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A conservative prayer for the Reform movement

By Shmuel Rosner

FRANKLIN LAKES, NEW JERSEY - Rabbi Elyse Frishman thumbs through to page 97 in the Reform movement's new prayer book and orders: "Read this!" A translation into English of a poem by Yehuda Amichai: "The diameter of the bomb was 30 centimeters / and the diameter of its destruction - / about seven meters." Initially, the editors of "Mishkan T'filah: A Reform Siddur" - the new prayer book of the Reform movement in the United States - had tried to integrate Amichai into the book, but the response of the worshippers to this innovation was mixed.

The question of whether the poem is suitable for the Friday night liturgy prompted a long debate. Frishman says she herself thinks "it's a wonderful poem." Yet she thought it would prove "too disruptive" for a Friday night. For her part, Frishman did want to have the poem in the prayer book, as did the rest of the editorial committee's members, consisting of rabbis, cantors and lay leaders. Finally the poem was moved to page 97, as a weekday prayer. This puts Amichai's crushing bomb opposite the last blessing in the Amidah prayer, "Shalom Rav" (Grant abundant peace).

The book lying on Frishman's desk, bound in a blue hard cover, became a bestseller even before it left the publishing house and its distribution began a few months ago. The first edition of the prayer book has been printed in about 150,000 copies and many congregations are awaiting its arrival. Hundreds of thousands of Jews will turn its pages, using it for their prayers, from one day to the next and from one Sabbath to the next. They will return time and again to the words Frishman gathered and edited for them over the course of many years. The past several years, she says, "reminded me of how serious Reform Judaism is."

Here, in short, are some of the outstanding innovations in the new prayer book of the Reform movement in the United States, to which about 1.5 million Americans belong: more traditional prayers than in the past, less English and more Hebrew as well as different instructions to worshippers about what to do and how to do it. Many view the prayer book's character as part of a general trend in the Reform movement toward a more conservative orientation and a return to rituals that had been abandoned. Contrary to its predecessors, the new prayer book looks more like a traditional prayer book. A person who is not familiar with the ins and outs of Reform liturgy can find in it materials that he knows from other prayer books. "Apart from Birchot Hashachar [morning blessings], we haven't changed much of the traditional prayer," says Frishman. So much so that a huge, publicized debate has arisen because of the decision to return the "Resurrection of the Dead [M'chayeih

Hameitim]" prayer to the prayer book.

Previous Reform prayer books had dropped this prayer because of the movement's refusal to accept the expression's literal meaning, which is not suited to the rational outlook of Reform belief, and instead replaced it with the blessing "Gives Life to All [M'chayeih Hakol]." The discussion on including the prayer went on for many long months. In the end, Frishman's own opinion was accepted: The dead were brought back to the prayer as a metaphor - but in parentheses. Frishman is not referring to the dead literally coming back to life but rather to a blessing that stands for renewal, for a flourishing after a withering. There is no need to be alarmed by a prayer like this. Our community, she says, is smart enough to understand why the prayer has returned and what it symbolizes.

From the Talmud to the Internet

Her quiet, spacious office at the suburban Barnet Temple contains a sheet of paper on which cuttings are pasted in a familiar format. In the paper's center is a bold text in larger letters. Around it, from right to left, are short segments in smaller letters. This is what the new community "Mission Statement" at Frishman's synagogue will look like. The members of the congregation, which numbers about 400 families, are now working on the definition of its aims, its beliefs and its outlook. The paper very much resembles the appearance of a traditional page of Talmud.

Frishman had also thought about arranging the

prayer book in this kind of format but then she abandoned the idea for a more comprehensible, simpler structure. Nevertheless, Frishman makes a point of always turning back to the Talmud - it is from this starting point that she skips into the future, to the Internet generation. Much has already been said about the Talmud as the first, primordial model of the modern hyperlink - the text sends the reader to additional sources, interpretations and expansions. Frishman thinks the prayer book of the next generation will be different from the one she has published. The nest generation is a restless generation, accustomed to truncated, brief reading - and she believes this will also affect the prayer book. Therefore, she does not know for how many years "her" prayer book will be the main, most widely distributed prayer book in American Reform Judaism.

Frishman believes the prayer book has to be suited to the spirit of the times and the place of the worshippers. While others view the prayer book as a return to origins, she sees the innovation in it. The Reform movement has had a great many prayer books - the first was distributed in 1892 and suited the Reform movement of those days. It did not include terms related to "Jewish peoplehood," and the "rabbi" was a "minister." In 1975, a very different book was published - "Shaarei Tefillah: Gates of Prayer" - which espoused the connection to the Zionist vision that had been rejected by the founders of Reform Judaism.

The new "Mishkan T'filah" also manifests considerable differences from its predecessors.

One of the most obvious changes is the use of Hebrew. More American Jews are learning Hebrew, love Hebrew and understand that this language is unique to them. This is why there is also a lot more Hebrew in the prayer book.

In the synagogue, Frishman stands on the raised platform, wrapped in a prayer shawl. She sewed the colorful tallit herself from a large length of cloth she found. She says such practice is apparently one of the effects of women's increasing participation in religious life. After all, what male rabbi would go shopping for fabrics and suddenly decide that a particular piece of cloth is just right for a new prayer shawl that he makes with his own hands?

Frishman thinks "worship is an art" - that is, if it is done properly. She also aspires for her prayer book to provide a spiritual experience. The Reform movement is more spiritual than Judaism's more traditional streams, which are parallel to it. In fact - and this, too, has often been spoken of, demonstrated and discussed - it has drawn quite a lot from Hasidism. The prayer book is "an opportunity to excite our congregants."

Critics of the new prayer book, including some members of the Reform movement itself, are protesting that it has been taken "too far to the right" and is making the Reform prayer too similar to that of the Conservative movement. But Frishman does not agree. She has always been Reform; that is how she grew up - clearly, this is not a matter of nostalgia or feelings of inferiority to more traditional movements. The

new prayers, she explains, "have not been inserted for the sake of tradition, but rather because today we are more self-aware, more educated." The "sources" to which she has returned are "resources" from which something new is created.

Ultimately, those who will create something new from this prayer book are the members of the Reform movement's various and varied congregations. Frishman notes that this is a movement of its members and offers structural evidence to support this view: For the Orthodox, the rabbis are those who make the decisions, whereas for the Conservatives, the rabbinical seminaries are the most influential. For the Reform movement it is the headquarters - an organizational, rather than a "rabbinical," "legal" or "educational" body. What is the organization if not the representative of hundreds of thousands of members? What is the prayer book if not "their book?" They will do with it as they choose.

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