

What Will the New Rabbi Change?

July 5, 2013

Rabbi Barry Block

The new rabbi approached the challah to lead motzi for the first time in her new congregation. After removing the cover and offering the blessing, she picked up the knife and cut the challah. The congregation gasped in horror. What had the rabbi done wrong?

It turns out that the previous rabbi had taught that an instrument of destruction, such as a knife, should never be raised over a blessing. The knife was there, not to be used, God forbid, but specifically as a reminder that it should consciously be avoided.

The rabbi had never heard such a teaching. As a result, she unwittingly transgressed a taboo of her new congregation. I, on the other hand, had the opportunity to see Rabbi Lipper cut challah with a knife, three weeks in a row!

Still, I have little doubt that I will unwittingly do things differently from the ways they've always been done here at Congregation B'nai Israel. I pray that you will be patient with me. The new rabbi of my little story quickly learned the ways of her synagogue. And the truth be told, the initial discomfort could not have been prevented. The Temple leadership had no idea that their previous rabbi's practice wasn't universal.

With any new rabbi, and you've had more than your share these last couple of years, some things change. Hopefully, most of these changes are thoughtful and carefully considered, with rabbi and congregation in partnership. Tonight, I would like to describe a change we are initiating in our ritual practice - the first, but surely not the last or the most significant. This change will surprise neither the Search Committee, which heard a version of this sermon in January, nor the Ritual Committee, with whom I discussed the matter, and who endorsed the plan, in April.

The first changes this rabbi proposed are to a few Hebrew words. Permit me to explain.

Each morning, those who use a traditional prayerbook recite: *Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha-olam, shelo asani goy*. Blessed are You, Adonai our God, for not making me a

gentile. This negative statement implies that there is something wrong with being a non-Jew.

These words have not appeared in Reform prayerbooks for more than a century. Still, this prayer has not been entirely left out of our *Mishkan T'filah* and its predecessors; it has been altered. Instead of praising God for not making us gentiles, we praise God *she-asani Yisrael*, Who made me a Jew. We do rejoice in our heritage. We do praise God for our destiny. Yet we do so in a positive way, without expressing a negative evaluation of others.

I am not criticizing our ancestors, who fashioned these prayers. Events too often led them to appropriately negative appraisals of gentiles. Hitler was not the first who sought to destroy us. Time and again, and we know it too well, our people has been oppressed and persecuted. And so they prayed, ever so fervently, not only for blessings upon themselves, but for curses upon their tormentors. Making distinctions, even negative ones, are appropriate when we are enslaved, when others seek our destruction.

But not today. Certainly not in American Reform synagogues.

Don't get me wrong. I know that the scourge of anti-Semitism yet lives. We are all too aware of the evil that would wipe Israel, land and people, from the face of the Earth.

But when we thank God *shelo asani goi*, "for not making me a gentile," we are painting all non-Jews with one stroke of the brush. Quite to the contrary, our American Reform experience teaches us that not all Jewish heroes are Jewish.

Today, the men and women of Congregation B'nai Israel, and of every Reform congregation, include more than a few non-Jews. Among us sit mothers and fathers who are sacrificially raising their children in a Jewish faith and tradition they do not personally share. Moreover, beyond our synagogue walls, we engage in meaningful interfaith exchange and social action with people of other faiths and of no faith. How could we possibly thank God for not making us like our heroes, our friends, our partners in repairing this broken world?

Unfortunately, not all negative reference to non-Jews has been removed from our Reform prayerbooks. The most potent example is the *Aleinu*, also known as the Adoration, which we recite before the open Ark toward the end of the service.

Traditionally, the *Aleinu* expresses reverence for God *shelo asanu k'goyei ha-ratzot*, "Who has not made us like the gentiles of the lands, and has not placed us like the families of the earth, since God has not assigned unto us a portion like theirs, not a lot as unto all their masses." No different from praising God for not making us gentiles, this version of the *Aleinu* expresses a negative view of our fellow human beings. Therefore, one would expect the traditional *Aleinu* to be omitted, or at least to be modified, in our Reform prayerbook.

In fact, the *Aleinu* was reformulated in Reform Judaism as early as 1841, when the West London Synagogue issued a prayerbook which excised the *Aleinu's* negative words. Instead of praising God for not making us like other peoples, that early British Reform liturgy praises God for choosing us from among all peoples by giving us the Torah. That prayerbook's authors did rejoice that God has made us Jews, and has chosen us for a special mission. They affirmed the *Aleinu's* conviction that we are a chosen people. They did not, in the process, express a negative view of other people.

Later Reform adaptations went even further, since some are altogether uncomfortable with the idea of a chosen people. Decades ago, American Reform Judaism adopted an English Adoration, which doesn't mention being chosen at all. You know this one: "Let us adore the ever living God, . . . Who spread out the heavens and established the Earth." That *Union Prayer Book* version, that Adoration we all know, appears in *Mishkan T'filah*, with slightly updated English.

This English *Aleinu* is certainly not offensive. And yet, the idea of being chosen is not only central to the traditional *Aleinu*, it is key to Judaism. We do not imagine ourselves chosen for special privilege, but rather for responsibility: to perform God's *mitzvot* and do the work of *tikkun olam*. Our English Adoration, while certainly acceptable, leaves out this vital component.

Perhaps most problematic - and you may want to see for yourselves on page 282 of *Mishkan T'filah*, at the bottom - the editors decided to include the traditional *Aleinu*, but not to translate it honestly. The Hebrew praises God "who did not make us like the people of the Earth or give us their destiny." The English speaks only of a "unique destiny."

There is another choice, honest and forthright in Hebrew and English, on the top of page 283. It isn't new for *Mishkan T'filah*. This version was originally written for a prayerbook published by the Union of Liberal and Progressive Synagogues in England in 1967 and was replicated in *Gates of Prayer*. In this version, we praise God for choosing us to make known God's unity and calling us to proclaim God's sovereignty.

This particular formulation of the *Aleinu* has much to recommend it. It does speak of us Jews as chosen. However, instead of insisting that we were selected for special privilege, this *Aleinu* praises God for giving us unique responsibilities. We thank God, for we Jews have the honor of proclaiming the *Shema*.

Fortunately, these words are adaptable to the familiar *Aleinu* melody, which is how we will pray it tonight, coupled with the prayer that this and all our prayers will be acceptable to God, the Holy One of blessing.

I pray that you will receive this change with equanimity, that you will at least embrace it as an experiment, and that you will offer feedback to Leah, to the Ritual Committee, and to me, as we make this change and others, knowingly and unwittingly, in the weeks and months ahead.

You have placed the challah knife into my hand, as it were. I think of Moses and Aaron, who took the rod, as God commanded, but who misused it. Aaron's death, recounted in tonight's reading, is part of the unhappy result.

No, I don't imagine that changes we make here carry life and death consequences. Still, you have placed a sacred trust in my hand, just as God placed that rod in the hands of that first rabbi, Moses, and his brother Aaron. While I will continue to cut the challah with a knife, I pray that I may always wield any authority you bestow upon me with humility and wisdom. Let any change we choose together be for the good of B'nai Israel, the Children of Israel, and those who walk with us in the service of God.

Amen.