

Reforming Reform

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In 1998 when the fall cover of Reform Judaism magazine featured Rabbi Richard Levy in a kippa and tzitzit, Reform Jews were openly provoked. But the cover was no empty provocation. Inside the magazine, Levy, then the president of the major association of Reform rabbis, went on to introduce and defend a platform of increased religious observance that called on the movement to return to practices such as kashrut and Shabbat observance.

For a movement that had built its reputation more than a century before by rejecting many of the traditional beliefs and practices of Judaism, including ritual garb and dietary laws, as archaic and irrelevant to modern life, the image called into question the very core of what the movement once stood for.

The Web site of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), the main body of Reform rabbis, became home to rounds of bitter sparring. Some suggested it was a sign of the movement's failure - that rejection of ritual simply can't withstand an era in which people are increasingly returning to tradition for spiritual sustenance. Others, who had joined the Reform Movement precisely for what it had rejected, felt betrayed.

"I dropped out of synagogue membership for nearly 50 years because I was not interested in following the 613 commandments and I was tired of being made to feel guilty about it," wrote one. "Excess ritualism is a cop-out," said another.

But, even then, an equal number of voices came out in favor of Levy's proposed principles. "If indeed we wish to be abreast of the developments coming in the 21st century, it seems clear we will have to embrace some of the same customs that were considered offensive a century ago," said one. "Generations to come will look back on these principles as a defining moment for liberal Judaism," said another. "They are a beacon to the future."

Six months after the appearance of the article, the CCAR voted to adopt a version of Levy's principles, even if slightly watered down. This version now serves as the movement's backbone.

Now, almost a decade since the principles were adopted, the return to ritual has been further codified in the pages of a new siddur. If Jews are a people of the book, then a siddur may be the best barometer we have to test the waters.

Mishkan T'filah, the product of almost 20 years of extensive research and discussion, reflects a noticeable departure from its predecessor, which had long been a source of dissatisfaction within the movement.

Prayers previously removed have been reinstated; references to traditional texts from medieval times to the present abound; stage directions and traditional choreography of prayer are provided; and Hebrew plays an unprecedented role. Not only is the name of the siddur in Hebrew, unlike its two predecessors, this time congregants have no choice - there is only one version and it opens from right to left.

At the same time, the siddur reaffirms some of the ideological mainstays of the Reform Movement: its concern for tikkun olam (making the world a better place) and its inclusive approach to gays and lesbians and intermarried couples.

"We've been undergoing a re-ritualization and returned to the more traditional liturgical formulations, and have adopted many rituals that earlier we found unnecessary," said Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union for

Reform Judaism, the congregational arm of the movement. "But at the same time, we remain a dynamic, creative and even radical movement and insist on the right to combine our embrace of tradition with this very dynamic, and open approach to Jewish life."

HISTORY

The founding principles of the American Reform Movement, delineated in the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform, affirmed a commitment to monotheism but rejected many of the ritual practices, including laws that regulate diet, priestly purity and dress as anathema to modern sensibility. With this it also rejected the goal of returning to Zion.

The Union Prayer Book of 1892, the first official siddur of the Reform movement in America, rejected traditional notions such as peoplehood, chosenness, resurrection and a return to the Land of Israel. But by 1937 the immigration of more traditional Jews from Eastern Europe had changed the face of Reform Judaism which until then had been shaped largely by German Jews.

Later editions of that first prayer book already bore signs of previously rejected traditions creeping in. In the 1922 edition, the term "rabbi" was substituted for the original "minister," as Reform Judaism began to moderate its universalism. And following the rise of Nazism, the 1941 edition expressed support for rebuilding Palestine.

Two decades or so later, it became clear that the UPB was dated. Hebrew had gained popularity; relief following the Six Day War was quickly undermined by the 1973 Yom Kippur War and concern for Soviet Jewry plus climbing rates of intermarriage fueled fears for the future of world Jewry.

The next siddur, Gates of Prayer - a compilation of 10 themed services published in 1975 - sought to accommodate these trends. The siddur included an unprecedented selection of new prayers, readings and meditations to accompany the Hebrew texts, some geared toward Holocaust remembrance and Israeli Independence Day. The success of GOP was immediate with sales reaching 50,000 in its first year and nearly 1.5 million copies to date.

But despite its achievements, Gates of Prayer was criticized almost from the start for being more of an anthology than a cohesive prayer book and for relying on the masculine in its language. Some congregations reacted by returning to the UPB, but many compiled their own prayer books, often editing the texts for gender sensitivity.

'MISHKAN T'FILAH'

By 1985 a new siddur was in the works.

As work began, Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, professor of liturgy at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, the Reform rabbinical seminary, prepared a monograph describing the changes in Jewish worship patterns over the course of the last generation. "A new prayer book," he wrote, "needed to take into account a number of trends: a growing emphasis on personalism as opposed to peoplehood, the individual's search for the sacred, the presence of many diverse constituencies within Reform congregations, the expansion of ritual occasions (such as new rituals for the New Moon), a new interest in the choreography of worship, and the influence of Jewish feminist thought on language and imagery in referring to God." In a radical proposition, he asserted that a new prayer book needed to take into consideration the opinions of the laity.

In 1994, funded by the Lilly Endowment and the Cummings Foundation, the CCAR began a three-year project that consulted with congregations across the country to better understand the evolving spiritual needs of Reform worshippers.

After years of discussions, and trial runs, the resulting text is Mishkan T'filah: A Reform Siddur, which has sold 150,000 copies prior to publication.

Rabbi Elyse Frishman, whose proposal won an initial competition, conceived of the approach to the layout: Each

prayer is set as a two-page spread. The prayer itself, fully transliterated and with a faithful English translation, appears on the right-hand page, and on the left are thematically related prayers, quotes by Jewish thinkers such as Martin Buber and Milton Steinberg, and meditations that include texts from the Talmud or contemporary poetry. Worshipers who prefer a straightforward, traditional service can choose to stay entirely on the right-hand side, while others might choose to say one or more of the alternative prayers on the left.

"Now we understand there is no single theology that we represent," said Hoffman. "Rather, Reform theology is an amalgam of many voices coming together. Instead of many services there is one with many different voices on each page."

MORE TRADITIONAL?

Yes and no, said Hoffman

"It's not so much a return to tradition as much as it an attempt to present the fullness of Jewish tradition modified by principles that animate Reform Judaism," he said.

Rabbi Daniel Bronstein, a congregation scholar at Congregation Beth Elohim in Brooklyn said it's more traditional than anything that's been done in a Reform siddur in terms of the restoration of traditional liturgy, drawing from more traditional sources, the inclusion of much more Hebrew and much less responsive English reading. But there is also a greater presence of women thinkers and rabbis, more renewal and non-rabbinic voices as well. "It reflects that on the one hand Reform is becoming more traditional and aligning itself with Klal Yisrael, but at the same time it's always going in the progressive direction."

The names of the prayer books, carefully chosen, offer some insight into what they package. Rabbi Levy, director of the School of Rabbinic Studies on the Los Angeles campus of HUC, points to the name of the latest siddur as the first indicator of the Reform Movement's embrace of tradition.

The Union Prayer Book was an attempt to create a book that all Jews could use, Levy explained. With Gates of Prayer, the emphasis is on being at the threshold. "Now we are inside the mishkan," said Levy. "Being inside reflects a wider embrace of Jewish tradition."

For the first time in the history of the movement, the title of the prayer book is in Hebrew and "siddur" has replaced "prayer book," signs that the desire by earlier generations to distance themselves from the "holy language" is something of the past.

"By using 'siddur' in the title instead of just 'Reform Prayer Book,' we are making the statement that our movement is comfortable with the age-old vocabulary of our people," explained Hoffman in an interview with Reform Judaism.

At the same time he explained that the word "Reform" modifies that language with a recognition that Reform Judaism has a point of view and, "having been practiced for almost 200 years is itself a valid tradition." Tradition and ritual, the title suggests, need not contradict Reform ideology.

"Most of us feel that it's keeping with the movement, which originally saw itself as responsive to change," said Levy. "If Torah is seen as continued revelation, then changing times help us see Torah differently."

The language of the Pittsburgh Platform, which said "at this time we reject the practices of diet and purity," opens itself up to such an argument, he said. "Whether by 'at this time' they felt it would always be so, or at another time could prove something different is open to interpretation."

The 1937 Columbus Platform, which came as a response to the Pittsburgh Platform, was created with the realization that the Reform Movement needed to affirm the synagogue as an important center of Jewish life. Similarly, the realization that holding on only to a "religion of reason" needed to be expanded was part of the motivation behind the 1999 Pittsburgh Platform. "With that platform we affirmed what had been happening for

10 years, namely an increase in spiritual life and dedication to study," Levy said.

With its origins in the 19th century, Reform Judaism was a response to an increased sense of alienation from Orthodoxy. Its founders looked to universalism as a way around the stringencies and ghetto mentality of the Orthodox world.

"Whereas in the 19th century we needed universalism, in the 1970s we needed particularism, and we did that by restoring several prayers that emphasize the particular destiny of the Jewish people," said Hoffman. The Aleinu prayer which centers around the notion that "our lot is not like theirs," was initially removed.

"By the time of the 1970s history had demonstrated that Jews have a unique destiny, like it or not, so it was restored," said Hoffman. "The issue now is no longer medieval heritage, now it is secularity."

Ethnicity lasted three generations, but Jewish ethnicity - food and humor - is no longer enough to sustain us, he said. "People ask why be Jewish, and there must be distinct values and experiences that Judaism offers. This prayer book offers an expanded repertoire of Jewish tradition merged with modern sensitivities, so that Jews in search of Jewish authenticity and deep spirituality will be moved to live richer Jewish lives."

While holding on to some of the previous liturgical decisions, the new siddur includes prayers never before included. Certain prayers that have been controversial within the Reform Movement, such as the prayer for the resurrection of the dead (Mehaye hametim), were reinstated after serious deliberation.

The previous prayer book replaced the phrase "who resurrects the dead" with "who gives life to all." The notion of resurrection is "antithetical to Reform reasoning," explained Frishman. "However, in our generation, there is a strong metaphorical response to traditional prayers, and a number of clergy and laypeople saw mehaye hametim like a flower withering that you pour water over," she said.

In the end "hametim" was included in parentheses, and commentaries on the left-hand page draw from sources that point to the traditional resurrection prayer as a metaphor. One of the texts points to the Talmud, which recommends saying "mehaye hametim" for greeting a friend after a lapse of 12 months and after awakening from sleep.

Deliberations about the Shema, one of the oldest known prayers, were probably the most divisive. In traditional siddurim, the Shema includes not just the Shema Yisrael and V'ahavta, but two more paragraphs which American Reform prayer books have omitted since the 1890s. The editorial committee was urged to reinstate the last two paragraphs, as part of a movement to recapture some of the traditional liturgy. But the third paragraph links divine reward and punishment to human merit and sin - an implicit suggestion that sickness or suffering may be Divine retribution, something Reform Jews reject. So Mishkan T'filah omits this paragraph, but readopted the second.

"We didn't include some traditionalist prayers that, in all good conscience, Reform Jews cannot say," said Frishman, who likens the decision to include more of the traditional liturgy to cooking. "The more I become aware of different herbs and vegetables, all become possibilities to create an amazing dish. The generation before might have rejected certain things because they were imposed on it, but we are not imposed upon, so we look at everything more openly."

CRITICS

A glance at today's critics reveals just how much the embrace of tradition has been solidified. A decade ago when Levy introduced his Ten Principles arguing in favor of greater ritual observance, critics argued the movement was caving in to Orthodoxy. Today those who point to shortfalls in the siddur say it fails to go far enough in its embrace of traditional liturgy.

"A strong editorial hand doesn't give justice to profound poetic impulse that humans have expressed over the last 2,000 years," said Rabbi Andy Bachman of Congregation Beth Elohim. "I am among a whole variety of rabbis

across the generations who are uneasy with too many changes to the siddur so that it makes it unrecognizable."

Leon Morris, executive director of adult Jewish learning for the Skirball Center in New York, urged the editorial committee of Mishkan T'filah to include the Shema in its entirety.

"One of the things I am asking is whether the 21st century provides us with a different way of thinking about what we do with inherited classical texts," he said.

Jews today are not looking to the prayer book to reflect their theology, explained Morris, who is part of a younger generation of Reform Jews who feel a connection to the traditional liturgy. "This is a post-modern turn - we are very much aware there are different ways to read texts and, increasingly, liberal Jews are appreciating and drawing meaning from classic texts even when they clash with our own personal beliefs."

Comparing the late 19th century with where the movement stands today, it is hard to deny the trajectory toward a greater embrace of tradition, said Morris. "But it is much less guided by a deepened commitment to Jewish law and more guided by a greater openness to tradition." No one, he said, felt a "halachic obligation" to include all three paragraphs of the Shema.

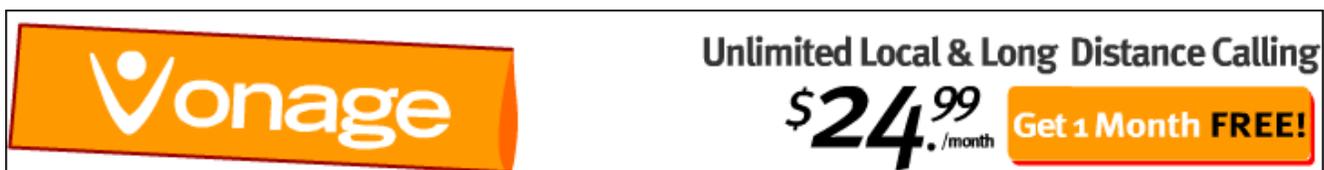
"It's not that Reform Judaism has no relation to Halacha, it's that the authority of Halacha is more in its ability to be persuasive than inherently authoritative by virtue of being Halacha," he said.

Today's generation of Reform Jews doesn't carry the same baggage as the founders of the movement, Morris said. "In a certain way Reform Judaism today is rebelling against secularism rather than Orthodoxy. Today Jews need to assert they are Jews."

Will adopting more traditional liturgy and ritual practice eventually make the Reform Movement indistinguishable from the Conservative Movement from which it sought so desperately to distinguish itself?

Levy hopes not. "I think a merger of Reform and Conservative Judaism would be terrible - difference helps keep vibrance," he said.

For Bachman it remains clear why he is a Reform Jew: "I am Reform because I believe humans wrote the Torah with divine inspiration, I believe men and women are inherently equal, I believe in welcoming gays and lesbians and intermarried families - and the movement that has those principles at the core is Reform."

A promotional banner for Vonage. On the left is the Vonage logo, which consists of a stylized white 'V' with a dot above it, followed by the word 'onage' in a lowercase, sans-serif font, all contained within an orange rounded rectangle. To the right of the logo, the text 'Unlimited Local & Long Distance Calling' is written in a bold, black, sans-serif font. Below this text, the price '\$24.99' is displayed in a large, bold, black font, with a smaller '/month' to its right. To the right of the price is an orange rounded rectangle containing the text 'Get 1 Month FREE!' in white, bold, sans-serif font.

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