

“You Haven’t Changed a Bit”
A Renewed Look at the Mahzor and Our Lives

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A couple of weeks ago, I ran into a friend who I hadn’t seen in 20 years. To my surprise, she was actually the leader of a workshop I was attending. At the end of the workshop she and I sat down and attempted to catch up on what we had each been doing for the last 20 years.

Then the time came to say goodbye. “Sarah,” she said, “It’s so great to see you. You haven’t changed a bit!”

I’ve been thinking about these words a lot over the last few weeks. I know she meant them as a compliment, but it’s an interesting kind of compliment. Here I had just finished telling her how I had become a rabbi, gotten married, had 3 kids. And her parting words to me were, “You haven’t changed a bit.” And you know, the truth is, I had the same feeling about her.

Each year at the High Holidays, we talk a great deal about change. Our ability to reinvent ourselves, to do T’shuvah, to change our ways.

And we ask ourselves: How are we going to be different this year?

This Rosh Hashanah, I want to propose another question for our self-reflection, however. **In what ways do we actually want to stay the same?**

I’m going to leave the personal realm for a little while, to shift to something else that you might have noticed is both different and the same. That is ... our new mahzor, the brand new High Holiday prayerbook that most of us are using for the first time today.

This new mahzor is a big deal – for our synagogue, for the Conservative movement, I might even say for the broader Jewish people, and I think it merits our attention on this, its opening day.

At the same time, I want to challenge us to use the mahzor as a metaphor. For ultimately, our job on Rosh Hashanah is to examine **the mahzor of our lives** – to read its text, to reflect upon its themes, and to outline our next edition – what we want to change, and what we want to keep.

For now though, let us turn to the mahzor of prayers.

As I understand it, our congregation has used the Silverman Mahzor, our old black high holiday prayerbook, since our beginning in 1957. Now most of the Silverman Mahzors I've looked at have a copyright date of 1951. However, I learned recently that the first edition of this book dates back to 1939. Rabbi Morris Silverman, the editor, was actually considered a pioneer in the field of liturgy in America. A Conservative rabbi, born in 1894, he wrote a new English translation, and added several English responsive readings, to increase congregational participation. He also dared to put explanations of the Torah readings and special prayers before those pieces of the service, rather than at the back of the book, or as footnotes at the bottom of the page.

He was an innovator in his time, but of course, that time was more than 70 years ago. His mahzor doesn't mention the Holocaust, because it hadn't happened yet. It doesn't include a prayer for the State of Israel, because the State of Israel didn't exist when he was writing.

So our movement recognized it was time for a new mahzor. There was a new mahzor, before this one. Rabbi Jules Harlow, who later produced the siddur that we use every week, Sim Shalom, published a new Conservative Mahzor back in 1972. Kol Emeth chose not to use the Harlow, however, probably because it left out some of the traditional piyutim, the extra poetry that embellishes, and lengthens, our High Holiday services.

Now, 38 years after that, a new mahzor has been born, and we are among the first to pray from its pages. This time it was prepared, not by an individual, but by a committee of 10 rabbis, cantors, and scholars from our movement, selected for their particular areas of expertise and love of liturgy. There was a leader and chief editor,

Rabbi Edward Feld. But the work was done by committee, meeting diligently, twice a month, for 12 years! Individual pieces were of course prepared by individual people. But the translations, and the vision, are the product of a group – debating, reacting, reflecting, and soul-searching – to give us this mahzor, Lev Shalem, literally “a full heart.”

So, what do you imagine was the substance of those discussions?

Where would you begin, if you were empowered to write a new High Holiday prayerbook? The very term, “mahzor,” is an interesting one. Literally, it means “cycle,” from the verb *lachzor*, to return.

So, would you return to the traditional text, and add, or subtract?

Or would you instead, set aside the old book, take out a clean sheet of paper, and begin anew? Where would you start in creating a new liturgy for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur? Would there be a liturgy at all? What themes would you want us to be thinking about, praying about, if indeed we still were to gather in synagogue to pray?

Clearly the committee that produced Mahzor Lev Shalem seems to have chosen the first option – *lachzor*, to return to the traditional text as a starting place. But I imagine a fierce reckoning beginning from there.

Imagine with me, if you will, yourself locked in a room, with just an old mahzor. I know, it may seem frightening, but try it. Put yourself there. Just you and the text.

“What are you about, old text?” You demand of it. Where did you come from? Who made you?

What messages do you still have to teach us? And why are they sometimes so hard to hear?

What do we and the Jewish people need to keep from you, old text? And what do we and the Jewish people need to change?

These are the questions the Lev Shalem committee has asked of the mahzor. These are also the questions we must ask of ourselves. But again, for now, let us focus on the mahzor.

What is this book about, this 500-page book of High Holiday prayers?

For starters, I would answer - it's not about just one thing. The mahzor is about many things –humility, awe, judgment, love, our tiny place in God's infinite universe, yet the importance of our every deed.

I recently heard Arnie Eisen explain, **“Our prayerbook is an anthology. It's not a credo.”**

I find this statement especially helpful, when it comes to the High Holiday prayerbook. For it so easily can seem like a statement of belief. Here is what Jews believe, and if you don't agree, then you're not one of us. Or you're not a good Jew. There's even a piyut, a poem in the mahzor, called “V'chol Ma'aminim,” “And All Believe,” – that He is the faithful God (I'm using the Silverman translation), that He knoweth the innermost thoughts, that He is the mighty Redeemer, etc.

The editors of our new mahzor chose to keep this piyut – perhaps for tradition's sake, perhaps for the influence it might have on us. But they put it in perspective with their comments on the side. We learn in the commentary on the right side of the page, that V'chol Ma'aminim was written by one person, the poet Yannai, who lived some 1500 years ago, in the land of Israel. Now, the poet Yannai is someone to respect. He wrote a lot of beautiful prayers in his time. But he's not God. And his words are neither the first nor the last words on what Jews are supposed to believe about God.

What the mahzor really is – is a collage of different images of God and God's relationship with human beings. On one page, God is proclaimed King, and our duty is to bow and humble ourselves. On the next page, God is our Parent, and we trust that God will care for us as beloved children. On one page God keeps track of every good

and bad thing we do. On another page God forgives, not because we deserve it, but because that is God's nature.

When I was younger, I found the mahzor to be hypocritical, changing its theology from one prayer to the next. And, I felt myself to be hypocritical if I blindly recited the words of a prayer without first reading through it to make sure I believed it.

At some point though, I realized what Arnie was trying to say. The mahzor is not a credo. It's not a consistent authoritative statement of belief. It's a collage, or maybe a chorus, of individual human voices, sharing their experience of God in the world, or their sense of what God wants from us.

Recognizing this has been tremendously liberating for me. It gives me permission to enter into a prayer and dwell there - to prostrate myself before the King, to plead before the Judge - and, to make a space for my own images, when I close my eyes, or put down the book.

What I appreciate about our new mahzor is that it tries to make this space within the book, with a second column of writings on the left side of the page. It is here that we find new voices, new images, and new reflections on the old images. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel tells of crying over the Akedah, the binding of Isaac. To the left of V'chol Ma'aminim we find Israeli poet Yehudah Amichai with his own statement of belief. "I assert with absolute faith that prayers preceded God. Prayers created God. God created humans. Humans create prayers that create God who creates humanity," says Amichai. At the beginning of the Yom Kippur service, we find the chilling account of a Holocaust survivor hearing Kol Nidre in a concentration camp.

As I read these passages, I am overwhelmed by the sense that these prayers are still alive. They're alive because our people have been praying them, and struggling with them, and developing them in every corner of the world for 2000 years, or more. What began as a Temple service, based around key verses from the Torah, was then expanded by the early Rabbis, then captured by the first prayerbook writers, then beautified by the medieval poets, and ultimately printed in the first mahzorim for the common people. But our expressiveness about God and about humanity and about Judaism

didn't end in the middle ages. We have continued to write and to question and to tell new stories in every generation and every land.

To me, the commentary on the left side of the page is a reminder that the book is still being written. Those before us have left their marks, and it is up to us to leave ours.

The editors of this mahzor leave their mark, one further way, by adding a new degree of sensitivity. They don't presume a homogeneous group of users. They understand that some of us in this room cannot read Hebrew, and feel totally left out of a traditional service, without transliterations. They understand that others of us really like davening in Hebrew, and don't want to see interruptions in the Hebrew text. And a lot of us may be able to read Hebrew, but when we want meaning, we go to the English. For this reason, the editors put a tremendous amount of time into the translations – I'm told that every translation was read aloud to the entire committee for comment and critique. The goals were ambitious – to be loyal to the Hebrew, to be gender sensitive, and for the English to be “prayable” on its own.

Finally, the editors of Lev Shalem understand that the texts themselves can both hurt and heal. Torah readings about infertility, prayers about who shall live and who shall die, who after a long life and who after a short one – these can offer comfort and meaning, and they can also increase pain. The editors don't delete these provocative texts. They keep them. But they present them with sensitivity and compassion. It's for good reason that the book is titled “Lev Shalem.” The writers truly care about well being of our hearts.

And with that, at last, I want to turn to us. For now we are the editors of the Lev Shalem, the mahzor that is us, our heart, our soul. Now is our time to go into the room alone and ask ourselves:

What are you about, old text?

Where did you come from?

What is it that you have to teach, and to give?

If someone were writing a sermon about you, or a tribute, or a eulogy, what themes would they highlight as the themes of your life, the values you hold most dear?

So often, on the High Holidays, we focus entirely on what to change. It's hard to know what to change though, unless we first discern what to keep.

Think about your year gone by, and ask yourself:
When did you feel you were doing the right thing?
When were you the "you" that you want to be?

Then consider what sometimes hinders that "you" from coming through. Old formatting. Bad translation.

What might you delete, re-write, or add to your text, to make this new version the best version yet?

Each of us must answer these questions for ourselves. No one can produce our new mahzor for us. However, we can, perhaps, draw inspiration from one another. In this spirit, I want to close with a story, of one fellow congregant, who recognized a piece of his text that he wanted to keep.

The story is about Jerry Schwartzman, a long-time member of Kol Emeth, who passed away just a few weeks ago. Now, I don't presume to know the inner world of Jerry's soul, but I do know that he had a passion for teaching kids to sound the shofar.

At some point, several years ago, Jerry discovered he could do it. He could break down the mechanics to something even a kindergartener could master. "Make a raspberry on your arm," he would say, modeling the "ppppp." Then he would have them do it into the shofar and watch their faces light up.

He knew this was his gift to share, and so, every Elul, he set up shop at Gideon Hausner Jewish Day School, offering to teach whoever would come. Over the years, probably hundreds of children, and teachers, and parents, came to school early to have their turn with

Papa Jerry and emerge as a shofar sounder. His students have then gone on to sound shofar in synagogues all around our community, for patients at Stanford hospital, for kids in nursery schools, and for their own grandparents, unable to come to shul.

Jerry insisted on teaching me to sound the shofar too. To be honest, I already could do it reasonably well, but I welcomed the chance to learn from the master and to see this side of who he was. He told me, when he was gone, this is how he wanted to be remembered. And indeed, it is a big part of how he is.

How do you want to be remembered, when you are gone?
What deeds, what qualities do you want to be known for, while you're alive?

This is your mahzor. This is your unique text. Now the task is to edit.

I'm giving you aid to begin the work. I know it's a shock, it's a card. You'll find on your card, a simple table, with 2 columns – 1 for things to keep, and 1 for things to change. I recommend you start with the first column. Like the editors of Lev Shalem, you might find there's an awful lot you want to keep. Like them, you might also realize though that there are ways you can present your inner text better – new sensitivity, new adaptations, new translation into action.

The goal, I believe, is to always be improving, to always be updating the mahzor of your life. And, at the same time, to know your inner text, to clarify your deepest values and to live by them every day. So that 20 years from now, when you run into someone you haven't seen in a long time, you'll smile and be pleased to hear "You haven't changed a bit."