here warmed.

Tonight, we celebrate a new prayer book. Even more, we say a formal "welcome home," to any who have felt the Temple at least a little bit foreign, ever since the prayer book got big and fat and light blue, nearly forty years ago. Let all of us feel at home, whatever dish is being served at this synagogue table, every Friday night. If we do, then the goal of Mac's gift, the blessing of this new prayer book, will make all the difference in the world.

Amen.