

Conservative Prayerbooks

By ERIC L. FRIEDLAND

SOME YEARS AGO Jakob J. Petuchowski, of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, crossed denominational boundaries when he praised the *Mahzor for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur* of the Conservative Rabbinical Assembly as a prayerbook come of age. The beginnings of Conservative liturgical creativity were guarded, often dilatory, and irrepressibly sanguine about the future; its latest efforts are, by contrast, not disposed to white-washing or dodging troublesome and inscrutable religious questions. The *Festival Prayerbook* (1927, under the auspices of the United Synagogue of America), the first publication to bear the stamp of the Conservative Movement, shared not a few of the characteristics of the liturgical productions of Britain's Orthodox United Synagogue, the *Authorized Daily Prayerbook* and various *mahzorim*, noted for their neat and orderly layout, textual accuracy, and judicious curtailment of *piyyutim*. The early disciples of Solomon Schechter, who himself had spent some time in Cambridge before he came and settled in New York to put the then-teetering Jewish Theological Seminary on its feet, were not impervious to the neo-classical trend of the nineteenth-century Anglo-Catholic Tractarians of the Church of England. While the elevated, formal "high-church" tone of the *Festival Prayerbook* has long since been supplanted, many of that prayerbook's meticulous standards have been retained. One innovation that has perdured is Professor Louis Ginzberg's Prayer for the Government. The entreaty is patriotic in the best sense of the term with scarce a trace of jingoism. Its longevity is warranted.

Rabbi Morris Silverman's *High Holiday Prayerbook* (first published in 1939), though at no time officially sanctioned by the Conservative movement, was widely accepted in Conservative congregations and some Orthodox and Reform ones as well. Silverman also compiled prayer-manuals for a wide variety of purposes. While his total output was no mean achievement, his style brings to mind the one that was typical of previous editions of the *Union Prayer Book* (prior to the present one).

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There was no attempt at theological rigor or consistency.

The Silverman-inspired *Sabbath and Festival Prayerbook* (1946), carried the joint imprimatur of the United Synagogue and the Rabbinical Assembly. It marked a return to the earlier *Festival Prayerbook* standard: 1) greater scholarly care; 2) keener discrimination of the *piyyutim*; 3) a translation that communicates; and 4) more decisiveness concerning textual revision. Hebrew and English hymns and songs, as well as extra-liturgical readings—either of passages in whole or in part or of responses—are deposited in an appendix with a list of citations. The mood permeating the greater part of the *Sabbath and Festival Prayer Book* is unwavering optimism. Right, good, and truth are guaranteed to win out in the end; freedom and brotherhood are undeniably, unshakably ours; and loyalty to America will bring relief to our long-harried people. It is taken for granted that Americanism is in complete rapport with the highest teachings of Judaism. (Cf. Hermann Cohen's no less roseate and ultimately flawed equation between *Deutschtum* and *Judentum*.) Everything fits, or, at least, will tidy itself in the long run. The tragic sense is missing. The prayer on behalf of the martyrs of the first Crusade of 1096 (*Av ha-Rahamim*) is set in small type to indicate its optionality (or dispensability). The enormity of the Holocaust had not yet sunk into the consciousness of the majority of Jews and the *Sabbath and Festival Prayerbook's* editorial committee. Much in the same vein, Zion was still being conceived as either a prophetic ideal or a halutzic idyll. The Partition Plan was to be implemented a year later.

What begins to stand out in the *Sabbath and Festival Prayerbook* is language. Consider, for example, the English rendition of the opening paragraph of the *Aleynu* or of Ps. 145:20. The trend started to gain momentum with each succeeding liturgical work of the Conservative Movement. Scrupulous attention is directed to fine points of style to convey the verve and perennial appositeness of the Hebrew text, and to contend with the unsettling circumstance of American Jews who, possessing minimal Jewish education, or none at all, find being confronted by Hebrew and by Jewish ideas a trial and embarrassment.

THE CONSERVATIVE prayerbooks subsequent to the *Sabbath and Festival Prayerbook*, mostly under the inspired and diligent editorship of Rabbi Jules Harlow, maintain the high scholarly principles of the previous *oeuvres* of the Movement while embarking upon new directions. The temper is naturally more sober. There is the recognition of the enormity of the evil humankind is capable of, and that the messianic time may be farther off than we had thought or hoped.

The first of the post-forties Conservative prayerbooks is the *Weekday Prayerbook* (1961), essentially a textual exercise and experiment. Advance that it is in numerous ways, the *Weekday Prayerbook* is infertile in devotional creativity, despite major structural, textual, and translational breakthroughs. They are in a sense revolutionary without being disruptive. The lean energy and controlled passion of Rabbinic and Biblical Hebrew are recaptured with amazing success in the revamped translation.

Unlike its antecedents which did not change the wording of the text, the *Weekday Prayerbook* introduces several forthright revisions, such as a universalized *Shalom Rav* ("Grant abundant peace") with its petition for peace for the inhabitants of the world. *Modim de-Rabbanan* omits mention of the Exiles' Ingathering; and the central section of the *Musaf* for Rosh Hodesh is recast, decultified and Zionized. The Hebrew side is entirely in Hebrew, not excepting all the rubrics and titles, in unpointed Hebrew at that! A brand-new 'Al ha-Nissim prayer is framed for Israel Independence Day, which, in the English, plays down "the miracle" of the heroism of the fighters for Israel's independence. In his day, Isaac M. Wise, under the pull of the prevailing Darwinism, expressed his reservations concerning the preternatural by simply and straightforwardly cutting out the nettlesome opening phrases of 'Al ha-Nissim for Hanukkah and Purim ("We thank Thee for the miracles, for the redemption, for the mighty deeds and saving acts...")!

A new track is followed in the *Selihot* service (1964) with its handsome type, pleasing layout and smooth and unpretentious translation. The novelty lies in the way the repetition is kept to a minimum so as to provide room for contemporary pieces in Hebrew and English. Both *Selihot* and the *Weekday Prayerbook* were compiled under the editorship of Rabbi Gershon Hadas.

The first Rabbinical Assembly publication edited by Rabbi Jules Harlow is *A Rabbi's Manual* (1965). *Yearnings*, a prayer-pamphlet containing

supplementary prayers and readings for the High Holy Days, appeared in two additions (1968 and 1974). As with most compilations of this type, the selections are uneven. Some of the material is also included in the *Mahzor for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur* (1972). The pamphlet was apparently to serve as an interim appendix. Just what the purpose of the second edition of *Yearnings* might be is hard to tell.

The summit of Conservative liturgical activity has been reached with the *Mahzor for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur*, a sophisticated, scholarly and stirring work. To start with the most obvious, the smart physical design and makeup, the moderate proportions of the type (in contrast to the primer-size type of the older prayerbooks), the discreet use of color, and the apt and dramatic spacing of passages. No less an asset is the intelligent couching of the rubric headings, a device first adopted by the Reconstructionists on a consistent basis. (It is no exaggeration to say that there is no non-Orthodox prayerbook of the last twenty-five years that has not been influenced by the Reconstructionists.) The captions do not only impart the gist of the prayer, but convey the emphasis the authors want to give; and they are used frugally and effectively.

The translation reads smoothly with scarce a jarring note, while remaining true to the text. Glancing randomly through the earlier portions of the Morning Service, one chances upon such felicitous readings as "Praised are You, Lord, who restores the soul to the lifeless, exhausted body." A few pages later *beney beritekha*, usually translated "sons of Thy Covenant," is rendered "Your people, partners to Your Covenant." Stilted language is used sparingly. The overly metaphysical "to all eternity" gives way to a brisk "for all time." The *avodah* section (*Retzeh*) of the *Amidah* has this lucky version in English: "Accept the prayer of Your people Israel as lovingly as it is offered." The service tone of most translations of this prayer is absent.

Another example of such sensitive treatment of a knotty passage is in *Emet ve-Emunah*. Birnbaum translates it: "It is he, our King, who . . . avenged us upon our oppressors, and requited all our mortal enemies." Harlow has a less vindictive "He brings judgment upon our oppressors, retribution upon our mortal enemies."

Other translations are not so plain: they sugar-coat or palliate difficult passages, using literary legerdemain. Thus, *rofé holey ammo yisrael* in the

daily *Amidah* is expressed in almost non-sectarian terms as "Healer of His people." The closing phrase of the *Amidah* (*oseh shalom bi-meromav . . .*) is extended to embrace the whole human race, which is as it should be; the Hebrew, however, is left intact. The recent Reform *Gates of Prayer* resorts to the same maneuver. The only twentieth-century rites that to my knowledge make bold to adjust the Hebrew verse are the British Liberal *Service of the Heart* and *Gate of Repentance*.

DESPITE THESE lingering half-measures there are far-reaching first-time textual changes in Conservative prayerbooks, and many also in other modern Jewish prayerbooks. For lack of space, we make only passing reference to some, both of the out-and-out and of the restrained kind. The selections from Scripture and Rabbinic writings for the preliminary Service (*Birkhot ha-Shahar*) run into different and appropriate choices for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur even to the extent of replacing the Priestly Benediction with Lev. 19:1, 14-18. The phraseology of the *Musaf* having to do with the restitution of the sacrificial cult is revised so that it is a reminiscence of bygone days as in the *Festival Prayerbook* and in the *Sabbath and Festival Prayerbook*. Such remembrances about the ancient Temple worship in the *Machzor* left to the *Avodah* of Yom Kippur, is reduced to its Mishnaic simplicity and removed out of its *Amidah*-matrix to a place unto itself. *Yizkor*, the Memorial Service, has been relocated to a spot ahead of *Ne'ilah*, as has been the rule in Liberal and Reform congregations for more than a century. The lengthy *Al Het* confessional is reduced to manageable proportions, at no sacrifice to the alphabetical order. The cumulative effect stays without, hopefully, unduly taxing the worshiper with repetitions. A new *Al Het* is inserted a few pages after the Martyrology during the *Musaf* with particular reference to the Holocaust. The verse, "And for the sin we have committed against You, and them, by theological rationalizations (*be-tzidduq ha-din*)," startles and saddens us with its truthful irony. Speaking of litanies, the *Avinu Malkenu* verses in Birnbaum add up to forty-four; in this *Mahzor* to just thirty.

A pedagogic purpose might be seen in the understating of *Kol Nidrei*. Many *mahzorim* were wont to go along with the popular—and mistaken—tendency of making *Kol Nidrei* the be-all-and-end-all of the Yom Kippur Evening Service and to name the service for the opening prayer, which is really a legal declaration. The new Conservative *Mahzor* rectifies this by providing a brief explanation of *Kol Nidrei* followed by this pithy translation:

All vows and oaths we take, all promises and obligations we make to God between this Yom Kippur and the next we hereby publicly retract in the event that we should forget them, and hereby declare our intention to be absolved of them.

The option of blowing the *shofar* during the Silent *Amidah* is an unexpected but pleasing reactivation of a usage in Lurianic-Kabbalistic circles. Similar is the revival of a series of blasts, also a matter of choice left up to the congregation, during the last *Kaddish Shalem* before the conclusion of the Rosh Hashanah service. It is good to see meaningful customs revived. It is harder, however, to justify the reinstitution of *dukhanen*, the priestly blessing. The changing fortunes of the *kohanim* in Conservatism have been interesting. The *Festival Prayerbook* gave them their full due; the *Sabbath and Festival Prayerbook* none; the Silverman *Mahzor* made a lukewarm allowance for them. The 1972 *Mahzor* gives approval to the practice. The Conservatives' reinstatement of Aaron's remote descendants is frankly incongruous. Still, the Harlow *Mahzor* is the most theologically aware and candid prayerbook issued so far by the Rabbinical Assembly.

The Sabbath and Festival Prayerbook was edited during the heyday of Mordecai M. Kaplan's influence at the Jewish Theological Seminary when matters of theological or metaphysical moment were not in the forefront. In contrast to the predominantly folk- and Zion-centered stress (with Torah as repository of the people's religious and cultural achievements) of the *Sabbath and Festival Prayerbook*, the *Mahzor* is unquestionably theocentric and Covenant-oriented, attesting to the theological direction of the past decade and manifest in the optional readings during the Silent *Amidah* (such as selections from Hermann Cohen, Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig and Leo Baeck).

Doubt is not stifled but treated as an integral part of faith. A good example is the poem by Miriam Kubovy before the *Barekhu* of Rosh Hashanah eve. The prayerbook contains other pieces, of contemporary and older provenance, that provoke and move.

Our overview merely skims the surface of this treasure trove of Jewish expressions of yearnings, disillusionments, uncertainties, exultation, probings and prayer. Jules Harlow deserves a prize for the liturgical excellence of the *Mahzor for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur*.

The latest prayerbook with the Rabbinical Assembly imprint is *The Bond of Life* (1975), a prayer-manual for the house of mourning, likewise edited by Jules Harlow. It contains the weekday

services, the pagination being from right to left, with a full-length guide in English on mourning practices, classical and contemporary readings on death and dying from the Jewish religious perspective, together with an explanation of the structure and contents of this prayerbook. The pagination of the English section is from the left.

The revisions in *Bond of Life* are consistent with those of the *Mahzor for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur*, in language, style, text, and theology. There are, to be sure, different Rabbinic passages in the Preliminary Benedictions, as might be expected, bearing on the significance of life. It is slightly ironic that the new Reform *Gates of Prayer* has restored the prayer *Nahem* for the Ninth of Av almost entirely, while *Bond of Life* has emended it drastically to account for the recovery and reunification of Jerusalem. Here is the updated version:

Cause, Lord our God, the mourners of Zion and those who grieve for Jerusalem, the city which was so desolate in mourning, like a woman bereft of her children. For Your people Israel smitten by the sword, and for the children who gave their

lives for her, Zion cries with bitter tears, Jerusalem voices her anguish: My heart, my heart goes out for the slain. My entire being mourns for the slain.

Have mercy, Lord our God, in Your great compassion, for us and for Your city of Jerusalem, rebuilt from destruction and restored from desolation. Lord who causes Zion to rejoice at her children's return, may all who love Jerusalem exult in her, may all who mourn Jerusalem of old rejoice with her now. May they hear in the cities of Judah, and in the streets of Jerusalem, sounds of joy and gladness, voices of bride and groom.

Grant peace to the city which You have re-deemed, and protect her, as proclaimed by Your prophet: I will surround her, says the Lord, as a wall of fire, and I will be the glory in her midst. Praised are You, Lord, who comforts Zion and rebuilds Jerusalem.

The new prayer books are distinguished accomplishments that will grow on the worshiper. The effect will be long-term and gradual. After all, with all its transformations prayer seems to be here to stay.

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