Emending/Updating the Siddur?

View PDF



Rabbi Marc D. Angel is Director of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

In his first volume of responsa, *Asei Lekha Rav* (Tel Aviv, 5736, no. 14), Rabbi Haim David Halevy suggested an emendation to the liturgy of the Ninth of Av. The traditional *Nahem* prayer in the afternoon *Amida* describes Jerusalem as "the destroyed, humiliated and desolate city without her children." Rabbi Halevy pointed out the obvious: these words are no longer true. After the six day war in June 1967, Jerusalem is a united thriving city with hundreds of thousands of Jewish residents. It is the proud capitol city of a vibrant Jewish State. He suggested that the text be revised so as to refer to Jerusalem as the city that *was* destroyed, humiliated and desolate without her children.

Rabbi Halevy emended the text to reflect current reality. To continue to describe Jerusalem as destroyed, humiliated and desolate is a lie.

This very small emendation—changing the text to the past tense—evoked an angry response from many. How dare Rabbi Halevy—or anyone else—tamper with the sacred text of our prayer book? What gives anyone the right to revise time-honored prayers that our ancestors have uttered for generations?

Rabbi Halevy replied to his critics (*Asei Lekha Rav*, 2:36-39): Yes, the texts of our prayer books are sacred; but how can we come before God and say prayers that are outright lies? Sometimes emendations are necessary in order to maintain truthfulness. How could people continue to describe Jerusalem with words that are no longer true?

This dispute over a text recited only once a year reflects a much larger issue. How do we deal with traditional siddur texts that we feel need to be emended? In the *Nahem* example, the traditional text is no longer factually true. But what about texts that are troubling to our ethical sensibilities due to sociological and cultural changes. For example, the daily prayers include blessings thanking the Almighty for not having made us a non-Jew, or a slave, or a woman. (A later blessing was added for women to thank the Almighty for creating them according to God's will.) Our musaf prayers foresee the day when we will once again bring animal sacrifices in the Temple in Jerusalem. Traditional prayer books include a passage to be recited by guests during the grace after meals, blessing the host, his children and his wife—in that order! Some prayer books include kabbalistic instructions and readings that are problematic for many moderns.

The traditional mind is averse to change, including altering siddur texts. Various rationales will be offered to justify or interpret existing texts. A common claim is that once changes are allowed, this creates a "slippery slope." If one change is permitted, this will lead to others, and then to yet others, until the classic prayers are eviscerated according to the whims of each editor.

Rabbi Dr. Daniel Sperber published a book in which he described the development of the siddur and how changes have often been made to standard texts. (*On Changes in Jewish Liturgy: Options and Limitations*, Urim Publications, 2010). The prayer books of today have a long history of development. For many generations, especially before the invention of the printing press, the prayer texts were more fluid. Different wordings emerged in different communities, so that even traditional siddurim differ from each other e.g. Sephardic, Ashkenazic, Nusach Sefard, Nusach haAri, Yemenite, Italian, Romaniot etc. Although general structures are shared by all groups, the actual choice of words and order of prayers vary. Rabbi Sperber suggests that current Orthodox siddurim can and should be emended to reflect our modern religious sensibilities.

Non-Orthodox groups have published siddurim with all the revisions they deemed appropriate. But within the Orthodox world, it is rare to find a siddur that dares to make wide ranging changes that seek to bring the text of the siddur into line with our religious worldview. Individuals who are uncomfortable with various prayers may choose to emend/omit them privately; but these are individual decisions, not communally sanctioned.

This brings us to a new siddur, *Alats Libi* (*My Heart Rejoices*) edited by Rabbis Isaac Sassoon and Steven Golden (Ktav Publishing House, 2023). While both rabbis are fully committed to Torah and halakha, they are not part of the mainstream Orthodox "establishment."

The siddur opens with a lengthy introduction by Rabbi Sassoon. A man of vast erudition, he offers a wide ranging view of the development of the siddur. He points out that the ancient sages referred to prayer as service of the heart; true prayer must reflect the heartfelt feelings of the worshipper. If one's feelings are at odds with the words of the prayers, then such worship is not service of the heart.

This siddur maintains the traditional structure but modifies texts that the editors feel need updating. Here are several examples.

The traditional blessings thanking God for not having made me a non-Jew, or a slave or a woman are problematic to modern Jews who bristle at the negative tone toward non-Jews and women. The new siddur replaces these blessings thanking God who has brought us closer to His service, who called us His servants, who created humans in His image. (*shekeirvanu la'avodato; shekera'anu avadav; shebara et ha'adam betsalmo)*

The traditional siddur has a blessing in the Amida asking the Almighty to destroy and wipe out workers of iniquity. *Alats Libi* does not approve of references to God as a destroyer of His own creations. The blessing is reworked praising God who crushes evil and sin. (*shover resha umakhnia zadon)* Following a Talmudic teaching ascribed to Bruriah, one should pray for the destruction of evil, not the destruction of human beings who are evil.

Alats Libi omits references to animal sacrifices. The paragraphs dealing with sacrifices in the musaf prayers for Shabbat and Yom Tov are replaced by a tasteful selection of verses.

The traditional *oseh shalom* prayer is universalized to refer not just to Israel but to the entire world. (*hu ya'aseh shalom aleinu ve'al kol yisrael ve'al kol olamo amen).* Likewise the *Sim Shalom* paragraph concludes with praise of God who makes peace, without specifying peace for Israel. (*oseh hashalom)*

The editors of *Alats Libi* have dared to update the siddur while drawing on historic rabbinic precedent and while maintaining the basic structure of the siddur. The result will please some, offend others, be ignored by most. It isn't likely that many (if any) congregations will replace the current Orthodox siddurim with *Alats Libi*. Nevertheless, our hearts should rejoice that a serious attempt has been made to address nagging issues that many face when praying with the traditional siddur. This siddur reminds us that when we address the Almighty, we should do so honestly…and joyously.