

# *The Reconstructionist*

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## FROM THE EDITOR

I am delighted to introduce myself to you as the new editor of *The Reconstructionist*. It is an honor for me to take the helm of this esteemed journal from the hands of Richard Hirsh, who has navigated it so ably for ten years, providing a fine example of astute editorship. I thank him for the invitation to step into his shoes, and for the gracious and generous guidance he has shown me as I produced this, my maiden issue of the journal. I would also like to thank Dan Ehrenkrantz, president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, for his enthusiastic and warm welcome as I took on the role of editor of this journal. I look forward to collaborating with the many people who work to make *The Reconstructionist* the high-quality journal that it has proven itself to be, and to bringing my own flavor to the issues we will continue to bring out.

With the next issue (Spring 2007), you will notice that *The Reconstructionist* is sporting a new look. We are currently working on a redesign that will give the journal a larger trim size, a new interior layout, and book covers selected from a magnificent palette of rich, textured colors. The result will be an updated, contemporary appearance that will appeal to an ever-growing community of readers. The content of the journal will remain focused on ideas and concerns that are critical to the development of the movement, and that will continue to contribute to the development of Jewish identity and culture.

This issue is devoted to the subject of liturgy — a term loosely defined as a form and arrangement of public worship laid down by a religion. But, as the old joke goes, if two Jews were stranded on a desert island, they would build three synagogues — one for each of them, and a third that neither would set foot in. How then, are we to explore that form of public worship laid down by a religion that is so various as to produce large numbers of houses of worship that contain an even larger, and growing number of demands by its populace? The answer: by embracing the riches of difference within Jewish religious and liturgical practice, and exploring the variousness that lies at its very core.

Liturgy, in many ways, forms the backbone of the Jewish communal experience, especially in synagogue-based communities. Some communities, across the movements, hold fast to centuries-old liturgical canons, reciting the same prayers from formal prayerbooks (*siddurim*), and in the same order, as generations of Jewish worshippers have done before them. There is, to be sure, no small measure of comfort and security in preserving the traditions of the past, and maintaining an accepted canon of texts that has been recited throughout the history of Jewish liturgical practice. At the same time, as new prayer books continue to appear in the various movements — not to mention informal booklets and self-published collections of prayers, songs and meditations — we mark an increasing tide in liturgical innovation, a daring step away from tradition and canon, a significant and conscious effort to use liturgy as an ongoing tool for religious and cultural self-definition. An important symbiotic relationship has developed between in-

novation and tradition — those two poles located the very center of the Jewish encounter with modernity — for they are complements, parts of a whole. And this symbiosis lies at the heart of contemporary Jewish liturgy.

Devoting an entire issue to liturgy affords us an opportunity to consider questions of writing prayers and prayerbooks; the tension between older, canonical prayers and newer liturgical innovations; *kavanah*, or finding meaning in prayer; and the role of community in defining and creating liturgical experiences. In this issue we also explore the roles of Jewish law and observance, and their relationship to sanctity and every day practice. As Richard Hirsh aptly puts it in his article on poetry and prayer, this issue of *The Reconstructionist* “offers an opportune moment to reflect on what prayer might be for us, how prayer might become more meaningful, and why prayer that truly evokes something deep within us sometimes (perhaps often) seems elusive.”

In this issue, David Teutsch, editor-in-chief of *Kol Haneshamah*, reflects on the process of creating a new prayer book series for the Reconstructionist movement. He offers us a glimpse into the thinking that went into the original impulse to create the series, his twenty-year involvement with it, and his views of what a new, updated prayer book might contain. Staying on the subject of writing prayer books, Michael Knobel discusses his involvement in the creation of a new Reform movement *siddur*, and the continuing production of new *siddurim* across the Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist movements.

Eric Caplan raises important questions about prayer and intellectual honesty in his discussion of Reconstructionist prayer texts, their historical context and their importance to synagogue-attending North American Jews. He examines the relationship between traditional liturgical formulations and liturgical innovations, and considers where Reconstructionist prayer texts fall along this continuum. Finally, Caplan suggests changes to the Reconstructionists prayerbook that might strengthen its roots in the Jewish liturgical tradition while still preserving a strong liberal Jewish integrity.

Richard Hirsh and Michael Strassfeld challenge us to consider how to make prayer more meaningful, how it can open us up in a new way to our internal and external realities. Hirsh raises the question of how prayer might be experienced not only as an affirmation of ideas about God, Torah or the Jewish people. What if, he asks us, we engaged in prayer by responding to and interacting with the ideas, the language and the imagery found in poetry? Like fine poetry, Hirsh suggests, exquisite prayer should be both a mirror and a window — something that allows us to see both within and beyond ourselves.

Strassfeld offers his views on the current model of the synagogue as flawed and requiring reconstruction. In his estimation, prayer is the function that the synagogue performs least well; it is the act of praying itself that is the synagogue's greatest challenge. To combat this flaw, Strassfeld argues for a reconstruction of prayer, reframing synagogue prayers so that they reflect on a deeper level upon the spiritual and ethical issues at play in human life — by incorporating, among

other elements, music, *kavanot* (intentions) and psalms.

New liturgical developments in Israel are the subject of Adina Newberg's article on the emergence of *tefillah* (prayer) communities arising in the midst of secular Israeli culture. By adding poetry and song to existing formal prayers, these communities create their own authentic experience with a Jewish liturgy and practice designed specifically for non-observant Israeli Jews.

As a complement to the articles on liturgy, we include in this issue two pieces that explore questions of Jewish law, sanctity and observance. Approaching *halakhah* (Jewish law) as a functioning legal system, Jonathan Cohen asks how restricting operative Jewish law to the ritual realm has influenced our understanding of sanctification. He suggests that this restrictive posture may have brought with it a narrowing of how we understand sanctification, and that we should attempt to undo this experience of narrowing. Kenneth Shuster explores the relationship between religious (Torah-given) standards and personal autonomy.

In addition to the essays we offer reviews of two very different books that explore favorite issues of import to American Jews: baseball, and cultural identity. Burt Siegel reviews a collection of essays edited by Marc Lee Raphael and Judith Z. Abrams, including articles and sermons on the practical and spiritual aspects of America's favorite pastime. The encounter with the self informs my own review of another essay collection, *Who We Are: On Being (and Not Being) a Jewish American Writer*, edited by Derek Rubin. This body of essays by renowned Jewish American writers considers questions of identity as refracted through the lens of family relationships, the Holocaust, the craft of prose and interactions with the modern secular world.

—Rena Potok

# Reflecting on *Kol Haneshamah*

BY DAVID A. TEUTSCH

**I**t is now close to 20 years since I began work on the *Kol Haneshamah* prayer books in earnest. Since that time, the series has grown to include a comprehensive collection of liturgical works: *Mahzor Leyamim Nora'im; Shabbat Vehagim: The Sabbath and Festivals; Limot Hol: The Daily Prayerbook; Erev Shabbat: Friday Evening; Tefilot Leveyt Ha'evel: Prayers for a House of Mourning; Shirim Uvrahot: Songs & Blessings; Nashir Unevareh: Songs & Grace After Meals; and Connecting Prayer and Spirituality: Kol Haneshamah as a Creative Teaching and Learning Text*. These Reconstructionist prayer books broke ground with their gender-neutral English text, descriptive references to God's attributes, new Hebrew and English liturgy, and transliteration of all communally spoken prayers.

When I urged Rabbi Ludwig Nadelmann, then president of the Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation, to convene a prayerbook commission in 1981, I had no idea that the process would become such an important part of my life. The commission met for two days. Charles Silberman, a longtime leader of the movement widely known for his books (including *Crisis in Black*

and *White* and *Crisis in the Classroom*), chaired that initial commission, and I served as the secretary, drafting the preliminary guidelines for the creation of a new Reconstructionist prayer book, or *siddur*. Those guidelines were widely disseminated within the movement at the time. They created a firestorm, because the guidelines were suited to the movement not as it was back then, but as we imagined it becoming.

## Initial Controversies

The Reconstructionist movement in 1981 was made up of a small and aging group that had barely begun to feel the impact of the new graduates of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, for they were few and young. The movement we imagined was one filled with vitality, a movement grappling with spirituality, feminism, the richness of Jewish tradition and the creation of democratic community. Those initial guidelines, so controversial at the time, were much less controversial five years later, for during those five years — while I was executive director of the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot, which is now known as the Jewish Reconstruc-

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Rabbi David A. Teutsch is the Wiener Professor of Contemporary Jewish Civilization and Director of the Levin-Lieber Program in Jewish Ethics at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, where he was formerly president. He was editor-in-chief of the entire *Kol Haneshamah* prayerbook series and chair of the Prayerbook Commission, which oversaw its development.

tionist Federation — the number of our affiliates more than doubled, the average age of JRF board members dropped by more than twenty years, and a significant number of RRC-trained rabbis became spiritual leaders of JRF congregations.

In 1986, I left the JRF to work on a doctorate focusing on organizational ethics in the social systems sciences program at the Wharton School, and I began teaching full time and serving as dean of admissions at RRC. In the spring of 1987, Rabbi Mordechai Liebling, my successor as director of the JRF, and Lillian Kaplan, JRF president, approached me about heading a project to produce an experimental *siddur* for use on Friday evenings. I agreed to become chair of the commission and oversee that task, with the idea that the actual work would be divided among several other people so that the burden on me would not be too great.

That decision reflected blind, foolish optimism on my part. It soon became obvious that the project could not move forward without an editor-in-chief to cajole the creative team into producing the work and to edit what they produced. The work was vastly more time-consuming than I had imagined it would be, and I already had two full-time occupations, as well as a young family. Running every bit that we produced through a detailed review by the Reconstructionist Prayerbook Commission slowed down the process considerably; it also disheartened the editors, whose work had to pass muster with commission members who did not share their expertise.

The experimental fascicle (a term

for which I still receive a ribbing) was introduced at the JRF convention of 1989, only two years after the project was begun in earnest. It was received with general acclaim, and the project was launched. That started a cycle of work that continued until 2001, when *Tefilot Leveyt Ha'evel: Prayers for a House of Mourning* was published. Over the span of those fourteen years, I finished my doctoral work, became executive vice president and then president of RRC and watched my children grow up.

## Importance of the Project

The cast of characters working on the books changed over time, as assistant editors graduated from RRC, ideological conflicts roiled the commission, and the demands of life changed the time commitments that were possible for people. The movement continued to grow in size and vitality, and I squeezed out precious evening and late-night hours to edit the succeeding volumes of the series. Had I known then what I know now, I probably would have had the good sense to say that I could not find the time for so massive an undertaking. Sometimes it's a good thing we don't know what we're getting into! I once asked the late Rabbi Ira Eisenstein, founding president of RRC, how he had had the courage to start the college with so little money in hand. He replied, "Who knew running a college would be so expensive?" To which I might add, "Who knew that editing prayer books was so time consuming?"

The JRF never allocated funds for the project. While most of us worked without remuneration, and the rest received

very modest pay, the typesetting, printing and binding were costly. We sought angels to support each volume as we went along, and later in the process the proceeds of book sales helped to keep us going. One reason that the project never faltered after 1987 was that we realized how important it was, even when others did not yet recognize it. In later years, sale of the prayer books became a major source of income for the JRF.

What was so important about this project? The original Reconstructionist prayer books were produced in the 1940s and 1950s. Not only did they feel outdated, most Reconstructionist congregations no longer used them. One major motive for us was to produce a *siddur* that our congregations could effectively use. At least as important was the realization that many congregants have their primary congregational experience shaped in fundamental ways by their encounter with the *siddur*. And congregations considering affiliation with a movement often make decisions based on prayerbook choices. We knew that the future of the movement depended upon a new prayerbook. The future of each congregation would be molded by a new prayerbook. And the lives of individual Jews could be wonderfully enhanced by a new prayerbook. Those were powerful motivations! I knew that it would make a huge difference, for example, when the weekday *minyan* at RRC could use a Reconstructionist *siddur*.

## Reverse Engineering

I am not primarily a liturgist. I understand the *siddur* not as an end

in itself but as a tool. For me, the challenge was imagining the ideal Reconstructionist community that would use the book, and then working backward to imagine how the book could help create that community. It was an approach of reverse engineering applied to the *siddur*. The characteristics that I wanted in that community included shared leadership, moral engagement, spiritual striving and multivocality. In that imagined community, individuals would be committed to ongoing Jewish learning, taking responsibility for their own prayer lives and fostering a shared community that lived up to its values. The very pages of this prayer book would embody Judaism as a civilization while serving both as a source of solace and as a challenge to the complacency with which we all too often lead our daily lives. And the book itself would be an embodiment of Reconstructionist values and aspirations, and a worthy representation of our shared vision.

Through its design and text, this *siddur* was intended to help bring changes in the communities and individuals who would use it. Such ambition required an enormous amount of *hutzpah*, which those of us involved in the project luckily had in abundant measure. When I now read the introductions to the early volumes, I see those aspirations lurking there. And they were embodied in the translation and transliteration, the readings and the Hebrew text and, perhaps most of all, in the commentary. The very idea that a liberal prayer book would have commentary represents a major departure. It suggests that congregants need not march through the service together in

lockstep, and that individual learning, meditating and reflecting are all valid parts of the worship experience.

Similarly, the readings come from classical and modern Jewish voices, as well as non-Jewish sources, and they include the voices of many women. This, too, represents a vision of the openness our communities should have when they are at their best. The return to a fuller, more traditional use of psalms broke new ground in yet a different direction. *Kol Haneshamah* is, in that sense, an extraordinarily ambitious book, albeit one that is difficult to hold aloft for too long at a time. It imagines a Jew who is at once a spiritual seeker and an explorer of Jewish tradition, one who fully engages contemporary culture and struggles to blend these disparate worlds. And then it sets about helping its users to become that kind of Jew.

## Surprising Outcomes

Despite careful thought, aspects of the books' actual use were impossible to anticipate in advance. We did not imagine ahead of time, for example, that people would choose to read the commentary aloud. Nor did we anticipate that anyone would try to read everything in the book for a particular service — although one brave rabbi did use every bit of the Rosh Hashanah *ma'ariv* service, including all the optional readings, the year that the *mahzor* came out. The result was a service lasting in excess of four hours. Luckily, the forgiveness of Yom Kippur was only ten days away.

One of the challenges of producing a movement *siddur* is that it must

receive the movement's political sanction and support to fulfill its function. The members of the Prayerbook Commission provided an invaluable sounding board for that purpose, and compromises were an ongoing part of the process, so that the books could meet the diverse needs of different congregations and individuals, even as they embraced the spectrum of ideological and theological views that our movement should contain. How extensively to change the traditional and earlier Reconstructionist liturgies, how to translate the four-letter name of God, how diverse to make the readings — and many, many more questions — had to be answered not only in intellectual, moral, emotional and spiritual terms, but in political ones as well. We needed to address those challenges, not only in terms of the Reconstructionist world of 1989, but also in terms of the world we hoped the books would serve several decades later. A movement prayerbook is thus not only a political document with a particular historical setting, but also a visionary one that helps over the years to create the setting it envisions.

## No Ideological Purity

In any case, a *siddur* can never be ideologically pure. Like poetry, its metaphors invoke varied responses and elude those who would reduce them to one or another clear and simple meaning. In that way, *Kol Haneshamah* supersedes the intentions of its authors. Liturgy has a life of its own.

The sacrifices the editors made over the years of creating *Kol Haneshamah*

gradually have faded in my mind, over the last twenty years. I am grateful that I have prayerbooks from which I can *daven* (pray) with a whole heart, a community with which to share in the experience and a movement that makes a major difference in the world

Quite often when I travel, people come up to me and thank me for the prayer books. These are some of the things they have said: “Only when I started using *Kol Haneshamah* was I able to pray with a whole heart”; “When I got to know *Kol Haneshamah*, I realized I wanted to become a Jew”; “This book helped me to discover my

spirituality”; “Using this *siddur* is the reason I want to go to shul.”

The work on the prayerbook was both a huge burden and a tremendous gift. Judging from our own experience about how long a prayerbook can speak to its audience with full force in a rapidly changing world and about how long it takes to bring a new prayerbook into being, it probably won't be that many more years before the process should begin anew. I hope the editors for that new prayerbook find the process as challenging — and the results as satisfying — as I have.

# Of the Writing of Prayerbooks, There Is No End<sup>1</sup>

BY PETER S. KNOBEL

Over the past two decades, I was involved in the process that created *Mishkan T'filah*, the new *siddur* for the Reform movement. I learned so much, and I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to be engaged in that process.

Today, the composition of a new movement *siddur* is an especially complex undertaking. If we examine the recent platforms of the Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist movements, we realize that each movement describes itself as having its traditionalists and its non-traditionalists. Each movement is a large tent that includes a variety of beliefs and practices. Therefore, each movement's *siddur* must be composed in such a way as to include all who consider themselves to be part of the movement. It would be interesting and worthwhile to do an in-depth analysis of *Siddur Sim Shalom*, *Kol Haneshamah* and *Mishkan T'filah* — the most recent *siddurim* of the Conservative, Reconstructionist and Reform movements, respectively — comparing each to the movement statements that seek to define them. At this moment in American Jewish history, many of the ideological battles that created the movements have dis-

appeared. Our situation is not very different from that of the mainstream Protestant denominations, where it no longer makes a significant difference whether one is a Methodist or a Presbyterian. Now, Americans choose their church or synagogue for reasons other than ideology.

## Desktop Publishing

Another challenge facing the three non-Orthodox streams of Judaism is that of desktop publishing. Each rabbi and each congregation is a potential publisher. Individual congregational *siddurim* are a source of congregational pride and identity. A movement *siddur* fosters the sense of a congregation belonging to a larger entity.

To prepare for the writing of the new Reform *siddur*, the Central Conference of American Rabbis created the *Siddur* Group, which for several years delivered learned papers to one another. The papers analyzed all aspects of worship and prayer, trying to identify the components of a successful *siddur*. During this process, the only lay member of the group, Daniel Schechter, approached the Indianapolis-based Lilly Endowment to apply for a planning grant to

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Peter S. Knobel is the senior rabbi of Beth Emet the Free Synagogue in Evanston, Illinois. He chaired the Ad Hoc Siddur Editorial Committee of the CCAR and is president of the CCAR.

fund an analysis of what was happening in Reform worship and to assess Reform congregants' ideas about what constitutes successful worship. This led to a further grant from the Lilly Endowment, as well as a grant from the New York-based Nathan Cummings Foundation that permitted us to conduct the CCAR Liturgy Project.

This was a complex project that involved using the services of an anthropologist to examine current worship practices and attitudes, as well the processes used in other Jewish streams and Christian denominations for the creation and testing of new prayer books. We also interviewed lay and professional leadership to understand their concerns and attitudes. Afterward, the group presented a series of recommendations to the CCAR board that outlined the criteria for content and delineated the process for the creation and testing of a new *siddur*. Ultimately, the CCAR formed a large editorial committee that represented a broad cross section of the conference.

## Including Cantors

The board decided to include a layperson and several cantors on the committee — a decision that was both practical and symbolically important. Music is central to worship, and cantors are *co-shelihei tzibur* (emissaries of prayer). Their voices added much to the discussion. Since a *siddur* must address the needs of the average worshiper, the input of an involved lay leader was a constant reminder of the audience for whom the *siddur* was being designed.

The key to the creation of a *siddur*

is a great editor who can draw together the diverse needs and concerns of the movement and transform them into a coherent whole. To accomplish this task, the CCAR selected a very talented editor, Rabbi Elyse Frishman, to transform the recommendations into reality. It was her creative genius that conceived of what I consider to be the revolutionary nature of *Mishkan T'filah*.

In the previous Reform siddur, *Gates of Prayer*, we provided for different theologies by creating a series of linear services, each constructed around a theme. In contrast, *Mishkan T'filah* uses a two-page spread to create an almost unlimited number of worship services. On the right page are the Hebrew text, the transliteration and a faithful translation of the standard prayer and source notes. On the left page are several alternative texts on the theme of the standard prayer, as well as spiritual notes. In some ways, the design of the *siddur* duplicates the multiplicity of perspectives found on a talmudic page, but I believe it is also a reflection of the computer era, with multiple links on a single page. In addition, it reflects the reality that the liberal streams of Judaism are large tents which must accommodate many views, and that each individual has different needs at different times.

## Seeking the Extraordinary

*Mishkan T'filah* underwent years of extensive testing in congregations and at regional and national conventions. This process was important, because it helped refine the design and content of the book, and it introduced large num-

bers of people to a new type of *siddur* page. The testing process also revealed something that has often been articulated but insufficiently emphasized — that the quality of worship depends upon the quality of those leading the worship. Our study demonstrated that one significant factor is a congregant's sense that those leading the service are also praying. Congregants wish to pray in a welcoming atmosphere, surrounded by a sense of community. People come to a synagogue service for many reasons, but almost all want to be drawn into a collective experience. As I have noted with Daniel S. Schechter:

Congregants have said that they come to the synagogue from the outside world in search of an extraordinary experience. They have described success worship as the experience of the transcendent, with prayer as one of the tools of worship. Experiencing a sense of peace, of respite, and of community were commonly used phrases of congregants to describe a successful service. Almost every congregant spoke of the power of music in worship. Congregants believed that worship is an art that can be taught and learned, that it should take place in a community that is egalitarian and participatory. They acknowledged the difficulty of satisfying an increasingly diverse community, but expressed a genuine desire that a service say nothing to inhibit full identification of the liturgical vision.<sup>2</sup> (Knobel and Schechter, 47)

With the increased use of Hebrew in Reform worship services, our study showed that congregants desire the inclusion of transliteration and see it as an invitation to participate. This does not substitute for having a grasp of Hebrew, but it serves as an entry point, encouraging some to learn Hebrew. It also contributes to a welcoming atmosphere.

The idea of including a comprehensive transliteration was controversial among some rabbis and educators. They expressed the concern that the inclusion of transliteration de-emphasized Hebrew, that it would discourage the learning of Hebrew, and that it made the *siddur* problematic as a text for bar/bat mitzvah preparation and for use in religious school worship. Therefore, a non-transliterated version is also available. The Hebrew type in the version that contains transliteration is larger than the type used for the transliteration to indicate the primacy of the Hebrew.

The faithful translation on the right page is also a response to the desire of congregants to know what the Hebrew actually says. Having access to a faithful translation represents a form of intellectual integrity for them, and it serves as an aid for those who are learning Hebrew. The source notes also reflect the desire of congregants to understand the origin of the prayers.

## Removing Authors' Names

In earlier versions of *Mishkan T'filah*, we also identified the sources of the prayers that appear on the left side on the page. We discovered that adding

the author's name below the prayer affected its reception. Famous authors were almost automatically deemed to have written beautiful and meaningful prayers, and the prayers by lesser-known people were often dismissed. When the authors' names were removed from the page, we discovered a marked difference in how the passages were judged. The authors are now identified at the back of the book.

One of the most interesting features of the book is that it contains no choreographic instructions. Reform prayer gestures are in a state of flux, and there is great variation from congregation to congregation, and even within congregations. We therefore developed a set of footnotes to explain the meaning and origin of some of the gestures people might encounter, but in a way that was not prescriptive.

I have had the opportunity to observe Reform worship in many different settings, and this diversity of practice is most striking. Many congregations have simultaneous or sequential services that have radically different styles. Professor Michael Morgan, in his wonderful book *Interim Judaism: Jewish Thought in a Century in Crisis*, describes how the philosophies and theologies of the 19th and 20th centuries have run their course. At the same time, there is an explosion of Jewish activity and practice that has no clear philosophical or theological explanation. This has been very liberating, especially within Reform Judaism. The 1999 Pittsburgh Platform affirms that Reform Judaism is a dialogue with all of Jewish tradition, and that certain ideas and practices that were ruled out in the past are available

for reconsideration: "We are committed to the ongoing study of the whole array of [*mitzvot*] and to the fulfillment of those that address us as individuals and as a community."

## Resurrection of the Dead

One of the more emotional debates among the members of the CCAR concerned the reintroduction of the metaphor *m'hayei meitim* (resurrection of the dead) in the *Gevurot*, the second blessing of the *Amidah*. For many, this was a dividing line between Reform Judaism and other movements, while others were struck by the power of metaphor. This is the only place in the *siddur* where the worship is provided with an alternative within the Hebrew text itself. *Hakol* (everything) and *ha-meitim* (dead) are placed side by side, separated by a diagonal line (*hakoll/ha-meitim*). The footnote explains: "Is there nothing beyond God's ability?" Historically, the *Gevurot* takes on the mystery of death in the face of God's power. God can reverse death. So, it concludes: "*Baruh ata, Adonai, m'hayei ha-meitim*. Blessed are you, Adonai, who revives the dead. Our Reform tradition emphasizes life and God's power to direct it in any way. *Baruh ata, Adonai, m'hayei hakol*. Blessed are you, Adonai, who gives life to all."

The metaphor is extended in rabbinic tradition: As water revives parched land, so Torah can revive a dead soul. For greeting a friend after a lapse of twelve months or upon awakening from sleep, the Talmud recommends, *Baruh ata, Adonai, m'hayei ha-meitim*. Blessed are you, Adonai, who revives

the dead (*Berahot* 58b; *Y Berahot* 4:2). In my view, the inclusion of *m'hayei meitim* represents the restoration of the talmudic notion that human beings are both body and soul. In the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885, we rejected both the resurrection of the dead and the bodily *mitzvot*.

We hold that all such Mosaic and rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity, and dress originated in ages and under the influence of ideas entirely foreign to our present mental and spiritual state. They fail to impress the modern Jew with a spirit of priestly holiness; their observance in our days is apt rather to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation.

We reassert the doctrine of Judaism that the soul is immortal, grounding the belief on the divine nature of human spirit, which forever finds bliss in righteousness and misery in wickedness. We reject as ideas not rooted in Judaism, the beliefs both in bodily resurrection and in *Gehenna* and *Eden* (Hell and Paradise) as abodes for everlasting punishment and reward.

## Gender Neutrality

We know ourselves only as embodied, and our fondest hope is that we, as we know ourselves, are eternal (Neil Gillman, *The Death of Death: Resurrection and Immortality in Jewish Thought*, 2001). We reject the Greek notion that it is only the spirit — the immaterial part of our self — that is good. The body, for Judaism, is not the

prison of the soul. By recognizing the sanctity of the body, we are now able to re-explore *talit*, *tefillin*, *mikvah* and *kashrut*. I believe that the renewed emphasis on the *Mi Sheberah* for healing, as well as the special healing services that take place in many congregations, are part of the same phenomenon. The ordination of women and the inclusion of gays and lesbians have made issues of gender and sexual identity central in the Reform movement, as well as the Reconstructionist and Conservative movements. Jewish spirituality is an embodied spirituality.

CCAR policy requires that our liturgical texts be gender neutral. The guidelines for the creation of the new *siddur* required that we take seriously the feminist critiques of liturgy. Would using gender-neutral metaphors for God be sufficient, or should we use gender-specific metaphors? Would the use of male and female metaphors and masculine and feminine pronouns be more faithful to the feminist critiques? Should we introduce a new *berahot* formula, such as *beruha at yah?*

The CCAR had already published a new haggadah, *The Open Door*, edited by Rabbi Sue Levi Elwell, which provides two complete Hebrew texts — one in the traditional masculine Hebrew, and the second in feminine Hebrew. In spite of this precedent, the editorial committee decided that a *siddur* meant for communal use was not the place for such a major change. Ultimately, I was surprised that both gendered metaphors and pronouns, as well as a new *berahot* formula, were rejected. One argument for keeping the *beraha* formula, *Baruh ata, Adonai*

was its almost universal familiarity. This blessing has kept us in synch with *klal Yisrael* and ensures that those with only a modicum of Hebrew knowledge would not feel disenfranchised. The rationale for not using special feminine metaphors for God was that they were too jarring, and that gender-neutral language would better foster our goal of breaking the stereotypical image of God as male.

Personally, I believe the use of gendered language would clearly have indicated that God is beyond gender. In my private prayers, I address God in both masculine and feminine metaphors. On the other hand, I believe the majority was correct in its decision that to move too far from the familiar would make the worship experience more difficult for many.

## ***Tikkun Olam***

Reform emphasis on *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) has been preserved in the prayerbook, especially in most of the pages opposite the Hebrew text of the *kedusha*. *Mishkan T'filah's* alterative readings for the *kedusha* are drawn from the prophets, the Torah and rabbinic literature. The alternative reading for the Shabbat-morning *Amidah* is Leviticus 19, and, for the weekday morning *Amidah*, a selection of texts from the prophets, the *Pirkei Avot* and *Kohelet Rabba*.

In addition to ensuring that our emphasis on social justice was prominent in the new *siddur*, it was important for us to express our commitment to Israel. Therefore, *Mishkan T'filah* restores the prayers for rain and dew to the *Gevurot*,

which explicitly links our liturgy to the agricultural cycle of *Eretz Yisrael* and, in an important and subtle way, establishes our connection to the Land of Israel.<sup>3</sup> The new *siddur* also restores two passages from the traditional *siddur* that were absent in the *Union Prayerbook* and *Gates of Prayer*. The passage “*Or hadash al Tzion tair ve-nizkeh kulanu meheirah le-oro*,” “Shine a new light on Zion that we all may swiftly merit its radiance,” is restored in *Yotzeir*, and the passage “*Havi-einu le-shalom mei-arba kanfot ha-aretz ve-toliheinu komemiyut le-artzeinu*,” “Gather us in peace from the four corners of the earth and lead us upright to our land,” is reinserted in *Ahavah Rabah*.

In *Mishkan T'filah*, the *Yom Ha-atzmaut* service is a candlelighting ritual that can stand alone or be inserted into a daily or Shabbat service. It envisions the use of a seven-branched menorah, like the one that stands in front of the Knesset in Jerusalem, and is similar to the menorah that was removed from the Temple by the Romans in 70 C.E. and depicted on the Arch of Titus in Rome. The menorah is understood as a symbol of Jewish sovereignty.<sup>4</sup>

The service utilizes the Israeli Declaration of Independence as its primary text,<sup>5</sup> and divides it into seven sections: 1) For the Miracle of Rebirth; 2) For the Beauty of the Land; 3) For the Ingathering of Exiles; 4) For a Society Based on Democracy, Equality and Justice for All; 5) For the Renewal of Jewish Culture, Learning and Language; 6) For Hope and Peace; and 7) For the Courage and Resilience of the People of Israel. The ritual involves the lighting of each candle, preceded by the recita-

tion of a section of the Declaration of Independence, followed by readings from biblical and other sources. The service concludes with a prayer for the State of Israel in which the meaning of the rebirth of Israel is called “*reishit tz’mihat geulateinu*.” While the phrase is ambiguous, it may be legitimately translated as implying redemption. The English translation in *Mishkan T’filah*, “the dawning of hope for all who seek peace,” equivocates on the redemptive meaning of the rebirth of the State of Israel. The service ends with the singing of *Hatikvah*, the Israeli national anthem.<sup>6</sup>

## Technological Change

The *siddur* is our most important sacred book. It is the book that Jews use regularly. It is a statement of our identity, our values and our commitments. One learns a great deal by studying a *siddur*. It reveals much about the people who use it. We live in an age of liturgical creativity. Almost daily, we see some new *siddur*, or at least some new worship service. Electronic publication and the Internet ensure that this process will accelerate. Handheld computers now contain the text of the *siddur*. The printed book is not obsolete, but the *siddur* of the future may very well be recorded on an iPod or its successor. Technology is changing our lives and it is changing our worship. One thing is for sure, to paraphrase Kohelet: Of the making of *siddurim*, there is no end.

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1. This article is a personal reflection on

what is contained in the new *siddur* and what I learned along the way. Others engaged in the process will no doubt have differing views. What was exciting and energizing about the process was the opportunity to learn from some of the most committed, talented and spiritual individuals. The rabbis, cantors, congregants, scholars and experts from every Jewish movement and most of the mainstream Protestant community, as well as the Catholic Church, generously shared their knowledge, their expertise, and their conceptions of worship. I am honored to have been invited to share these reflections in *The Reconstructionist* because it gives me the opportunity to publicly thank Rabbi David Teutsch, one of the United States’ most important liturgists, for his support and help.

2. It was Daniel Schechter’s foresight that gave the CCAR the opportunity to do the research necessary to prepare for the new *siddur*.

3. The three pilgrimage festivals, Pesah, Shavuot and Sukkot, are celebrated according to the agricultural cycle of the Land of Israel. Therefore, Pesah occurs in the autumn in the Southern Hemisphere, which is spring in Israel.

4. The service was composed by Rabbi Karyn Kedar, who served as a rabbi in Israel and now is a rabbi in Glenview, IL, and Rabbi Kinneret Shiryon, who serves a Progressive congregation in Modi’in. The service was designed to reflect the Israeli experience in a way that both Israelis and North American Jews could find significant.

5. It is in some ways quite strange for Diaspora Jews to raise up a recently created secular text of a state in which they do not live to the status of *keva* (fixed) text in its newly created liturgy.

6. For a more complete discussion of Zionism and Reform liturgy, see “A New Light Shall Shine on Zion,” *CCAR Journal* Spring 2007.

# On Reinventing the Wheel: Fashioning a Liturgy We Can Pray with Integrity

BY ERIC CAPLAN

**T**he basic order of rabbinic Jewish prayer (*nusah ha-tefillah*) took form between 70 C.E. and 600 C.E., and was closed to further significant revision by the religious leadership of Babylonian Jewry of the 9th and 10th centuries. Jewish liturgical creativity, however, did not cease in the centuries that followed. The liturgical creativity of the Middle Ages added many new pieces to the *siddur* (prayer-book), but did not alter, in any significant sense, the basic *nusah ha-tefillah* mandated by the Babylonian Geonim. In our time, Orthodox Jews continue to pray from a text that preserves these early rabbinic formulations.

In contrast, liberal Jews have instituted far-reaching changes to the *siddur* text, and liturgical reform remains a defining characteristic of non-Orthodox Judaism today. As a liberal Jew and a researcher of contemporary Jewish heterodoxy, I have often wondered if much of the effort that has been invested in creating alternative formulations of the inherited rabbinic prayer texts has really been necessary.

One of the central assumptions that

motivated the first generation of German liturgical reformers was the belief that low rates of synagogue attendance were a direct result of deficiencies in the inherited rabbinic prayer book. Speaking to the first conference of German reformers in 1844, Joseph Maier rejected the possibility that empty pews were a function of “an unfavorable attitude to religion in our time” and argued instead that it should be traced to the shortcomings of the *siddur* itself, which “suffers in formal as well as material respects from so many ailments that it is no longer in a position to satisfy the religious needs of a progressively educated generation.” Most troubling to Maier was the fact that the text is written in a language (Hebrew) most congregants can no longer understand, that certain prayers appear multiple times in the same service (“Every repetition is boring, tiresome, negates devotion, and makes the whole service a formal *opus operatum*”), that it contains lengthy passages from rabbinic literature that stifle devotion — for example, the selection from the Mishnah traditionally inserted into the Friday night service

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Eric Caplan is a professor of Jewish Studies and Jewish education at McGill University. He is the author of *From Ideology to Liturgy: Reconstructionist Worship and American Liberal Judaism* (Hebrew Union College Press, 2002) and a member of the Board of Directors of the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation.

describing the oils and wicks appropriate for the Sabbath lights (*bameh madlikin*) — and that the prayers contain numerous statements that contradict the beliefs of the majority of the congregation (Maier, 154-155).

## Amending the Text

The editors of the first Reconstructionist liturgies — Rabbis Mordecai Kaplan, Eugene Kohn, Ira Eisenstein and Milton Steinberg — shared Maier's view that amending the inherited *siddur* text was essential to maintaining and/or rekindling an interest in prayer among liberal Jews. Indeed, they embraced many of the abridgements and alternative formulations of rabbinic prayers suggested by earlier liturgical reformers. Like Maier, they were convinced that passages that made reference, for example, to the revelation of the Torah at Sinai or expressed hope for the rebuilding of the Temple and the reinstatement of the sacrificial system could not be prayed with integrity. Perpetuating these formulations not only rendered prayer dishonest — an untenable state, because honesty is vital to the act of prayer and to religious life in general — but risked “mislead[ing] the simple and alienat[ing] the sophisticated” (Introduction to the 1945 *Reconstructionist Sabbath Prayer Book*). Kaplan was deeply troubled by the personal career of Felix Adler, who had abandoned his plans to become a Reform rabbi and instead founded the Society for Ethical Culture — in part, because he could no longer recite liturgical passages that reflected theological positions he considered outdated. Kaplan believed

that Judaism could not afford to lose intellectuals of Adler's caliber if it was to survive in America, and it therefore needed to reform itself.<sup>1</sup> Although Kaplan and his co-editors did not imitate the German reformers in divesting the prayer service of much of its Hebrew content, they did devote close to 60 percent of their Sabbath prayer book to English readings — a move meant to make parts of the service more accessible and immediately relevant to congregants.

Kaplan's personal commitment to intellectual honesty in prayer never wavered. But by the mid 1950s, the continuing dismal rates of synagogue attendance led him to question whether the prayers of the rabbinic tradition — even when divested of repetitions and questionable theological positions — could still move congregants spiritually. Petitionary prayer is untenable once the existence of a supernatural God is denied and much of the inherited liturgy is devoted to requests. Personal prayers of thanksgiving are most appropriately recited in the home or at synagogue-based life-cycle events where, in the presence of family and friends, people experience the intense thankfulness that brings forth heartfelt prayer. In response to these challenges, Kaplan suggested that Torah study must become the centerpiece of communal worship and that prayer should “constitute only a fraction of the service.” For centuries, Torah study has been the central vehicle for fostering Jewish group consciousness and a sense of collective destiny. Therefore, when Jews gather as a community, it is only fitting — said Kaplan — that

they study Torah. Prayers recited during the service should relate primarily to the Torah and express thanks for God's presence in the life of the Jewish people, as witnessed in and represented by the Bible (Kaplan, *Questions Jews Ask*, 459-461; *The Reconstructionist*, June 7, 1967, 27).

In a series of editorials in the 1960s, *The Reconstructionist* endorsed the view that enhancing the position of Torah study in public worship was the key to rejuvenating synagogue life (June 14, 1963, 4; October 28, 1966, 4-5).

## An Echo Chamber

This position rarely has been argued in Reconstructionist circles since the founding of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC) in 1968 and the subsequent transference of movement leadership to people who were not part of Kaplan's original circle. Indeed, in recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in interest in the traditional liturgy among the members of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association and a greater faith in its ability to foster spiritual experience. In a related development, a number of Reconstructionists and Reconstructionist sympathizers have questioned whether it is necessary, constructive or even possible to adapt this liturgy to contemporary beliefs.

Rabbi Arthur Green, former dean and president of RRC and editor of the Hebrew text of *Kol Haneshamah: Shabbat Vehagim*, has turned Kaplan's original assumption on its head by arguing that since liberal Jews reject a literal reading of Judaism's core beliefs,

maintaining the rabbinic language of prayer is actually essential to Jewish continuity: "Being a [literal] nonbeliever, being a liturgical affirmer becomes all the more important to me," Green writes. "What I have left, in some ways, of Judaism is the poetry." Moreover, Green believes that the liturgy is "a profound echo chamber of all the generations that have said it" and that when we "put our own emotions into these archaic phrases, [it] gives our own emotions a depth and power and historical resonance that nothing we could create would ever have . . . and the more you tamper with it, the less of that you have." Accordingly, the inherited liturgy should only be altered in response to urgent ethical demands.

He endorses, for example, the traditional Reconstructionist approach to liturgical passages that refer to Jewish chosenness; he believes that these are responsible for "some of the Jew's attitude of superiority to non-Jews, some of the Israeli attitude toward Arabs" and he is in favor of the inclusion of the matriarchs in the first blessing of the *Amidah* (interview, June, 1995).

Others have emphasized similarly that the liturgy is a mythopoetic construct and that to demand that it reflect literally held belief is to misunderstand its essence. For example, such a position was argued by Charles Silberman — then chair of the Reconstructionist movement's prayerbook commission — in an article in *Raayonot* in 1983. It was accepted as one of the core principles of that commission, and is evident also in a number of the commentaries that Rabbis David Teutsch, Mordechai Liebling and Arthur Green

wrote for *Kol Haneshamah* (Silberman, 4-11.)<sup>2</sup> In this view, when we recite a liturgical passage, such as “*ve-zot ha-torah*” (“This is the Torah that Moses placed before the children of Israel”), we use traditional Jewish language to express our belief that the Torah has been central to our civilization for thousands of years. Like all myths, revelation at Sinai is not literally true, but conveys an essential message in powerful, poetic language.

### Power of Tradition

The people who advocate for this approach often question whether our “replacement language” has the same power, and point out that it too rarely conveys literal truth. Reflecting, for example, on Kaplan’s alternative “*ve-zot ha-torah*” — “This Torah is a tree of life to those who hold fast to it, and of them that uphold it, every one is rendered happy” — Silberman writes, “I know all too many people who have held fast to the Torah and who have suffered tragedy nonetheless.”

Whereas Kaplan would have us alter the traditional liturgy in response to theological concerns, and Green would have us leave it mostly untouched, the mythopoetic school has left no such clear-cut directives. For example, the Silberman prayerbook commission voted to restore the traditional “*ve-zot ha-torah*” because revelation is “true as central myth,” but echoed Kaplan and his co-editors in choosing to leave out all references to the equally central Jewish myth of “*mashiah ben david*.” The prayerbook commission that produced the *Kol Haneshamah* series reinstated

the rabbinic “*ve-zot ha-torah*,” but left out “*yismah mosheh*,” which also makes reference to Moses having received the tablets, because they deemed its mythic imagery too vivid. In addition, they omitted all references to a Davidic messiah, because the myth implies that “the Jews will be the ultimate, triumphant rulers of the world.”<sup>3</sup> And yet the only liturgical passages that express this aspect of the messianic myth — the Psalms of the *Kabbalat Shabbat* service — are retained in full (as they were in Kaplan’s liturgies). To suggest that liturgical statements such as “and He will graciously bring a redeemer to their children’s children” (*Amidah*) or “Gladden us, Lord our God, with the appearance of your servant Elijah the prophet, and with the rule of the house of David your anointed” (Haftarah blessings) carry sufficiently negative baggage that they cannot be read as positive expressions of the Jewish myth of a world redeemed, is to put forth an unnecessarily critical reading, unbefitting those who would embrace reinterpreted core mythic language.

### Eisenstein’s View

The only call within Reconstructionist circles for a full reinstating of the traditional liturgical formulations that had been reworked in the 1945 prayer book came, ironically, from the late Rabbi Ira Eisenstein, who, in the final years of his life, no longer believed that the inherited liturgy should be edited to reflect contemporary thought. Eisenstein believed that “If you change this word, or that word . . . you still haven’t done the job, because there’s so much

else that really needs to be changed” — for example, the references to God as a person, an *atah*, which conflict with Reconstructionist views of God as process. Accordingly, it is impossible to render the ancient text a mirror of current belief without causing it to “fall apart.”

Eisenstein suggested that Reconstructionists approach praying the rabbinic liturgy as “an exercise in reminiscence,” where we “we put ourselves into the world of our ancestors, the world of our fathers, and see how it feels, how it sounds.” In this approach, traditional prayer becomes an act of quotation that connects us to our people’s past and provides the basis for communal singing. “It’s an aesthetic experience, really. . . . [W]e come together with other Jews and we sing.” We should not attempt to superimpose our contemporary positions and concerns onto the inherited text. Such concerns are more appropriately expressed through the supplementary readings and new prayers included in all liberal services (interview, June, 1993).

Eisenstein’s basic approach to the rabbinic liturgy has recently been endorsed by the immediate past president of the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, Daniel Cedarbaum, although Cedarbaum also follows Green in his belief that the liturgy should be edited to avoid all references to Jewish chosenness and to include the matriarchs in the *Amidah* (Cedarbaum, 76-78).

## Mythopoetic School

When I began researching Reconstructionist prayer texts fifteen years

ago, my personal approach to the editing of the traditional liturgy was essentially Kaplanian. I identified strongly with his inclination to take the liturgy fairly literally; I agreed, for example, that since the belief in the physical resurrection of the body after death is a central tenet of early rabbinic thought, the *siddur’s* references to life after death cannot be read as assertions of the immortality of the soul without distorting, in an intellectually dishonest manner, the intended meaning of the texts. As such, the modern Jew who no longer holds such beliefs has no choice but to edit the liturgy. I thought that Kaplan, in *The Future of the American Jew*, provided the definitive response to those who refuse to edit the traditional liturgy on the grounds that the text is not meant to be taken literally:

The romantic type of Jew deprecates all insistence on taking literally matters of ritual and liturgy. They are not intended, according to him, to convey exact truth, but to arouse the religious emotions. That purpose, he contends, is defeated by all attempts to submit the language of prayer or religious creed to the scrutiny of reason. But why flout reason unnecessarily, when it is possible to evoke an even more profoundly religious emotion which can be shared by everybody, by using language which calls forth no mental resistance? (Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew*, 227.)

For a number of reasons, I have abandoned much of my earlier Kap-

lanian stance. Although I still believe that Kaplan was correct in arguing that the rabbinic liturgy articulates a clear theological position and that, in theory, much of it contradicts contemporary liberal belief, I have found that, in practice, it is possible for me to pray these formulations in a way that is intellectually honest. I have embraced the basic position of the mythopoetic school and believe that the words of the rabbinic liturgy, like all poetry, are sufficiently evocative that they can be read in multiple ways.

For example, I have experienced many times in my life when I have lacked energy and have found it a great battle to fulfill my responsibilities to work and family. Reconstructionist theology would attribute my ability to transcend my lowest personal moments, those times when I feel physically and/or spiritually dead, to the workings of the godly force in the universe. As such, it does not feel dishonest when I refer to God as “reviver of the dead” in the *Amidah*. Indeed, the fact that the rabbinically ordained blessing for seeing a friend after a long separation is “Blessed are you, O Lord our God, who brings the dead to life” (“*mehayei ha-meytim*”) indicates that the early tradition itself was open to nonliteral readings of this phrase.

Similarly, I can pray liturgical references to a Davidic messiah wholeheartedly, because I see them as articulations of the Jewish hope for a world redeemed, a hope that I share deeply. As I have indicated, I do not believe that these liturgical passages articulate a morally problematic ethnic triumphalism. Because I think it is possible

to find deep spiritual meanings in the majority of the traditional formulations that have been reworked by liberal liturgists, I no longer agree with Eisenstein’s view that praying the rabbinic liturgy involves “quoting” but not affirming the inherited text.

In my work as director of the Jewish Teacher Training Program at McGill University, I have devoted much energy to helping my students find their personal spiritual truths reflected in the *siddur* and have had success in doing so. The majority of students — Orthodox and non-Orthodox — seem naturally inclined to view the text as open to multiple understandings. Although today’s liberal Jewish youth often share Kaplan’s rejection of talmudic theology, they do not seem to experience references to a personal messiah, revelation at Sinai or physical life after death as an obstacle to connecting to the text in a meaningful, honest way.<sup>4</sup>

## Nonliteral Approach

I do, however, share Eisenstein’s view that the rabbinic liturgy can never be made to reflect contemporary belief literally, because to do so would require instituting far-reaching changes that would sever our connection to the prayer norms, past and present, of the Jewish people. Accordingly, we have no choice but to approach our tradition in a nonliteral manner, and the truth is that we do so all the time. Reconstructionists continue to sing *Eliyahu Hanavi*, *Maaz Tzur* and *Lekhab Dodi* and to pray the *Kedushah* and the *Unetaneh Tokef*, although all of these raise serious theological problems for

us when taken literally. We have not stopped referring to God as “*malbish arumim*” (“S/He who clothes the naked”), even though we reject a literal reading of this assertion. It is time that we apply our talent for reinterpretation to more pieces of our liturgical tradition.

Whereas Kaplan was correct, in theory, that our reworked liturgies can be more powerful than the texts they replace, in practice, this frequently has not been the case. For example, because the second blessing of the *Amidah* already refers to God as “*mekhalkel hayim behesed*” (“S/He who in kindness sustains the living”), to refer to God as “*mehayei kol hat*” (“S/He who gives life to all that lives”) does not add as much to our appreciation of God’s presence in our lives as does the original phrase, “*mehabyei meytim berahamim rabim*” (“S/He who in great mercy gives life to the dead”), understood in the way I suggested earlier. The Orthodox theologian and Jewish community activist Rabbi Irving Greenberg has convinced me that there is a compelling message in the image of a personal messiah, one that is lost when redeemer becomes redemption, Messiah, messianic era. As Greenberg explains:

Modern people are embarrassed by [*mashiah ben david*] and prefer to speak of a messianic age or the triumph of the forces of progress. The Purim story, like the Passover story, emphasizes that one cannot pass the buck to the forces of history. The concept of the personal Messiah should not represent some deus ex machina, some di-

vine intervention that will relieve humanity of its responsibility or of the consequences of its folly. Rather, it is meant to underscore that, in the final analysis, humans must take responsibility for their own fate: The final liberator will be a human redeemer. Then all our limited strides forward will become part of the way to the realization of the grand design (Greenberg, 242).

Understood in this manner, I not only can pray “*mashiah ben david*,” I want to pray it.

## Reconstructionist Diversity

The final reason that I no longer endorse the editing of the traditional *nusah ha-tefillah* on theological grounds is an outgrowth of the many conversations I have had with Reconstructionist rabbis and laity over the years. These have made clear that movement members today relate to the rabbinic liturgy in a myriad of ways. Some can imagine reinstating most of the reworked passages of the 1945 prayerbook; a few cannot imagine reinstating any of them; and still others can embrace a few of the excised passages but do not agree on which of these should be returned. There is also no consensus on what alternative wording should be used for phrases that continue to be left out. The traditional texts serve to connect us to *klal yisrael* (the community of Israel) and have, once again in the words of Arthur Green, a “power and historical resonance that nothing we could create would ever have.” Why replace these

texts with alternative formulations that are unlikely to satisfy a majority of Reconstructionists?

The next Reconstructionist *siddur* should reinstate all traditional references to revelation at Sinai, “*mashiah ben david*” and resurrection of the dead. (Miracles and biblical understandings of reward and punishment — for example, in the second paragraph of the *Shema* — are already put back in *Kol Haneshamah*.) As in the current Reconstructionist liturgies, commentary should be included indicating the many ways contemporary liberal Jews understand these passages.

I would continue to omit prayers for the rebuilding of the Temple and the reinstatement of the sacrificial system, because I see no way to pray these with integrity. Even Conservative Judaism has accepted that these requests are too detailed to be viewed metaphorically. Adding the *imahot* (the matriarchs) to the first blessing of the *Amidah* is our generation’s most significant liturgical innovation and should definitely be perpetuated.

Like Green and Cedarbaum, I would not want to see passages referring to Jewish chosenness returned to Reconstructionist prayer. Although I accept the Silberman prayerbook commission’s argument that “there is a historical link between chosenness and the ideas of holiness and covenant” and I recognize that a strong sense of ethical responsibility can flow from this idea, the *siddur* passages in question emphasize Jewish superiority over our ethical calling. The Jews are not simply chosen, but “exalted above all nations” and “not made like the peoples of the world.”

These passages articulate an unhealthy and potentially dangerous self-image that is not easily reinterpreted. To include them as options in our *siddur* — as is the case in *Kol Haneshamah* — is unacceptable and risks leaving the impression that we do not take our ethical commitments seriously.

## ***Musaf* Service**

Finally, I would reinstate the *Musaf* service to our liturgy. From a political standpoint, the omission of a *Musaf* in *Kol Haneshamah* has served to distance our movement from certain liberal Jewish congregations that might otherwise purchase the book and in time become members of the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation. More importantly, liberal prayer services often lack opportunities for silent meditation, and the *Musaf* provides a Jewishly rooted mechanism for addressing this lack that can serve as an important counterpoint to the very verbal Torah discussion that precedes it. The fifteen minutes that it will add to our services will be worth it. Although I agree with Maier and Kaplan that, in general, repetitions do not further spiritual experience, the distance between the *Amidah* of *Shaharit* and the one in *Musaf*, coupled with the fact that this *Amidah* could be a silent meditation, serves to mitigate this concern.

On their own, none of these suggestions will return liberal Jews to the pews. But I believe that they will help put a more powerful liturgy in the hands of those who do attend — one that can still be prayed with full intellectual honesty. North American Jews

can find spirituality in multiple venues. They come to synagogues specifically because they want contact with Jewish community and Jewish tradition. Any changes to our prayer book that serve to strengthen its roots in the Jewish liturgical tradition without compromising our integrity as liberal Jews should be welcomed.

different mode — to a religious experience that takes place with little direct relevance to the words” (Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen, *The Jew Within: Self, Family, and Community in America* [Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000], 176-177). Although my students generally have not articulated this position, it is possible that a similar experience of prayer is influencing their ability to accept the *siddur* as is.

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1. For a thorough discussion of Kaplan's complex relationship to Felix Adler, see Mel Scult, *Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: a Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993).
  2. The Silberman prayerbook commission disbanded before it produced any liturgy. The principles that were to inform its work also appeared in the Spring 1983 issue of *Raayonot*, at the time, the journal of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association. Commentaries reflecting a mythopoetic take on the traditional liturgy can be found on pages 79, 283, and 406 of *Kol Haneshamah: Shabbat Vehagim*.
  3. Interview with David Teutsch, July, 1995. “When it gets too graphic,” Dr. Teutsch observed, “people say ‘that doesn't seem like myth anymore, that feels like a real account.’”
  4. A study of American Jews born between 1945 and 1965 indicates that the words of prayer are not essential to them. “[They] have learned to use the words as a sort of springboard — background music in a

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# Prayer and Poetry

BY RICHARD HIRSH

For the past few years, our friends in the Reform movement have been hard at work developing a new prayerbook for Reform Jewish prayer. The book has occasioned debate and dissent within both the lay and rabbinic arms of the Reform movement. As far as I can discern, every faction, cohort and demographic group is unhappy about some aspect of the new *siddur*. If there is a more thankless position than being editor-in-chief of a Jewish prayerbook, I cannot imagine what it would be.

I mention the Reform movement's prayerbook problems as an example of how perplexed, confused and unfocused contemporary Jews often are (regardless of denomination) when we come to the form, function and content of prayer. This issue of *The Reconstructionist*, devoted as it is to liturgy, offers an opportune moment to reflect on what prayer might be for us, how prayer might become more meaningful, and why prayer that truly evokes something deep within us sometimes (perhaps often) seems elusive.

## Discovering Aesthetic Experience

During a recent sabbatical, I spent a fair amount of time reading works from an end of the spiritual spectrum

where I usually do not spend much time. This excursion included dipping into anthologies of poetry, where I discovered the discipline of economy in language, which is not a bad thing for a rabbi to learn and relearn from time to time. I was able to experience the importance of deeply common human experiences that can be shared, expressed and reflected upon through carefully chosen words combined in evocative ways. For someone usually given to the celebration of the cerebral, this was a bit of a revelation to me, but a valuable one.

It is not as if I was unaware earlier that the arts can be deeply spiritual, or that drama and music and literature have the ability to move us beyond the experience of aesthetic pleasure to one of deep meaning. For years, I have been encouraging my students at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College to experience the texts of Jewish tradition as they would experience a painting in an art gallery, to enter into a relationship with the text, to reflect on what they hear it expressing and to share with others their own response — while seeking out perhaps different responses from other people engaged with the same text. I discourage my students from asking, “What does the text mean?” and encourage them to ask, “What do you see or hear in the text?”

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Rabbi Richard Hirsh is the executive director of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association and teaches at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College.

In a similar way, I want to raise the question of how prayer might be experienced if, instead of seeing it as an affirmation of ideas about God or as an endorsement of concepts about Torah or as a validation of the experiences of the Jewish people as historically accurate, we engaged prayer by responding to and interacting with the ideas, the language and the imagery found in prayer.

## Connecting Prayer and Poetry

One of the ways in which I rediscovered my own ability to pray in a serious and meaningful way was through the application of things I was learning about and through poetry. And this led me to think about what it is that poetry allows us to experience, and what it is that enables it to be resonant. What does poetry do?

A book that proved informational as well as inspirational to me is Edward Hirsch's *How to Read a Poem*. It is either an occupational advantage or a hazard that rabbis tend to read through Jewish lenses. But as I made my way through this book, I kept noticing how much of what was being said about the nature, meaning and experience of poetry could easily be applied to the experience of religion and prayer. Three things I have experienced in poetry stand out in particular.

The first is Hirsch's observation that "the spiritual life wants articulation — it wants embodiment in language" (Hirsch, 6). Surely, anyone familiar with Jewish tradition understands its love of language, its embrace of expression, its insistence on interpretation and its commitment to conversation

and to commentary. But what is the point of all that language? Specifically, what is the goal, the purpose and the intent of the language of prayer?

I want to make a distinction between davening and praying. I know what davening is supposed to do, and what it often manages to accomplish: Davening is meant to connect us to the Jewish people through the quotation, chanting and reading of traditional words that have durability and currency across Jewish time and space. Davening, in the language of Reconstructionism, is about belonging — belonging to a community, belonging to the Jewish people and laying claim to the language, legends and lyrics that comprise the traditional language of the *siddur*. Davening has its place.

But davening is not the same as prayer (although my spell-checker, which does not recognize the word "davening," does offer as a suggested correction the word "divining"). Precisely because davening relies on the familiarity and comfort of the routine and the regular, it loses the capacity to surprise us, to pull us out of where we are, to stop us from turning the page and keeping up with where the community is going in order to linger over an insight, a thought or a feeling that has been stirred up.

## Being Pried Open

Hirsch says: "I need [a] poem to enchant me, to shock me awake, to shift my waking consciousness and open the world to me, to open me up to the world — to the word — in a new way. I am pried open" (9). Prayer ought to work the same way, drawing

us in through enticement, challenging us to be open to change and shifting the ways we think, act and speak during the many minutes, hours and days that comprise our lives. When we gather for prayer, what are the moments that touch us most deeply, and why? When is prayer “working” for us? When does it break through the routine and reveal something unexpected or unanticipated? When does it get inside of us and linger? When does it become a persistent presence that transforms us?

Prayer ought to open us up to the world in a new way — not to a new world, but to a new way of seeing our world. Genuine therapists and mystics, teaches Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, do not claim to change the world, but “to change the self-awareness of the one who looks at the world, and in so doing, thereby change that person’s reality” (Kushner, 33). And if we are resistant to being pried open, to looking at ourselves honestly, deeply and courageously, then prayer ought to be both inspiration and reassurance that we can take that risk. “The question poses itself,” Hirsch says, “as how to keep alive an interior life in the face of our own and the world’s corruptions” (56). The intersection of interior and exterior experience may be one of the key places where prayer and poetry meet.

It is a daily struggle to defend decency, inspire integrity and challenge complacency. The despair common to the daily lives of so many people that confronts us every time we open a newspaper can be numbing. It sometimes seems as if the world is so prone to disappointment and disillusionment

that we cannot imagine what difference doing *tikkun* — repairing and healing of our small internal cosmos — can make. And if we are in fact pried open, the despair we may experience by looking at the choices we have made, at the opportunities we have missed or at the decisions we have avoided can lead to a loss of faith in ourselves.

And so prayer, like poetry, ought to help us embrace and articulate the complex and multidimensional realities of our lives. It ought to help us to acknowledge failure and capture hope. It ought to motivate us toward atonement and encourage us toward forgiveness. Prayer ought to help us strengthen our commitment to nurture and sustain and cultivate our interior lives in the face of our own and the world’s corruptions. Like fine poetry, exquisite prayer should be both a mirror and a window — something that enables us to see ourselves and also lets us see beyond ourselves.

## **Making Connections**

The second dimension of the experience of poetry that relates to the experience of prayer is the ability of poetry to make connections, to be relational, to engage us, and to order, arrange and narrate our experiences in a way that gives us a deeper, more thoughtful and more complex understanding of our lives.

For the past eight years, I have taught a class at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College on issues of Jewish identity as they emerge at the various stages of the life cycle. I encourage my future colleagues to think of these life-cycle punc-

tuation points as dots in people's lives. What I want them to see as part of the holy work for which they are preparing is that rabbis have an opportunity to help people connect those dots, to help them make meaning out of these universal human moments through the particular symbols, resources, rituals, rhythms and vocabulary of Judaism — through the spiritual tools of their own tradition. And, if they do their work well, the people they serve will be able to connect those dots so that the picture that emerges has meaning, coherence and holiness.

None of these ideas is obvious. Life is broken into discrete pieces, often experienced as a series of moments whose only connection is that they follow one upon the other. Our multiple roles seem to yield multiple and often conflicting selves. If we are successful as parents, perhaps we are failures as children. If we are exemplary at work, we may be found wanting at home. If we are acknowledged and validated by others, we may be unable to appreciate and accept ourselves. We go through good years as well as difficult ones; we have some moments when we soar and others when we crash. We age, and as our experiences accumulate and the decades pass, we increasingly sense an urgency to tie it all together, to see the patterns emerge, to connect the dots. We seek meaning, both the meaning we create and the meaning we can discover.

Life so often seems to be anything but organic. We cannot always account for what appear to be the extraneous dots that remain when we think we have finished drawing the lines of connection. But one of the things that

poetry enables us to do, according to Hirsch, is “thinking through the relation of unlike things.” When we read a poem, just as when we read a prayer, there is no single meaning waiting to be acknowledged. The meaning emerges, he says, “as part of the collaboration between writer and reader” (14).

## ***Midrash and Poetry***

By coincidence, I happened to be reading Hirsch's book at the same time I was rereading Kushner's classic *The River of Light*, which explores the correlated dynamics of mysticism and psychotherapy. Kushner is particularly interested in how *midrash*, that part of Jewish literature that comments on, amplifies and interprets biblical texts, functions in a way analogous to psychotherapy. The function of *midrash*, according to Kushner, is “to fill in the spaces between the words . . . [to] connect the discordant and apparently unrelated pieces. . . . [M]eaning is literally in the connections.... *Midrash* is literature that appears in the spaces in between” (Kushner, 29-30).

Hirsch's “thinking through the relation of unlike things” and Kushner's “connecting the discordant and apparently unrelated pieces” point toward the same goal — namely, the attempt to pull together the discrete pieces of our lives so that a narrative emerges that we recognize as authentic, honest and meaningful. What else can it be that draws us together in prayer — whether during the High Holidays, on Shabbat or on a weekday — if not the compelling combination of opportunity and obligation to discover who we most

deeply and fundamentally have been and could become?

According to Kushner, *midrash* “does not seek to change the text. Rather, by joining its fragments together in a new and more coherent pattern of meaning, it seeks to set it free of old, paralyzing stereotypes” (Kushner, 32). That is particularly important for the process of *teshuvah*, or repentance, which occupies our prayerful attention during the High Holiday season. One challenge of *teshuvah* is to take the pieces that have made up our lives and bring them together in a new way, to connect the dots so that a different picture emerges and to avoid repeating that to which we have become accustomed — or, more dangerously, that to which we have surrendered as unchangeable. Reflective, quiet, calm and contemplative prayer can help us accomplish that goal, and can help us to find ourselves again.

As in prayer, so in poetry: Hirsch suggests that the “everlasting splendor” of the moment of epiphany in a poem “may well be the mystery of communicating moments when the self is both lost and found” (Hirsch, 243). I remember well the first poem I ever learned, on the first day of school in third grade, when we had to write down and memorize Robert Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.” I was not sure exactly what “and miles to go before I sleep” meant, but I felt it, and I knew at that moment the reality of mortality, and that a boundary of consciousness had been crossed that could not be reversed. A piece of my self had been lost, but another piece had been found.

## Finding the White Space

My third and final insight on the connections between poetry and prayer comes from the poet and liturgist Marcia Falk, who wrote and edited a prayer book called *The Book of Blessings*. Responding to the criticism that her book had too much white space on the pages, some of which did, in fact, contain as few as two or three lines in Hebrew or in English, she said:

[The people who complained about too much white space] are accustomed to seeing as many words as possible filling the pages of Jewish prayer books. Indeed, not just prayer books but all the sacred books in Judaism tend to look crowded, stuffed with words — beginning with the (orally composed) Hebrew Bible, which does not preserve in written form the pauses for breath that are detectable when the text is read aloud . . .

In contrast, the ordinary poetry reader does not blink at this arrangement — for what is a poem but language in lines, and how can you have line breaks without space? In a poem, white space is every bit as important as black ink: the one creates the silence that makes intelligible the other’s sound (Falk, 64).

This affirmation of the importance of allowing the white space on a page to surround the words in order to allow them to breathe and be experienced as well as read, provided me with a new

perspective on prayer and on the liturgy that is supposed to support prayer and, perhaps most importantly, on what prayer might allow us to see that we otherwise might miss altogether. Falk's reflections made me more appreciative of the aesthetic considerations applied to the Reconstructionist movement's *Kol Haneshamah* prayerbook series, where white space also plays an important role.

Our lives are complex and complicated. Many things are demanded of us on a daily basis, and our "to-do" lists seem to have no end. The individual strands that comprise our lives are tightly woven, and we, in turn, are bound by them. Our lives look like those crowded pages, where whatever white space remains is yielded grudgingly — pages where the main task seems to be to finish as quickly as possible so that we can get on to the next page and do it all over again.

Like poetry, prayer ought to be about creating white space and allowing us to see more clearly where we are by letting us pull back far enough so that our margins — or, more appropriately, our horizons — can expand. If we pull back from the dense complexity of daily life, we see that we are really something much smaller, existing within a much larger context. And the words of prayer can help us to create that white space.

## **The Promise of Transformation**

Many rabbis will agree that the most anxiety-producing words in a Jewish service are, "We continue individually." We are, appropriately, oriented toward community, and we want to be in a

congregation that shares a familiarity with the language, melodies and words of the tradition.

But we also need to take care of our personal spiritual needs — the ones that arise from the place in life where we find ourselves, from the internal struggles that gain our attention and from the impact of events on our lives. These are the needs that arise from the insights or discoveries that are transforming us; they are the needs that arise out of the solitary thoughts that come to us in the middle of the night or at dawn. We ought to find space in our lives for the kind of prayer that can help us respond to those needs.

Prayer is not always easy, but then neither is poetry. Each makes demands, extends an invitation, offers an opportunity, extends a consolation, inspires an effort and reveals something familiar and comfortable or something challenging and even disturbing. Each asks for engagement, reaction and relationship. Each holds out the promise of transformation.

But poetry has at least this to teach us about prayer: 1) that it is meant to open up the world to us in a new way, to pry us open from the ways in which we have become closed; 2) that it is meant to help us connect the dots so that the narrative we shape out of our lives has meaning and integrity; and 3) that it is meant to remind us of the white space that surrounds us — even, perhaps especially, if we have allowed ourselves to forget that it is there.

## **Regaining Perspective**

Significant moments in the Jewish

calendar invite us to look with humility at those elements that we have come to understand as defining our lives, and to become open to new possibilities. We are asked to reposition ourselves in consequence of regaining perspective on where we are in the story of our lives — both on how far we have come and on how much more time we might expect to have. And we are asked to place our lives in perspective by looking at ourselves as we imagine God is looking at us — even, perhaps especially, if we have allowed ourselves to forget that God is always present.

A poem “asks us to open up to its experience, it urges us towards a reckoning. [It] asks us be accountable to its dark wisdom” (Hirsch, 60). It seems to me not coincidental that Rosh HaShanah falls on the new moon, when only the slightest sliver of light challenges the dark wisdom that indeed holds us accountable. As the ten days of teshuvah progress, the light grows, as does our self-awareness and our ability gradually to acknowledge and accept what we need to see. By the night of *Kol Nidre*, ten days into the new year, the darkness can no longer conceal, hide or protect. Who and what we are, who and what we have been and who and what we want to become are all revealed to us. We see ourselves fully — the good and the bad, the hope and the despair, the decent and the decadent. What

begins as a communal ushering in of the new year in the darkness of Rosh HaShanah becomes a solitary moment of accountability in the white light of Yom Kippur. The challenge is to be open to the moment.

A poem, Hirsch concludes, “incites us to listen, to change, to feel a living hand coming off a page. To take up the offer of [a poem] is to engage a solitude that would be transformed, a loneliness that would become holy, a desolate crying out that signals we are in the presence of the sacred” (Hirsch, 60).

We could not ask for a better description of the work that lies before us in locating the meaning and center of prayer in our lives: “to engage a solitude that would be transformed, a loneliness that would become holy, a desolate crying out that signals we are in the presence of the sacred.”

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# Reconstructing Prayer

BY MICHAEL STRASSFELD

In the last couple of years, there has been much focus on the synagogue — positively, as the institution that has the largest number of affiliated Jews, and negatively, as a staid institution that many Jews do not join and many other Jews leave, especially after their children have become bar/bat mitzvah. Synagogue 2000, ICE and Synaplex are among the more significant attempts to change the synagogue. Recently, the Hebrew College and STAR (Synagogues: Transformation and Renewal) published a book entitled *Re-envisioning the Synagogue*. Edited by Zachary Heller, the book contains a variety of essays on the subject that are, on the whole, provocative and thoughtful.

Yet, I would posit that many of these efforts at change are tinkering around the edges of the problem. In my view, the current model of the synagogue is deeply flawed structurally and may require radical change or, at least, reconstruction.

Here is my own brief analysis of what is wrong. David Kaufman, in an essay in *Re-envisioning the Synagogue*, suggests that the synagogue has three functions: prayer, study and assembly (I would call the latter “community”). He writes: “Though the three synagogue functions are usually cited in unison,

as if each were equally valent, the truth is that there is a hierarchy among them. The central one is unequivocally prayer. For nearly two thousand years, the prayer service has been the sine qua non of synagogue life.” I would suggest that while on paper that hierarchy is true, in reality, community has become the central feature of synagogue life. In the absence of ethnic neighborhoods, Jews may gather with other Jews at synagogue. At its best, a synagogue provides community and meaning at life-cycle moments especially important for people living in the diverse neighborhoods of modern life. How many times have I heard congregants expressing their deep appreciation for Jewish community in such words as: “Rabbi, it meant so much to me that people from the synagogue came to my house for *shivah*.”

## Lack of Comfort with Prayer

The dirty little secret is that prayer is the function that the synagogue does least well. The challenges are not just that the liturgy is in Hebrew or that Hebrew is an ancient language. It is the act of praying itself that is the greatest challenge. Many people do not feel comfortable praying or do not really believe in prayer. Whatever their theol-

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Rabbi Michael Strassfeld is the rabbi of the Society for the Advancement of Judaism. He is co-editor of *A Night of Questions: A Passover Haggadah*. His most recent book, *A Book of Life: Embracing Judaism as a Spiritual Practice* was recently issued in paperback by Jewish Lights.

ogy, they fundamentally do not believe that prayer does anything. I believe that is true whether in an Orthodox synagogue, where the worshippers are saying all the words, or in liberal synagogues that struggle with the question of how much liturgy to say.

How do I know whether people are praying or not? I cannot really tell what is in people's hearts, but years of observation have convinced me of this truth. It is the deadly silence in liberal synagogues when it is time for silent davening. It is the reading of liturgy at the speed of light in Orthodox synagogues or *kiddush* clubs — a speed that suggests even Orthodox Jews would rather be anywhere except in the sanctuary. Prayer, never an easy enterprise, has been made least likely to succeed because of an erosion of belief in the enterprise itself. This erosion, begun by the Enlightenment, has led to a demphasis even in traditional circles of such fundamental theological beliefs as the resurrection of the dead, or the afterlife or the power of prayer to affect change in human life.

Why, then, is it surprising that many Jews do not want to join synagogues and even fewer (in liberal congregations) show up to services? At best, synagogues have tried to make prayer lively through more upbeat music, as in services that follow the style of the late mystic and musician Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach. While lively is better than boring, such cosmetic change leaves the fundamental challenge essentially unmet, and is comparable to trying to sell season tickets to the Yankees solely on the basis of the seventh-inning stretch, and focusing on the popcorn and

crackerjacks rather than what happens on the playing field.

Yet, if what I posit is true, why do so many Jews still join synagogues? For many, it remains the way to identify with the Jewish community. For others, it is the necessity of having a bar/bat mitzvah that compels synagogue membership. I would suggest that the latter factor has begun to diminish as families discover that they can have a bar/bat mitzvah without a synagogue. Utilizing the services of freelance tutors and rabbis, families can create their own service for a lot less than the cost of four or five years of synagogue dues. Those with the means, the Jewish learning or simply the will are increasingly opting out of the synagogue for b'nei mitzvah.

I also think we are beginning to see the emergence of non-synagogue synagogues. A group of parents in Manhattan has organized a Hebrew school for their children. They have begun to coalesce as a community to celebrate holidays together. I can imagine that while at one time they would have become a congregation, this group, seeing no need to pray, will find other ways to build community and learn together.

## **Tradition Not Valued**

The problem of synagogues is not just the problem of a loss of belief in its central function — prayer. It is also a reflection of the larger challenge to Judaism in the contemporary world. We have not found a way to make Judaism compelling. Why? I believe it is because modernity undercuts traditional beliefs. In our fast-moving society, tradition itself is not valued.

This is because Judaism proclaims the importance of commitment and community, while America proclaims the importance of the individual and the freedom to live as one wants. While Mordecai Kaplan saw the opportunity and blessing of living in two civilizations, we now are overwhelmed by the power and pervasiveness of American civilization. The truth is that most Jews are proud of their Jewish identity, but many have marginalized it, reducing it to the leisure-time activities of Shabbat or to an occasional moment.

What can be done?

## **Judaism as Meaning**

Unless Judaism can give meaning to people's lives, I don't believe we will succeed. There is an opportunity that can be seized in living in these two civilizations, American and Jewish. While America is the dominant civilization, let Jewish civilization supply teachings that will bring meaning to our lives. What gives purpose to my life? When I look back over my story, what gives me a sense of a life well-lived? When I reflect upon my faults and foibles, what provides me with insights and wisdom to help me grow spiritually? When I face the inevitable challenges and losses, what grants me comfort? When I feel existentially alone, what gives me the sense that I am part of the unity underlying the cosmos?

Perhaps America has something to teach about these things, but the values of America have become obscured. Do we learn about freedom from the Fourth of July? About memory and sacrifice from Memorial Day? About

gratitude from Thanksgiving? Or would Passover, the High Holidays or even Tu Bishvat be better reminders of freedom, mortality, change and respect for the environment? As a majority culture, America does not have to fight to preserve its way; it just is. Judaism, as a minority culture, can continue, as it always has, to raise questions and to challenge what is. It needs to maintain the edge of its teachings, but in so doing, it will provide to American Jews that which is not easy to find — meaning. Synagogues, through study, the context of community and prayer, can be the prime locale for transmitting the meaning of Judaism.

## **Reconstructing Prayer**

One of the primary settings for conveying meaning is the synagogue service. As I suggested, the problem with prayer and services goes beyond the commonly acknowledged challenges. A service in Hebrew expresses itself in an ancient style. In our increasingly faced-pace world, the synagogue service, averaging 2½ to 3 hours, may feel burdensome to many participants. Some find the gendered God language of the synagogue service troubling or the theology foreign. These are significant challenges, but I think the most fundamental challenge is the practice of prayer itself. Engaging in prayer has always been a difficult activity. Rabbinic sources struggle with such issues as distractions during the service and how to maintain *kavanah* — intentionality. Yet our challenges are even greater, because so many do not believe in the act of prayer and others have no idea

how to pray.

At a conference I attended a number of years ago, a nun shared with the audience a sample of the prayers she has composed with her hospital patients. The prayers reflected the various experiences of those patients. When one of the participating rabbis spoke, he talked about the *mi-sheberah*, the traditional prayer for healing. This formulaic prayer is recited whether the patient is dying or celebrating a good prognosis or going into surgery. The rabbi had never composed a prayer for a patient.

I suggest that we need to reconceive prayer. We should see the time we spend praying as time devoted to our spiritual work. Praying is not about addressing the Divine Being with praise and requests. It is time for reflection — a precious gift we give ourselves in the midst of our busy lives. The liturgy of prayer should remind us that there is something larger than ourselves in the universe — what many of us call God. This is an important perspective that also reminds us that we are not alone. Time spent praying should be a time to reflect on the spiritual issues in our lives — to think about how to improve our ethical qualities (*middot*) and to be more like the persons we deeply desire to be. Prayer offers us an opportunity to express gratitude for the blessings in our lives — most of all for the blessing of life itself. This is, in fact, a reconstruction of the traditional forms of rabbinic prayer: *shevah*, *bakasha*, *hoda'ah*. Reframing *bakasha* as focusing on spiritual growth rather than asking God for things is a critical redefinition of the purpose of prayer.

Prayer, like Judaism, needs to be

experienced as connecting people to the most important issues of their lives. The notion of reframing prayer is the beginning of that process. How to use the traditional liturgy or parts of it to make those connections to the spiritual life of individuals is the next challenge. On the Friday night after September 11, I reflected on the hymn *Lekha Dodi*, with its images of a city in ruins. Suddenly, what had been at best a song took on new meaning and resonated with the tragedy that was at the center of everyone's thoughts. On the Shabbat after Hurricane Katrina, as we began the service with *Mah Tov*, I pointed out the connection between the imagery of our dwelling places in the tents of Israel and the pictures we had all seen of hurricane victims who had been left homeless. The liturgy's language of home and caring took on a new context and gave the congregation a new framework in which to acknowledge the feelings evoked by the tragic pictures from New Orleans.

How can we make that sense of meaningfulness happen in our daily lives, not just during moments of great tragedy or great joy? Here are a few suggestions for how to begin:

- 1) Plan the service. Services should not just happen. If the service is the same every week, it will have a numbing effect. They need to be conceived as a whole, with attention paid to their pacing and timing. Like a symphony, they have hills and valleys, climaxes and moments of rest. The climaxes are related to the liturgy's structure.

- 2) Choose music that can help set the pace for the service, create a variety of moods and emphasize certain lines of

liturgy. Service leaders often lead their congregations in singing set melodies, rather than varying the tempo or style of the music. Singing three *leybidik* (fast) songs in a row may be exhausting; singing three songs one after the other, whatever their tempo, might be musical overkill; going for long periods without any singing may have a dulling effect. Instead, music can be used creatively, by applying different melodies to familiar lines of liturgy. Increase the congregation's repertoire of music, offering musical variation from week to week. Varying the music in the service is the easiest way to offset the sameness of the service.

3) Adopt *kavanot* — intentions or themes — to provide variety to the service. A theme can be introduced by the service leader and then highlighted by focusing on particular readings, parts of the liturgy and music. Themes can be chosen that relate to the holidays — freedom and Passover, *teshuvah* (repentance) and the High Holidays or light and darkness and Hanukkah, for example. Or they may focus on broad spiritual and emotional states, such as gratitude, joy, miracles of the everyday or the beauty of nature. If there is a line of liturgy that gives expression to a theme, put it to music by taking any

simple melody and adapting it to the line you wish to highlight.

4) Harness the emotional and spiritual power of the psalms. I think we need to reconstruct the psalms so that their connection to the emotional states of suffering, abandonment, hope and joy become clear to those who are praying and thus speak to their inner spiritual lives. We need to see the whole book of Psalms, not just the few psalms that are in our prayer book, as resources for our services.

What I am suggesting overall is that we approach each week's service with an eye to two challenges: keeping the service fresh and connecting the liturgy with the spiritual lives of our congregants. If Judaism is to provide meaning for Jews, then prayer must become a primary vehicle for that — first, by setting aside time devoted to the inner life, and second, by giving expression to the spiritual longings and challenges we all experience in our lives. We are just at the beginning of transforming our services, and we don't have all the answers, but the challenge is clear. Yet the opportunity is clear, as well, to provide a time and a structure for people to reflect on their inner lives. That would be a precious gift in our increasingly fast-paced world.

# *Tefillot Hadashot Kan ve-Akhshav* (New Prayers Here and Now): Reconnecting to Israel Through Prayer, Poetry and Song

BY ADINA NEWBERG

## New Prayers

*Lyrics and Music by Chava Alberstein*

*Translation by Chava Alberstein*

It is dark in the woods. There is no one but him  
A frightened man who has lost his way  
It is dark in the woods. Shabbat Eve  
Here by himself tonight he'll stay  
A prayer would be of use to him now  
But he does not have a prayer book

And he does not remember, not even a phrase  
It is dark in the woods, Shabbat eve  
So much sadness and woe  
So dark are the woods  
It is dark in the woods and it is dark in the heart

So he shuts his eyes and calls out loud  
You, you, you, creator of all  
You who created every ant and grain  
You who understand every chirp and howl  
Surely you know every word of the prayer

Here they are before you, here are all the letters  
One by one from Aleph to Tav  
Take them in your hands and make prayers out of them  
New prayers here and now  
Aleph, Bet, Gimel, Dalet, Vav, Zayin and Tet  
Alone in the woods he stands and cries  
Yod, Kaf, Lamed, Nun, Samech, Ayn, Pey, Tzadik, Kuf,  
Reysh, Shin and Tav  
That is all there is.

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Adina Newberg is director of the Modern Hebrew Language Program and Associate Professor of Hebrew Language at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. She has been a lecturer in the Asian and Middle Eastern Studies department at the University of Pennsylvania and serves as a consultant for religious and nonprofit organizations.

This Chava Alberstein song speaks about the experience of those “lost in the forest” of Jewish culture. Though based on a story by the Baal Shem Tov dating from a different time and place, it speaks of a state of being spiritually lost. It expresses a sensibility that may typify the members of Beit Tefillah Israeli, one of the prayer groups for nonobservant Israeli Jews that have emerged in recent years. This song is included among the prayers/songs in their *siddur* (prayerbook). It is easy to infer from observations and interviews with leaders and members of these groups that the phenomenon of feeling “lost” among secular Israelis (*hilonim*) is a phenomenon that is experienced by more than this one group. These secular Jews and their new reaction to the sense of being lost is the subject of this article.

### “*Hiloni Lite*”

While the dichotomy between those who view themselves as *datiyim* (religious) and those who are considered *hilonim* is increasing because of political developments of the last few years, a new sense of evolving identity is emerging in Israel in which the old labels of “secular” and “religious” no longer work. During a recent conversation, one of the leaders of this new trend remarked, with a wink of his eye, that he could not seriously call himself *hiloni* anymore. He is, he said, “*hiloni lite*” (not really *dati*, but not totally *hiloni*, either.) At a conference on the evolving place of Shabbat celebration in the public sphere, another leader called for getting away from these

now-irrelevant labels that do nothing but foster separation and dissension. Clearly, the question of labels is still in flux. Nonetheless, for the sake of clarity, I will refer here to the collective of nonobservant Israeli Jews as “secular,” while acknowledging the problematic nature of that label.

Since 2001, I have been studying the phenomenon of secular Israeli Jews as they connect to Judaism through study and ritual. This paper discusses a particular sector within this group: those who are experimenting with ritual and *tefillah* (prayer). It is based on observations and in-depth interviews I have conducted between December 2003 and the present.

I have participated in and observed *Kabbalat Shabbat* services — the worship service that welcomes the Sabbath — at the two main prayer communities (*kehilot tefillah*) mentioned here: Nigun ha-Lev in Nahalal and Beit Tefillah Israeli in Tel Aviv. I have examined their *siddurim* and conducted lengthy interviews with ten of their members and most of their leaders. In addition, I have maintained regular contact with their leadership and thereby kept up with changes and transformations within the communities. I also receive their weekly Web-based reports, which allow me to follow developments when I am back in the United States. Notably, in September 2005, I participated in a Tel Aviv conference on Shabbat celebration sponsored by a consortium of secular communities. The conference included speeches by prominent Israeli intellectuals, such as the poet and literature scholar Ariel Hirschfeld and Judge Ruth Gavison. There were

also presentations by representatives of four groups that observe Shabbat in different ways. Most exciting were live performances of Shabbat songs by various secular groups and individuals, framed by personal reflections on the power of those songs in the singers' lives. The much-anticipated "prize" of the evening was a performance by the popular Israeli singer Shlomo Gronich, who had been commissioned by the conveners of the conference to compose a song inspired by anything he chose in the siddur. The excitement among the 300 or so individuals in the hall was contagious, and it led those present to a deeper level of engagement.

While Israelis' lives are based on Jewish culture, in a certain sense there is also a fundamental rupture between Jewish culture and Israeli culture for modern Israelis who view themselves as *hilonim*. The Jewish culture that is the basis for their Israeli cultural identity is not accessed by most of them. This rupture is one consequence of the vision of the founding generation of the State of Israel. The founders very deliberately left behind traditional Judaism for their dream of an independent Jewish state based on secular socialist, economic and social values. Having discarded the authority structures of Jewish life in Eastern Europe, including those of religious life, they created a new country based on new beginnings in every sphere — a revitalized Hebrew language, a new army, a new culture and a new identity for the exemplary citizen of the new country. Their ideal new Israeli was not oppressed by rabbinic authority or by anti-Semitism. This new citizen was to be strong,

independent, healthy and physically attractive, looking toward a new future and refusing to look back. To a large extent, the dreams of Israel's founding generation have been achieved. One of the unfortunate results, however, has been a disconnect between the secular identity of many Israelis and their much weaker Jewish identity.

## Secular Israeli Identity

While part of Israeli identity entails a strong connection to the land of Israel, the culture and the Hebrew language, and while much of Israel's official culture is based on Jewish values and ideas, such as the calendar and the traditional holidays, the lives of secular Israelis generally have not been connected to Judaism as a culture or as a source of inspiration for meaning making.

Political upheaval and wars that increasingly have become more difficult and, to a degree, more tragic and even shocking brought with them existential questions about living in Israel. The Yom Kippur War, the Lebanon War, the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and, more recently, the collapse of the Oslo Accords followed by the al-Aksa *Intifada*, have left their marks on the psyche of many Israelis and raised questions about life in Israel and the identity of Israeli Jews. Yael Zerubavel has discussed the effect of the continuous wars and trauma on the psyche of the Israeli — an Israeli who, over the past 50 years, has attempted to create an identity as a "new Israeli": robust, daring and resourceful. This new identity, which entails a complete dissociation from the *galut* (Diaspora)

identity and image, carries the high price of denial and repression. It cannot withstand the new traumas that assault Israelis again and again.

The Israelis of the second and third generations, born into this difficult reality, do not fully understand or know in any deeply meaningful way why they are in Israel. As Zionist ideology has eroded, the assumptions stemming from the civil religion of total commitment to the redemptive power of the Zionist dream have cracked and weakened. Thus, in the words of a man who fought in the Lebanon War and today is one of the leaders of this movement: "I swore that if I came out alive from this nightmare I would need to look at what the hell I was doing in this country. Since this is my home and I have no other place that I want to live, the only response I could find was to deepen my connection to Judaism and examine how it is connected to my life in this place."

Many of the interviewees with whom I spoke mentioned in one way or another their need to figure out what their life in Israel meant to them, as opposed, to a life in the United States or France (for example). The words of Alberstein's song reflect that sense of aloneness in the metaphoric forest. These individuals are searching to know why they are there and, more importantly, what they can do to find their way out of the darkness of the forest. Their identity as Israelis and citizens of the Western world has been shaken by the various wars and the events that followed them; they are now seeking to fill the void and fathom the core of the reason for their living. And from that they hope to gain knowledge, a sense of purpose

and greater peace of mind, while at the same time preserving their Western sensibilities and predilections.

The crisis facing contemporary secular Israelis can be viewed in Jack Mezirow's terms as a "disorienting dilemma." The process of attempting courageously to confront it, reflect upon it and resolve it is a process of what he refers to as "transformative reflection and learning."

## Search for Answers

This search for answers has led many secular Israelis to seek connections with the earlier generations of Jews whose writings and lives created and shaped Judaism, from biblical times to the present. They quest in search of something beyond the immediate demands of daily life — caring for the land, for individuals and for their immediate circle. This search for a more connected identity attempts to reconcile the past on which the country is built — the traditions and texts of the Jewish people — with a meaningful life in contemporary Israel.

For a large number of these seekers, the pluralistic *batey midrash* (houses of Jewish study) that have been in existence for at least 15 years have been an important vehicle for exploring new aspects of identity in connection with the traditional written sources. They strive to bring those texts to life in a new way that relates to contemporary life in modern Israel, to their individual personal struggles and to their personal narratives in relation to the big existential questions.

In part due to the success of the

*batey midrash*, new ways of exploring a connection to Judaism have emerged. They involve a stronger relationship with the rhythm of the week and the year. Groups that gather to celebrate Judaism in a more visceral and emotive manner have become more prominent. Although they do not necessarily exclude studying Jewish texts, they also tap into other sources of being. One of the most telling comments about the connection between studying and engaging in prayer came from one of the interviewees: “So we studied, now we have to do something...” That “something” has led, over the last few years, to the development of new phenomena that attempt to bridge the chasm between traditional Judaism and modernity.

One such attempt is represented by gatherings designed to conduct *tefillah* and ritual celebration in community. These communal gatherings vary in their frequency and content, but all of them at this preliminary point include some celebration of *Kabbalat Shabbat* services. The prayer sessions are framed by the structure and general content of the traditional Friday night prayer service, including the use of a *siddur*. Yet there are also a number of innovations. The content of the service includes modern Israeli songs and poetry. Each group’s *siddur* is custom-made to meet the group’s own needs, and traditional *halakhah* (Jewish law) is by and large not considered of particular import.

As Alberstein’s song says:

A prayer would be of use to him now  
But he doesn’t have a prayer book  
And he doesn’t remember, not even

a phrase . . .

It is dark in the woods and it is  
dark in the heart

The poet concludes with a plea for creating new and relevant prayers:

Take them in your hands and  
make prayers out of them  
New prayers here and now.

These prayer communities attempt to address the issue of personal and national alienation by creating communal celebrations that reflect shared values through which participants can strive to transform and find their own identity by reclaiming their place in the historical and ritual narrative.

## **Tefillah and Secular Israelis**

The secular segment of Israeli Jewish society has come of age with little knowledge of Judaism other than the *Tanakh* (Hebrew Bible), which is taught in public schools. Secular Israelis strongly identify with Western values, such as democracy, pluralism and a free-market economy. While Judaism is part of their identity, it fails to inspire them. Until the recent emergence of a desire to reconnect to the sources through study in the *batey midrash*, a majority of Jewish Israelis have not tended to look to Jewish sources in times of crisis or when struggling with moral dilemmas. Rather, the likes of such Western writers as Michele Foucault, Albert Camus, Thomas Jefferson or Betty Friedan have been their sources of inspiration, alongside Israeli poets such as Yehudah Amichai, Dalia

Ravikovitch or Natan Alterman. By sharp contrast, the writings of Jewish thinkers — whether ancient, such as Rabbi Meir, Dona Gracia or Rabbi Akiva, or even contemporary, such as Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik or Martin Buber, largely have been ignored.

Following upon the various Israeli national crises, some university-educated Israelis confronted key existential questions and began a search to connect to the wealth of Jewish tradition from which they had been alienated previously. For some, this search led to the creation of a new language and new symbols for their lives. As one of the participants in Beit Tefillah Israeli in Tel Aviv told me:

We secular Jews . . . have the particular filter of Judaism that bridges it with universalism. We have to create a narrative, a point of view based on values. It is important to have a way of distinguishing what is good and what is bad. What is holy and what is not.

Ironically, this experience creates a paradox for secular Israelis: Even as they seem alienated from and ignorant about traditional *tefillah* — although there are times in most Israelis' lives when they encounter it — they are seeking expressions of transcendence in ways that include some of the components of ritual and prayer. Even if, in today's Israel, many actively avoid traditional *tefillah*, there are at least three occasions in their lives when they encounter it. First is the *brit milah*, the circumcision of Jewish boys that is performed universally, whether the parents view

themselves as religious or not. The two other occasions are weddings and funerals, especially state- and army-sponsored funerals.

## Coercive Norms of Judaism

These Israeli Jews are seeking connections to their traditional roots in ways that are innovative, flexible and free of coercion. They are not interested in conforming to the norms of the Judaism they have rejected in response to their perception of its coercive nature. And they are not just reacting against something (Abramovitch 1991, 97); rather, they are searching for something, even if it is not yet clear what the form and content of the new rituals and prayers should be.

While the obligatory nature of traditional *tefillah*, especially on the three occasions mentioned here, has alienated secular Israelis, that same population has always used poetry and song in communal expressions of longing for transcendence: Historian Shalom Lilker reports that as early as 1922, kibbutzim created their own rituals to achieve a mystical experience in commemorating Jewish holidays, even as the content and format of those rituals did not correspond with traditional or halakhic rules (22–32). And we can name some recent examples: Rabin reading a poem when he received the Nobel Prize and when the Oslo Accords were signed, as well as his singing and being moved by Naomi Shemer's songs, by *Palmah* songs and by the many songs sung during ceremonies of days of remembrance. These most important moments are typically marked by the communal reading of

poems and the singing of songs. The concept of *tefillah* as a way of reading or singing words that bring solace and that connect one with others who are sharing the same experience is thus not foreign to secular Israelis, even if these activities are not labeled “prayers.” What is groundbreaking about the new phenomenon described here is that the concept of *tefillah* and of a *Kabbalat Shabbat* service framed by a *siddur* is no longer alienating to these secular Israelis. At the same time, the service is not just a traditional *siddur*-centered *Kabbalat Shabbat*, such as one would see in a traditional synagogue; the structure of the service and the repertoire of *tefillot* that are sung and recited combine traditional *tefillot* with new ones, such as Chava Alberstein’s. And in some cases, the traditional language is changed to accommodate the sensibilities of the secular congregation.

Those engaged in this celebration do not shy away from calling it *tefillah* and thus connecting themselves symbolically to Jewish practice across the generations. Although these *tefillot* are being conducted from a *siddur*, the innovations within the prayers draw from the layers of Israeli culture, history and language.

The other big innovation in relation to Israeli modern culture is that the *tefillah* described here has become a regular event. It takes place every second Friday night and not just when there is a special occasion, such as a *bar/bat mitzvah* or a commemoration of some sort. The shared and communal celebration of Shabbat is momentous in and of itself.

## Communities of Prayer

Chava Alberstein’s song says,

Take them in your hands and  
make prayers out of them  
New prayers here and now

These lines reflect a desire for prayers that are indeed prayers, but that are also contemporary and relevant — prayers that are connected to the creator of all, and to the prayerbook, the *siddur*. The need for connection is a need to be rooted in Judaism, through *tefillah* expressed in a personal, relevant, contemporary, independent way. It is a need for the creation of a community with *tefillot* as its base.

Both Beit Tefillah Israeli and Nigun Halev are located in the midst of very secular environments — one in the center of metropolitan Tel Aviv and the other in Nahalal, the epitome of the secular Israeli Labor Zionist settlement at the beginning of the *Yishuv*. And both take egalitarianism to be an intrinsic value: Men and women sit together and both assume leadership roles. This is a critical point, since many of the original founders of this movement of reconnecting to Jewish sources are women who feel that they did not have a place in male-dominated (Orthodox) Judaism but are thirsty to create this connection.

In addition, both utilize a blend of traditional and innovative prayer. Many of the traditional prayers are sung with melodies that would be recognizable to anyone who has regularly attended synagogue. Some are traditional prayer words set to new, modern melodies that

have been popularized as Israeli songs and, as such, are recognizable from song festivals broadcast on Israeli radio and television. Most of the important prayers that appear in a *Kabbalat Shabbat* service occur in the right place and represent the right messages. While many are the traditional *tefillot*, not all of them are. Some are new songs that appear in the service as substitutes or additions to the traditional *tefillah*.

In both communities, most of the service consists of singing. The participants skip the parts that would have been chanted quietly by a *hazzan*, or cantor, because they tend to have some discomfort with a more overtly traditional style of prayer, and the style of quietly praying is harder to learn and adopt as a modality. Yet the participants are emphatic in their belief that this is not *shirah b'tzibur* (a communal song), but rather *tefillah* — prayer. This distinction highlights their desire to connect to the tradition of prayer as a spiritual and religious activity that is characterized by a particular structure, context, language and purpose. The singing is often ecstatic; people sway and close their eyes and some may even burst into dance for a few minutes.

Both as an aesthetic statement and as a tool to help participants sing songs and prayers that may be unfamiliar, most of the *tefillot* are accompanied by instruments — either a guitar or a small ensemble. Most important, the repertoire of *tefillot* is interspersed with modern poetry and contemporary songs. In fact, the Alberstein song quoted here was sung in one of the groups and it appears in their *siddur*. Modern Israeli songs and poems by Israeli poets,

such as Yehuda Amichai, Natan Zach, H.N. Bialik and Dalia Ravikovitch are interspersed as prayers. At times, these songs are used as bridges between traditional prayers; at other times, as the prayers themselves, replacing the traditional ones.

The content of the poems and songs that stand for *tefillah* represents such feelings as longing for a better world or expressing thanksgiving. The poems and songs are deliberately positioned at the site where such a prayer would be found in the traditional service. The *Aleynu* prayer, for example, which praises the wonders and plenty of the world's vision, is replaced by a song reflecting those themes in a different, more agricultural context. Written by Bertold Brecht, the song was translated by Natan Zach and popularized by Shlomo Gronich.

Even when traditional *tefillot* are used, some of the traditional language is changed in response to feminist sensitivity to patriarchal names of God. Instead of *meleh ha'olam* (king of the universe), they may say, for example, *tif'eret ha'olam* (the glory of the world) or *boret hakol* (the one who creates all, in feminine language). Whenever the *avot*, the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are mentioned, so, too, are mentioned the names of the *imahot*, the matriarchs Sara, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. With time and weekly repetition, the songs and poems become part of a new canon of a contemporary Israeli *Kabbalat Shabbat* service. Each one of the groups develops its own canon and set of *tefillot* and songs according to its own needs, talents and knowledge.

Traditional customs are included

in the evening, even if they are not done in a traditional manner—for example, the blessing of the children, or a *mi sheberah*, the blessing for those in need of healing. The definition of who needs a blessing or healing is left to members of the group. For example, when I visited one of the communities in March 2005, the participants offered a blessing for the pope, who was being buried that day.

The service also includes a *d'var torah*, a talk connected to the biblical portion of the week. This commentary usually connects the weekly reading in subtle and important ways to salient societal or political events in Israel.

### Warm and Informal

Each congregation further builds its sense of community within the framework of *Kabbalat Shabbat* by celebrating birthdays, marking *yahrtzeits* (the anniversary of a death), praying for healing, supporting sick members of the community and sharing personal stories and reflections. The atmosphere is warm and informal, and often includes expressions of physical affection to spouses, children or people standing nearby. There is also a sense of excitement at being on the cusp of something innovative and new.

When the time for the *Shema* prayer comes, almost all participants cover their eyes with their hands, as is traditionally done; others simply close their eyes. During my last visit, only one person did not perform either action. The mourner's *kaddish* is recited both by men and by women. No musical instruments are used during this recitation.

Children are engaged in both groups, although in different ways. One of the groups has separate services; the other incorporates children and families into the general service.

Each community has its own style, its own selection of *tefillot* and, especially, its own selection of extratextual material. Both, however, follow the basic structure of *Kabbalat Shabbat* and include some of the basic *tefillot*, such as *Yedid Nefesh* and *Lekha Dodi*. One of the differences between the two communities is that the Tel Aviv group offers and expects men to wear *kippot*. During a recent visit, I noticed a few who did not, but the norm is to wear them. Women do not wear *kippot*.

Although warm relationships and mutual learning and teaching connect the various groups, each is independent. At this time, there is no umbrella group encompassing all of them. The groups are fiercely independent and opposed to belonging to a religious movement, especially any of the American religious groups, such as the Reform and Conservative movements, which have synagogues in Israel, or even the Reconstructionist movement, which does not yet have established synagogues there.

### Discussing Current Events

Connecting the present reality of Israel with a nascent spiritual/religious awareness is extremely important to members of these communities. The addition of prayer and attention to tradition are, as discussed, a response to the lack of connection typical of secular Zionist thinking. The prayer service,

with its various rituals and words, is a new tool with which to interpret their daily and weekly lives. As a result, current events from Israel and the world beyond, or the political issues summed up on the latest bumper sticker are noted and, at times, discussed.

This new trend, while unique to Israel and independent of other movements, did not develop in a cultural and sociological vacuum. Certain influences are important to mention, some of them clearer than others.

The North American havurah movement is part of the *Zeitgeist* bringing these Israeli groups to the fore, even if there was no conscious attempt to emulate the movement's ideas and customs. At its inception in the late 1960s, the havurah movement sought to provide an "alternative institutional framework for its members to pursue their evolving Jewish styles." This alternative included less hierarchical structures for governance and for leading services, empowering its members to be full participants in their Jewish lives. The attempt to provide an alternative finds an echo now in the Israeli communities discussed here.

The philosophy of the havurah led to the development of a style that brings the personal into the religious domain and encourages divergent interpretations of texts and prayers. Even as individual differences are encouraged and celebrated, creating communities of involved Jews has been the hallmark of the havurah movement. Both groups described here pride themselves on building communities that extend beyond the time frame of *Kabbalat Shabbat*. One way of fostering the sense

of community is by sharing personal perspectives and stories as part of the service. Members of these groups form friendships and connections by coming together to mark other life-cycle events (moving to a new house, celebrating b'nei mitzvah and weddings, acknowledging illness and tending the sick and so on).

## Neo-Hasidic Influence

The neo-Hasidic tradition, with its singing and ecstatic expressiveness, appealed to those in the havurah movement as an antidote to the formal environments of North American synagogues. Similarly, for the Israeli communities, singing and dancing — even ecstatic singing and dancing — are a core element of their identity. The singing and dancing are a source of connection to the Jewish Renewal movement, which also has been influential in the development of the style of the Kehilot Tefillah in Israel, even if its influence is less recognized.

An example of such an influence appears in the brochure inviting people to Beit Tefillah Israeli — a brochure describing an alternative community that welcomes meditation and other spiritual practices during Shabbat services. Such practices, influenced by the Buddhist tradition, have become popular both in North America and in Israel, and Nigun Halev invites people to blend the two worlds in its midst.

Another North American institution that has been particularly influential in the development of the two communities is Congregation B'nai Jeshurun in New York City, known as "BJ." Groups

from the Israeli Kehilot Tefillah come regularly to BJ seeking to be inspired and to learn skills. In turn, the BJ rabbis visit them regularly in Israel. At BJ, music, both instrumental and vocal, is a very strong component of the service, as it is with the Israeli kehilot. BJ places a high priority on community building, egalitarianism and strong social consciousness, and so do the Israeli groups. One difference between them is that BJ depends upon the leadership of its highly charismatic professional rabbis, whereas none of the Israeli groups has paid professional staff.

The work of the Reconstructionist movement, as well as the work of other North American scholars and theologians who experiment with feminine God language, also have influenced the Israeli groups, which have adopted such terms as *ruah ha'olam* (spirit of the world) and *magen Avraham v'ezrat Sara* (the shield of Abraham and Sarah) as they appear in the Reconstructionist prayerbook, *Kol Haneshamah*.

## Questions for Further Research

The phenomenon described here is in its inception, and many questions may be raised that call for further exploration. Important questions about the development of these communities and their leadership will be answered only with the passing of time and the evolution of these groups:

1. How will this movement expand? Will new communities start in other places? Will the more "established" communities guide and mentor the new ones?
2. Which populations have an in-

terest in developing such new groups? How can this interest be measured?

3. Who will the lay leaders be, and how will they be trained?

4. Will this remain a volunteer endeavor, or are some communities reaching the point of wanting or needing a rabbi? Who would the "rabbis" be, and who would pay them?

5. How different will these communities be from liberal North American synagogues?

Other questions, addressing the internal structure and content of the communities and their prayers will present themselves as well:

1. What will be the ongoing role of women? The influence of women and of feminism is palpable in these groups, yet things may change as these communities learn more and are influenced more by their counterparts in the United States.

2. As these groups grow and develop their own style, will they have a continuing relationship with North American prayer communities? How can they continue to learn from each other?

3. Ultimately, it will be important to explore the ongoing creation of a progressive Israeli *tefillah* as it continues to evolve. Is a canon being developed? How will poetry and songs not necessarily written as ritual *tefillot* influence the creation of this new form of *tefillah*?

The new Israeli phenomenon of *kehillot tefillah* is rooted in the need of secular Israelis to draw connections between, on the one hand, Jewish tradition, transcendence and modern Israeli sensibilities and, on the other, their desire to be part of and to create

a community in which individuals can support one another, connect to their heritage and create meaning in their lives. One of the leaders of one of the *batey midrash*, a participant in one of these communities, said:

Our grandparents deliberately rejected Jewish tradition and they knew exactly why. Our parents accepted the rejection and had no time to ask why and what it meant. And now, the young generation has no idea how they got here, to this country and this situation that is so alienated from our roots. It is as if they lived on the fourth floor of a building and they don't know why and how . . . They need to figure out how they got there and what they are doing there.

The people active in these communities of prayer (as well as others involved in an active search for connections with Judaism and Jewish tradition) want to ask questions and they do not necessarily want to have predetermined answers. As one of the leaders in the movement said: "This is not a place for answers. We are not interested in answers. We want everybody to feel that it is okay to ask questions."

While influenced by their more experienced counterparts in the North American Jewish community, these groups are crafting a new and uniquely Israeli approach to ritual and to an encounter with the divine and the holy. Poetry, song, politics, traditional prayer, community building and commitment to gender equality and pluralism com-

bine to create a new language and new tools for finding comfort and inspiration for those who feel the darkness of the forest or who live on the metaphoric "fourth floor" of a developed, sophisticated, exciting, sad and challenging reality.

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# Judaism without Ordinary Law: Toward a Broader View of Sanctification

BY JONATHAN R. COHEN

**I**n the second chapter of *Judaism as a Civilization*, Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan makes a remarkable assertion: “[T]he elimination of the civil code from Jewish life has, in fact, administered as severe a blow to Judaism as the destruction of the Jewish commonwealth” (Kaplan, 17).<sup>1</sup>

The political emancipation of the Jew, beginning in France in 1791 and then spreading elsewhere, both gave and took. With the granting of full civil rights to Jews came the loss of much of Jewish law as a functioning legal system, since the secular legal system replaced the Jewish legal system for most ordinary disputes. Functionally speaking, the basic law-in-practice as known by most Diaspora Jews, including American Jews, became the secular law.<sup>2</sup> If a neighbor damages your property or a business partner breaches a contract, your must sue them in the civil court to recover. Whether the neighbor or the business partner is a fellow Jew is essentially irrelevant. The operative law and the legal system that will address the dispute are secular ones. As a by-product of political emancipation,

Jewish law-in-function was essentially relegated to the ritual realm. This applied not simply to progressive or liberal branches of Judaism, but to traditional ones, too. As Kaplan wrote, “[T]he most important elements of Jewish law are as obsolete in Neo-Orthodoxy as they are in Reformism.” We learn that Neo-Orthodoxy accepts with equanimity the elimination of the whole civil code of Jewish law, and is content to confine the scope of Jewish law to ritual observance” (Kaplan, 157).<sup>3</sup>

## Differences in Gravity

Upon first reading Kaplan’s statements, I reacted strongly. While I suspected some hyperbole (could the replacement of much operative Jewish law with civil law really compare to the destruction of the Jewish commonwealth?),<sup>4</sup> Kaplan’s words struck a deep chord. As one who is both a law professor — a professor of American law and legal practice — and a Jew, I know how different the functioning of civil law can feel from that of ritual law.

Let me give two examples. My wife

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Jonathan R. Cohen is a professor of law at the University of Florida in Gainesville. He received his A.B., J.D., and Ph.D. (economics) from Harvard University. His teaching focuses upon dispute resolution, and his writings address areas related to ethics and society.

and I have had numerous discussions about *kashrut*, addressing “legal” questions such as what level of *hekhsher* to require of foods, what to say to dinner guests who wish to bring a dish to our home and so on. By contrast, I recall when serving as a law clerk to an appellate judge discussing with that judge whether a defendant’s conviction should be overturned for evidentiary error, a decision that would determine whether that person would spend the next decade in prison. My wife and I consider our *kashrut* decisions carefully. We attempt to articulate general principles underlying our decisions rather than deciding cases ad hoc. Yet, no matter how seriously we take them, the gravity of our *kashrut* decisions is simply of a different order of magnitude than a decision that determines whether a human being will remain incarcerated for much of his life.

As I pondered Kaplan’s words, my mind began turning his statements into questions. How has the relegation of Jewish law to the ritual realm affected the role of the rabbi? What does it mean that rabbis rarely serve as judges in real human disputes? How has this shift affected the lives of other Jews? For example, Jews wishing to work in the law-in-practice would have to undertake a secular rather than a religious legal training. How would that affect their lives? And what of the Jewish wisdom and lore contained in now largely inoperative sections of Jewish legal texts like the Talmud?<sup>25</sup> Would that rich knowledge also be lost as civil law replaced *halakhah* has operative law?

Numerous important questions arise, far too many to address here.

Rather, I shall confine myself to a single question: How has the restriction of operative Jewish law to the ritual realm influenced our understanding of sanctification?

## Visions of Sanctification

In response, I will suggest that restricting operative Jewish law to the ritual realm may have brought with it a narrowing of how we understand sanctification — a narrowing we should attempt to undo. Before explaining this, let me make a request by way of confession. Although I study Judaism seriously, I am not an expert in it. My primary expertise lies in American legal practice — specifically, in legal dispute resolution. That vantage point is of aid as I approach the question above, for it gives me an understanding of an ordinary functional legal system — that is, a legal system that exercises real power to resolve actual disputes. Yet as one not formally trained in either history or Jewish thought, it is with much humility that I approach the religious, historical question of how relegating operative Jewish law to the ritual realm may have influenced our understanding of sanctification. I ask that readers approach the statements below as hypotheses rather than as conclusions, and hope that, should they see fit, those versed in other fields will evaluate and, where appropriate, refute such speculations.

It may be helpful to begin by identifying two different, though not unrelated, visions of sanctification (*kedushah*).

The first vision is sanctification as separation from the ordinary, that

is, *kodesh* vs. *hol*. In the words of the Orthodox Union, “The basic meaning [of *kedushah*] is separation from the ‘general’ and dedication to the particular” (<http://www.ou.org/about/judaism/jl.htm>). This is the sense of holiness we usually have in mind when we think of Shabbat (as different from ordinary days), of *kashrut* (as dividing the kosher from the *treif*), and even of marriage (as separating a couple from participating in sexual relations with all others through *kedushin*). Separation lies at the core of such fundamental Jewish ritual building blocks. Further, much ritual effort is devoted to marking the lines of separation. Candles are lit at the beginning and end of Shabbat. Much energy is devoted to kashering a kitchen when moving into a new home. The wedding process is usually marked by a sense of ceremony, often with many guests invited.

The second vision is sanctification as elevating or improving. When we announce in the *Kedushah*, “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts; the whole world is full of God’s glory,” it is not that we are seeing God as separate from our world. Rather, we are seeing God as permeating and elevating our world. Sanctification, in other words, can be viewed as a direction.

Often, the first vision of sanctification as separation and the second vision of sanctification as elevation exist simultaneously. Shabbat is a holy day not merely because it is a separate day, but because that separation is in the direction of elevation toward greater joy, fulfillment and rest. Even the solemn Yom Kippur — the holiest of days — is ultimately oriented toward elevation

(through *teshuvah*). Note, however, that this second vision of sanctification need not be tied to that of separation. It is possible to improve or elevate something without separating from it.

## Legal Implications

As mentioned, in the ritual realm, Jewish law centrally concerns itself with promoting sanctification through the process of separation. Jewish ritual law seeks to construct a world in which the holy is separated from the ordinary. Moreover, the fact that Jewish law provides the parameters of such ritualized activity helps to authenticate the religious foundation of such activity. Part of what helps the ordinary Jew to feel holiness through such rituals is that Jewish law provides for these rituals.

By contrast, in the non-ritual realm, separation is not the hallmark of sanctification. Though analysis and classification are of course important to non-ritual Jewish law, separation per se is not especially so. If one’s ox gores a neighbor’s ox, the central legal issue is not whether an ox is or is not a kosher animal. Rather, as with most types of ordinary law, the central legal question is what remedy should ensue.<sup>5</sup> Ordinary Jewish law does not pursue the construction of binary categories. Yet this does not mean that there is no sanctification to be found. Quite the reverse. Often, for people in the midst of conflict, great sanctity is experienced when that conflict is resolved, whether by mutual agreement or by a legal award. The critical point is that such sanctification — as with much of the sanctification in our world — is to be

found not by separating off from ordinary life, but by going through it. Indeed, were a comparison to be made, I suspect that such sanctification through ordinary life “exceeds” sanctification vs. ordinary life in importance. What we do on the six days of the week ultimately has more to say about whether we lead a sanctified life than what we do on Shabbat.

We can now see a root problem that may have arisen with the restriction of operative Jewish law to the ritual realm. Both because the basic forms of sanctification are different and because the imprimatur of Jewish legal authority no longer attaches to the ordinary realm, many Jews no longer recognize ordinary life as sacred, or at least as an activity that can be sanctified. For many Jews, the non-ritual realm has lost much of its religious significance.

Perhaps an example will help convey this. Recently, I presented a *d'var torah* to my havurah and shared the thesis of this essay. A mother responded with a story about her six-year-old daughter. Until this year, the girl had attended our community’s Jewish preschool, but had since switched to public school. After several weeks in public school, the daughter asked her mother (I paraphrase), “What does it mean to be Jewish in public school? Does being Jewish in public school mean keeping kosher and keeping Shabbat?” The girl’s questions focus upon ritual Jewish life. In one sense, no doubt, she is right: *Kashrut* and Shabbat are critical, distinctive aspects of being Jewish in the multicultural world of public school. Yet what about the matter of how one treats others? Is not that central to being

Jewish as well? Is not “Thou shalt not steal” (a commandment quite relevant to young children) among the Ten Commandments, along with keeping Shabbat? My point is that the girl’s questions may reflect a view of Judaism as restricted to ritual Judaism. If so, what a loss this is. If we cannot see the sacred in ordinary life, much of our vision of the sacred has been lost.

## Separation and the Sacred

I close with four final notes.

First, affirming the value of the sacred in ordinary life — the sacred through — is not to denigrate the importance of the ritual sacred. Separation — the sacred verse — is often sadly neglected. The pursuit of the sacred through should not come at the expense of the sacred vs. Indeed, the two are usually complementary. Experiencing the sanctity of Shabbat can help us pursue sanctity in the other days of the week, and vice versa. At a deep level, the dialectical construction of the sacred through vs. the sacred vs. may blur.

Second, much of the ritual sacred concerns either emotionally powerful life-cycle events (such as birth, bar/bat mitzvah, marriage, divorce and death) or emotionally powerful Jewish calendar events (such as holidays and Shabbat). Further, many but not all of these events are uplifting experiences. By contrast, the sacred through is often much more mundane. It concerns the challenges of ordinary life. Life can be unpleasant. Life can be boring. The sacred through focuses not upon the liminal, but upon the typical. Yet that is precisely why it is so important. It is

easy to sense holiness at the moment of a child's birth. It is harder when changing diapers. However, for every one birth, there are thousands of diapers to change. That is why finding holiness in the ordinary is essential.

Third, let me share a few brief thoughts about what one might call Jewish "sacred knowledge." Often, we think of Jewish sacred knowledge as knowledge about the ritual domains of Jewish life — to follow the questions of the six-year-old, knowledge about things like keeping Shabbat and *kashrut*. Yet knowledge about the nonritual domains of life — more specifically, knowledge about how to appreciate and elevate those domains — should also be viewed as sacred knowledge. Our respect for ritual knowledge, in other words, should not make us insensitive to the sacred value of other life knowledge. Before the functional restriction of Jewish knowledge to the ritual realm, such a prioritization of ritual knowledge over other sacred knowledge made little sense. There was no reason to give preference to knowledge of the laws of *kashrut* over knowledge of the laws of contracts, since both addressed operative law. It is critical that we respect sacred knowledge in both ritual and nonritual areas.

Fourth and finally, broadening our vision of the sacred may help Jews who live in a largely secular world have a greater sense of religiosity and perhaps even integration in their lives. In one of his final orations, Moses declares to the children of Israel, "This instruction (*mitzvah*) which I enjoin upon you this day is not hidden from you, nor is it far off. It is not in the heavens (*lo*

*ba-shamayim hi*), that you should say, 'Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we may hear it, and do it?'" (Deuteronomy 30: 11-12)<sup>6</sup>

## Life of Torah

There are many lessons to be found in these lines. The rabbis, of course, used this passage as a proof text for their power to interpret and determine Jewish law, for the Torah was "not in the heavens" but here on earth (Babylonian Talmud, *Bava Metzi'a* 59b). Perhaps the simplest reading is that of rebuttal: Were Jews to assert that they could not follow the Jewish law because they could not obtain or understand it, such a claim would be false. Let me suggest a third reading — namely, that a life of Torah (and here I mean Torah in the broadest sense) can be all-enveloping. It is not "hidden" or "far off," but can guide and infuse life throughout, from birth to death, in things large and small. To borrow Abimelech's words to Abraham, it is the sense that "God is with you in everything that you do" (Genesis 21: 22).

## Recognizing Sanctification

With the functional constriction of Jewish law to the ritual, it is easy to relegate Torah and, with it, our sense of sanctification, to the ritual. Such is a great loss. Recognizing sanctification as not only separation but also elevation may help us see the possibility of pursuing sanctification throughout our lives. In other words, the legal constriction produced by history should not become a spiritual one as well.

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1. Kaplan's usage of "civil law," which I follow in this essay, is in the civil- vs.-religious sense, rather than the civil- vs.-criminal sense.

2. I do not here address the question of to what extent the lives of Israeli Jews are governed by Jewish law. Kaplan's view was that, even within the State of Israel, the effective scope of Jewish law was quite limited through the restriction of rabbinical courts to questions of personal status (e.g., marriage, conversion, etc.). See Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Questions Jews Ask: Reconstructionist Answers* (New York: Reconstructionist Press, 1956; 1972), 323. For secondary discussions of Kaplan's approach to Jewish law generally, see Ronald A. Brauner, ed., *Jewish Civilization: Essays and Studies: Jewish Law, Vol. 2* (Philadelphia: Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, 1981).

3. Observe that many of the subjects most contested among various branches of contemporary American Judaism (e.g., patrilineal descent, rabbinical ordination of women and gay marriage ceremonies) concern matters of ritual law. No great internecine battles are being waged over criminal penalties, tort damages, evidentiary standards and so forth.

4. In *Questions Jews Ask*, Kaplan later discusses this change in less dramatic terms. *Id.* at 323.

5. Consider, for example, the glorious Mishnaic passage proclaiming the worth, equality and uniqueness of every human life:

Therefore was the first man, Adam, created alone, to teach us that whoever destroys a single life, the Bible considers it as if he destroyed an entire world. . . . Furthermore, only one man, Adam, was created for the sake of peace among men, so that no one should say to his fellow, "My

father was greater than yours." . . . Also, man [was created singly] to show the greatness of the Holy One, Blessed be He, for if a man strikes many coins from one mold, they all resemble one another, but the King of Kings, the Holy One, Blessed be He, made each man in the image of Adam, and yet not one of them resembles his fellow. (*Sanhedrin* 4:5)

This passage is found, quite poignantly, as part of the instructions to given to witnesses before testifying in capital cases. With the relegation of Jewish law to the ritual realm, such a subject is no longer strictly "necessary." Perhaps this passage is sufficiently famous that it will not be "lost," but one senses the risk. Many Jewish legal texts contain much more than simply law. Without the need for the law, such "more" may be lost.

5. The question of what remedy should ensue is often far less salient when it comes to ritual law. Violations of ritual law may roughly be seen as violations between a person and God (*bein adam l'Makom*), while the violations of ordinary law are typically violations between a person and another person (*bein adam l'haveiro*). Though specifying remedies for ritual violations is, of course, possible (think of Leviticus' elaborate sacrificial system), generally speaking, the remedial focus is more immediate and clear for nonritual law than for ritual law. For non-ritual transgressions, there is often a present need for compensation of the injured party, as well as the risk of vigilantism should that need not be officially addressed.

6. Though *mitzvah* is in the singular, the sense in which it is normally understood is a broad one, a reading supported by the attendant text. See, e.g., Deuteronomy 29: 28, 30: 10 and 30: 16.

*Works Cited*

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# Toward a Committed Liberal Judaism: Autonomy and Standards of Observance

BY KENNETH SHUSTER

One of the most important tenets of Liberal Judaism (by which I mean both the Reform and Reconstructionist denominations of Judaism), affirmed in its platforms, and the writings of its most noted theologians,<sup>1</sup> is personal autonomy. Individuals must be free to choose for themselves which *mitzvot*, or Torah-based precepts, rituals, customs and teachings they will observe. Admittedly, the leaders of Liberal Judaism consistently enjoin their laity to exercise this freedom of choice from a position of knowledge, following a period of study and reflection, but this ideal rarely pans out in practice. Usually, only rabbis and scholars have the interest or inclination to study any given Jewish issue thoroughly. More often, identification with liberalism is offered as a rationale for non-observance, i.e., “I need not do such-and-thus, because I am a Liberal, or non-Orthodox, Jew!”

This article seeks to understand why this is so, and what can be done to rectify it. Specifically, I explore whether Judaism has standards of belief and

ritual which every Jew should practice, and whether an unfettered personal autonomy, either at the individual or community level, is compatible with a widespread commitment to those standards.

## Personal Autonomy

Personal autonomy is vitally important in the area of religious observance. To appreciate why this is so, let us briefly compare Liberal Judaism with Jewish Orthodoxy. An Orthodox Jew is subject to rules and regulations which govern every aspect of her existence from the moment she wakes up till she goes to sleep. Although she can decide to dishonor these laws, if she does so publicly, she will be ostracized by her community, and, if she does so in private, she may indict herself as a sinner. This is true even of rituals that make no sense — such as that the right shoe must be put on before the left one when dressing (as codified in *Shulhan Arukh, Orakh Chaim 2:4*) — or that have become obsolete, such as the second-day

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Kenneth Shuster, an ordained rabbi and attorney, received his ordination from Yeshiva University. He has an M.S. in philosophy from Yeshiva University, a J.D. from New York Law School, and an LL.M. from the New York University School of Law. This article is dedicated to Bianca Simone Buim. The author thanks Manel Frau, Assistant Librarian at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, for his help with research.

observance of biblical holidays, the reason for which became obsolete long ago when Hillel the Second fixed the Jewish calendar.<sup>2</sup> Over time, an Orthodox Jew may resent those rituals that do not speak to him, and begin to keep them from habit. Because Orthodox Judaism teaches that every aspect and detail of both the biblical and rabbinic law was revealed by God to Moses at Sinai, the only avenue open to an Orthodox Jew to insure he does not connect to many of his religion's prescriptions by rote, is education. He can consult with his rabbi, attend classes in *halakhab* (Jewish law), and avail himself of the myriad of Jewish books available in his vernacular to find meaning in nonsensical protocols. If that works, fine, but if, in spite of study, he still cannot relate to such rules, he may lose interest in more and more aspects of his religion, until his Judaism becomes uninspiring, then meaningless, and finally, nonexistent.

Liberal Judaism, however, understands Sinaitic revelation either symbolically, or as the beginning of a covenantal relationship between us and the divine. To be sure, for Reform Judaism, Sinai commenced a "progressive revelation," whereby God slowly over time makes God's ideas for how we should live known to us.<sup>3</sup> "Sinaitic revelation" continues in the present, via a partnership between God and humans, by which God calls us to certain protocols and practices, which we consider and often accept. For Reconstructionists, Sinai is a symbol for our connection to God, for Judaism is a civilization created by human beings, and God is a process that promotes the good and inspires us to make the world a better

place (Kaplan, *The Future of the American Jew*, 183). The rituals and practices of the Torah are useful only insofar as they achieve this objective. Accordingly, according to both Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism, the text of the Torah scrolls we keep in the temple is not a code of ordinances set in stone, but a record of theological and moral imperatives which should always be kept, as well as of rituals, such as animal sacrifice and *shatmeiz* (the mixing of wool and linen, proscribed in Leviticus 19:19), which were important to the authors of the Torah, but which do not speak to us today.

## Four Standards of Judaism

Now, although progressive revelation, or viewing Judaism as a civilization, frees us from the shackles of many irrational, and uninspiring biblical and talmudic rules, these doctrines challenge us, for they compel us to fashion a meaningful Judaism for ourselves. Such an individual foray into Judaism is possible, then, through the exercise of personal autonomy.

Broadly put, the Liberal Jew has the right to decide for herself what she will, and will not keep, Jewishly speaking. Yet, as necessary as personal autonomy is, it should not be used to avoid the bare minimum the Torah demands. This is because Judaism is not merely a personal religion, or outlet for self-expression, a form of Protestantism, if you will, but a program for public and private existence, that has standards of belief and practice that are binding on all Jews at all times.

Judaism has four such standards.<sup>4</sup>

First and foremost is its call to monotheism. Simply stated, the Torah requirement to believe in one God is so strong, an atheist cannot be a good Jew (Borowitz, 1984). One can question the existence of God, or even believe in a God that is different from the Adonai of the Torah. For example, according to Mordecai M. Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, God is not personal, or supernatural, but a process, i.e., the “power that makes for salvation” (Kaplan, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*, 17-20). However, a Jew may not believe there are many gods or idols,<sup>5</sup> or deny God’s existence.

Judaism’s second standard is observance of the Sabbath, or Shabbat, and biblical festivals of Rosh Hashanah (“New Year”), Yom Kippur (“Day of Atonement”), Sukkot (“Tabernacles”), Shmini Atzeret (“Eighth Day of Assembly”), Pesah (“Passover”) and Shavuot (“Pentecost”). The biblical sources for these holidays are Leviticus 23:1-44 and Deuteronomy 16:1-17. The Sabbath and holidays are vital to Judaism, because they belong to a class of protocols named *ediyot*, or “testimonials,” which certify, directly or indirectly, to the importance and centrality of the God belief in Jewish ideology and culture. To be sure, because God is said to have concluded creation on the original Sabbath (Genesis 2:2-3), Shabbat implicitly testifies that something we call “God” exists, and that It created the world.

For Reform Jews, Rosh Hashanah celebrates God as Creator of the Universe. For Reconstructionists, Rosh Hashanah affirms the idea of a God, and godly values, as the basis of all hu-

man aspiration. Yom Kippur calls us to take responsibility for our actions. For Reform Judaism, Sukkot commemorates the booths God made for our ancestors as they traveled to the promised land, Passover marks the Exodus from Egypt, and Shavuot is dear as the traditional anniversary of the revelation at Sinai. For Reconstructionist Jews, Sukkot, Passover and Shavuot symbolize how Judaism, in Kaplanian terms, inspires “man to rise above the brute,” by affirming the values of civilization (living in booths, or housing, and not in a state of nature; Sukkot), freedom (Passover) and education and morality (Shavuot).

Judaism’s third standard, identified most famously with its Prophets, is its call to ethical and moral behavior, which demands that we work, individually and globally, for *tikun olam*, the betterment of society,<sup>6</sup> that we engage in tzedakah or philanthropy,<sup>7</sup> that we be sensitive to the needs of our environment<sup>8</sup> and that we respect the basic humanity of others.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, Judaism requires its members to identify themselves as Jews by performing acts which, because they are unique to Jews, distinguish them from Gentiles. So, for example, Jews circumcise male offspring, behave modestly in speech and dress, have Hebrew or Yiddish names and enjoy Jewish foods, art and other manifestations of their ethnic culture.

## **A Modified Autonomy**

Because the above four standards represent the minimum that a Jew should do, the personal autonomy that Liberal

Jews hold so dear cannot be absolute, but must be informed by a willingness to commit to those standards. This is because requirements and guidelines become meaningless in the absence of commitment, and an unbridled right to choose what one will do is always antithetical to commitment.<sup>10</sup>

By way of illustration, imagine a doctor tells you your blood pressure or cholesterol is high, prescribes a regimen of diet, exercise and medication, and further informs you that if you exercise, eat less fat and take your pills, you stand a good chance of living at least an average life span. You become vigilant about taking your medication, but refuse to exercise and do not watch your fat. Under these conditions, you are not committed to your health, but to taking your medicine, an aspect of your health care. You are not committed to improving and maintaining your health, because you are not doing everything you can to reduce your blood pressure and cholesterol.

Let us examine commitment in the area of religion as applied to the Sabbath. Shabbat is a block of time, which begins twenty minutes prior to sundown on Friday, when candles are traditionally lit to welcome Shabbat, and ends forty minutes<sup>11</sup> after sundown on Saturday. On Shabbat, a Jew should behave differently than she does during the week, by performing acts, like the *kiddush* ("sanctification"), and refraining from other conduct, like business, cooking, carrying and strenuous activity.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, one should bathe, set the table with better utensils, and dress in finer clothing before sundown, to honor the Sabbath when it arrives and

maximally experience Shabbat. To be committed to Shabbat, then, is to be willing, at candlelighting time, each and every week, to stop one's weekday activities immediately, even when one does not wish to do so.

In the area of personal conduct, a Jew must be prepared to inconvenience himself to behave in a manner that will reflect well on him as a Jew and creation of God. For example, a Jew may not, in good faith, be respectful only to those he needs, to get ahead in business or his profession, but must treat all human beings, and even animals, with the honor they deserve as God's handiwork. One might honor others by not interrupting them when they speak, and show sensitivity for the rights of animals, by becoming vegetarian, or establishing a kosher home, because ritual slaughter is thought to be the least painful death for animals. The key here is that, although personal autonomy is vital if one's Judaism is to remain relevant and meaningful, autonomy cannot be absolute and unmitigated, for an unbridled autonomy is incompatible with commitment, and commitment is necessary for Judaism to work its magic in our lives.

This latter point warrants emphasis. Being committed to any of Judaism's tenets must never be a matter of following the law for its own sake. Rather the purpose of Jewish observance is to enrich human life. So Shabbat comes not to inconvenience us, but to force us, after the exhaustive work week, to rest from our usual endeavors. Charity, and other acts of loving kindness, is meant, not to control how we spend our funds, but to imbue us with empathy for others, and

an awareness that we must partner with God to make the world better. These tools cannot work for us when we view the Torah's standards, not as binding commitments, but as *divertissements* we can employ, from time to time, to make us feel better about ourselves, and connected to family and friends who keep them. So how does one become a committed Jew?

### Three Steps to Commitment

First, one must appreciate that Judaism, through its teachings, rituals and protocols, constitutes something that is greater than oneself. One achieves such an awareness through a realization that (a) the teachings of the Torah, whether found in the Five Books of Moses, the Prophets, Chronicles, Mishnah, Talmud, medieval and contemporary rabbinic scholarship, and Jewish lore, generally, contain within them the "wisdom of the ages," i.e., great psychological insights, and meaningful musings on the human condition, regardless of whether every such pronouncement was dictated by God, fashioned from a fusion of human authorship and divine inspiration, or written entirely by human beings, and that (b) because of this, what Judaism has to offer is at least as good, if not better, than what one is apt to find in any non-Torah based source. To be sure, although organized religion has its problems, no one, this side of the Holocaust, can argue with a straight face that any purely human creation, whether it be culture, philosophy, literature or science, is more worthy of allegiance than Judaism. Even other religious views of,

for example, Buddhism, Catholicism, Islam and Ethical Humanism are no better than those of Judaism, often stem from Judaism, and, in any event, can often be used in conjunction with Jewish practice; it would, therefore, be inappropriate for a Jew to ignore the riches of his own tradition, in favor of foreign ideologies.

Respect for the integrity of Judaism is not enough, however, to become truly committed to Jewish practice; one must also study and reflect on the *mitzvot*. This is because it is extremely difficult to be dedicated to what one does not understand. The beauty of this step is that virtually anything one wants to know about Judaism is available, in the vernacular, from books and articles, either in print or on the web. Moreover, such an exploration of the various *mitzvot* need not be limited to the academic. One might, during her search, acquire "hands-on" knowledge of what is involved in doing a *mitzvah*, through, for example, spending a Friday evening with an observant family to feel what a Shabbat atmosphere is like, or performing *tzedakah* by donating her services to a soup kitchen.

Finally, to become a committed Jew, one should, to the extent possible, associate with other Jews who are devoted to the rituals and practices which have engaged his interest. Judaism, like other expressions of the human condition, becomes most meaningful, when it is experienced, not as a "spectator sport," but as a communal enterprise shared by many who are devoted to its teachings. This is because finding one's way in Judaism together with others helps the would-be practitioner to judge himself

part of a “community of believers,” and not some oddball alone in a spiritually apathetic world. Sharing one’s search with others also exposes the searcher to those who can teach her how to perform the *mitzvot* she is interested in correctly.

## History of Negation

Unlimited personal autonomy is not the only reason Liberal Jews often do not do as much as they might religiously. To be sure, both Reform and Reconstructionism were founded, to a large degree, on a “spirit of negation,” which defined these denominations by what they would not believe or observe. To be sure, the early German reformers applied this spirit of negation to the synagogue, to allow instrumental music on Shabbat, and men and women to sit together during services. Reconstructionist Judaism denied the existence of a personal God and, consequently, all supernaturalism. Over time, other beliefs and protocols that were thought to be superstitious, unreasonable, immoral or unethical, such as a personal messiah, the ancient sacerdotal scheme, bodily resurrection, the dietary laws, the *mamzer*,<sup>12</sup> and that women may not participate in the synagogue service, were abandoned by both Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism. Liberal Judaism then continued to define itself by its differences with Orthodoxy, by increasingly refusing to observe the *hukim*, or “ordinances,” which, by definition, are irrational.<sup>13</sup> Over time, this stance of negation became a badge of pride for Liberal Jews, something they could use to show off their freedom. Yet

it came with a price, for Liberal Jews began to define themselves by what they do not keep, rather than by the positive and inspiring notions they affirm.

It is time for liberals to embrace a more positive and active Judaism. Reform and Reconstructionist expressions of Judaism are no longer experiments, in their formative years, which must stress their negations for validation; their durability testifies to their viability, and liberals can now find meaning in their Judaism, not by comparing themselves to the Orthodox or Conservative, but by studying and doing customs and rituals that are meaningful to them.

## Centrality of the Synagogue

The centrality of the synagogue in Reconstructionist and Reform Judaism is yet another reason Liberal Jews often do not do as much, Jewishly speaking, as they might in their personal lives. This is, in part, because many Liberal Jews seem to regard the synagogue as not merely an edifice in which they can worship, and fraternize with others who share their interests, but as the almost exclusive locale for the practice of their faith.<sup>13</sup> For these Jews, the dietary laws are satisfied if the temple’s kitchen is kosher, the *mitzvah* to reflect on Torah is discharged by the rabbi’s study, and one is Sabbath observant if she attends Shabbat services.

This view is due, at least in part, to the negations with which Liberal Judaism was founded, and the autonomy that informs them. To be sure, it is easier to practice a religion which defines itself by what it does not entail,

and allows its members to decide what they will keep, in the synagogue, for affiliates then need not trouble themselves to consider what they will observe — they have a rabbi or cantor to do that for them.

Yet such a temple-based understanding of Judaism is undesirable because it shortchanges its practitioners. It transforms Judaism from an expansive plan for individual and global existence into a solely public enterprise, in which one celebrates her faith for very prescribed periods in very limited places. A Judaism confined to the synagogue also denies one's home life many beautiful and meaningful rituals. For example, consider how a traditional Shabbat dinner, with candles and *kiddush*, and enhanced by special songs, family and friends, will be that more fulfilling than the increasingly common phenomenon of parents and children eating at different times, often at different places. Ritual holiday celebrations, like the apple and honey we eat on Rosh Hashanah, or the Seder we conduct to commemorate the Exodus from Egypt, provide other opportunities to spiritually enrich our home lives, which are lacking when we connect to Judaism solely in the synagogue.

Whatever customs we choose to bring into our homes, today, when Liberal Judaism is, through its various programs and dedication to partner with God to create a better world, so much more than a solution to being Orthodox or Conservative, Liberal Jews are uniquely situated to use the gifts of their conviction and commitment to enrich their lives away from temple.

Monotheism, the Sabbath and festivals, social consciousness and Jewish identity are Jewish standards, which should be observed by all Jews at all times. Judaism also boasts a host of other rituals, mores and customs that are optional, but which can enrich human life. Accordingly, Liberal Jews who decide to take their faith seriously, will best experience Judaism through answering the call of the Torah's standards, and employing a modified autonomy to inform their study and possible acceptance of other aspects of their faith. Moreover, as serious Jews, they will do so with an eye to how a Jewish life can maximally, and not minimally, benefit them.

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1. Leaders of Reform Judaism who have espoused the primacy of personal autonomy include W. Gunther Plaut (*Contemporary Reform Jewish Thought*, Bernard Martin, ed., 1968): "The fundamental principle of Liberalism [is] that the individual will approach this body of *mitzvot* and *minhagim* in the spirit of freedom and choice"; and Eugene B. Borowitz (*Liberal Judaism*, 1984): "Liberals insist on the freedom to determine for themselves which aspects of their inherited faith they will continue to observe" (324). Reform Judaism reaffirmed its commitment to freedom of choice in its platform, *Reform Judaism: a Centenary Perspective* (1976): "Jewish obligation begins with the informed will of every individual" ([www.ccar.org](http://www.ccar.org)). Reconstructionist Judaism also strongly supports personal autonomy, both in the individual's right to choose and in the community's right to decide which practices to observe. See Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations, Platform of Reconstructionism, cited in the FRCH

Newsletter, September, 1986, D and E.

2. There are six biblical holidays: Rosh Hashanah (New Years), Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), Sukkot (Tabernacles), Shmini Atzeret (Eighth Day of Assembly), Pesah (Passover) and Shavuot (Pentecost). Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are observed for one day, on the first and tenth days of the Hebrew month of *Tishrei*, respectively (Leviticus 23:24 & 23:27), the eight-day celebration of Sukkot commences with a one-day “holy convocation” on the 15th of *Tishrei*, and concludes with a one-day “holy convocation,” known as “Shmini Atezeret,” on the 22nd of *Tishrei* (Leviticus 23:33-36), and Pesah begins and ends with “holy convocations” on the 15th and 21st of *Nisan* (Leviticus 23:6-8).

Originally, these holidays were kept by calculating how many days had passed from the first of the month (Rosh Hodesh). For example, Pesah would be celebrated two weeks after *Nisan*'s new moon was announced, and Shavuot would be enjoyed six days after Rosh Hodesh *Sivan* was proclaimed. Rosh Hodesh itself was determined via the oral testimony of witnesses, who certified to the Sanhedrin, or Supreme Court, in Jerusalem, that they had witnessed the new moon. Once Rosh Hodesh was established, the court would send messengers to areas throughout, and immediately outside of, Israel, to notify people that Rosh Hodesh had passed, so they could determine when to observe the respective holiday. Now, due to the relatively small size of Israel, it was usually no problem for messengers to leave Jerusalem on Rosh Hodesh, and reach all areas within Israel, by the ninth and 14th of *Tishrei*, fifth of *Sivan*, or 14th of *Nisan*, so Israeli Jews might honor Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Pesah and Shavuot at the proper time. In Israel, therefore, these holidays were always one-day celebrations. However, because the messengers might not arrive outside of Israel in sufficient time to tell

the locals when the new moon had occurred, the rabbis instituted a second day outside of Israel for all the above festivals except Yom Kippur. This second day was enacted, therefore, to insure that communities outside Israel keep at least one day of the respective holidays on the proper date even when the messengers arrive late. (Yom Kippur was spared a second day because a second day would transform it into a two day fast, which would be undoable for most persons. Rosh Hashanah, however, was kept as a two-day festival even in ancient Israel, because Rosh Hashanah is also Rosh Hodesh Tishrei. Because messengers could not travel either within or outside of Israel once Tishrei's new moon was announced due to the sanctity of the holiday, a second day was needed to insure Rosh Hashanah was observed properly even in Israel.)

In 358 C.E., Hillel the Second established a calendar that fixes the dates of the holidays, for all intents and purposes, in perpetuity. Because of this, today these second days are unwarranted, and most liberal congregations do not observe them.

3. See *The Guiding Principles of Reform Judaism*, “The Columbus Platform of 1937” (“Revelation is a continuous process, confined to no one group and to no one age”), and *A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism* (1999), “Torah,” (“We cherish the truths revealed in Torah, God's ongoing revelation to our people”) at [www.ccrnet.org](http://www.ccrnet.org).

4. The following four protocols — belief in God (and rejection of idolatry), observance of Sabbath and holidays, philanthropy and social consciousness, and maintaining a Jewish identity — are Jewish standards because they are the tenets that are most consistently stressed in biblical and Rabbinic Judaism, have been accepted by all the Jewish denominations, and serve to identify Jews in the world at large.

Monotheism, as a Jewish value, is best known through the *Shema* credo: “Hear,

O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4), and the first pronouncements of the Decalogue (Deuteronomy 5:6-9). The Prophets remind us there is only one God (II Kings 17:35-39; Isaiah 45:5-6), and Maimonides lists belief in one God as the second of his thirteen articles of faith (*Commentary to the Mishnah Sanhedrin*, Chapter Ten).

Moreover, the Torah requires a Jew to lose her life rather than worship idols (see Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 74a). Finally, to not believe in multiple deities is such a Jewish value that Webster’s defines Judaism as the “monotheistic religion of the Jews” (*Webster’s New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*, 1992).

Reform Judaism has embraced Monotheism ever since its founding (see the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885: “We hold that Judaism presents the highest conception of the God-idea . . . as the central religious truth for the human race,” cited under “Declaration of Principles” at [www.ccar-net.org](http://www.ccar-net.org)). Reconstructionist Judaism also affirms the centrality of God, and Godly values, in Jewish life, albeit by defining God as a “process,” or “force” that makes life meaningful. See “Position on God,” under “Reconstructionist Judaism,” at [www.wujs.org](http://www.wujs.org).

Shabbat is a Jewish standard because Sabbath observance implicitly testifies to belief in a force, however defined, that created the world in six days (Genesis 2:1-3), the Shabbat is the only holy day mentioned in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15), the Prophets enjoin its observance (Isaiah 58:13-14 and Jeremiah 17:19-27), and the ancient sages equate public Sabbath desecration with idolatry (Babylonian Talmud Eruvin 69b).

The biblical holidays deserve to be counted among Judaism’s standards, for their observance reminds us of the inspi-

ration that the idea of God, and God’s providence, affords us in the fulfillment of our goals and needs. So Sukkot, as the holiday which recalls the booths God made for our forefathers in the desert (Leviticus 23:39-43), motivates us to “rise above the brute,” and work for housing, and otherwise not live as animals. While Pesah formally commemorates our liberation from Egyptian bondage (Deuteronomy 16:1-3), it also stands for the ideal of freedom generally. Shavuot celebrates the harvest (Deuteronomy 16:9-11), and marks the date tradition teaches God revealed the Torah at Sinai (Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 86b). However, even one who does not believe in these reasons for the holiday can, on Shavuot, celebrate the Torah as the basis for our morality and admiration of education.

Rosh Hashanah (“New Years”) and Yom Kippur (“Day of Atonement”) are vitally important, for they afford annual opportunities to take stock of where we are going in life, repent for wrongdoing, and affirm the ideals we hold dear. The Reform movement suggested that “Judaism as a way of life requires . . . the preservation of the Sabbath, festivals, and Holy Days,” in its Columbus Platform of 1937 (see the Columbus Platform, under “The Guiding Principles of Reform Judaism,” “C. Religious Practice 9,” at [www.ccar-net.org](http://www.ccar-net.org)). For a cogent presentation of why Reconstructionist Judaism supports observance of the Shabbat and holidays, see Rebecca Alpert and Jacob Staub, *Exploring Judaism: a Reconstructionist Approach*, 1985, 91-96.

Righteousness and loving kindness, whether manifested in charity (*tzedakah*) or other acts that promote individual and societal well-being, is a Jewish standard, for it is demanded by both the Pentateuch (see Deuteronomy 15:7-8 and 22:1-4) and the Prophets (see Isaiah 42:6-7, “I am the Lord, I have called you with righteousness

... for a light to the nations, to open blind eyes, to remove a prisoner from confinement"; Jeremiah 22:3, "Thus said the Lord, 'Administer justice and righteousness, and save the robbed from the hand of the oppressor, do not taunt and do not cheat the stranger, the orphan and the widow'", is one of the three pillars on which the world rests (see Ethics of the Fathers 1:2), and is the means by which one emulates God (see Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 133b). Moreover, it is a commitment to acts of loving kindness which informs *tikun olam*, the desire to make the world a better place, a doctrine promoted by both the Reform and Reconstructionist movements. For examples of how Reconstructionist Judaism is dedicated to social action, and the betterment of society generally, see "Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association: Resolutions Adopted in 2004-2005" ([www.terra.org](http://www.terra.org)). Reform Judaism's commitment to *tikun olam* has been called the "jewel in the Reform Jewish crown." See "Rabbi Eric Yoffie's Comments to the UAHC Executive Committee February 2, 1998," cited under "UAHC Leadership" ([www.urj.org](http://www.urj.org)).

The requirement that Jews maintain a distinctive identity must be a Jewish standard, for without its own identity, the most important reasons for the Jewish people, i.e., to perform and spread the ideals of the Torah, and transform itself, and the world at large, into a civilization predicated on monotheism, ethical conduct and social activism, will be severely compromised. This is because Judaism's mission can best be achieved long term only if the Jewish people is viewed as a separate entity with unique rituals, for then it can continue to serve as an example of morality in the eyes of the other nations; Gentiles who perceive Jews as no different from themselves, will be less motivated to follow the example of a Judaically inspired monotheism, ethics and morality.

Moreover, the Gentiles respect us more when we comport ourselves as Jews, and, conversely, exhibit a greater degree of anti-Semitism when we try to be like them. As a practical matter then, Jews must openly embrace Judaism and a Jewish identity, individually and nationally, to acquire Gentile esteem, and combat anti-Jewish prejudice.

Today's Jews, due to the benefit of their longstanding religion and heritage, the prestige and relative security afforded by the State of Israel, and Jewish scholarship and global contributions, are eminently qualified to enjoy the trappings of their tradition, whether by using their given Hebrew names, publically wearing the kippah, or traditional head covering, circumcising male offspring, keeping a kosher home, publically observing the Sabbath and Jewish holidays and practicing *tzedakah*.

Reconstructionist Judaism supports the uniqueness of *Am Yisrael* in its notion that Jewish identity development is critical to the future of Jewish life, and that such development is best achieved through Jewish theology, ritual and ethical action. See "Reconstructionists define Judaism as the evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people," under "Who is a Reconstructionist Jew" ([www.jfr.org](http://www.jfr.org)): "The Reconstructionist philosophy affirms the uniqueness of the Jewish people and its heritage." Reform Judaism acknowledges the need for Jewish uniqueness in its "Centenary Perspective." See Reform Judaism: A Centenary Perspective Adopted at San Francisco, 1976: "The Jewish people in its unique way of life validates its own worth" ([www.ccarnet.org](http://www.ccarnet.org)).

That there are four standards of Jewish observance should not imply that the Jewish conduct of one who does not honor the standards possesses no value. Rather, to the extent one does not perform the four standards, she does not allow Judaism maximally to inform and benefit one's

experience.

5. A careful reading of the relevant scriptural passages seems to suggest the Torah is more anxious about our believing that “God” is not more than one, and about our not worshipping idols, than about our belief in a specific conception of the Deity. To be sure, the Decalogue enjoins belief in one God (Exodus 20:2) immediately before it prohibits the worship of “the gods of others” (Exodus 20:3) and idols (Exodus 20:4); it does not detail the particulars of the Deity we must believe in, other than to remind us that God redeemed us from Egyptian bondage (Exodus 20:2). The Prophets also combine their invitations to believe in God with warnings not to worship idols (see Jeremiah 10:10-16; Chabakuk 2:18-19).

One who does not deny God’s existence does not violate Judaism’s call to Monotheism, even if he doubts whether the Adonai of the Torah exists, or believes God is a process, for to require specific, non-questioned, belief in a non-corporeal entity, not amenable to empirical proof of any kind, would be to place an insurmountable stumbling block before those who cannot believe in Adonai, due to personal suffering, the reality of evil generally, or the teachings of sociology, philosophy and science.

To be sure, the Torah seems to require a consistent affirmative belief in God: “I am the Lord, your God, Who took you from the land of Egypt” (Exodus 20:2); “God [is] Creator of the heavens, He is the God, the One who fashioned the Earth . . . I am God and there is no other” (Isaiah 45:18). Yet, this is not because the Torah does not allow for doubt, but because it expresses its prescriptions in ideal terms, and, ideally, one should always believe in some notion of one God. Practically, however, a Jew who doubts Adonai’s existence or nature, cannot lose her good standing, as long as her agnosticism does not cause her to deny God

outright. This view of Torah monotheism is supported by the nature of belief, as opposed to knowledge, generally, for to believe in anything, by definition, is to accept that which cannot be proven.

6. Examples of prophetic invitations to ethical and moral conduct include Micah 6:8, Isaiah 58:6-7, and Jeremiah 7:5-7.

7. *Tzedakah*, usually translated as “charity,” refers to the obligation to be solicitous of the well-being of others, and has its biblical roots in the requirements that landowners leave the produce which falls from the sickle, or accumulates on the corners of the field, for the poor (Leviticus 19:9 and Deuteronomy 24:19); one must “open one’s hand” to lend the needy money (Deuteronomy 15:7-8).

The impetus for an ethic of caring was famously summarized by Hillel, as, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I care only for myself, what am I?” (Ethics of the Fathers 1:14). It is informed by *Imitatio Dei*, the call to emulate God, by clothing the poor, visiting the sick, comforting mourners and burying the dead, which acts tradition tells us God performs (see Babylonian Talmud Sotah 14a).

8. The requirement to be sensitive to the needs of the environment is based on Deuteronomy 20:19-20, which forbids the destruction of fruit-bearing trees in wartime. The sages widened this proscription to include all needless, wasteful destruction (Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 129a and Bava Kama 91b). The reason we must all care for our world is poignantly summed up by the Midrash: “When God led Adam through the Garden of Eden, God told him, ‘I made my beautiful and glorious world for your sake. Take care not to hurt or destroy my world, for if you do, there is no one to fix it after you’” (Midrash Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7).

9. Because basic respect for others, *kavod ha-briot* in Hebrew, is informed by the fact

that all human beings are created in the “image of God” (Genesis 1:27), the sages tell us in quite strong terms to respect the human dignity of others. (See Y. Hagigah 2:1 and B. Bava Metzia 58b.)

10. This does not mean, of course, that personal autonomy undercuts commitment to Judaism. To the contrary, the right to choose, as we have suggested, often facilitates a meaningful Judaism. It is an unfettered personal autonomy which can compromise total dedication to any endeavor, because one who enjoys an unbounded autonomy, often feels free not only to decide the rituals one will keep, but the circumstances in which one will do so. For example, one might, through one’s right of autonomy, choose to observe the Sabbath, and commit oneself to traditional Shabbat meals and services. If personal autonomy is not reigned in, however, faced with a Friday night office party here, or a Saturday ball game there, one may decide such pursuits are more important than Shabbat in any given instance, and one’s Sabbath observance may gradually become non-existent.

11. Shabbat begins before sunset on Friday, and ends after dark on Saturday, because in Judaism the day begins the night before (Genesis 1:5: “And it was evening and it was morning, Day One”). Shabbat ends forty minutes after sunset, and not at sundown, because the sages were not sure whether the day begins at sunset, i.e., when the sun disappears from the horizon, or when it is completely dark. Accordingly, to accommodate both possibilities, the Sabbath commences before sunset, but does not end until nightfall. (See Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 34b-35a.)

12. As part of the Ten Commandments, Exodus 20:9-10 and Deuteronomy 5:13-14 are perhaps the most famous passages that forbid work on Shabbat. Yet the language of these sources, “Six days you shall work and

accomplish all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord, your God, you shall do no work,” seems solely to prohibit business, employment, or physical exertion, activities the dictionary defines as “work” (see Webster’s *New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*, 1989: “Work is . . . exertion or effort directed to produce or accomplish something; labor; toil . . . employment, as in some form of industry, esp. as a means of earning one’s livelihood”). Although they are forms of exertion, the Torah specifically bans cooking and carrying on Shabbat. The Torah demands we not cook on Shabbat in Exodus 35:3. That we not carry on Shabbat is derived from at least three scriptural passages. First, the Babylonian Talmud in Shabbat 96b tells us the request that Jews stop gifting to the Tabernacle (Exodus 36:6), was made to prevent the carrying of such gifts on the Sabbath. Second, Exodus 16:26 records that the Jews, on their way to Canaan, were not allowed to gather the quail that fell outside the camp for them on Shabbat, because they could not legally carry it back to their homes. Finally, the prophet Jeremiah states that we must not, “carry a burden . . . on the Sabbath” (Jeremiah 17:27).

To be sure, the Talmud teaches there are 39 “works” forbidden on Shabbat because they were performed in the Tabernacle (see Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 49b). Yet, with the exception of carrying and cooking, the 39 works are rabbinic in origin, inasmuch as the Sages of the Talmud derive them from the textual juxtaposition of the commandment to rest on Shabbat (Exodus 35:1-2) with the demand to erect a Tabernacle (Exodus 35:4-19). Accordingly, although the “39 works” were traditionally avoided on Shabbat, today we may choose whether to observe them. For an excellent articulation of why Shabbat observance is important even without keeping the 39 works at least as originally intended, see

J. Romain, *Faith and Practice: a Guide to Reform Judaism Today*, 1991, 134.

In addition to not working, one should treat Shabbat differently from the rest of the week, by reciting the *kiddush* before Friday dinner and lunch on Saturday (based on Exodus 20:8, which invites us to “Remember the Sabbath day to make it holy”), wearing better clothes, and refraining from *uvdin d’hol*, or “weekday doings,” i.e., acts which insult the dignity of the Sabbath because they add no spiritual value to the day. Admittedly, what constitutes “weekday doings” will be determined subjectively. Yet, most Sabbath observers would agree that, for example, an indiscriminate use of the television or computer, and attendance at movies, rock concerts, and the like, compromises the atmosphere of holiness the Sabbath deserves, which environment is best achieved through study, reflection, prayer and rest.

13. The *mamzer*, or one born from an adulterous or incestuous liaison, may not “enter the congregation of Hashem” (Deuteronomy 23:3). Because of the gross unfairness of penalizing someone for the mistake of others, both the Reform and Reconstructionist movements disregard the institution of *mamzerut*, and permit such offspring full membership and participation in Jewish life.

14. Examples of *hukim*, or laws which have no rational basis, are the dietary laws, the demand that Jews not wear garments in which wool and linen are mixed, and the requirement that women immerse themselves in a mikvah, or ritual bath, at the conclusion of their menses. Classic Reform Judaism disregarded these *mitzvot* because they are irrational, or, as in the case of *mikvah*, degrading to one segment of society. Reconstructionist Jews frequently abandon such protocols as superstitious remnants of a stage in Judaism’s development that is no longer necessary for the fulfillment of contemporary Jewish life and culture.

15. To be sure, as Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, advocated, the synagogue should be not just a place for communal prayer but a center for all expressions of Jewish culture and identity.

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# Writing the Jewish Self

*Who We Are: On Being (and Not Being) a Jewish American Writer*

Edited by Derek Rubin

(Schocken Books, 2005), 368 pp.

REVIEWED BY RENA POTOK

Who are we? Human beings are, perhaps by nature, self-reflective creatures, perpetually preoccupied with the task of questioning and defining our identities. Jews are no exception; in fact, this question drives much of Jewish discourse, whether in the arenas of philosophy, theology or literature. Living in North America, we may ask ourselves, is a Jew a Jew by virtue of being born one? By choosing to become one, or being called one by others? Because of one's views or practices? Is our religion tied to our nationality — are we Americans who also happen to be Jews, or are we Jews who happen to live in North America? We might begin to answer these questions by considering that these two facets of our identity — being Jewish, being American — are inextricably entwined, informing one another, each borrowing critical elements from the other to create the quintessential modernist identity composite: the cultural hybrid.

Derek Rubin has gathered together a collection of remarkable essays that does not ask the question, "Who are we?" It utters the descriptive statement, "Who we are." Written by some of the most esteemed 20th-century and con-

temporary Jewish writers, *Who We Are* — winner of the 2005 National Jewish Book Award — is aptly subtitled, *On Being (and Not Being) a Jewish American Writer*.

In his introduction to the book, Rubin maps the key themes explored by the contributors (all fiction writers) to this volume: what it is that makes their fiction Jewish; how Jewish writers who emerged from the second world war spoke to the imagination of so many American readers at large, and became so central to American literature; whether there is a future for Jewish American literature after the great post-war writers; and the place of Jewish writing in contemporary multicultural America.

The contributing writers represent a diversity of Jewish American fiction from the second half of the 20th century up to the present moment, from Saul Bellow's account of starting out as a young writer in 1930s Chicago, to Yael Goldstein's discussion of the influence of bible stories and her Orthodox schooling on her writing in 1980s and '90s New York; from Leslie Epstein's Hollywood, to Grace Paley's Bronx; to Pearl Abraham's Hasidic upbringing and what Robert Cohen calls his

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Rena Potok is the editor of *The Reconstructionist* and senior acquisitions editor at the Jewish Publication Society.

“suburban Reform, New Jersey division.” Reading their essays in a single context, we see the mutual influence these writers have upon one another. Similarly, we begin to understand the extent to which they’ve been influenced not only by their American Jewish peers and forebears, but by the great writers of world literature — Joyce, Flaubert, Homer and more.

While arranged chronologically, from the oldest writers to the youngest, the essays in *Who We Are* revolve around a set of repeating themes and ideas that express shared concerns:

- Influences of other writers on their works;
- American and Jewish identities: the writer’s relationship to Jewish history, the immigrant experience, the sense of identity as “Jewish writers” and the notion of outsidership and insidership;
- Matters of writing, language and traditional Jewish storytelling;
- The Holocaust

## Mutual Influences

In “Culture Confrontation in Urban America: A Writer’s Beginnings,” Chaim Potok describes his encounter as a young reader with the umbrella civilization of Western secular humanism, an encounter he calls a core-to-core culture confrontation. Here, the center of his Orthodox Jewish upbringing — a world based upon the idea of absolute truths — collided, and then became enmeshed with a world where there are “[n]o gods, no God, no comforting Truths and Absolutes; only stumbling, fumbling man, provisional truths, and an indifferent cosmos in which man,

though a trifling speck in the totality of things, commits himself to life and dreams and to pumping meaning into the universe.”

Potok counts among his early influences in this cultural encounter Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited*, which he read at the age of 14 or 15; and a summer art class with an itinerant art teacher, which he took at age 10. These encounters — urban wanderings, as Potok terms them — can create the core-to-core culture confrontation that is the topic of this essay, and much of his fiction. They shape a kind of individual whom he calls “a *Zwischenmensch*, a between-person. Such an individual will cross the boundaries of his or her own culture and embrace life-enhancing elements from alien worlds. . . . To be a *Zwischenmensch* is to feel at home everywhere and nowhere simultaneously, to be regarded with suspicion by those along the banks as they watch you float by on your raft.” That idea of belonging everywhere and nowhere is a common thread among the writers in this volume.

In “Deism,” E. L. Doctorow describes his major influences: his grandparents, Isaac and Gussie Doctorow, immigrants from White Russia, or Belarus. While he was studying for his bar mitzvah, Doctorow received from his grandfather a copy of Tom Paine’s *Age of Reason*, an analysis of the Bible’s inconsistencies and contradictions. This work had a strong influence on the young Doctorow. “My own mind is my church,” he quotes Paine as saying, announcing, as Doctorow puts it, Paine’s “blasphemous Deism.” This notion of Deism — a belief in God

based on reason rather than revelation, and involving the view that God has set the universe in motion but does not interfere with how it runs — informs Doctorow's swing back and forth between secular humanism and religious reverence. From there, Doctorow goes on to talk about writers and their affiliations (or lack thereof). He argues that, "All writers worth the name are unaffiliated":

The novelist, the poet, will understand the institutions they live within, including their religious traditions, as aggregate historically amended fictions. Appointing themselves as witnesses, they are necessarily independent of all institutions, including the institution of the family — which may be why nothing makes family members more nervous than the discovery that one of them is a writer.

In talking about political correctness, Doctorow observes that the term is, in many ways, socially constructed, and by way of shoring up his point he references Mordechai Kaplan's distinction between separateness and otherness: "Ideally, it is not separateness but otherness that is practiced when people affirm their roots while warranting themselves as citizens of the larger community."

## **Matters of Identity**

What these writers come to, again and again, is that identity is not split; it is dual. The Jewish American

writer is not half of one element and half another; he or she is both-and. For Alan Lelchuk, fiction offers us a way "to understand if not actually dramatize this duality, to be genuine about one's origins while reaching out beyond, to other worlds." To illustrate this duality he describes, in "The End of the Jewish Writer?" the unpleasant experience of being tutored for his bar mitzvah by a demanding, unforgiving father. Immediately afterwards he tells us, "Being an American is no less easy, if taken seriously, than being a Jew, if taken playfully; and the one without the other is a thinner experience." He goes on to say that, "Like most native types, whether Midwest Lutherans, Boston Catholics, inner-city blacks or chicanos, Brooklyn Jews know that we are richer because of the other; and they in turn are enriched by us." And he concludes by suggesting that it is time for the modern Jewish writer to become "just the writer, a writer."

Lelchuck goes on to explain, "If I seem to be speaking about the end of the Jewish writer as an ethnic entity, I am not speaking of the end of things Jewish in his work. . . . Let's say this, the Jewish writer should resemble others of his international troupe, writers performing in the peculiar circus of literature."

In "Max and Mottele," Max Apple describes himself as created of two complementary personae — whose names form the title of the essay — each corresponding to the American and Jewish aspects of his identity. "Lives are distorted, or occasionally salvaged, by questions of identity," he says, "and people are sometimes consumed

by who they are or, even worse, who someone else is. Yet this is a struggle I've never felt in my own bones. Identity is someone else's problem. We know who we are." The "we" here is the doubled aspects of Apple's Jewish-American identity. They communicate with one another, they compete, they separate and reconnect. And like all couples, Apple tells us, "they hold harmony as their highest goal, and they find it above all in the lively carnival of America, in the English language, in words like these, which are to their ears music."

Jews, suggests Erica Jong, in "How I Got to Be Jewish," are obsessed with identity. And writing is a means of creating oneself: "By writing, we re-invent ourselves. By writing we create pedigrees." And what is a Jew? she asks. "A Jew is a person who is safe nowhere (i.e., always in danger of growing payess at inappropriate times). A Jew is a person who can convert to Christianity . . . and still be killed by Hitler if his mother was Jewish. . . . This explains why Jews are likely to be obsessed with matters of identity. Our survival depends upon it."

## Writing and Language

Matters of Jewish identity and writing influence the arc of Cynthia Ozick's "Tradition and (or Versus) the Jewish Writer." She compares her position as a Jewish writer to that of her contemporaries, writers who hail from the other three major world religions: "I am a Jewish writer as John Updike is a Christian writer, or as V.S. Naipaul is a Hindu writer, or as Salman Rushdie is a Muslim writer." But then she goes

on to define her passionate connection to writing and language as defined, on a fundamental level, by her Jewishness, while arguing that writing ought not merely be a means of expressing or developing cultural identity:

I have been enchanted by Jewish fable . . . or struck to the marrow by Jewish historical catastrophe. It is self-evident that any writer's subject matter will emerge from that writer's preoccupations, and it goes without saying that all writers are saturated to one degree or another, in origins, in history. . . . and yet no writer should be expected to be a moral champion or a representative of "identity" . . . I have never set out to be anything other than a writer of stories. . . . As a writer I feel responsible only to the comely shape of a sentence, and to the unfettered imagination, which sometimes leads to wild places via wild routes.

In "Body of Love," Nessa Rapoport writes of her life-long love affair with the Hebrew language, and the places it has taken her: from the text of the biblical Song of Songs, to Sabbath morning prayers, to the Hebrew novels and poems of S.Y. Agnon and Chaim Nahman Bialik, to Israeli radio broadcasts instructing her how to affix gas masks to her children's faces during the Gulf War, and finally to her daily study of Amos Oz' *Sippur al Ahavah ve-Hosbekh* (A Tale of Love and Death) with her mother, by phone. It is her own encounter with the language of Jewish texts, she tells us, that made her

a Jewish writer.

Rapoport describes her generation of writers as having made a transition away from the Yiddish-influenced insular world of Orthodoxy (which informed the writing of the preceding generation), and toward the anarchy of 1960s secular America. Nowhere does this transition, and the linguistic migration attached to it, come across more clearly than in the following lines:

“My great-grandfather said: Yiddish is my mistress, but Hebrew is my wife.

“I say: English is my mate, but Hebrew is my lover.”

## Holocaust

Two essays in this volume focus specifically on the Holocaust, though others touch upon it indirectly. Art Spiegelman, true to form, creates an autobiographical two-page color comic book spread titled “Mein Kampf,” which offers a pictorial journey through his own childhood memories, references his own *Maus*, and concludes with the throwaway line: “Dash [his son] is four years old, and his sister is almost nine. (Two of their grandparents survived Auschwitz).” And Melvin Jules Bukiet’s “Nothing Makes You Free” describes the writer’s rage over the unimaginable losses of the Holocaust, “The *Khurbn*,” as he calls it, the personal impact of those losses on his own family and the innumerable challenges of being a Second Generation writer.

## The Perpetual Juggler

In the concluding essay of the

volume, “When God’s Your Favorite Writer,” Yael Goldstein coins the term “writerly Jew” to help trace her own transformation as a writer:

Though the term “writerly Jew” is clearly just the old familiar “Jewish writer” with the words reversed, a writerly Jew is something altogether different from a Jewish writer; “writerly Jew” is not a literary category at all. A writerly Jew is simply someone whose entire sense of herself as Jewish consists in stories. When a writerly Jew thinks of her Jewishness she thinks of these stories, and when she thinks of these stories she feels very Jewish. . . . they mean enough to her to form her religious identity...

Born of two cultures, sustained by the literature, music, history and customs of two powerful socio-cultural realities — the Jewish American, the writerly Jew, is a perpetual juggler. And the 29 writers who contributed to Rubin’s volume are no exception. It is, significantly, being American that drives these writers, their experiences, their perceptions and perspectives. But they can no more extract their Jewishness from their writing (no matter how secular their upbringing) than could Toni Morrison extract her African heritage, or Paul Monette being gay. These writers ask the question, who are we? But ultimately they explain, in no uncertain terms, who we are.

# Play Ball!

*What is Jewish about America's 'Favorite Pastime'?*  
*Essays and Sermons on Jews, Judaism and Baseball*  
Edited by Marc Lee Raphael and Judith Z. Abrams  
(The College of William and Mary Press, 2006)

REVIEWED BY BURT SIEGEL

While the over twenty essays contained in *What is Jewish About America's 'Favorite Pastime'?* strive mightily to answer the seminal question posed in the title, I'm afraid the volume is hardly a home run, perhaps not even a triple. But it certainly leaves the reader (no doubt a baseball fan, for who else would read a book such as this?) with the sensation of having a player on "your" team hit a solid double with one out. You admire the accomplishment, had hoped for a little a bit more, and believe with all your heart that better things are still to come.

As someone who collected the baseball cards of Jewish players for many years, and paid particular attention to the "stats" of rather mediocre players on teams I never cared about let alone rooted for, like Richie Scheinblum, Art Shamsky and Jesse Levis, I've been thrilled with the recent interest paid to the connection between Jews, Judaism and baseball. Not that long ago my telling people of this hobby often elicited the kinds of mean-spirited ethnic jokes one used to hear about Italian military

heroes or Irish painters. But publications like this one, the issuance in 2004 by the American Jewish Historical Society of a special edition set of the cards of Jewish players (the brainchild of Martin Abramowitz, a contributor to this book) and a dinner honoring Jewish players at the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown—all have established the fact that the "boychiks of summer" have a firm and abiding place in many a Jewish baseball fan's heart.

## Sports and Jewish Stereotypes

As contributor Rebecca Alpert notes, Jews made much greater contributions to professional boxing, and while today's fan might be incredulous to find this out, to professional basketball as well. In the 1930's, Jews dominated the nascent NBA. In fact, in the days when sportswriters could still get away with writing such things, Jewish success in those two sports was often attributed to the natural "cunning" and "craftiness" of the Jewish "race." Other ethnic groups had great natural athletic ability, it seems, but Jews used guile in

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Burt Siegel is the Director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Philadelphia. At the age of 63 he still hopes that Dodgers might sign him as a utility infielder but that will take place only after they make *aliyah* and return to their "homeland" in Brooklyn.

those sports where “faking out” one’s opponent could lead to success.

It is, of course, much more likely that given the patterns of Jewish migration from Europe to America’s major cities, greater involvement in the typically indoor sports played on “canvas” or “hardwood” rather than the grass or dirt needed for a baseball diamond and a reasonably sized outfield made perfect sense. What is still something of a mystery is why so many Jews have a special, deeply emotional and abiding connection to a game that more emerged from America’s small towns and pastures. In fact, it is probably no surprise that many of the early last century’s Jewish players came not from New York or Chicago but from small towns in the south and mid-west — such as Barney Peltey, known as the Yiddish Curver, from Farmington, Missouri who pitched for the old St. Louis Browns at the turn of the century and a little later, rural Virginia born Andy Cohen, who played for the New York Giants in the late 1920’s.

Several of the essays in *What’s Jewish about America’s ‘Favorite Pastime’?* make reference to the impact of the desire of all immigrant groups to “Americanize” and more fully integrate themselves into American society and culture. To the sons of European newcomers, nothing seemed more essentially American than baseball. Indeed, it would be interesting to compare the way the assimilationist instinct played out in other immigrant communities with that of the Jewish experience. While some of the contributors look for Talmudic underpinnings for the Jewish baseball connection, it is more

likely that what motivated the Greenbergs and Cohens to take up the sport was the same motivation that drove the Dimaggio brothers, the Rizzutos and the Furillos. It is worth bearing in mind that during the period of the early twentieth century that shaped so much of the American Jewish psyche, baseball was indeed the quintessential American game. While college basketball was certainly a factor for urban Jews, it did not hold the same iconic value. Pro basketball was hardly a blip on our nation’s sports consciousness and in the early days of TV, in many cities, professional football wasn’t even broadcast. Baseball teams, on the other hand, defined America from the 1920’s until well past the postwar years.

## **Serious-Minded**

The more scholarly essays in this volume, especially those looking for Biblical and halakhic underpinnings for our love of the game, will be the least engaging for most readers. Some are so didactic and serious-minded that I had the urge to remind the writers that what we are talking about is, after all, essentially only a “pastime.” The following comment from the opening contribution by Hillel Goodman entitled, “Mythic Baseball, Mythic Judaism: Time, Space and the Soul,” most typifies that style: “This explicitness in baseball is based upon an epistemology of objectified knowledge that is reported through a dualistic ontological paradigm whereby the observer/recorder is separate from the phenomena which s/he is observing.” I have no doubt that this observation

is accurate, and important, but the reader who cares to learn about how Cal Abrams felt about being thrown out at the plate in a 1950s playoff game between the Dodgers and the Phillies (a relative of mine was so upset that it was a Jew who broke up a potential game and pennant winning rally that he was nervous about an increase in anti-Semitism in his Brooklyn neighborhood), or to read once more about the “to play or not to play” on Yom Kippur struggles of Hank Greenberg, Sandy Koufax and Shawn Green will simply have to wade through a good bit of such verbiage. I’m happy to say, however, that the wading is worth the effort.

Ori Z. Soltes manages to discuss in one place, the history of Jewish immigration to the United States, the best of American sports fiction, an outstanding series of collage paintings covering fifty Jewish families (one from each state), the Hank Greenberg saga (touched upon by several contributors), and toward the end, a summary of the fairly impressive collective statistics of all the Jews who have played in the major leagues (a win-loss record of over .500, a very respectable ERA of 3.66, a batting average of .265). The Soltes piece alone would almost make buying *What is Jewish About America’s Favorite Pastime?* worthwhile. (Though he does make the common claim, which Greenberg himself disputes, that pitchers “stopped pitching hittable balls to him” so that a Jew would not beat Babe Ruth’s home run record.)

Jeff Gurock’s essay discusses, among other matters, how increasing Jewish self-confidence led some to protest the scheduling of playoff games on Yom

Kippur. He quotes one fan as describing this conflict as an “appalling, offensive, discriminatory and totally irresponsible” act.

## **Kosher Food at the Ballpark**

According to Gurock, during the 2000 “subway” series between the New York Mets and Yankees, another Jewish fan complained of discrimination against observant Jews when World Series phone order ticket sales began on Shabbat. We also learn from Gurock where one can find the minyan for davening *ma’ariv* in Baltimore’s Camden Yards, and that the kosher food stand of the Florida Marlins has a better location than in any other ball park. On a personal note, the recent availability of kosher food at baseball stadiums is truly heartening as I recall going to several opening day games at Ebbets Field during Passover with gefilte fish, chopped liver and matzah wrapped in waxed paper.

Several contributors note that Ebbets Field and the Brooklyn Dodgers always seemed more Jewish than did the Polo Grounds, home of the New York Giants or Yankee stadium — a judgment I certainly share, although I believe over the years the Giants had more Jewish players on their roster. Avi Shulman writes that “the Dodgers are, in my opinion, the most Jewish of teams” and quotes from a *Tikkun* magazine article by Ted Solotarof, entitled “Fans as in Fantasy,” where the author suggests that it was the small, crowded, more humble feel of Ebbets field that created the bond between many Jews and the Brooklyn Dodgers. For some reason the entire borough of Brooklyn felt more Jewish;

ironically, although the Yankees home borough of the Bronx had a very sizable Jewish population, the Yankees always seemed very Protestant by comparison. My own theory is that the signing of Jackie Robinson in 1947 was what cemented the loyalty to the Dodgers of many Jews around the county. The recruitment of a black player made a profound statement that the Dodgers apparently envisioned the inclusive America for which Jews yearned. I still recall my father proudly pointing out in the early 1950s that the Dodgers, unlike just about any other team, had both a black and a Jewish (Abrams) player.

## Parents and Sons

Rebecca Alpert skillfully surveys much of the literature, both fictional and autobiographical, that treats the theme of Jews and baseball. Much if it explores the role the game has played in defining relationships not only between fathers and sons, but mothers and their sons as well. The recurring concept of feeling still connected to a dead father who taught us the love of the game through loyalty to “our” team permeates much of this literature. My own experience of losing my rabid Dodger fan father fifteen years ago, in the last weeks of a tight pennant race, is still keen in my memory. His loss felt most permanent the night our team was eliminated, when I realized I no longer could call him to commiserate. Like several of the authors whom Alpert quotes, my own son now roots fervently for the Dodgers, in large part to honor his Zaydie’s legacy.

This work, like the one by Soltes, will have great emotional appeal to the majority of readers. Alas, two pieces that might also have had a more human dimension will have much more limited appeal, other than to the more observant baseball fan. One, by two fourth graders from an unidentified Jewish day school, discusses the somewhat esoteric question of whether “very valuable” baseball cards can be shown to friends on Shabbat or Jewish holidays or can be moved on those days. The answer seems to be that it depends, but if they are not valuable there is no problem. The second is an essay by 6th graders (I assume from the same school) that deals with whether it is permitted to play baseball on *hol ha-moed* (the intermediate days of Passover and Shavuot). I doubt that many readers will have considered these questions, but it seems that the answer is yes if you play for sheer enjoyment, no if you play professionally. But the loophole, according to our young authors, is that you are permitted if you are playing because of your love of the game and not only for your salary or if refusing to play would mean the loss of your job or of a “great deal of money.”

Curiously, none of the contributors is identified other than by name. Some clearly are rabbis as revealed in their essays, and Cal Abrams’ widow’s very readable reminiscence entitled “Memoirs of A Jewish Major League Player’s Wife” makes it obvious who the author is. Otherwise, one’s experience of reading is like watching a player come to bat having no idea of his record. He might please you with a hit, but you’d like to know more about what to expect.

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