

# A CASE FOR THE NEXT *SIDDUR*

## AN ESSAY CALLING FOR *SIDDUR* REVISION

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"Most American Jews have long had trouble believing in the **standard-issue rabbinic God**, which, after all, comes to us as a **semifinished product of medieval times**. Few such products thrive amid the tailwinds of the Enlightenment zeitgeist, so this stuttering propensity to disbelief is no surprise, if we're in a mood for a little honesty." Adam Garfinkle, *The Collapse*, Tablet, 4/11/19

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*Gates of Prayer* was published in 1975. By 1985, ten years later, a “*Siddur* Discussion Group,” which eventually led to the publication of *Mishkan T'filah* in 2007, convened. *Mishkan T'filah* is now in its fourteenth year. It may be **time to envision** the next *Siddur* Discussion Group.

There has been much praise, and criticism, for MT, the volume that serves as the official *siddur* for the Reform movement. We would scarcely expect otherwise. This article will focus on one aspect of MT, and it is a critical one.

MT, like GOP before it, sought to incorporate many, if not every, possible theological perspective into its pages. GOP did this by offering various service options, each purporting to reflect a different religious viewpoint.

This turned out to be of greater interest and significance to rabbis than it did for laypeople, the overwhelming majority of whom were oblivious to its nuances. Similar to its predecessor, MT incorporates what it calls an “integrated theology: the transcendent, the naturalist, the mysterious, the partner, the evolving God.”<sup>1</sup>

In justifying this integrative approach, MT states that the “ethic of inclusivity means awareness of an obligation to others rather than mere self-fulfillment.”<sup>2</sup> **It is an admirable sentiment but perhaps a misplaced one.** While diversity and inclusivity are indeed cornerstones of our movement, in a *siddur* they are **more likely to be confusing than helpful**. When prayer is the object, given the tenuous relationship that exists between so many Reform Jews and God to begin with, trying to be as many things as possible to as many people as possible does not necessarily serve us well.

**Few Reform Jews** who have thought seriously about the matter **believe in the personal, intervening, theistic God** that is found, claims of integrated theology notwithstanding, throughout

MT's pages. Nor have we educated our people, certainly not in any systematic or clear way, that **this is not the God that the great majority of Reform rabbis believe in either.** Most people continue to come away with the sense that the *siddur* affirms belief in "the God they grew up with." And this is a God that they accept, at best, with a huge grain of salt.

A not uncommon reaction, which predates MT, has been that "If this is what Judaism really says about God, it might be better for me to seek spiritual and religious guidance elsewhere." This they have done, becoming secular, agnostic, not-so-religious, syncretistic, atheistic, "none," etc., in the process. **Our next *siddur* should respond** to this phenomenon, with a **living, non-mythical God at its heart.**

The primary purpose of the Jewish prayer service is to strengthen the connection between the worshipper, God, and tradition. Our people embrace modern sensibilities. The God they meet in a twenty-first century Reform *siddur* should cohere with, and not contradict, their level of education, understanding, and experience. The God we present must at the very least be plausible, and hopefully, believable. It should present God, on every page, as inviting the response: **this God makes sense to me, this is a God I can live with, this may even be a God I can live for.**

Since the vast majority of worshippers have neither the expertise nor the time during a service to do anything other than take its words at face value, the *siddur* needs to engage the worshipper directly. **It needs to present God so that God cannot be dismissed out of hand.** Nor should it require esoteric knowledge or scholarly reinterpretation for its words to make sense. Where God is concerned, **the *siddur* should offer clarity, not choices that most people are ill equipped to make.** As Reform rabbis we are diverse in our theological stances. At the same time, we are rather consistent when it comes to what we do **not** believe God is and does.

Much in MT is, and remains, valuable, beautiful, and transcendent. But much still testifies, in Hebrew and in English, to God ideas and images that most of us have left behind.

The essential task of deciding precisely which oxen to gore, and how to gore them, will be a formidable one. The work of the next *Siddur* Discussion Group will likely be extensive. But if the fundamental principles can be agreed upon, and my sense is that most of us subscribe to the ones described below, it can be accomplished.

**The remainder of this article is envisioned as an introduction to the new *siddur* for lay worshippers.** Think of a version of it appearing over the signatures of the editorial committee-to-be. We can simultaneously look at it as a guide-template for ourselves as we contemplate the *siddur*'s composition. The issues are divided into four categories, understanding that there is overlap between them.

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## INTRODUCING THIS NEW *SIDDUR*

**The *Siddur*** is the traditional gateway to Jewish life, belief, and practice. The prayers it contains, the statements it makes, and the faith it describes are understood, as much as any one volume can be, as

**Judaism’s “official word.”** There are many streams and expressions of Judaism. This *siddur* represents ours.

As the **Jewish people and Jewish belief have evolved through history**, so too, has the *siddur*. In recent centuries, *siddurim* have been modified to reflect contemporary perspectives on animal sacrifice, bodily resurrection, the use of the vernacular, the nature of the messiah, Jewish chosenness, Zionism, the length of the service, gender, and more. There was considerable restructuring and revision during the two millennia prior, as well.

Yet much remains in *siddurim* that attests to beliefs and understandings that large numbers of twenty-first-century Jews no longer accept. There are **prayers that ask God to overturn the laws of nature** or to “come down” and change the course of history. There are assurances that **God protects people who are good**. There is testimony that **God determines, justly of course, our fate**, as individuals and as a people. Each of these perceptions, as well as others, have been challenged and repudiated by our own life experience and reason.

This *siddur* is conceived as a guide for modern, critically thinking, spiritually interested Jews. The Hebrew prayers, as well as the English translations, commentaries, and readings, **cohere with the teachings and understandings of current scholarship, science, and belief**. It has been compiled with an eye towards touching the divine in the Jewish heart, mind, and soul—in language that can be readily understood. We believe its time has come.

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## WHAT WE HAVE REVISED

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### —תפילות שוא—*Tefilot Shav*—Prayers in Vain

The *Mishnah* teaches that prayers asking God to change outcomes that have already been determined are *tefilot shav*—“prayers in vain” or “wasted prayers”.<sup>3</sup>

Someone returning to his town who sees a house burning in the distance and prays that the fire not be in his home is making a *tefilat shav*. The fire’s location has already been determined and, the Rabbis understood, it was beyond the power of prayer to change it. Similarly, if expectant parents pray that the sex of their *in utero* child be one or the other, it is a *tefilat shav*. That, too, has already been determined and prayer is powerless to change it. Despite this venerable teaching, **contemporary *siddurim* contain numerous prayers that might also be considered “in vain.”**

There are **pleas asking God to cure illness**. They derive from biblical accounts that portray God as the source of both disease and recovery.<sup>4</sup> The Bible and Talmud suggest that when people pray on behalf of the sick, God can be moved to heal them.<sup>5</sup>

Moderns understand that **this is not how disease works**. The condition of the patient, the skill of the physicians, the medicines administered, and (God’s) laws of biology, chemistry, and nature are what determine an illness’ outcome. Prayer plays a supporting role, at best. If the classical Rabbis

understood science as we do, they too would have considered petitions asking God to “come down and heal” to be prayers in vain.

We believe that **the *siddur*, of all books, should not portray prayer as capable of doing what it cannot.** When people see that prescribed prayers fail to alter the course of nature, it serves to undermine, instead of strengthen, their relationship with God. There are prayers that we can, and should, offer on behalf of the sick but, “God, please heal her,” is not among them.

We do recognize that moral support can be a critical factor in the treatment of serious, and even not-so-serious, illness. **When patients are aware that others are concerned enough to pray for them, they are often comforted.** This can aid in the healing process. And, while the prayer itself may have no effect either on the disease or on God, **praying for the sick can give the pray-er comfort as well.** Sometimes it is the only thing we can do for our dear ones. **The prayers for healing within this volume reflect such an understanding.**

*Siddurim* are similarly filled with petitions asking **God to grant us peace.** But these, too, are prayers in vain. **When humanity remains intent on disturbing the peace it is beyond the power of God to bestow it.**<sup>6</sup> Nor do we believe that God changes the behavior of others in response to our requests, however impassioned they may be. Instead of vain words like these, this *siddur* offers prayers that will encourage, and hopefully inspire, humanity to utilize our free will to seek peace and pursue it.<sup>7</sup>

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### בקשות—*Bakashot*—Requests

Other prayers of doubtful efficacy are known in the tradition as *bakashot*. These are **requests we make of God and they can be found in every service.** *Bakashot* ask God to grant us things such as protection from harm, justice for the oppressed (and the oppressors), mercy for the deserving, victory over our enemies, abundant harvests, improved self-control, a multitude of descendants, righteous leaders, and greater prosperity.

*Bakashot* are premised on a **hierarchical** relationship with God; we tell God what we want and God grants our wishes—or doesn’t. *Bakashot* are also predicated on the belief that our prayers have “**agency**,” i.e., the power to change God’s mind or course of action. They imply that God is able to alter the laws of nature in order to protect us.<sup>8</sup>

These are not beliefs to which we subscribe. We prefer to think of *bakashot*, like *tefilot shav*, as **worthy desires that are our responsibility to fulfill**—if and when they can be fulfilled at all.

Asking God to do things for us, whether they are possible or not, likewise carries within it the **potential for spiritual harm.** When it appears that God has denied one of our requests, we may walk away feeling disappointed, rejected, alienated, or worse. It may leave us thinking that God did not find our prayers good enough, or that God did not find **us** good enough, or perhaps that God does not even exist in the first place. **Prayer should never point us in any of these directions.**

Ancient legends notwithstanding, God has yet to answer a prayer to rescue a decent and righteous human life from danger with miraculous or supernatural intervention. The only possible explanations are that God has rejected us, that God does not exist, or that this is not how God works. We believe the latter is correct. **God does not betray<sup>9</sup>—although misdirected prayers may.**

This *siddur* is intended to inspire us to make our lives, and the world, better through our individual and collective actions and behavior. We do not ask, or expect, God to supernaturally intervene and magically do such work for us.

*Bakashot* can, and do, remind us of what is worthwhile and valuable. They articulate goals to which we can aspire and values we should strive to uphold. They **are presented here as requests we make of our higher selves, and of the Divine spirit within.**

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השגחה: פרטית וכללית—*Hashgacha: pratit and klallit*

### Oversight and Dominion

*Siddurim* are generally filled with affirmations of the ancient Jewish belief known as *hashgacha*. It is a doctrine that asserts **God watches over, cares for, and protects us**—as individuals and as a people. At the same time, it holds that **God has a plan through which He (*sic*) guides human history.**<sup>10</sup> These beliefs are problematic for many moderns. We understand why.

The idea of God as the protector and guardian of the innocent and righteous is **impossible to square with all that we have seen and experienced.** Far too many decent and upright individuals—of every faith and nation—have suffered cruelly, unjustly, and mercilessly. Entire peoples, including our own, have endured unspeakable catastrophe. Billions have now borne witness to this.

If the God of justice and love is overseeing and directing the course of history, then God is doing a poor job of it. Rather than accept this, **we can affirm that while the course of human destiny may depend on God's spirit, it rests very much in human hands.**

The Torah commands us to **pursue justice and righteousness, by loving our neighbors as we love ourselves, and by protecting the powerless from the predations of the powerful.** The protection of the righteous and the innocent, and the overall state and well-being of our world, once again, depend on us.

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### The Supernatural and the Superstitious

Texts conceived by the ancient religious imagination that describe supernatural occurrences abound in Jewish literature. They are found in *siddurim* as well. The preeminent twelfth-century philosopher and legal authority **Moses Maimonides** believed they should not be taken literally. Instead, he **taught that “the Torah speaks in the language of humanity,” i.e., metaphorically.**

We accept this, while at the same time appreciating that many of those texts possess great inspirational power.

For example, *siddurim* traditionally contain prayers asking God to bring timely rainfall and dew to the Land of Israel. They are predicated on an ancestral belief that life-sustaining rain and dew are rewards for keeping the commandments.<sup>11</sup>

Once again, we know differently. The fall of **rain and dew** are determined by meteorological conditions and **are not dependent, in any way, shape, or form, on how closely people adhere to the Torah's commandments.** The belief that God can be persuaded to make dew or rain fall when atmospheric conditions do not warrant them is, in essence, a superstitious one.

We do know, however, that **human conduct has a profound effect on the overall health of the environment.** The quality of our care for the earth, seas, and skies impact not only dew and rainfall, but much else as well. The prayers in this *siddur* that relate to weather and climate focus on our responsibility to be faithful stewards of the planet.<sup>12</sup>

*Siddurim* also portray **God as our shomer—guardian and protector.**<sup>13</sup> This is an understanding that dates to the covenants described in the Torah between God and Abraham, and later, between God and the nation at Mt. Sinai.

The fealty of our people to this covenant has been a hallmark of Jewish existence and survival. But this **does not mean that God protects us from harm as a reward for our dedication.**

Here, we hold that **commitment to God's path and way is its own reward,**<sup>14</sup> without an expectation of *quid pro quo*. This *siddur* reflects the understanding that ancient descriptions of supernatural protections are best understood as legendary.

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## WHAT CAN WE PRAY FOR?

If we eliminate prayers that are *tefilot shav*, *bakashot*, claim *hashgaha*, or rely upon superstitious or supernatural premises, what might be left? A great deal, actually.

We can pray to be able to recognize God's presence in the works and laws of creation and in the spirit of holiness.

We can pray to make more of that spirit our own through acts of kindness, wisdom, truth, compassion, love, charity, and justice.

We can pray that we might draw more deeply upon our Jewish tradition as a source of moral and ethical counsel.

We can pray to be instilled with the spirit of gratitude for life and its blessings.

We can pray to strengthen our commitment to our achievable dreams and worthy hopes.

We can pray for the courage to persevere, to overcome fear, and to pass life's severest tests.

We can pray that we might find the path to our highest selves.

We can pray that we might hear the still, small voice within.<sup>15</sup>

We can pray to embrace more behaviors that can lead to holiness.

We can pray to understand how life can be an expression of divine service.

We can pray for the wisdom to help us find a sacred community.

We can pray for a stronger desire to help heal and repair the world.

We can pray to embrace the role and responsibility of the people Israel to be a light unto the nations.

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## NOTES

1 *Mishkan T'filah*, p. ix

2 *Ibid.*, *loc. cit*

3 *M. Berachot* 9:3

4 Job 5:18; also, “ממית ומחיה” in the *Amidah*

5 Numbers 12:9–15; numerous Biblical and Rabbinic references

6 הכל בידי שמים חוץ מיראת שמים— Ber. 33b

7 Ps. 34:15

8 כי אל פועל ישועות אתה

9 I Sam 15:29 נצח ישראל לא ישקר

10 Ps. 33:14, Malbim

11 Deut. 11:13–14

12 Gen. 2:15

13 כי אל שומרנו אתה

14 Avot 4:2 שכר מצוה מצוה

15 I Kings 19:12

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