

# Reform Judaism: In 2000 Words

## Prayer and Liturgy



### **Context**

*The liturgy that we hold in our hands as we pray articulates our values, expresses our concerns, provides language and structure for our communal worship. As Reform Jews we believe that it must therefore evolve to reflect who we are, to speak as we speak. Indeed, liturgy has never been static; it has always grown and changed, influenced by where Jews lived, their experiences and their relationships with those around them.*

*This week, not one essay but two, reflecting the importance of liturgical development in Reform Judaism. In these articles, **Rabbi Professor Jonathan Magonet**, former Principal of the Leo Baeck College and **Rabbi Paul Freedman** of Radlett Reform Synagogue, both of whom have edited Reform liturgies, explore some of the major changes in the liturgical life of our community over the last century.*

### **Content – Rabbi Professor Jonathan Magonet**

The liturgy, prayers and forms of service of the UK Reform Movement, like those of the many versions of non-Orthodox Judaism worldwide, are dynamic and ever changing. This often leads to the charge of being ‘fashionable’ and therefore somehow superficial. However, a look at the difference between the siddur in use from 1931 until the major revision in 1977 is a stark reminder that between those two dates the Jewish people experienced two major world-shaking events, the Shoah (Holocaust) and the creation of the State of Israel. Not to have changed, not to have taken these into account, would have been absurd, irrespective of any ‘progressive’ ideological concerns. Perhaps less dramatic but equally significant in terms of the wider society in which we live, the recognition of gender inequality and the wish to address it clearly within the movement, had to be reflected in the ‘new’ siddur published in 2008 – not for the sake of being ‘trendy’ but because a religious tradition that is out of touch with the forces affecting its members becomes at best a mere cult and at worst asks its members to hold very different ideals in their ritual and daily lives.

While such major shifts in society may be obvious and require addressing, many others will also exact subtle pressures on communities and lead to almost invisible changes unless attention is called to them. An obvious example is the increasing assimilation of Jews in the UK, reflected in the growth of intermarriage. One response to the need to increase Jewish self-awareness and knowledge is the investment in Jewish day schools. Just as important for the adult population is the need to make synagogues more open, friendly, welcoming and inclusive, and the synagogue service is often the open door to congregational life. Since the lack of fluency with Hebrew can be a major stumbling-block for participation in synagogue services, we introduced transliteration of the Hebrew into the ‘new’ siddur. Though controversial and heavily debated at the time, it has proven to be a welcome move to increase a sense of engagement. Judaism is not a ‘mystery’ religion available only for an in-group, but a home for all who wish to belong.

Having noted these ‘external’ aspects that lead to change, there is much in the development of our liturgy that reflects sensitivity to the content of our prayers themselves, both in terms of innovation to meet perceived new situations, and the reconsideration of amendments and omissions made by our Reform predecessors in their time. A variety of issues affected decisions about Reform liturgy in the 19th century. The external one was the consequence of emancipation and the desire to become accepted as full citizens of European societies. This meant bringing the actual service into conformity with contemporary Christian ‘models’, including greater decorum, aided by the introduction of musical accompaniment; a shorter service, by removing repetitions; reading prayers in unison instead of individually; and the introduction of a sermon addressing contemporary issues.

Ideological issues included concerns about expressing beliefs that were no longer considered acceptable, such as prayers for the restoration of Temple sacrifice, or the belief in a personal messiah. After centuries of ghettoisation and a separate existence, the reformers wanted to embrace the new freedoms given to them to play a full role in society, so began to emphasise the more universal values to be found in Jewish sources.

Conversely, prayers like the Kol Nidre, that could be used by anti-Semites to suggest that Jews could not be trusted to keep their word in business matters, were removed or replaced with what were felt to be more appropriate sentiments. The sense of commitment to the newly emerging nation states to which they belonged made the historical yearning to return to the land of Israel problematic for some, so such prayers were removed or made more muted. The growing study of the history of Jewish texts led to decisions about what was the 'core' of Jewish liturgy and what were additions from later periods that were time-bound and could be removed.

These and many other such ideological concerns, valid in their time, have had to be continually re-evaluated as circumstances changed. Today we are more conscious that some of these traditions are essential building blocks of our inner Jewish life, and, provided they are properly introduced, explained or translated, could be used again today, perhaps with minor amendments, to reinforce the values and spiritual basis of Judaism.

But the Reform Movement's prayer books have also been the source of innovations, some of which have been taken up elsewhere. In the 1975 Sabbath and Daily book we introduced study passages from traditional and contemporary sources into the regular Shabbat services. In order to extend this opportunity we added a study anthology which has been a major feature of subsequent volumes. Part of the thinking was the awareness that the prayer book is one of the few Jewish books to be found in the homes of our members, so that what it contains could have an important educational role, both in exploring Jewish traditional teachings and introducing some of the ideas and values that have stemmed from Jewish authors in the present and have influenced our contemporary society. Another area of importance has been the provision of new passages and prayers to address contemporary life-cycle events and the stages in the spiritual journey of individuals. Thus beyond being solely a 'synagogue' book, our prayer books are a 'kol bo', literally 'everything is in it', a compendium of Jewish wisdom and spiritual aspiration.

The liturgy we use today aims to preserve as far as possible the structure and overall content of the traditional Jewish service, while offering sufficient flexibility to allow it to meet the very different needs of the congregations that make up the movement. Liturgy is only words on a page. What matters is the spirit with which it is used. From highly formal choral services, to informal, innovative musical worship, our liturgy seeks to offer an open door to all who seek a place and a time in which to experience a sense of a shared community life, or simply the personal space for their own private spiritual search and devotion.

## Content – Rabbi Paul Freedman

There are two complementary aspects of what we might think of as prayer in Reform Jewish life and practice. To a degree, these correspond to *keva* (fixed, i.e. structure or routine) and *kavvanah* (intention, i.e. focus or spontaneity). This second, the 'prayer of the human heart', is at the same time universal in that it transcends all religion, as well as uniquely individual, expressing our own spiritual need, our own search for Ultimate Meaning and Purpose, our own connection with Something beyond ourselves. The first aspect, *keva*, is provided by liturgy, liturgy being not just the prayer text but also the routine of time and place, the structures of prayer within a community. It is in this area of prayer, *keva*, that it will be most helpful to consider what is more specifically and characteristically Reform.

Jewish prayer, or rather Jewish liturgy, has evolved over centuries. The present Reform Siddur, *Seder Ha-t'fillot* (2008) is in fact the eighth edition of Forms of Prayer, vol. 1, which dates back to 1841. The introduction<sup>1</sup> to that first edition reminds us that "nothing can be more incorrect than the current notion that the whole of the Prayer Book, as we now possess it, was composed by the men of the Great Synagogue, from Ezra to Simeon the Just... and that, being stamped by the authority of these great names, the Prayer Book has as fixed and immutable a character as the Sacred Code itself."

Furthermore, the aims were to make prayer intelligible and to remove those prayers which do not express sentiments of “a pure and elevating character,” that are “deficient in devotional tendency,” or “are known to be the offspring of feelings produced by oppression, and are universally admitted to be foreign to the heart of every true Israelite of our day.” The service was shortened further since the editors also held that a “service should be confined within such a period of time as to afford ground for the expectation that, from the beginning to the end, it may be able to command the constant, unwearied, and devout attention of the congregation.” A very small number of new prayers and additional “portions of scripture” were introduced, but on the whole the service was “altogether based on the existing ritual.” The editors also sought to combine Spanish and Portuguese (i.e. Sephardi) and German (i.e. Ashkenazi) liturgies. Where the traditions differed, they claimed to give “preference to the superiority of intrinsic merit alone.” Traces of those Sephardi roots of British Reform Judaism remain part of the liturgy to this day.

Although the spiritual needs of the prayer community and the issues of the day and wider society have continued to change, nevertheless, over a century and a half later, the principle of liturgical reform remains the same. In many cases this results not just in novel compositions and liturgical innovation but also, where desirable, in the re-introduction of older texts or structures, a return to older forms of prayer. Of course the fact that Jewish liturgy has always been evolving is an indication that in every age new forms of *keva* arise to facilitate new *kavvanah*. And yet Jewish liturgy is not created anew in each generation; it is a process of development and evolution offering some continuity of traditional forms as well as a degree of consistency across the Jewish world. Liturgical reform offers, not always consistently, a balance of tradition and familiar forms on the one hand with theological innovation and poetic creativity on the other. We might even imagine a spectrum from liturgical conservatism which reinterprets or loosely translates texts rather than edit them, through to a liturgical radicalism that favours contemporary compositions that are thought to address modern concerns and needs more directly.

Reform liturgies, then, will be abridged to shorten the length of the service and to allow the text to be read more slowly. There is a primary emphasis on participation and, to some degree, on a level of understanding by the *pray-er*, in contrast to a sense that there is an obligation or religious duty to ensure that a fixed liturgy has been recited, independent of the experience of the one who is praying. This means that in addition to largely avoiding repetition of prayers, some prayers are omitted altogether (e.g. many lengthy mediaeval *piyyutim*) and others are offered as alternatives so that not all are recited on every occasion (e.g. a series of prayers or psalms within a section of the service). This of course facilitates greater variation in the liturgy from one service to the next. Certain prayers may be read in English, to enable greater understanding, but many (the majority) are still recited or sung in Hebrew as the traditional (and international) Jewish language of prayer, for its history, poetry, its own sound and music, even without, or at best more limited, understanding. The translations since 1977 have used ‘modern idiom’ (i.e. “you” rather than “thee” and “thou”) and since 1995<sup>ii</sup> have been ‘gender sensitive’ (both in language for humanity, including our ancestors, but also in avoiding the pronoun “He” for God and using “the Eternal” rather than “the Lord” to translate the Hebrew tetragrammaton, God’s unpronounceable name).

Other examples of reform in the liturgy are the exclusion of some references to angels (which early Reformers removed but later ones re-introduced); a shifting balance between particularism and universalism (such as in the weekday *Amidah* or the *Aleinu* prayer); the ‘ingathering of exiles’ to the Land of Israel; the reinstatement of animal sacrifices and the Temple cult; a personal redeemer or messiah, or the idea of a messianic age; and the resurrection of the dead.

Reform Jewish prayer is also more than the collective recitation of a Reform text. The Reform Jewish value of egalitarianism also means that men and women are not separated in services and may participate equally. A different understanding of the celebration of Shabbat means that musical instruments are not universally prohibited, so that early Reform synagogues introduced the use of an organ; more recently guitars or other instruments have become more common accompaniments to the service.

<sup>i</sup> D.W.Marks (Ed.), *Forms of Prayer, Daily and Sabbath Prayers*, 1st Edition (1841), pp. v-xii

<sup>ii</sup> Publication of the Pilgrim Festival Machzor. Throughout the year, the 1977 siddur remained in use until the 8<sup>th</sup> edition, which included gender-sensitive translations, was introduced in 2008. Where the text listed patriarchs, the matriarchs were also included.