

Lost in Translation – our Hebrew Siddur

A DVAR Tefillah at Temple Emunah on Shabbat, August 3, 2013.

by Leon Gunther

Shabbat Shalom!

I imagine that many of you might be wondering what lurks behind the title of my dvar. It will be clear to you later.

I will begin by sharing with you a pivotal experience that compelled me to give this dvar.

In early 2012, I was fortunate to make the acquaintance of Susanne Jubenville, who is the music director at the First Parish Church in Lexington. She strongly supported my need to have choral singers join the Mak'haylah for our Yom HaShoah Service that April.

My understanding was that the First Parish Church, which is Unitarian Universalist, avoids reference to God. They focus on human relations and what we would refer to as Tikkun Olam.

With this knowledge I felt comfortable attending their **Maunday Thursday** Service the night before Good Friday. I looked forward to hearing a performance of a masterpiece of choral music entitled "Miserere mei, Deus", composed by Gregorio Allegri in the 1600s.

The performance of this piece, whose lyrics are none other than Psalm 51, was incredibly moving. However, the music was interlaced with readings from the New Testament. I heard text that pained me deeply for its anti-Semitic content. I don't recall the exact text – however, I will give you an example from Matthew of the kind of words that were pronounced.

Matthew 23

1 Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, saying:

2 "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat.

3 Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, **[[a] that] observe and do**, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do.

4 For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay *them* on men's shoulders; but they *themselves* will not move them with one of their fingers.

While Christian attacks on the Pharisees might have originally been directed at the harsh Pharisaic School of Shammai, the attack still feels for me like an attack on Judaism. For me, "Pharisee" equals "Jew".

I sat there in the sanctuary of the First Parish Church cringing. Yet I didn't say a word to anyone about my feelings after the Service, nor have I since then. It wasn't the time to bring up such an issue. I hope to do so when I gain the wisdom of how to express my feelings in a constructive way.

I doubt that anyone attending the Church Service was aware of the significance and intent of the words they were hearing, even though some of the members are born Jews. They certainly were not aware of my feelings.

Rabbi Fel recently shared a book with me that addresses the need for Christians to be aware of what they are saying that might be anti-Semitic and painful for Jews to hear.

I feel that we ought to do so correspondingly.

I have long felt very uncomfortable with a number of passages in our Siddur that I feel are offensive to non-Jews. My experience at the First Parish Church has driven me to give this Dvar. I am asking you to consider our need to make serious revisions in our Siddur, both in the Hebrew text as well as in the English translation.

Before proceeding, we need to understand the history of revisions to our Siddurim. What justification is there in our tradition for making revisions? What are the bases for making a specific revision?

I have placed on the table a pile of Siddurim. The oldest is a Siddur that was given to me by my maternal Grandmother. It has no English translation and was published in 1930 in Vilna. The newest is our New Maḥzor. I have also included the Siddur that is used at Temple Isaiah in Lexington.

All these Siddurim are different from each other.

While we are prepared to make changes in our Siddur, we are not prepared to make changes in the **Torah**, which is identical throughout the world as far as I know and has been fixed for centuries. We regard the Torah as sacrosanct, even if we disagree with some of its content.

Today, we have an opportunity to have revisions in our Siddur that are meaningful and important for us.

Currently, the JTS is in the midst of producing a **new Siddur** that is expected to be available in about two years. We **can** present our thoughts for revisions to the editors for their consideration.

Why do we find Siddurim changing?

Introductions to our Siddurim contain justifications for changes and revisions, such as

- Changing views – a changing sense of values or sensibilities
- Changing English language – we need to 'modernize' the English translation

In supporting their work, editors of the Silverman Siddur quoted **HaRav Avraham Isaac Kook** (1865–1935), who was the first Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of the British Mandatory Palestine.

He said: "הישן יתחדש, והחדש יתקדש" – "the old must be renewed, while the new must become sanctified."

In our context, “new” is a “revision”. What does it take for a **revision** to become sanctified? I suggest the following as possible factors:

1. first and foremost, a **resonance** of their vision with our current values
2. **repetition** of the revision
3. patience with the revision- in **time** it feels natural and **spontaneous**.

The change becomes our **current tradition**.

Interestingly, as well as unfortunately, I suggest that the second two factors -**repetition** and **spontaneity**- can make us blind to the need for change.

Why so? Because we stop paying attention to the meaning of the words.

Let us now turn to the title of my dvar – "**Lost in Translation – our Hebrew Siddur**"

What might be lost in translation?

FIRST: The translation can destroy the beauty of the Hebrew.

Consider the term אֲבִינוּ שְׁבַשְׁמַיִם

I love and adore Hebrew. I find this term extremely endearing, full of an expression of love for God.

The old Silverman Siddur translates this term as "Our Father who art in heaven". If one prefers, one could have it as "Our Father who **is** in Heaven"

I feel that this is an accurate translation that captures as best I can see the feeling of the Hebrew.

However, over the years, translations have changed:

Sim Shalom, 1985 p. 148

יהי רצון מלפני אבינו שבשמים...

Translated as: *May it be the will of our heavenly Father...*

I am used to referring to a "heavenly ice cream cone".

Is God "heavenly" for you?

Sim Shalom, 1985 p. 416 in the Prayer for the State of Israel:

אֲבִינוּ שְׁבַשְׁמַיִם, צוּר יִשְׂרָאֵל וְגוֹאֲלוֹ

Translated as: ***Our Father in Heaven, Rock and Redeemer of the people of Israel ...***

This is an improvement for me.

I wonder whether these translations are **intentionally** avoiding reference to the Sermon on the Mount of the New Testament which begins with "Our Father who art in heaven".

This phrase is of Jewish origin and is recited frequently in our Services: אֲבִינוּ שְׁבַשְׁמַיִם

Let us be proud instead of disdainful of Jewish traditions that have inspired non-Jews.

Perhaps you regard these differences as minimal and unimportant. They are important to me. I ask why should we give up the moving Hebrew intent when we can preserve it at least a bit in an English translation?

I don't agree with Rabbi Harold Kushner, who wrote in the Or H'adash Commentary on the Sim Shalom siddur. I quote him with some omitted phrases:

“How important is it for us to understand the meaning of the words we pray? . although the prayers use words, their impact is more emotional than intellectual.”

What Rabbi Kushner says might be fine for him and many others, and perhaps for most members of our congregation. It is **not** fine for me and many others, especially for those who know what we are missing in the English translation.

Listen again. “אבינו שבשמים” “Our Father who is in Heaven “

A **SECOND** way in which the Hebrew can be lost in translation is that an **inaccuracy** might be present in order to replace the offensive nature of the Hebrew itself. As a result we might be unaware of the nature of the original.

Such is the case, I believe with our **Aleynu prayer**. And if we feel this is so, I would propose that both the Hebrew and English be revised.

The **Aleynu prayer** is recited towards the end of each and every Service. It is the climactic prayer of every Service, wherein the entire community comes together in song to express majestically our praise of God.

I'll sing the first few lines:

עֲלֵינוּ לְשִׁבְחָם לְאֶדְוֶן הַפֶּל, לְהַתְּ גְדוּלָהּ לְיֹצֵר בְּרֵאשִׁית

שְׁלֵא עָשָׂנוּ כְּגוֹיֵי הָאֲרָצוֹת וְלֹא שָׁמְנוּ כְּמִשְׁפְּחוֹת הָאֲדָמָה
שְׁלֵא שָׂם חֶלְקֵינוּ כְּהֵם וְגוֹרְלֵינוּ כְּכָל הַמּוֹנֵם
וְאִנְהֵנוּ בּוֹרְעִים ...

Transliteration

Aleynoo l'sha-bey'ach la'Adon ha-kol, la-teyt g'doolah l'yo'tseyr b'reyshit.

She-lo a-sa-noo k'go-yey ha-a-ra-tsot, v'losa-ma-noo

K'mishp'khot ha-a-da-mah

She-lo sam khel-key-noo ka-hem, v'go-ra-ley-noo k'khol ha-mo-nam.

Va-a-nach-noo kor'eem oo-mish-ta-cha-veem oo-mo-deem

Translation:

We are asked to give praise to the Lord of all, to express the greatness of the Creator.

He didn't make us like all other peoples

(or Silverman: "like the pagans of the world") ,

and didn't place us like the families of the Earth

(or Silverman: "like the heathen tribes of the earth")

He didn't give us a portion like theirs, or a destiny like that of the multitudes.

We bend our knees ... -

The 2nd and 3rd sentences violate my principles. At Services I stand silent during the recitation of these lines. I know of a number of fellow Emunah congregants who feel and act the same way.

I would be embarrassed for the Mak'haylah to sing the Aleynu at one of our annual Lexington Choral Fest concerts, whose purpose is for choirs of Lexington Churches and Temples to share their songs and their traditions, with each other.

Note that currently, in **Israel** we find Siddurim that include a sentence that used to be common world wide:

שְׁהֵם מִשְׁתַּחֲוִים לְהַבֵּל נְרִיק, וּמִתְפַּלְלִים עַל אֵל לֹא יוֹשִׁיעַ

She'heymish'tachaviml'hevelvariqoomitpal'liml'Elloyo-shee-a

For they worship vanity and emptiness, and pray to a God who cannot save.

Might the recitation of this phrase, three times every day be connected with the attitude of extremist Israeli Jews who have total disregard for Arabs as human beings?

Note too, that the New Mahzor of the JTS repairs the English translation. It reads:

He made us unlike the pagans who surrounded us.

Unlike the heathens of the ancient world.

He made our heritage different from theirs.

We note that the translation refers to the **past not the present**.

Is it sufficient to modify the English translation while leaving the Hebrew intact?

I don't feel so. Doing so feels deceptive and ignores the fact that many Jews know Hebrew and feel the meaning of what they are saying and cannot ignore that meaning.

I will now present to you a proposal for a possible **revision** of the controversial two lines of the traditional Aleynu prayer

Here are its virtues:

1. It avoids demeaning other peoples and expresses God's connection with **all** of mankind
2. It can be sung without any change in the traditional melody
3. Its message of acknowledging both our evil inclination and good inclination, is deeply embedded in our Jewish tradition.

Our power to choose is the focus of the opening of today's parshah, "R'ey". This message in the Aleynu prayer would express our awareness of our human frailty and our need to rededicate ourselves in our behavior at the end of each and every Service.

Let us now take a look at this alternative.

Alternative Aleynu

עלינו לשבח לארון הכל. לתת גדולה ליוצר בראשית
שהוא עשנו עם כל העמים עם יצר הרע ועם יצר הטוב
שהוא נתן לנו יכולת לבחור בין רוע וחסד, בין חשך ואור.
ואנחנו בורעים...

Transliteration:

Aleynool'sha-bey'achla'Adonha-kol, la-teydg'doolahl'yo'tseyrb'reyshit.
She-hooa-sa-nooeemkolha-a-mim--eemyey-tserha-rahv'eemyey-tserha-tov.
She-na-tan la-nooy'cho-letleev'chorbeynro-av'che-sed,beyncho-shechv'or.
Va-a-nach-nookor'eemoo-mish-ta-cha-veemoo-mo-deem
Leef-nay Me-lechMal'cheyham'la-cheem,haKa-doshba-roochHoo.

Translation:

We are asked to give praise to the Lord of all, to express the greatness of the Creator.
Along with all peoples, He gave us both an inclination to do evil and an inclination to do good.
He gave us the ability to choose between malice and compassion, between darkness and light.
We bend our knees ...

I will summarize my key points:

First. I suggest that we try to avoid a knee jerk negative reaction upon hearing text that is associated with Christianity in our minds but which is either essentially Judaic in origin or if not so reflects our Jewish tradition.

An example are the words I mentioned above that open the Sermon on the Mount of the New Testament: "Our Father who art in heaven". This phrase is of Jewish origin and is recited frequently in our Services:

אבינו שבשמים

Let us be proud instead of disdainful of Jewish traditions that have inspired non-Jews.

Next:

I propose that the controversial lines in the **Aleynu prayer** be revised so that the words are reflective of how we want to relate to the entire world, our non-Jewish neighbors, respecting their traditions, whether or not they are monotheistic. The alternative version should be singable with our current melody so as to preserve tradition as much as possible and ultimately feel authentic.

Let us open up a dialogue on revisions that might be made to our Siddur, beginning with the Aleynu prayer. You might wish to propose others. I hope that you will share your personal thoughts and feelings with each other, the Temple Religious Committee, and our Rabbis.

Here are some thoughts for your consideration:

- It is healthy for every person to feel unique, while respecting the uniqueness of others.
- It is healthy for every community to feel unique, while respecting the uniqueness of other communities.
- It is healthy for us, the Jewish people to feel unique, while respecting the uniqueness of other religions, be they monotheistic or not.

For guidance, I call your attention to **Rabbi Lerner's** provocative Article in the current summer 2013 Temple Bulletin. I strongly urge you to read it.

Here is a quote from Rabbi Lerner's article:

"Decisions about innovation are not taken lightly.... I believe that for Judaism to thrive it needs to find a perfect zone between authenticity and innovation. And when appropriate or necessary, we should push the Halachah so that new ideas and approaches can come to fore.... Sometimes we change, we grow, but over time that can also become an authentic experience. ..."

Thank you for your attention

Shabbat Shalom