

Some Considerations Underlying Jewish Liturgical Revisions

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In this article I present some factors that must be considered when confronting traditional Jewish liturgy's view of the non-Jew: which options exist for addressing problematic texts and what constitutes the fundamental dynamics underlying liturgical change in the Jewish tradition.¹ With respect to this last consideration, we must not only address cultural, social, and theological concerns, but we must acknowledge the role of *halakhah* (Jewish law) in liturgical change. That is, to what extent does the halakhic system even permit critique of Jewish liturgy? Are there some parts of the liturgy that are open for critique and others that are not? And more complicated: To what extent do the different religious groups within Judaism differ from one another in their attitudes toward liturgical change?

This question of the role of *halakhah* is by far the most thorny, entering as it does into a realm that is extremely susceptible to subjective interpretation and about which each religious sub-group has its own particular attitude and each legal authority his (or, far less frequently, her) own methods and biases. Stances toward the binding nature of *halakhah* vary, even within a single group whose members readily identify theologically and socially with one another. To say that the spectrum of attitudes spans the extremes of those who do not acknowledge the binding nature of *halakhah* in the liturgical arena (and in every other area of life) to those whose every decision, liturgical and otherwise, is governed by an overt, explicit deference to *halakhah*, still understates how individual and variable the interpretations of this religio-legal literature can be.

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My approach is not halakhic; consequently, some will consider my observations to be neglectful of the halakhic system, whereas others, no doubt, will detect an unstated bias toward it. Although mindful of the *halakhah*, I prefer to examine the question of liturgical change from a perspective both historical and methodological in order to get a sense of the general boundaries that can be empirically observed to have governed (and will probably continue to govern) decisions around liturgical change in Judaism. But references to the halakhic system will be inevitable.

Statutory and Non-statutory Liturgy

At the outset, I must emphasize the distinction between that liturgy that is statutory (halakhically mandated) and that which is not. For example, the *Amidah* (also called the *T'filah*)—a central unit of Jewish liturgy consisting of an established series of *b'rakhot* (formalized acknowledgments of different aspects and deeds of the deity)—is an example of statutory liturgy, whereas the *Aleinu*—a poem of praise, customarily sung at the close of every worship service—is not.² My operating assumption is that the former carries a statutory status because it is a series of *b'rakhot* explicitly mandated in the Mishnah (*B'rakhot* 4:1, 3), the second-century legal code that lays out (among a myriad of other rulings) the Jewish liturgical framework, whereas the latter is not statutory because it is not cast into the *b'rakhah* formula and is simply a poem of praise that, gradually and as late as the thirteenth century, became appended to the end of the worship service.³ Any discussion about liturgical change must consider whether the text under examination is statutory; if it is, the halakhic system is harder to avoid. But even the non-statutory category is slippery, for interpreters of the halakhic system extend their jurisdiction over these liturgies as well.

Matbe'a and *Nusah*

Next, I must introduce the distinction between *matbe'a* and *nusah*, integral characteristics of the Jewish statutory liturgy. *Matbe'a* is best translated as template or pattern, and refers to a formulaic and thematic arrangement of individual *b'rakhot* into a discrete series—this use of *matbe'a* typifies all the statutory liturgy; whereas *nusah* should be understood as the exact wording of the text of each indi-

vidual *b'rakhah*. The former has been halakhically fixed since the period of the Mishnah and dictates the use of the *b'rakhah* formula (*Barukh atah Adonai*) followed by a predicate phrase (Tosefta B'rakhot 4:5), and the thematic arrangement of individual *b'rakhot* into a particular series, such as the *Amidah* (Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 4:5 and Babylonian Talmud Megillah 17b–18a). For example, the *matbe'a* of the Sabbath *Amidah* requires seven *b'rakhot*, the first three and the last three being the same as in the weekday *Amidah*, with the fourth *b'rakhah* (which is mid-point in this particular *b'rakhah* series) having the theme of the sanctity of the Sabbath and closing with the *b'rakhah* formula and a predicate phrase that summarizes that idea. However, the *nusah* of this fourth *b'rakhah* for the Sabbath is variable; not only does its exact, standard wording vary among the four services (whereas the *b'rakhah*'s theme and its use of the formula remain constant out of respect for the *matbe'a*),⁴ but the wording of the entire *b'rakhah* text—the *nusah*—has varied from our earliest medieval records through to the modern period. In some cases these variants are dramatically different, for example, the poetic alternatives composed in Palestine in the early medieval period.⁵ In other cases changes in the language of the text are minor, even if theologically radical, for example, the slight textual changes that Conservative Jews have made by converting future tense verbs referring to temple sacrifices into the past tense.⁶ But in all these cases, the *matbe'a*—the *b'rakhah*'s placement within the *b'rakhah* series (#4), its theme (Shabbat's sanctity), and its use of the *b'rakhah* formula at its end—remains constant.

Beginning in the nineteenth century, Reform Jews tested the boundaries that had traditionally governed liturgical variants and changes by completely eliminating certain *b'rakhot* deemed theologically untenable, thereby altering the *matbe'a*. This was only possible because they had also jettisoned the assumption of a divinely mandated halakhic system. (An example will be discussed farther on.) So when considering changes to the statutory liturgy, the question necessarily and fundamentally is: To what degree is the individual or group committed to working within the halakhically determined *matbe'a* and changing only the *nusah*?

One who is loyal to the halakhic system might take issue even with the suggestion that the *nusah* can be changed. But here the historian observes that the evidence overwhelmingly indicates that variant texts—different versions, in fact—have always existed

and that even traditional communities clearly have felt free to employ differing versions.⁷ Nevertheless, at certain times and places, there has been adherence to the notion of a completely fixed liturgical text and, ironically, our present era has to be listed among these—thanks largely to the printing press, which has contributed to the wide distribution of one (now standard) version.⁸ Liberal persistence in altering the *nusah* has to be viewed against the backdrop of medieval evidence that presents a similar picture of liturgical variety. The historical evidence irrefutably indicates that Jewish liturgy has undergone changes, but (also irrefutably) usually within the constraints of *matbe'a*. The question that I always bring to any version of the *nusah*, medieval or modern, is whether or not this version is so radical as to violate the *matbe'a*. That is, do the *b'rakhah* formula and relative placement of the *b'rakhah* conform to the dictates of the *matbe'a*, or do they not? And even if they do conform, do the changes in the *nusah* of the *b'rakhah*, no matter how slight, stand at odds with the theme of the *b'rakhah* as it was understood in the Mishnaic period?⁹

Allusive Language

The next factor we need to consider when discussing Jewish liturgical change is the phenomenon of allusive language. Composers of the liturgy have long subscribed to a *de facto* prescription that the liturgical language has to be drawn from the Hebrew scriptures or, at the very least, from the rabbinic literary corpus. So, for example, the *b'rakhah* formula itself, *Barukh atah Adonai*, was taken from Psalm 119:12 and I Chronicles 29:10. The predicate phrase of the closing formula for the first *b'rakhah* of the *Amidah*, *magen Avraham* (“shield of Avraham”), was drawn from the language of Genesis 15:1. Although this “rule” is not followed slavishly, it has always served as the ideal and, consequently, most phraseology of the statutory (and even the non-statutory) liturgy can be traced back to the scriptures or rabbinic liturgy. (See the Appendix for one example.) Using scriptural language imbues the liturgy with the potency of revelation. This is even the case when the liturgy draws from the language of the rabbinic literature, for that material enjoys the status of “Oral Torah”—complementary, unwritten revelation that (as tradition tells it) was transmitted to Moses at Sinai and then down through the generations until its recording during the Rabbinic era.

I wish to emphasize that I am describing something other and far more nuanced than the use of direct scriptural quotes, which Jewish liturgy also frequently does. The phenomenon that I am describing is that of disconnected and unrelated biblical words and phrases that are first excised and then woven together (sometimes undergoing grammatical alterations, e.g., from singular to plural) into a literary tapestry that has multiple and continuous allusive qualities.¹⁰

Hebrew Language and Translation

A final consideration is that Hebrew is the language of the statutory liturgy, which is not the first language of most Jews and is not even readily comprehensible by the majority of Jews. Consequently, the role of the vernacular translation (which generally accompanies the Hebrew text in most modern prayer books) has enormous importance and influence. Prayer book editors who do not feel bound to the traditional *matbe'a* are obviously free to dispense entirely with problematic passages, but those who do feel bound will often resolve the problematic passage in the translation, leaving the standard Hebrew text intact. So, for example, some Reformers retained the theologically challenging predicate phrase in the closing *b'rakhah* formula of the *Amidah's* second *b'rakhah*, *m'hayeh ha-metim*, but chose an interpretive translation "source of eternal life"¹¹ over a more literal "who enlivens the dead."

This practice of "resolution through translation" has its obvious appeal, especially to traditionalists who fancy themselves as liberals. But it is an inherently deceptive practice that exploits the reader's lack of Hebraic knowledge, neglecting to inform him or her of this less-than-honest rendering.¹²

Some Examples

Armed as we are now with these considerations, particularly with the distinction between *matbe'a* and *nusah*, we can look at two passages in the liturgy that might be perceived as offensive to a non-Jew. One passage that seems to be unduly hostile is the twelfth *b'rakhah* of the weekday *Amidah*, *Birkat ha-Minim*. Its theme, stated in the predicate phrase of the closing *b'rakhah* formula, is the acknowledgment of the deity who *shover oi'vim u-makhni'a zedim* ("breaks enemies and humiliates the arrogant"). Much discussion has been spent on this *b'rakhah*—its origins, meaning, and its prob-

lematic nature¹³—but suffice it to say that it has its origins in suspicion of “Jewish sectarians among whom Jewish Christians figured prominently”¹⁴ during the early Rabbinic period. So while it was composed with Jewish sectarians in mind, it, nevertheless, was retained and reinterpreted through time as the wish for vengeance on whomever Jews have viewed as their enemies and oppressors. Consequently the *nusah* has varied over time in an effort to express these specific sentiments, as well as to attempt to mute them. One medieval version even identifies the enemy explicitly as “*notsrin*,” usually understood to refer to Christians, but originally meant to refer to the “Nazoreans, a Jewish Christian sect.”¹⁵ And although this term was censored already during the medieval period, I will venture to assert that many contemporary Jews (and Christians) still interpret this *b’rakhah* as directed specifically against Christians. This *b’rakhah* poses a particularly interesting example for our discussion, precisely because it is the *matbe’a* that one could argue is offensive, no matter who the original object of the malediction was, and no matter what moderating changes might be made to the *nusah*. The very theme of the *b’rakhah* invites the Jew to envision, specify, and personalize the “enemy.” Here the question of how far even liberal Jews are willing to go to confront a troublesome *matbe’a* has to be asked. In some cases, nineteenth- and twentieth-century liberal Jews were willing to omit this *b’rakhah* altogether. But in general, more specific references, such as “apostates” and “sectarians,” were just modified to tepid references such as “enemies.” And in other cases, only the vernacular was tempered, leaving the standard Hebrew intact.¹⁶

Thus even some Jews who identify themselves as liberal have to acknowledge that maybe they do not want to change the liturgy—either out of respect for the *halakhah* or out of historical and cultural loyalty to the *matbe’a*. For them, their recourse is limited to tempering the *nusah* or euphemizing the translation.

Liturgy defines a group, who is in and who is out, and I wonder if it is not inevitable that it will be triumphant, chauvinistic, self-aggrandizing, and even xenophobic. Certainly bleaching out particularisms results in an unfocused, thin, impotent reflection of what a given liturgy was meant to be and what it should be. On the other hand, I can think of no justification for lamentable reintroductions of previously censored passages in non-statutory liturgy, such as we see in the sentence “For they bow to vanity and emptiness and pray to a god that helps not”¹⁷ in the *Aleinu*. Such a litur-

gical change must be deplored and identified as an unnecessary (halakhically speaking) regression. The entire Jewish community must ask itself bluntly what such a change says about its commitment to tolerance and dialogue. Even Lawrence Hoffman's astute observation that "Christians think explicitly about the theological meanings of their liturgy, whereas Jews do not"¹⁸ does not excuse this hostile and contemptuous reinsertion. In such cases—including the excision of "*notsrin*" from *Birkat ha-Minim*—we have to realize that some censored passages are better left censored, even if the censorship was originally imposed from the outside.

In sum, I have identified some major considerations that, historically speaking, have governed Jewish liturgical change. I have purposely avoided entering into discussion concerning the purpose of the Jewish liturgy. The answer would be extremely difficult to ascertain from the historical perspective, although it becomes easier when working with modern sources wherein self-conscious critics of the liturgy have expressed themselves eloquently.¹⁹ Nevertheless, I will close with these thoughts. If the goal of liturgy is "the rectification of our relation with the universe in the presence of other people,"²⁰ then there is a moral imperative for us to do some serious housecleaning, perhaps even at the cost of the *matbe'a*. But if a more sociological assessment is brought to the liturgy, which understands that it serves to define the group,²¹ then I would submit that the chauvinism is unavoidable and even necessary. In that case, there should be a willingness to temper that chauvinistic self-definition with an explicit liturgical statement of respectful acceptance of the other—at least within the *nusah*, if not in the *matbe'a*.

Appendix

The First *B'rakhah* of the *Amidah*—Biblical Sources for the Language

Traditional Text with Literal Translation

(*The Metsudah Siddur*, trans. Avrohom Davis

[Brooklyn: Metsudah, 1982], pp. 108–10):

Blessed are You, Adonoy	ברוך אתה ה'
our God and God of our fathers,	אלהינו ואלהי אבותינו
God of Abraham, God of Isaac,	אלהי אברהם אלהי יצחק ואלהי יעקב
and God of Jacob,	
The Almighty, The Great,	האל הגדול הגבור והנורא
The Powerful, The Awesome	
most high Almighty	אל עליון
Who bestows beneficent kindness,	גומל חסדים טובים
Who possesses everything	וקונה הכל
Who remembers the piety	וזוכר חסדי אבות
of the Patriarchs	
and Who brings a redeemer	ומביא גואל לבני בניהם
to their children's children	
for the sake of His name, with love.	למען שמו באהבה.
King, Helper, and Deliverer, and Shield:	מלך עוזר ומושיע ומגן:
Blessed are You, Adonoy,	ברוך אתה ה',
Shield of Abraham.	מגן אברהם.

Biblical Sources for the Language and Imagery

Ps. 119:12; II Chron. 29:10	ברוך אתה ה'
many	אלהינו ואלהי אבותינו
Exodus 3:6, 15; 4:5	אלהי אברהם אלהי יצחק
Deut. 10:17, Neh 9:32	האל הגדול הגבור והנורא
Gen. 14:19	אל עליון
I Sam. 24:17; Prov. 11:17; 31:12	גומל חסדים טובים
Gen. 14:19, 22	וקונה הכל
Jer. 2:2, Ex. 32:13, Deut. 9:27; Ps. 25:7, passim.	וזוכר חסדי אבות
Isa. 59:20; Ezek. 37:25	ומביא גואל לבני בניהם
Ps. 23:3; Song of Songs 8:7	למען שמו באהבה.
I Kings 20:16	מלך עוזר ומושיע ומגן.
as above	ברוך אתה ה',
Gen. 15:1	מגן אברהם.

Notes

1. I thank Ruth Langer and Phil Cunningham of Boston College's Center for Christian-Jewish Learning for inviting me to deliver an earlier draft of this paper at the Center's Conference on Liturgical Issues in Jewish-Christian Relations, June 10–11, 2001.
2. This despite its earlier placement into the fourth *b'rakhah* of the *Musaf Amidah* for Rosh Hashanah; see Joseph Heinemann, *Prayer in the Talmud*, trans. Richard Sarason (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1977), pp. 270–74.
3. Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, trans. Raymond P. Scheindlin (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1993), p. 71; Israel Ta-Shma, "The Origin and Placement of the Prayer *Aleinu Leshabe'ah* in the Liturgy" [Hebrew], in *The Frank Talmage Memorial Volume*, ed. Barry Walfish (Haifa: University of Haifa, 1993), 1: 85–89.
4. See these *b'rakhot* in the standard traditional prayer book, *Daily Prayer Book*, trans. Philip Birnbaum (New York: Hebrew Publishing, 1949), pp. 267, 353, 395, 453.
5. See Ezra Fleischer, *שירת הקודש העברית בימי הביניים* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1975), pp. 183–85; and Naphtali Wieder, *The Formation of Jewish Liturgy in the East and the West* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1998), 1: 295–351.
6. *נעשה ונקריב* ("We will do and offer") becomes *עשו והקריבו* ("They did and offered"—referring to the Jews of the Temple period); see *Siddur Sim Shalom*, ed. Jules Harlow (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 1989), p. 434; cf. Birnbaum, p. 395.
7. Fleischer's work on piyyutic, alternative versions has thoroughly demonstrated this. For example, see the piyyutic version of the weekday *Amidah*, *שירת הקודש*, pp. 201–2.
8. The Birnbaum Siddur typifies this. Yet, even the most conservative groups acknowledge liturgical divergences between the Ashkenazic and Sephardic traditions, demonstrated by the fact that contemporary, traditional *siddurim* such as *Rinat Yisra'el* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1984) and *The Complete Artscroll Siddur*, trans. Nosson Scherman (Brooklyn: Mesorah, 1984) come in both versions.
9. The Conservative Movement's change from future to past verb tense mentioned in note 6 could be viewed as a violation of the *matbe'a*. True, the *b'rakhah*'s placement remains unchanged, and its theme is still the sanctity of Shabbat. But it could be argued that this *b'rakhah* in the *Musaf* service is supposed to contain a request for, and a statement of faith in, the restoration of the sacrificial system. This is a case demonstrating that where the *matbe'a* ends and the *nusah* begins is not always clear and is hence debatable.
10. To my knowledge this phenomenon has not been treated thoroughly in the academic literature; it is a desideratum. Fleischer discusses it briefly, *שירת הקודש*, pp. 103–4.

11. *Liberal Jewish Prayer Book*, second edition (London: Union of Liberal and Progressive Synagogues, 1937), 1: 9.
12. When teaching liturgy, I repeatedly am struck by the sense of betrayal expressed by my students who are shocked to discover that "the text does not say what the translation says it does!"
13. Ruth Langer offers a detailed treatment of this *b'rakah* in a forthcoming article entitled "Theologies of Self and Other in American Jewish Liturgies." I wish to thank David Sandmel for his thoughtful and helpful conversations with me about this *b'rakah*.
14. Reuven Kimelman, "Birkat Ha-Minim and the Lack of Evidence for an Anti-Christian Jewish Prayer in Late Antiquity," in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, ed. E. P. Sanders et al. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 2: 232.
15. See Kimelman, *ibid.*, p. 238, on the dating of this language to the third and fourth centuries, its original spelling of *natsrim*, and its reference to this Jewish sect.
16. Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, pp. 45–46; Jakob Petuchowski, *Prayerbook Reform in Europe* (New York: World Union, 1968), pp. 223–25.
17. *The Complete Artscroll Siddur*, p. 351. Ruth Langer's forthcoming article provides a further discussion of this passage.
18. "Jewish and Christian Liturgy," in *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, ed. Tikva Frymer-Kensky et al. (Boulder, Co.: Westview, 2000), p. 177. Toward the close of the Conference on Liturgical Issues in Jewish-Christian Relations (see note 1), faith-alike groups met and prepared statements. The Jewish group's first statement reads: "What are the theological questions that Jews must address before we can proceed to discussion of Jewish liturgical issues? In the Christian world, theological deliberations have come first....We have not yet undertaken this prior step."
19. For example, the comments of Joseph Maier on the need for a new prayer book, recorded in Gunther Plaut, *The Rise of Reform Judaism: A Sourcebook of Its European Origins* (New York: World Union for Progressive Judaism, 1969), pp. 154–56.
20. Catherine Madsen, "Kitsch and Liturgy," in *Tikkun* 16: 2, p. 42.
21. See Lawrence Hoffman, *Beyond the Text* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 175–76.