

Welcoming Our New Prayerbook

The Bible never changes. The Mishna, Talmud, Zohar – all of these sacred, holy texts of Judaism never change. And so it would be easy to imagine that in “real” Judaism, all sacred texts are unchanging. This is not true. The prayerbook, the *Siddur* of Judaism is continually changing.

Even in the Orthodox world, the prayerbook changes to meet the needs and theology of each community at each time. As I was once taught, the prayerbook is where the theological rubber meets the road. As Judaism evolves, it is our prayers (as written in both Hebrew and English) that change.

Those of you who have been around the Reform Movement for a while have seen quite a few prayerbooks – from the old “Union Prayer Book” to the blue “Gates of Prayer” to the grey “Gates of Prayer.” Some changes are very clear: in my copy of the old Union Prayer Book, there are clear instructions as to where the Choir performs and where the Minister reads. The translations are in old English “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God...” The blue Gates of Prayer wanted so to avoid theological controversy that it gave us 10 different Friday night services including one where the word “God” is not mentioned. Translations were more modern: “You shall love the Lord your God...” Our grey prayerbook was notable for being gender-inclusive. Our matriarchs are included up there with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and even the translations are gender neutral: “You shall love your Eternal God...” [no male Lord or female Lady for us!]

You may not know that the “Gates of Grey,” as we rabbis call our current prayerbook was always intended to be an interim version. The newest Reform prayerbook is called *Mishkan T'filah* (The Sanctuary of Prayer) is now published and the Temple has acquired some 50 copies through a generous donation by the late Shirley Sussman of blessed memory. Last month, we started our journey into this wonderful volume.

There are many things that make *Mishkan T'filah* wonderful and I'd like to highlight a few. For each prayer and song in the Hebrew, a transliteration (Hebrew words spelled in English characters) is provided along with an accurate translation of the text. Beyond this, in several of the services, optional inspirational readings are provided for the prayers. This allows us to take many journeys through the same prayers on different *Shabbatot*. In addition, there are helpful footnotes on the pages providing background information as well as some stage directions (bow here, etc.). Beyond this, there is a full selection of songs so that we will not have to fumble with song sheets, as well as prayers for the various holidays and other occasions.

My plan is to use this new *Siddur* on Friday nights while continuing to use our Gates of Prayer for *B'nai Mitzvah*. I hope that you will join me in welcoming *Mishkan T'filah* to our community and share the excitement of its exploration. I also hope that you will consider buying your own copy of the book.