

The Sources and Reasons for Reforms to Our Traditional Prayer Book

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This is the final (second) article in a series on the traditional prayers that are being altered by “New Jews” and the inherent danger to the continuity of the Jewish people and Judaism.

Jewish law, Halacha, is very extreme in its opposition to the development and integration of new prayers. We can observe this opposition in a very remarkable law. One who is traveling and finds himself in a dangerous place where he is unable to pray the complete Amidah, שמונה עשרה, (not even the condensed version of הברינו) for all intents and purposes may not beseech God, for his request would not be in accordance with the structure of Prayer, תפילה, instituted by the Members of the Great Assembly in the time of Ezra, אנשי כנסת הגדולה. For example, Rabbi Elazar is of the opinion that a Jew who is traveling and finds it difficult to pray the regular Amidah has permission to offer only the following request (ברכות כט:): עשה רצונך בשמים ממעל ותן נחת רוח ליראיך והטוב בעיניך עשה ברוך אתה שומע תפילה. If he adds an additional word or request to this short text, he breaches the wall erected by our Rabbis (פורץ גדר). He must be content to restrict his prayer to this short format and text. Even Piyut, about which a great debate raged among Chazal, and whose majority content is more Midrash than prayer/request, i.e., more a study of Torah than prayer, was incorporated into the prayer service only under the rubric of Tefila and the blessings surrounding Kriat Shma. Piyut as a standalone entity was never permitted.

Even though here and there an occasional prayer was formulated, a request, a יחי רצון, it sprang from the depths of the soul of the nation, from the inspiration of holy generations, from the hearts of Jews who sacrificed themselves daily for Judaism and whose faith was fresh, awake and alive as the early morning dew. Despite all this, our sages, the leaders of those generations, did not recite these additions. They held firmly to the opinion that the text set by the sages of the Talmud era may not be altered. When one finds himself in front of the King of Kings, our sages would remark, one must be very careful with each uttered word, sentence and phrase.

In considering the great mysterious and impenetrable concept of Tefila in general, from one side, and its absolute necessity and ancient historical reality from the other, it is clear Jewish prayer was carefully crafted and created. It consists of 2 components:

- 1) The inner feeling, which is individual, intimate and flowing - each individual experiences his own specific and unique עבודה שבלב;
- 2) The technical realization of Tefila, which expresses itself in the realm of a strict, established text.

We must never weaken our hold on, and commitment to, this established text. For the entire prayer process remains a mystery which we are incapable of understanding and over which we have no right to claim ownership.

However, despite our inability to penetrate the text of the Tefila and to understand it, Knesset Yisrael has displayed something wonderful. She has imbued the fixed, stable prayer routine with oceans of emotion. With this סדר התפלה, Knesset Yisrael kindled the flames of heavenly empathy and ecstasy. Through this text it cried, wiped away its tears and consoled itself. It expressed joy and triumph. Every sentiment in the Jewish soul has found its echo in the text of our Tfilot. The expression of every yearning and need, can be found in its text. This has been the basis of our prayers for all generations, in all countries throughout the ages. In every age, with its specific voices and needs, our people poured out their hearts before God through the text and words of these ancient prayers. No one ever felt uncomfortable using this text. “ולא אמר לי אדם צר לי המקום שאלין בירושלים”. (Paraphrase of אבות דרבי נתן לה:א and other places.)

Along comes our cynical, superficial, irreligious, unproductive generation, and initiates a search for emendations to our ancient texts, a generation that cannot even begin to fathom the depth and meaning of this text. How can we not have a heavy heart when we consider the Chutzpah of people devoid of understanding of Halacha, our weltanschauung, or our history, who attempt to destroy our established laws, customs and סדר התפלה, that have been sanctified and drenched with the blood of martyrdom throughout the ages.

It is heartbreaking to observe how a rabbi in a temple interrupts the Chazan in the middle of חזרת הש"ץ for מוסף on Rosh Hashanah prior to his chanting אלקינו ואלקי and starts to expound, catching the congregation off-guard when they did not expect a sermon between the verse of שמע ישראל and the conclusion of the blessing of מלכיות and therefore were unable to escape the Shul before the rabbi began to speak. One instinctively becomes angry at the boorishness and irreligious anarchy of a rabbi who consumes so much time with his speeches on Rosh Hashanah, and then directs the chazan to omit the blessing of זכרונות, for according to his opinion, it contains a lot of nonsense anyway.

How can we be tolerant towards the empty and worthless reform custom of having the chazan face the congregation with his backside towards the ארון קודש so he can observe the facial expressions of the men and women in the congregation. He does this instead of facing front so he may clear his mind and focus on the singular traditional task of setting his mental state to that of a pauper who pours out his heart to God - תפלה לעני כי יעטוף ולפני ד' ישפך שיחו - Is not Halacha opposed to such superficiality? Are these actions not in opposition to the entire philosophy of Tefila and to the most fundamental foundations of religious respect and fear of God?

Is it not preposterous that people who have absolutely no concept of a “religious experience” formulate prayers and compose dialogues with the Master of the Universe, a task that the great leaders of our nation exhibited extreme trepidation to do? Is it not a tragic comedy that intelligent people convince themselves that mixed seating of men and women, or organ music, is in accordance with the sanctity of the synagogue and the traditional form of prayer while they are fully cognizant that such actions rob both the synagogue and the Tfila of their respective sanctities?

All these practices stem from one common source: from feelings of inadequacy and contempt that many American Jews have for their religious leaders. The desire to mimic Christian ceremonies and practices often drives Jews to religious self-denial and to christianize the synagogue. For very valid reasons the Torah warned against imitating foreign cultural methods and motifs in the service of God. השמר לך פן תנקש אחריהם.. ופן תדרוש לאלהיהם... לאמר איכה יעבדו הגוים האלה ואעשה כן גם אני... לא תעשה כן לד'. For this can destroy the specific and unique aspects of our individual and collective Jewish existence.

In conclusion, I would like to focus on one episode recorded by Reb Avraham Berliner ע"ה, that in my opinion, orthodox rabbis should be acquainted with.

The first time an organ was used in the prayer service was in the city of Seesen, Germany. The initiator of this and other changes to the סדר התפלה was Israel Jacobson. The newspaper Shulamis provided the following description of the first reform service, which took place in that city on 17th of July 1810.

“The 9 o'clock hour was announced by the ringing of the bell, which meant that the ceremony was to begin. As the congregation was entering the sanctuary, they were treated to listen to beautiful organ music accompanied by the voices of a 60–70-person choir, which created a festive mood. After this, the ceremony continued

with the usual set of prayers, which were accompanied by the choir, its leaders and other rabbis who were assisting. At the conclusion of the ceremony, the previously mentioned Israel Jacobson presented a sermon. The choir, accompanied by the organ, sang in both Hebrew and German. Afterwards, Dr. Heinrut, of the municipal church, conducted the cantata (musical arrangement) that was sung in the synagogue. The celebration was original and unique. Had anyone ever heard of Christians and Jews praying together in the presence of 40 dignitaries of both faiths?

Let us fast forward 5 years. We find Israel Jacobson in Berlin. At this point he is a member of the local leadership council. Let us pick up the narration of the story as presented in Shulamis, describing another “sensational religious service”.

“The previous Shavuot, the festival of the Receiving of the Torah, in the year 1815, the council member Israel Jacobson celebrated the “Bar Mitzvah” [Note: Jacobson was a proponent of a confirmation ceremony, similar to Christian denominations, which the reform movement conducts on Shavuot] of his son, Naftali, in his private synagogue in a very festive form. Many Christians attended the religious ceremony. A very festive religious service was presented every Sabbath in the private synagogue of Mr. Jacobson, including a sermon and the accompaniment of an organ”.

The years fly by. Time does what it always does. In the year 1855, a missionary book appears (in its third printing) that consists of 6 essays revolving around the theme of “faith through knowledge and not through tradition”. The author of these essays is none other than our bar mitzvah boy, Naftali, who by this time has converted to Christianity and is now a vicar in the German church hierarchy. He is now called Dr. Herman Jacobson and taken upon himself the task to glorify Christianity and bring the stubborn Jews under the wings of the church. It is interesting to note the forward written by the author, Dr. Jacobson, who had the opportunity to be the first Jewish boy whose Bar Mitzvah was celebrated with the accompaniment of an organ: “I have dedicated these essays to the memory of my dear father. This will appear to be amazing and incomprehensible to all those (a line is missing in the text of the article) ... as a symbol, and the original christian, the symbol of his ignorance. I discussed this with him many times in my youth. I often made known to him my opinion regarding the reforms he instituted, and I have continued the work he started. Therefore, I thank my dear father and I cherish an commemorate his initiative with devoted love.” (as quoted from the writings of Reb Avraham Berliner).

Usually, in America, the danger of conversion is mitigated for the simple reason that conversion to Christianity is not a pre-requisite to a successful career, nor is it something that American Christian society demands. Even in cases of intermarriage, very rarely is the marriage the reason behind the conversion of the Jew to Christianity. However, the danger confronting Jewish spiritual existence does not only rest with conversion, but also with partial or full assimilation. The reforms instituted in the synagogue, that lead to ever increasing christianization of the prayer service and the exclusion of true Halacha as a factor in Jewish life must inevitably lead to the loss of Jewish identity and to religious-spiritual disintegration.

This is my answer to the question regarding my position (and opposition) to alterations to the prayer format, סדר התפלה.

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