

# The reform of Jewish liturgy or how the (un)traditional becomes traditional

Judith Frishman

The Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), the rabbinical organization of the Reform movement in the United States, is in the process of publishing the final version of *Mishkan T'filah*, *The New Reform Siddur* or prayer book for weekday prayers. This prayer book has been produced by an editorial committee whose members belong to the CCAR; its editor in chief is Rabbi Elyse Frishman.<sup>1</sup> Before embarking on an analysis of this new *siddur*, some introductory remarks about Jewish prayer and liturgical reform in general will be useful.

## 1. Introductory remarks on prayer and meta-narratives

Traditional Jewish prayer is commonly acknowledged as representing one major meta-narrative or rabbinic worldview, which held sway until modernity. The Israeli scholar Adi Ophir, in an article entitled 'The poor in deed facing the Lord of all deeds', offers what he himself calls a postmodern reading of the Yom Kippur *mabzor* (the prayer book for the Day of Atonement) and the working of this meta-narrative.<sup>2</sup> Ophir is struck by the fact that in Israel the Yom Kippur service is one of the few occasions when religious and secular Jews sit together, practicing the ritual as dictated by the text and customs of their congregation.<sup>3</sup> He qualifies his article as an attempt to "articulate that unsecularized common ground between secular and religious Jews" by means of the main liturgical text of Yom Kippur. In other words, he looks for what it is about the prayer book that enables and shapes "that unique partnership in the ritual between religious and secular Jews." How does the text constrain its possible uses by groups of such diverse readers, he asks. And how do different users, with different, sometimes conflicting purposes, manage to maneuver so diversely within the framework of the same text? Ophir's answer is that it is not mean-

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank my cousin Elyse Frishman for providing me with the first draft of *Mishkan T'filah*.

<sup>2</sup> A. OPHIR: The Poor in deed facing the Lord of all deeds, in S. KEPNES (red.): *Interpreting Judaism in a postmodern age* (New York 1996) 181-217.

<sup>3</sup> This phenomenon is in no way restricted to the State of Israel but is common to Jewish communities around the world.

ings and interpretations that are at stake, but practices, i.e. the text is conceived as an aggregate of discursive practices and a set of rules for ritualistic practices.<sup>4</sup>

The Yom Kippur *mahzor* implies and partly expresses a meta-narrative that frames Jewish history, from the creation of the world to the messianic culmination of God's presence in history. The past consists of a series of events from God's covenant with Abraham to the destruction of the Second Temple. The future is post-historical, with God's return to Zion and the restoration of the kingdom of David in some undecided sense of restoration (e.g. spiritual or historical or otherwise). The present is a diasporic present, void of historicity, in which human action is of no or limited influence on events.<sup>5</sup>

The *mahzor* has an annual rhythm of sin and repentance. This cycle is not one, which is non-mediated between the sinner (i.e. the individual) and his/her God, but a mediated one, the mediator being the People of Israel. The cycle of sin and repentance is incorporated into the history of the nation and, as Ophir writes, it functions there "as that which bends the axis of time and forces it to go in circles, with neither memory nor progress, except for the pre-exilic memories and post-exilic hopes."<sup>6</sup> Only two fundamental situations exist and alternate with each other: persecution and salvation. This meta-narrative is flexible; indifferent to history, it opens the way to a myriad of approaches to history for both the individual and the collective. This is why secular and religious can overcome their differences in the framework of ritual and share the open structure of the meta-narrative. Why the secular and the religious, and even the religious among themselves, are not able to overcome their differences in the framework of ritual at other times of the year is a more complicated issue. For postmodernists the life of mankind, or even of one people, can not be reflected by one single meta-narrative. For modernists, this issue has everything to do with the turn to history in Judaism since the *Haskalah* and the subsequent disruption of the meta-narrative. This break is not only reflected in the historical studies of the practitioners of *Wissenschaft des Judenthums*, but also in the newly created liturgies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

## 2. Liturgical Reform

Since the nineteenth century Jewish worshippers have conveyed the need for liturgical reform. The new prayer books issued in Germany from the 1840s onward reflected the wish of bourgeois Jews to attend services attuned to their

<sup>4</sup> OPHIR: The Poor in deed 184.

<sup>5</sup> For similar descriptions of the Jewish sense of history see J.H. YERUSHALMI: *Zakhor: Jewish history and Jewish memory* (Seattle / London 1982, 1996) and L. HOFFMAN: *Beyond the text. A holistic approach to liturgy* (Bloomington IN 1987).

<sup>6</sup> OPHIR: The poor in deed 193.

modern sensitivities. Many Jews no longer observed the Sabbath or dietary laws, and were unable to understand Hebrew, if still able to read it. The new services were to be edifying, filled with decorum and in the vernacular. The role of the rabbi changed from that of legal interpreter to pastoral leader. He even became an intermediary of sorts between the people and God, conducting prayer himself and restricting congregational participation to explicit moments. Because the outside world considered the Jews unworthy of citizenship and accused them of double loyalty, proof of loyalty was proffered even in liturgy. The desire to return to Zion was transformed into the wish for a universal messianic redemption of which the Jews were the heralds. Negative references to non-Jews as idols worshippers were expunged and exile became Diaspora. Emphasis was placed on social justice and ethical behavior, while the attitude towards ritual was ambivalent at best.

Liturgical reform in Europe and later the United States continued along the same lines until World War II.<sup>7</sup> The belief in progress and optimism so typical of the Reform movement was shattered by the *Sbo'a*, and the establishment of the State of Israel led to a rethinking of the concept of nationhood. Although universalism remained on the agenda of Reform, room for both ethnicity and (ritual) commandments had to be created once more. Refusing to adopt an Orthodox approach to *halachah*, Reform Jews turned to the model of Franz Rosenzweig, in which individual growth and autonomy played important roles.

### 3. Gates of Prayer

*Sba'arei T'fila* or *Gates of Prayer*, published in 1975, was the result of years of experimentation. The large selection of texts the worshipper is offered are the products of many contributors. The Sabbath evening service, for example, is available in ten varieties and the Sabbath morning service in six. These services range from classical Reform, i.e. the service as it was in *The New Union Prayer Book*,<sup>8</sup> to the return to tradition and include such themes as social justice, covenantal theology, religious naturalism and mystical search. Yet if we consider the central sections of the service – the *shema* and *sh'mone esre* – in each of these renditions, we will note that nineteenth-century Reform doctrine has been maintained throughout. In the *shema*, the second paragraph, in which natural disasters are described as the result of sin (Deut 11, 13-21), has been omitted. In the *amida* the petitionary prayers referring to redemption by a personal messiah and the ingathering of the exiles have been altered to refer to redemption in the abstract, or have even been replaced entirely by prayers with other

<sup>7</sup> For an overview of liturgical reform especially in the 19th and early 20th century, see J. PETUCHOWSKI: *Prayer book reform in Europe* (New York 1968).

<sup>8</sup> *The New Union Prayer Book*, Central Conference of American Rabbis (New York 1947).

themes. So too reference to the resurrection of the dead has been transposed into God's sustaining life, which in this sense may be considered eternal. In the *aleinu* or concluding prayer, the four offered versions struggle with the prayer's description of Israel's unique destiny, expressed as a negation – "who has not made us like the peoples of the earth (...) who has not made our lot the same as theirs (...)" – as well as with the more universal second paragraph in which false gods vanish and all will come to worship the one God of Israel.

The prayer book of 1975 may be said to have come too early in many ways. The feminist and *chavurah* movements were just beginning to have their effects on the Jewish community: the first woman was admitted to Hebrew Union College, the reform rabbinical school, in 1974. Gender sensitive versions of the prayer book with many more home activities in the style of *The Jewish Catalogue* (1973)<sup>9</sup> began to appear only in the 1980s, after the Conservative movement had incorporated many of the new developments in *Siddur Sim Shalom* (1985).<sup>10</sup> During the course of the thirty years since the publication of the *Gates of Prayer*, the British Reform and Liberal movements have produced new prayer books for the weekdays and Sabbath as well as for the High Holidays.<sup>11</sup> The Dutch Liberal Jewish community has most recently published a new daily *siddur*<sup>12</sup> and a new *mabzor* is in the making. It would seem that the need for liturgical reform has become more pressing as the endorsement of the ideologies reflected in the prayer books becomes more short lived with each successive generation. A look at the trends operating on the Jewish scene world wide and in the USA in particular, where the new Reform prayer book *Mishkan T'filah* and its predecessor *Gates of Prayer* (1975) were conceived, should help us understand why.

#### 4. Trends in Postmodern Judaism

We may speak of two major trends in postmodern Judaism which are seemingly opposites. On the one hand there is a weakening of Jewish identity, of attachment to the Jewish people and institutions and to Israel. On the other hand

<sup>9</sup> The two volumes of *The Jewish catalogue* were bestsellers and of great influence on publications in the 1980s. Cf. S. & M. STRASSFELD (reds.): *The First Jewish catalogue* (Philadelphia 1973) and IDEM: *The Second Jewish catalogue* (Philadelphia 1976).

<sup>10</sup> *Siddur Sim Shalom*, The Rabbinical Assembly (New York 1985). Shorter Reform liturgical publications of the 80s were jointly published in *Gates of Prayer for Shabbat and Weekdays*, Central Conference of American Rabbis (New York 1994).

<sup>11</sup> The first version of the *Forms of Prayer for Jewish Worship* was published by The Reform Synagogues of Great Britain in 1977. Versions for the High Holidays and the Pilgrim Festivals were published respectively in 1985 and 1995. The Union of Liberal and Progressive Synagogues published *Siddur Lev Chadash* in 1997.

<sup>12</sup> *Seder Tov Lehadot*, Verbond van Liberaal-Religieuze Joden in Nederland (Amsterdam 2000).

there is talk of a Jewish renewal, revitalized Jewish culture, making a point of including Jews from previously marginalized and silenced sectors of Jewish society. This Jewish renewal or postmodern Judaism challenges the hegemony of the prevailing modern, rationalistic orientation of the organized Jewish community, its challenge being particularly aimed at non-orthodox Judaism with its nineteenth-century universalistic bent and belief in progress. Postmodern Judaism, in approaching sacred and literary texts, attempts to bridge the modern dichotomies of high and low culture, sacred and profane, philosophy and literature. It celebrates the value of the local and particular and attempts a new openness to pre-modern forms and motifs.

I have borrowed this description of postmodern Judaism from Peter Margolis, who, in his article 'Postmodern American Judaism: origins and symptoms',<sup>13</sup> lists six symptoms of postmodernism which he applies to postmodern Judaism: 1) The first symptom is the allowance for multiple voices whereby expression is given to the marginalized other.<sup>14</sup> 2) The second is the breaking up of the canon, challenging accepted sources of cultural legitimacy. Margolis refers here to a form of Jewish neo-*Hasidism*, in which a synthesis of elements of pre-modern Eastern European ecstatic Judaism and modern personal autonomy occurs. The interest in *Kabbalah*, but also in *Zen*, pertains to this symptom.<sup>15</sup> 3) The supplementing, modification or replacement of existing institutions by e.g. retreats, *chavurah*. 4) Non-linearity is an alternative to rational progression and involves the use of associative experience and the use of *midrash* to construct and reconstruct reality.<sup>16</sup> 5) The fifth symptom involves the changing of meanings whereby local and personal spirituality replaces the centrality of Israel (both people and land); 6) Finally ironic juxtaposition is the combination of hitherto seemingly incompatible elements, such as the use of healing services or Hasidic *niggunim* (melodies) in Reform synagogue prayer, characterized by decorum and the music of Lewandowski (composed in the 1870s in Berlin).

Any successful prayer book or Jewish (religious) organization for that matter will somehow have to take the trends discussed by Margolis seriously, attempt-

<sup>13</sup> P. MARGOLIS: Postmodern American Judaism: origins and symptoms, in *Central Conference of American Rabbis Journal* 47, 2 (spring 2001) 35-50.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. S.D. BRESLAUER: Building a postmodern Reform Judaism: the example of Eugene B. Borowitz, in D. KAPLAN (red.): *Platforms and prayer books. Theological and liturgical perspectives on Reform Judaism* (Lanham MD 2002) 247-260, here 254-255 referring among others to the works of both Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin.

<sup>15</sup> For similar phenomena in the Netherlands among (postmodern) Christians and others cf. C. ANBEEK: *Zin in zen. De aantrekkingskracht van zen in Nederland en België* (Rotterdam 2004).

<sup>16</sup> The interest in *midrash* has been growing over the past decade. See for example D. BOYARIN: *Intertextuality and the reading of midrash* (Bloomington IN 1990) and more recently M. SATLOW: *Oral Torah: reading Jewish texts Jewishly in Reform Judaism*, in KAPLAN: *Platforms and prayer books* 261-270.

ing to infuse a measure of spirituality into prayers, while including new voices and social patterns, synthesizing ancient sources and modern autonomy. Whether or not the new Reform *siddur* does so will be discussed in the following section.

## 5. Mishkan T'filah

Already in the 1990s the CCAR called its 'Liturgy Project' into being with the intent of studying the factors involved in successful worship including the role of *Gates of Prayer*.<sup>17</sup> The significance of the themes developed in *Gates of Prayer* eluded most congregants. But, more importantly, they "pondered the paradox of our active or passive assent through liturgy to a theology we do not believe."<sup>18</sup> At the heart of this theology is (a) God who is felt by some to be too omnipotent or judgmental despite Reform Judaism's openness to perceiving or understanding the Divine in manifold ways. They might identify with a God as described by Eugene Borowitz "who becomes a sign that something has occurred to the worshipping person (...) God (who) symbolizes expectation, speculation and hope."<sup>19</sup> Subsequently, they might look for a flexible way of Torah that arises out of personal experience.<sup>20</sup> The emphasis on the personal infers that identification with the collective as examined in Ophir's analysis of the *mahzor*,<sup>21</sup> fails to speak to many Jews today. They might (subconsciously) share the postmodern readings of God in the *mahzor*, who, according to Ophir

is no longer the absolute, always absent referent (...) but an addressee of a special sort, a pole of intentions, flexible and not uniform, created by the ensemble of representations that describe Him (...) . Conceived as an addressee (...) God's existence or essence is not a basic assumption necessary for 'making sense' of (or endowing) each of His diverse representations.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>17</sup> For a brief description of the findings of this project see P.S. KNOBEL: The Challenge of a single prayer book for the Reform movement, in KAPLAN: *Platforms and prayer books* 155-170.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem* 162.

<sup>19</sup> S.D. BRESLAUER: Building a postmodern Reform Judaism 249-250, and E.B. BOROWITZ: *Renewing the covenant: a theology for the postmodern Jew* (Philadelphia 1991).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem* 252.

<sup>21</sup> The presence of the meta-narrative and the emphasis on the collective in weekday and Sabbath services is intimated but once by Ophir. Cf. OPHIR: The Poor in deed 198-199.

<sup>22</sup> OPHIR: The Poor in deed 188. Cf. KNOBEL: The Challenge, 163 where a worshipper notes: "I only find God acceptable within the context of the service. I read the word as part of the Jewish experience of him (...). The God of prayer makes some kind of sense to me more than in any other place (...)"

Yet in a modern or postmodern age it is humanity and not God who is in the center of reality, and it is this humanity that *Mishkan T'filah* addresses.

*Mishkan T'filah* seems to be an attempt to incorporate both the traditional and the personal. This first volume, like more recent European Liberal and Reform prayer books, is intended for weekday prayers, implying that Reform Jews practice, may want to practice or should regularly practice their Judaism at moments other than the Sabbath, as do other traditional Jews. The traditional is juxtaposed rather than integrated with the personal as the lay-out indicates. On the right hand pages the prayers are arrayed in two columns: the one on the right containing the Hebrew text, that on the left the transliteration. Following these two columns is an English translation centered on the page. On the left hand pages two alternatives for or supplements to the traditional texts are available, culled from the Bible, prayer books and the poetic and narrative works of Jewish authors. These texts are surrounded by a barely visible frame which creates margins on the top, outer edges and bottom of each page. The sections of the service are indicated in the top margin of the first page, on which the opening prayer of the section such as the 'Shema and Blessings' may be found. The outer edges list one above the other the first words or names of all the prayers in this section of the service in Hebrew (on the right hand page) and in English (on the left hand page), the prayer at hand being indicated in bold face. The bottom margins offer explanations of the prayers and references to the non-traditional source material. As is clear from the above, the intended worshippers may feel attracted to the traditional, but are not assumed to be from a traditional background. They are in need not only of a translation, but also of transliteration and a navigation system to guide them through the service and its various parts. In this sense *Mishkan T'filah* is not unlike *The Art Scroll Siddur*,<sup>23</sup> which is intended for an (modern) Orthodox public who may or may not be familiar with the prayer service and is in search of or in need of additional meaning and interpretation.<sup>24</sup>

Two prayers which have traditionally posed difficulties for the Reform movement – i.e. the second paragraph of the *shema*, and the *aleinu* – have been reintroduced in the first drafts of the new *siddur*. However, the passage from Deut. 11 will be substituted as it was in *Gates of Prayer*. While some have problems with a retributational theology and others understand the passage metaphorically, "because the paragraphs come from Torah, it was decided that in the

<sup>23</sup> *The Art Scroll Siddur* (New York 1984) does not provide transliteration. *Mishkan T'Filah* will probably be published in two versions: one with and one without transliteration. This compromise is the result of ongoing debates as to whether it is better to encourage the study and reading of Hebrew from the original or acknowledge the reality of the lack of Hebrew knowledge among members of Reform synagogues today.

<sup>24</sup> At least some of the worshippers are likely to be *ba'alei t'shuvah*, i.e. those who have turned to orthodox Judaism after having been brought up in secular or non-Orthodox environments.

context of prayer, this material continued to be too challenging.”<sup>25</sup> The text of the *Tefila* or *sh'mone esre* proves to be more problematic and more often than not the traditional text has been substituted. The first prayer which mentions the merits of the ancestors adds the foremothers to the forefathers in both Hebrew text and translation. Moreover, God does not send a redeemer (*go'el*) to their children, but redeems them himself – according to the translation – or, less explicitly, brings redemption (*ge'ulah*) as in the Hebrew text. The intellectual integrity found in the rendition of this prayer is not wholly maintained in the second prayer on the resurrection of the dead as found in the first draft. While altering the traditional “who revives the dead” in the opening and conclusion of the second *berachah*, *Mishkan T'fila* retains *m'chayyeh metim* in the middle of the prayer and translates

Your power is vast, Adonai, *renewing life* against all odds. You nourish life with compassion, *renewing what is dead* with mercy profound (...) . Sovereign who takes life, *who gives life* (...) Truly you *revive what was dead*. Blessed are you, Eternal, the One who *renews life*.

The giving of life and its renewal after death, surely meant as consecutive events in the original, are presented here as separate courses of not necessarily related actions. This inconsistency is brushed aside in a note explaining Reform Judaism's preference for emphasizing life rather than death. Many have already expressed their discomfort with this compromise, but concurrence regarding the definitive text has not as yet been reached.

Equally problematic in the twenty-first as in the nineteenth century are the ingathering of the exiles, the rebuilding of Zion and the temple and the reinstatement of judges there. These have been given a universalistic bent in both the Hebrew and English without further comment. Thus the traditional

Sound the great shofar for our freedom; lift up the banner to bring our exiles together, and assemble us from the four corners of the earth. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who gatherest the dispersed of thy people Israel<sup>26</sup>

has become

Sound the great horn to proclaim freedom, inspire us to strive for the liberty of the oppressed, and let the song of liberty be heard in the four corners of the earth. Blessed are You, Eternal, Redeemer of the oppressed

<sup>25</sup> This quote is from a forthcoming article by E. FRISHMAN, to appear in *Journal of Reform Judaism*.

<sup>26</sup> PH. BIRNBAUM (ed. & trans.): *Daily Prayer Book. Ha-Siddur Ha-Shalem* (New York 1949).



So too

Return in thy mercy to the city Jerusalem and dwell in it as thou hast promised; rebuild it soon, in our days, as an everlasting structure, and speedily establish in it the throne of David. Blessed art thou, O Lord, builder of Jerusalem<sup>27</sup>

has been transformed into a prayer for peace

And turn in compassion to Jerusalem, Your city. May there be peace in her gates, quietness in the hearts of her inhabitants. Let your Torah go forth from Zion and Your word from Jerusalem. Blessed is the Eternal who gives peace to Jerusalem.

Diverse and even conflicting perceptions of God are to be found in *Mishkan T'filah*. In the traditional prayers for the evening service, God is addressed as the one who brings evening, changes seasons, and discerns between darkness and light; He is the force behind nature. The alternative prayers take their cue from the former, but identify God closely with nature, implying that God may be experienced through nature, i.e. "your radiance is sun pouring down over my head, coming up close against me." God is not the beginning, center and conclusion of these prayers, but forms at times their culmination (a mysterious will) or is even absent. The diversity is expressed most explicitly on the introductory pages to the *Shema*. A poem adapted from Leah Goldberg opens with the words: "On high, I am unity, but below I am the multiple (...) On high I am God, in the stream, I am the prayer." A brief commentary on the same page notes that when the *Shema* prayer is offered, "we seek to unify the higher and the lower realms, to make this world resemble the one on high." Thus God will always be understood in many forms and the prayer book must somehow represent these many voices within its pages. The reader will be able to identify his or her own visions of God on these pages and be exposed to the visions of others which theoretically unite, allowing the personal to link up with the communal.

If (the conceptions of) God is (are) multiple, so too the people of Israel's relationship to Torah and *mitzvot* is not unequivocal. While the *b'racha* just prior to the *Shema* unambiguously considers the Torah and *mitzvot* as gifts of God's love upon which Israel meditates and in which it rejoices with wholehearted commitment, the texts on the left page reveal doubt. On the one hand the Torah has been passed down from one generation to the next, yet it is a struggle to understand it; on the other hand Torah itself is full of understanding, yet not wholeheartedly adopted by the people and we are warned that it would be foolish "to lose our way, stop our ears, freeze our hearts."

In conclusion, the generation of Reform Jews whom this *siddur* addresses are uncertain and confused about their commitment to the people Israel and its

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*.

God. They are the offspring of previous generations of Jews who question their own role as links in this chain of tradition. These different users, with different, sometimes conflicting purposes, apparently do not manage to maneuver diversely within the framework of the same text, as do religious and secular Jews on Yom Kippur. Unable to identify the God of the traditional prayers as an addressee of a special sort, a pole of intentions, flexible and not uniform, these worshippers are, therefore, in need a diversity of texts. Whether or not the so called 'integrated theology'<sup>28</sup> of the *siddur* will "motivate a life of Torah, mandate loyalty to the Jewish people and make life with God possible for the individual" as Jewish theology according to Borowitz must do,<sup>29</sup> remains to be seen. If subjective reality rather than the objective fact provides the motivation for a Jewish deed and regulars at synagogue are those who attend more than eight times a year on Shabbat,<sup>30</sup> one may wonder what subjective reality will motivate these and less regular attendees to perform Jewish deeds.

J. Frishman is sinds 1998 hoogleraar Geschiedenis en literatuur van het rabbijnse jodendom aan de KTUU. Zij is sinds 1995 tevens bijzonder hoogleraar Geschiedenis van de relaties Jodendom-Christendom vanaf de nieuwere tijd, vanwege het Haagsch Genootschap aan de Faculteit der Godgeleerdheid van de Universiteit Leiden. Correspondentieadres: KTUU, postbus 80101, 3508 TC Utrecht; JFrishman@ktu.nl.

<sup>28</sup> According to Elyse Frishman this term, coined by Elaine Zecher, refers to the polyvocal nature of *Mishkan T'filah* whereby people holding diverse beliefs are invited to full participation at once, without conflicting with the *keva* text (i.e. the text more or less in its traditional wording as found on the right hand side pages). Cf. E. FRISHMAN: *Journal of Reform Judaism* (forthcoming). Interestingly enough, this claim seems to coincide with Ophir's description of the traditional prayers.

<sup>29</sup> E.B. BOROWITZ: *Renewing the covenant* 58-60.

<sup>30</sup> This is the definition of regulars according to the Union of Reform Judaism-CCAR-American Conference of Cantors Joint Commission on Religious Living.