

Mishkan HaNefesh: A Sanctuary for Our Souls

I was sitting between my parents during High Holy Day services at the congregation where I was in the process of growing up. I was a young teenager at the time, so it is not all that surprising that I leaned over to my father not long into services and whispered, “I’m bored.” He nodded. 15 minutes later I leaned in again. “I’m bored.” My father nodded once more. Counting the number of pages left until the end of the service brought me no relief. The number was high, and we didn’t seem to be skipping any of them. “I’m so bored,” I whined once more. My surely exasperated father turned to me and quietly replied, “Have you ever considered reading the actual words in the prayer book and thinking about them?” and with that returned his attention to the *bima* at the front of the room. In fact, that possibility had never occurred to my adolescent self. I remember giving it a halfhearted try, but on that day it was not meant to be for me.

There are, indeed, obstacles to engaged, meaningful, reflective, and inspiring prayer experiences, particularly at the season of these High Holy Days – and not just for the youngest in our community...for all of us. Our liturgy includes descriptions of God that may not align with our own understandings, readings which often employ lofty language that can fail to resonate – and, of course, the stumbling block of Hebrew which remains inaccessible to so many of us. And in several ways, the Gates of Repentance *machzor* – or High Holy Day prayerbook – which our Reform Movement has used from 1978 until just one year ago – compounded these challenges. Though it came to feel like home – a familiar friend with whom we got to visit each year – its masculine God language, lack of English transliteration and accurate translation, and dearth of contemporary melodies were impediments to many.

Nine years ago on this very night of *Erev Rosh Hashanah*, I shared my first High Holy Day sermon with our Temple Beth Shalom community. In it, I sought to prepare us for the arrival of our brand new Shabbat and weekday prayer book, *Mishkan Tefilah*, which was due to be released just weeks later. Unfortunately, due to printing problems it did not arrive until more than a year after that.

So this time I waited until I had the book in hand to speak with you about it. On this, my tenth *Rosh Hashanah* in this sacred community, I am thrilled to welcome you to the pages of *Mishkan HaNefesh* – our Reform Movement’s brand new *machzor* – and, now, our liturgical home for these holy days. This is a milestone moment in our congregation and movement about which we are so excited. Rabbi Jay, Cantor Jonas, and I have spent countless hours this summer pouring over the pages of this book and its counterpart for *Yom Kippur*, and we are reinvigorated by these volumes. They are filled with rich, thought provoking, challenging, uplifting, inspirational words to guide us through these holiest of days. I suspect that even my 14-year-old self could have found a great deal worth reflecting upon in these pages.

Before we begin our High Holy Day prayers together, I want to introduce you to this new friend. *Mishkan HaNefesh* has been thoughtfully crafted over the last several years, and its team of editors had a number of specific goals in mind throughout its creation.

1. The authors sought to create a book that shows great respect for the traditional High Holy Day prayers but with a fresh approach to them. In this regard, *Mishkan HaNefesh* is – perhaps counter intuitively – both more traditional and more progressive at the same time. Traditional Torah and Haftarah readings for these days have been woven back into the book with multiple options for congregations to choose between. The same is true of traditional prayers for these days which newly appear in a Reform *machzor* but with contemporary context and framing.
2. The prayer book's creators were deeply committed to gender equality in reference to people but even more importantly, in speaking of God. Thanks to their attention to this pivotal detail, I will never again have to speak the words, "Please hold your place on page 175, and turn to the inside cover of your prayer book for our *t'fillah*," so that we can find a gender sensitive version of our prayers there.
3. The compilers of this *machzor* were committed to addressing major themes of our lives, which are both relevant specifically in our present day and are timeless as well.
4. They sought to embrace the particularism through which we celebrate those aspects of Jewish life unique to our faith tradition while also helping us to focus on the universal needs of all humanity. As such, in our very particular Jewish prayer for the deceased, the Mourner's Kaddish, for example, the prayer concludes with a wish that God will not only bring peace from on high to us and to all the Jewish people – but to all of humanity.
5. The book's editors were insistent that the traditional High Holy Day images of God as sovereign ruler and judge be balanced with other understandings of God as well, such as the God who empowers and inspires us to act for the betterment of our world.
6. Finally, as was true in the creation of our *Mishkan Tefilah* prayer book for weekdays and Shabbat, the authors of this volume wanted to insure that all worshippers, regardless of knowledge or background, could engage meaningfully in the worship experience. As such, transliteration of the Hebrew appears in our High Holy Day prayer book for the first time to enable those who cannot yet decode Hebrew characters to follow along with our prayers in the sacred language of our people. Likewise, *Mishkan HaNefesh* provides faithful translations for each prayer we recite so that we can all know exactly what we are saying.

These were worthy and lofty goals, and I believe the editors made great strides towards each of them. Yet the new offerings of *Mishkan HaNefesh* do not stop there.

A story is told of a man, unfamiliar with Jewish prayer, who came to attend services one Shabbat morning only to find that his fellow worshippers were *davening* so quickly through the words of the prayer book that he could barely keep up. "How could these

words continue to have meaning to them,” he wondered, “when they are recited by rote with seemingly no space for contemplation or reflection.” A month later, the man returned to the *shul* but this time with his horse. To the astonishment of the others in the congregation, he brought the horse inside the sanctuary. “You can’t bring that beast in here,” hollered the rabbi. “But my horse can pray!” the visitor protested. “Prove it!” the leader replied. So the man led his horse to the front of the sanctuary to the readers desk, opened his *siddur* on the table, and lo and behold...the horse began to pray. She nodded at the book then turned the page, scanned the text once again, and turned the page. Indeed, she seemed to be keeping a pace similar to that of the worshippers in this synagogue.

An audible gasp arose from the congregation. “How on earth did you teach your horse to *daven*?” asked the rabbi. “In fact, I did not,” replied the visitor. “I placed oats between all the pages of the prayer book, and my horse learned how to turn them looking for more food. After a couple of weeks I removed the oats, but the horse still turns the pages looking for the nourishment she seeks. I fear that I witnessed something similar here in this congregation when I visited a month ago. The words of prayer in your books...I’m sure that at one point you all found fulfillment in them. Yet, it seemed to me that now you were just turning the pages, reciting words with no particular intention, finding no nourishment in them, just like my poor horse.”

Jewish prayer is often spoken of using the two opposing terms, “*keva*” and “*kavanah*.” *Keva* is the fixed text of the prayer book...the traditional prayers...The *Shema*, The *Amidah*, *Mi Chamocha*, or *Oseh Shalom*, for example. In our *Mishkan HaNefesh*, these prayers are found on pages that are white and also contain transliteration into English characters and a faithful translation of the fixed prayer being recited.

Kavanah, on the other hand, is the intention that comes with prayer...the meaning found within the words. *Kavanah* might be translated as “aiming,” as in archery. It is the direction in which we each point our heart or our mind as we utter the words, and while we may all recite the same words of prayer, we may also each bring a wholly unique *kavanah* to the experience. This is what the man with the horse found lacking in the Jewish prayer setting he visited.

To complement the white pages filled with the *keva* of our traditional prayers, then, in *Mishkan HaNefesh*, we also find pages tinted gray which feature “alternative translations, poems, counter-texts, and creative readings”¹ meant to be in dialogue with – or even to challenge - the words of traditional liturgy found on the preceding white pages. We can use them to expand our horizons, to create new meaning, to find greater nourishment in this prayer experience we share.

And the editors of *Mishkan HaNefesh* have given us yet another gift...pages tinted blue which contain texts for us to explore on our own, individually...texts for reflection, contemplation, or personal study. Throughout the entirety of the book, source citations

¹ *Mishkan HaNefesh: Machzor for the Days of Awe, Rosh Hashanah*, CCAR Press, 2015, p. xiv

and further information on readings and prayers can be found at the bottom of each page to engage the analytical left side of our brains.

I invite you to turn now to pages 100-101. Each service in our new *machzor* is preceded by a piece of art to stimulate the right side of our brains. What do you see here? Why is this piece of art an introduction to the Rosh Hashanah morning service? Last week at our TBS *Selichot* service I asked the same questions of those in attendance, and the responses were fascinating: “I see an eye...maybe my eye looking out on the world, maybe God’s eye watching us.” “I see a person at the center walking the road of life which has a beginning and an end.” “I see that the path is rough around the edges...just like we are as we reflect on our behavior over this past year.”

With so much rich content for us to explore in these volumes, how will we make our way through it all together? We won’t. We can’t. But as we begin our High Holy Days together this year, I want to extend an explicit invitation to all of you on behalf of our service leaders.

We will continue to tell you what page we’re on, when to rise, and when to sit. We will invite you to lend your voices to prayer and song. But, as you walk the path of our prayers during these Days of Awe, if something catches your attention, a piece of art, a poem on a gray page, a reflection question on a blue page, even if we’re not all reciting it together at that moment...stay with it. Take the time you need to soak it in...it grabbed your attention for a reason. You need that reading this year at this moment. Regardless of what the rest of the congregation is doing, explore what you’ve found to be of interest, and rejoin us in a few minutes when you’ve completed your reflection. The book’s very title, *Mishkan HaNefesh* means “Sanctuary of the Soul.” You are invited to find yourself in its words so that its words can inhabit the sacred space that is you.

The editors begin their introduction to this new *machzor* with these insightful thoughts: “Opening a prayer book on the High Holy Days, what do we hope to find? This is not an easy question, since the *machzor* (if it succeeds) leads us on a path across rough terrain: honest soul-searching; reflection on our deeds, especially on how we have fallen short; introspection about our personal qualities and how they impact our closest relationships; examination of our beliefs about what it means to be human and Jewish in relation to the world and to God; feeling the loss of loved ones and thinking about our own morality; asking forgiveness and bestowing it. The inner path that we travel on these days is not smooth; it is paved with remorse, grief, and guilt; but also with holiness, awe, gratitude, and hope. It tests our spiritual stamina...”²

Thankfully, we have this [hold it up] as a new road map to guide us on our circuitous journey. I issue the same challenge to all of us which my father shared with me all

² *Mishkan HaNefesh: Machzor for the Days of Awe, Rosh Hashanah*, CCAR Press, 2015, p. xi

those years ago: Please...truly engage this text...thoughtfully, mindfully, with purpose and intent. In doing so, we should remember that most years will not be like this one. In most years, the prayer book at the High Holy Days will be exactly the same as the year before. It is our hope, however, that – from one Rosh Hashanah to the next - we have changed, and changed for the better, in no small part because of the reminders, calls, and agitations provided within these pages which help us to take stock of our lives and to turn back towards the best selves we strive to become. “May this book be a source of healing and repair; and may it provide nourishment to meet the spiritual hunger of our times”³ and the yearnings of our souls.

³ Mishkan HaNefesh: Machzor for the Days of Awe, Rosh Hashanah, CCAR Press, 2015, p. xiii