

A New Prayer for Jewish Unity

By Ari L. Goldman

Judging from the release this fall of two new prayer books just in time for Judaism's holiest season, Jews on both ends of the religious spectrum might slowly be inching toward one another.

On the one end, we have the Reform prayer book, "Mishkan T'filah: A Reform Siddur," which replaces "Gates of Prayer," the prayer book that a whole generation of Reform Jews grew up on.

On the other end, we have "Shaarei Simcha: Gates of Joy," which is being billed as the first Jewish liturgical work produced by Orthodox women.

While the language of the Hebrew prayers in Shaarei Simcha is rather traditional, the translations are inclusive of both men and women. And there are numerous prayers that you would not find in a regular Orthodox *siddur*, like a new liturgy for the adoption of a child.

It might not be entirely fair to compare the two volumes. The Reform siddur is the product of years of research by an eminent committee of scholars and laymen. It will soon become the official prayer book of the Reform movements for use in its 900 congregations.

The Orthodox prayer book is the work of two women, Adena K. Berkowitz and Rivka Haut, who have deep roots in the Orthodox community and consulted widely with progressive scholars within the movement. Their work is not meant to replace any existing prayer book, but is rather a supplemental siddur, centered on the Grace After Meals and other home rituals.

Despite their differences, the Reform and Orthodox volumes grapple with many of the same issues. The Reform siddur, for example, expands the traditional formula-



tion of invoking Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to embrace the matriarchs: Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah.

The new Orthodox siddur includes the matriarchs as a footnote in the text, asking the worshipper to meditate on their names rather than speak them aloud. "We have to be sensitive to the Hebrew text," says Berkowitz. "We could not tamper with it."

"What we strived to do," she explains, "was to come up with something faithful to Jewish law, while at the same time being inclusive to the needs of women, single people, and children."

The new Reform prayer book re-embraces some Orthodox language and imagery. For example, the notion of the resurrection of the dead was not included in the previous text, "Gates of Prayer." But in the new volume, resurrection is offered as an "optional" text.

Rabbi Peter S. Knobel, the chair of the editorial committee for the new Reform siddur, explains that the notion of resurrection, once anathema to the movement, has gained greater acceptance as a metaphoric concept.

Likewise, he said, the chapter of the *Shema* on *tzitzis*, ritual fringes, is in the new volume even though it was not in "Gates of Prayer." "There's a significant change in terms of re-embracing ritual," he says.

The new Orthodox siddur is especially sensitive to women's spirituality. While the name of God is preserved as a masculine noun in the Hebrew text, the English translation uses words like "ruler" or "almighty."

There are also special meditations while lighting Shabbat candles, including one for *agunot*, the so-called "chained women" who are unable to remarry because of a husband's refusal to give them a Jewish divorce. The siddur also includes a communal call-to-prayer for women who are about to say the Grace After Meals.

It is too soon to say if this siddur, which began to circulate over the summer, will gain wide acceptance in the Orthodox community. But at least it has not yet been banned in Brooklyn.

The Orthodox volume, of course, does not neglect men. In fact, it has a newly adapted prayer for husbands that is to be recited on Friday nights after the traditional "Woman of Valor" prayer for the women of the house. The new prayer is called "A Wife's Prayer for Her Husband" and includes this wish: "Continually help us to live with each other in love, peace, and friendship."

It is a prayer that might also be uttered for the various branches of the Jewish communal tree. With people on both ends working to produce such inclusive yet traditional liturgies, perhaps we, as a people, can live in greater friendship and peace.

I don't know if those branches will ultimately meet in the middle, but we can always pray that they will. ☺

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