

# IS PRAYER BOOK REVISION ENOUGH?

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THE RECONSTRUCTIONIST OCTOBER 5, 1962 Vol.XXVIII, No.11

Our people have come back to the Synagogue in substantial numbers. Some attend regularly, some only on the High Holydays. Others come when invited, for Bar Mitzvahs, Bat Mitzvahs, Confirmations and the like. Some wander in other times, due to *Yahrzeit* or a specific program, or a new Rabbi, or " a series of guest speakers, or some inner quest. The "regulars" attend for many reasons: fellowship, a desire to learn, a vague sense of guilt, "it's the right thing to do"; or, "it's a shame the *shule* is so empty," or (the closest we come to a religious experience), "I feel good when I do."

The service has been sung and read, explained and elucidated, translated and retranslated. Some have become familiar with it, are able to participate in it and respond to it. Some even understand it. And with it all, we cannot in all honesty say that the prayer service has made a difference in the lives of our congregants. We are used to the perceptible stir, which precedes any break in the service. A sermon or a panel discussion causes a stir closer to a physical than a spiritual awakening. Even in the regular attendants we do not note behavior of greater sensitivity or carryover to the world outside the Synagogue. To blame this all on callous laymen is unfair. To say simply that those who do not come regularly are insensitive is likewise unfair. Our Jews have been exposed. They have not come back. The majority dare not, out of politeness, say that the whole endeavor has no meaning for them. Their empty places speak for them.

## RABBIS HAVE THEIR DOUBTS

Is there a connection between the prayer service and piety? Rabbis are not impervious to doubts on this score. For we, too, are often "bored stiff" with the endless repetition of the same formulas over the years. And time and repetition have not endeared the service to us: We acknowledge the problem by programming for services. We have gimmicks for all occasions: Brotherhood and Sisterhood services, youth group and old folk Sabbaths. There is a tacit agreement that the daily *minyan* is maintained for the *Kaddish* sayers. We encourage people to do "Jewry duty" to support the *minyan*, because it is the

right thing to do. We tell our people to come to *shule*, because "the family that prays together stays together," or, in some mystical fashion, "Friday night and/or Saturday morning is "*shule*" time." We tell ourselves that all this will help the Jewish People live-- and it might. Yet we avoid dealing directly with the efficacy of our worship. We offer our congregants no real reason for participating in our liturgy beyond a sense of ancestral piety or guilt or a vague notion that somehow, in some fashion, it is a good thing to do.

For most of us Rabbis, satisfactions come in areas other than prayer. We see ourselves as teachers, pastors, counselors, administrators, fundraisers, community statesmen, and much else. Few of us would recommend prayer to a person who came for counseling. Few of us, deep down, see ourselves as especially adept at prayer. We are supposed to be the prayer leaders. Our training and our role have made us that. We are concerned with prayer as something more than just ornamentation for ceremonial occasions. And we are convinced of the need for worship. But our doubts remain. Is our prayer liturgy effective? Are we, ourselves, moved by it? Does it lead to piety? And, because we are not convinced, we find it hard to convince others. To paraphrase the feelings of many of the committed: "If there were no services at all, if all the Synagogues were closed Saturday morning, it would make very little difference, except that a lot of Rabbis would be out of jobs." This sense of serious doubt, this sense of a lack of purpose exists even among many of those who otherwise serve effectively in our pulpits.

## NEED FOR A "WHY" AND A "WHITHER"

The problem is not new. Attempts have been made to improve the service. For over a century, revisions and adaptations have been made. We, in this generation, are inveterate innovators. We have many prayerbooks. There is a good deal of ongoing liturgical activity, rather mixed in quality. New translations have appeared. New prayers have been added. Introductions have been written. Elucidating comments have been included in the *Siddur*. Prayers we could not in good faith say have sometimes been omitted, occasionally in the Hebrew, more often by means of a deft translation.

Still, no prayerbook has swept the country. None has made our people want to pray. None has brought them back to the Synagogue, in droves, for more prayer. Our prayers may be shortened, they may be in Hebrew or English or a mixture, they may be active or passive, led by a cantor or a teenager, but they have not been made to count. The revisions have not helped solve our ethical

dilemmas. They have not helped us lead our people to piety. If a congregant should happen to leave *shule* better than when he came in, we do not really believe that it had anything to do with his reciting the *Shemoneh Esreh*, the *Shema* or *Alenu* with special fervor.

So a number of questions plague us: Is prayer today an effective means of encouraging piety? Can the present prayer orientation be maintained if only we tinker with it here and there, or must something more drastic be done with our liturgy in order to help move our people to a greater sense of devotion and piety? What is piety? Many of us still picture a person, scrupulous in observing ritual, one who "*davens*" regularly, one concerned with the minutiae of the tradition, one who is obedient to what the authorities, however conceived of, require. We usually associate "going to pray" with piety.

But most of us are not interested in ritual scrupulousness for its own sake. Ritual is not an end. We find little inherent value in the life of ritual concern. As a means, ritual is important, but only as that. Ritual may serve to focus our attention, to deepen our commitment, and to bind us to our people. It is not for us, in a literal sense, God's command. We do not share our ancestors' basic assumptions about it. We cannot say *gezerah gazarti*, it's a divine decree, and therefore say *Kiddush*. We need a "Why?" and a "Whither?" in addition to a "How." Ritual is not our goal in piety. Ritual may be a means of attaining it. Prayer likewise is but a means. There is no question that it can be a help in our search for piety. The question is: Is it today a sufficient means of moving our people in the direction of piety?

## WHAT IS PIETY?

Piety connotes other things: a reverence for God, an awareness of living in His presence, a sense of gratitude for all that is potential and realizable in man and the world, an awareness of creativity, of the holy dimensions of the universe available to man. To paraphrase Dr. Kaplan: "Piety is the attempt to leave the world a better place for our having lived in it." Piety is living guided by these affirmations. It means that we try to realize our fullest potential by using all those forces in us and the universe that can help us realize the divine in us. It must include a sensitivity to the ethical as *mitzvah* and a profound and sympathetic understanding of ourselves and our fellowmen, without which ethical sensitivity is meaningless.

The life of a pious Jew reflects these ideas. He is aware of the divine dimensions in Jewish history. He, as a Jew, undertakes to live his life as an exemplar of these ideas. He is devoted to Torah. Study is a religious obligation, one which leads to action. Torah is a guide to daily living. It includes the tradition and all knowledge, which he uses to make him ethically sensitive and more pious. He treats the tradition not as archaeology, but as a tool with which to shape his life. He would further want to study Torah as a means of uniting himself with his people. He would find in it a record of his people's quest, and a guide for his people's destiny. He loves the Jewish People. And he is aware of signs of divinity in the history of his people. In every way possible, he strives to understand those signs and to help the Jewish People achieve a dimension of divinity today. He, therefore, strives to make his people an example to the nations rather than a reflection of them. Religiously and ethically, he wants the Jewish People to be a holy people, and he is willing to start with himself. This involves a special relationship as well to the State of Israel...for in it he sees the opportunity for the greatest fruition of the hopes and destiny of a potentially holy people.

#### **TRADITIONAL ASSUMPTIONS UNDERGIRDING PRAYER**

An outline of piety is only that. Yet, if these are legitimate aims, we must ask ourselves if the prayer service is an effective way of achieving them. Is the expenditure of time and effort on a liturgy of regular, routinized prayer in all its forms moving us significantly in this direction?

I think the answer is no. The prayer service, even as it has been revised, cannot move us significantly toward these goals--for a number of reasons. The traditional assumptions which undergird our prayer service preclude its doing its job as effectively as we would wish. Our prayerbook and our prayer service are an honest and direct result of these traditional assumptions.

The liturgy presupposes that man can speak directly to a personal God. Furthermore, it assumes that God not only can, but, given the right circumstances, will answer. Twenty centuries ago and two centuries ago, this was accepted as fact. And it was basic to our religious experience. Today it is, at best, "a manner of speaking." What we mean when we say that God answers prayer is "...” and off we go into what are often very clever rationalizations. One thing is certain: We do not mean what our ancestors meant, that God could and would answer prayer quite directly, if need be by interfering with natural law and

human affairs; we do not mean that God personally listens to the entreaty of man.

The drama of prayer was acted out between a petitioner and an all-powerful Sovereign, speaking to one another. Today, prayer is self-exhortation, self-analysis, self-evaluation and self-motivation. At best, these were the byproducts of our ancestors' worship. As a part of worship, the petitioner was enjoined to praise the Sovereign for His beneficent rule of the world. And it was meant as praise, not as a means of making oneself aware of the potential implicit in nature. Our ancestors lived and worshipped by their basic assumptions. They believed what they said.

The service was also God's command. To pray was a *mitzvah*, incumbent on the Jew. It was a part of God's pattern for him. The Jew had to "*daven*," in a certain order, a certain fashion, a certain number of times. He fulfilled God's will by praying. The act itself fulfilled the divine will, irrespective of the efficacy of his prayer.

## NEED FOR A THOROUGH REEVALUATION

For those who share these basic assumptions no revision of the service, no change in its structure need be considered. For those who do not hold to these assumptions about worship, and yet are committed to a Jewish worship experience, the problem of the role of the service is all too real.

For the latter, revision of the traditional service will not suffice. Tinkering with the service, changing a word here and there, will not be enough. In this the age of the astronauts, "rolling away) the light before the darkness and the darkness before the light" does not really put us in touch with the divinity found in the cosmos. In an age of neglect of *Torah* the recitation of *Shema* paragraphs, day by day, does not even come near fulfilling the *mitzvah* of *Talmud Torah*. Praise and petition in the liturgy, taken seriously, may very well have in them the seeds of passivity; but ours is a generation which clearly eschews passivity. To a generation that has witnessed the tragedy of the Six Million, the mention of our exile is not enough to make us aware of the tragic dimension of our history. In an age where we have witnessed the miracle of *kibbutz galuyot* (ingathering of the exiles) *yetziat mitzraim* (exodus from Egypt) alone cannot sensitize us sufficiently to the divine in Israel's history.

Some of the service is even a little embarrassing. Who can fail to feel uneasy, when he finds himself a part of an angelic choir, while reciting the *kedushah*? To meet the problem of meaningful Jewish worship head on we will need more than a revision of the words of the past, more than a new sentence here, a new introduction there, or comments in passing. We will have to thoroughly reevaluate the very presuppositions of our service and its function today.

## CHALLENGE, MET ONCE, CAN BE MET AGAIN

Words were once our ancestor's only outlet. Prayer served as a buffer for the Jew against a relentlessly hostile world. It was a world he could not affect. Today a majority of the world's Jews live in a situation where they can act upon their environment and move it. They need a better tool than one geared to a different situation. Routinized prayer is not enough in an age where words are plentiful, where they often serve to conceal rather than reveal, where there are so many other avenues of communication and motivation. Prayer has not led to greater piety, to greater ethical sensitivity on the part of the overwhelming majority of those who pray. Indeed, it often seems that many of those who are our regular service attendees have an attitude approaching arrogance and intolerance toward the uninvolved.

Some say: "Maybe it will all sink in, if we just repeat it enough. After all, there are ethical concepts at the services. God is the supporter of the downtrodden, God is He who opens the eyes of the blind, God helps man day by day. Perhaps, if we just repeat it enough, it will be effective." But it is more likely that we will become immune; it may even be that we are already immune.

A similar challenge was faced once before. The destruction of the Temple brought about circumstances which dictated a change in the form of Jewish worship. At that time we moved from sacrifice to prayer. That move guaranteed our creative survival. It provided a source of security in a world in which we were buffeted about. It shaped our people. Prayer had been present in Judaism before; from that time on, it became primary.

Today's challenge might be similarly met. The assumptions underlying our service have been destroyed. Circumstances dictate a thorough rethinking of the very form of our worship and of what we want our worship to mean and do. We will, no doubt, have to create new forms of worship. A thoroughgoing new emphasis will have to be laid. The new forms may come from materials present

in the tradition, or they may have to be created *de novo*. But they will have to be found.

## GIVING STUDY A POSITION OF PRIMACY

Prayer will, no doubt, remain within our new form of worship. It is important that we verbalize our feelings. It is important that we evaluate and motivate ourselves. It is important that we try to be aware of God. But there will have to be a *strong shift in emphasis away from the services which consist of routinized prayer repeated day by day, week by week.* Prayer will occupy a smaller place in our worship service. The sacrificial system was not eliminated from the prayerbook. In like manner, some of the traditional prayers will have a place within the new emphasis, side by side with prayers which reflect the dilemmas of modern man.

What areas might we explore in formulating and seeking a new emphasis for our services?

Study is perhaps the primary area; not just study, but *talmud torah*, studying in order to act, studying as an act of worship: This is an authentically Jewish conception, and, given a position of primacy in the services, it could bring significance to our worship. It could help move our people toward greater piety. Study was of tremendous import to the Jew, but it was not the crucial portion of his worship. Study tended, as a matter of fact, to become rather routinized within the service framework, and today, living in an era when study as worship is not appreciated by our Jews, when study as worship is not engaged in, we must take the limited amount of time we have in the Synagogue and give the study of Torah a primary place as an act of worship.

## SOME TENTATIVE SUGGESTIONS

The following are just a number of very tentative suggestions:

- a) The daily *minyan* might revolve around a Torah study session. It could be preceded by the *ahavah rabbah* or other words, to focus our attention on our purpose. To follow it with the Mourners' *Kaddish* would be appropriate,

b) Sabbath mornings offer an extended period for worship. The study in depth of Torah, with an active give-and-take between Rabbi and congregation as to the implication of the material for their lives, could be tried. The Torah reading once fulfilled this function. That was in an age when Jewish knowledge was more limited and the problems were different. Today it has become a "ritual" act.

The service cannot become just an act of intellectual exercise. The devotional framework and all that goes with it, the music, the congregational singing and participation, the sense of ritual symbolism and drama that must take place in a worship service, must be dealt with and included. These acts help make public worship vital, and for religion to be vital its public worship must be vital.

The new understanding of personality cannot remain outside our realm. It is crucial to our work, and our hopes for man are realistic and realizable only when we take it into account and use it. Psychology cannot remain just an uneasy ally. Psychodrama, or sociodrama, must find a suitable place within our worship

## **THE BRAVE WILL SEEK NEW WAYS**

The Sabbath could be meaningful if indeed it would become a time for spiritual regeneration, for a greater understanding of one's identity and relationships, of the place of God and man as partners in an ongoing creation. Studying both within and without the tradition, of sources that help us move in significant direction in the week to come, would be important. In this context the prohibition of the "every-day" on the Sabbath would make sense, for the Sabbath would be indeed the height of life, the time when getting together to live at our most devotional could shed strength upon the coming week.

These are only a few very tentative initial suggestions. This kind of endeavor will take great effort, it will take time, it will take energy and it will take thought. To make the service beautiful and moving will call for great effort, it will call for devotion and regularity, and it will mean that those who are committed to trying to create a new worship will have to make a regular, ongoing commitment. It will mean that we will have to see the Synagogue as a primary

place for worship not as one for entertainment or for ceremonial acts celebrating occasions of the life cycle.

People shy away from the new. There is a fear in all men of change. The old is familiar, and change is usually accompanied by controversy. Yet, change we must. And some of us, at least, dare not hesitate. It may be only a small experimental group who will go out in search of new ways, but someone or some group must give it a try. "There is much to do, the master of the house presses." "We need not finish the task but we are not free to neglect it."