

# Reconsidering Reconstructionist Liturgy

## *The Kaplanian Paradox*

DANIEL GOLDMAN CEDARBAUM

ALMOST TWENTY YEARS AGO, a knowledgeable Conservative Jew chided me in a way that has troubled me ever since. “You Reconstructionists,” he said, “believe that you can distinguish a denomination on the basis of liturgical changes like substituting ‘*mevi ge’ulah*’ (bringing redemption) for ‘*mevi go’el*’ (bringing a redeemer/Messiah) in the first paragraph of the *Amidah*. Do you really think that more than a handful of people even notice these changes, much less think that they are important?” Allowing license for hyperbole, I think he was making an important point.

Mordecai Kaplan believed that his commitment to intellectual honesty required the reconstruction of Jewish liturgy, including Hebrew liturgy. He was famous at the Jewish Theological Seminary for telling his students, “If you don’t believe it, don’t say it.” For Kaplan, this meant not affirming the chosenness of the Jewish people, which he rejected on both logical and ethical grounds. (If God is a non-supernatural force, then God can hardly have chosen Israel from among the nations as a people with a unique status and mission; for that matter, such a God is not in the business of any sort of “choosing” at all. Kaplan also argued that, even if one believes that God could have chosen Israel, the chauvinism entailed by acceptance of chosenness is ethically indefensible.)

***Kaplan’s stance also meant not affirming, among other things, the concept of a personal messiah, the notion of physical resurrection of the dead, and the desirability of restoring the sacrificial service in the Temple. All of these redactions were made under Kaplan’s aegis in the first series of Reconstructionist prayer books, published in the 1940s, and almost all of them were incorporated into the current series, *Kol Haneshamah*. (To give credit where it is due,***

---

*Daniel Goldman Cedarbaum, JRF’s immediate past president, is a member of the Jewish Reconstructionist Congregation in Evanston, IL and of Ezra Habonim, the Niles Township Jewish Congregation in Skokie, IL. A version of this article appeared in the Fall 2005 issue of The Reconstructionist.*

many of these changes were adopted or adapted from the earlier work of liturgists of the Reform movement.) But almost from the beginning, a very different approach to liturgy has also played an important part in Reconstructionist thinking.

Seventy years ago, in the very first volume of *The Reconstructionist*, an editorial appeared called “Praying for Peace” (Vol. I, No. 9, May 3, 1935). Signed by if not written by Kaplan, the editorial contained the following provocative observation, in the context of a call to prayer “issued by the Pope and taken up by other religious denominations” in response to the German government’s declaration that it would no longer be bound by the armaments clause of the Treaty of Versailles:

We should like . . . to submit that this emphasis laid upon prayer is an unfortunate one. Prayer, by itself, may do more harm than good, for the one who prays for a worthwhile ideal somehow gets the impression that he has done something positive to achieve that ideal. The psychological effect is a curious one; praying becomes a substitute for action. Religious leaders who have been interested in the whole problem of prayer have always maintained that people are reluctant to pray because the traditional prayers are couched in archaic language and express irrelevant aspirations. Modernize prayers, they said, make them relevant, and people will once again take to praying. The fact is that the more relevant the prayer, the more likely is the worshipper to feel he has worked for the realization of those values which he affirms.

This language prefigures what would become a familiar Reconstructionist aphorism about prayer, which states that most or all of our praying (or *davennen*), at least of Hebrew liturgy, is (or should be) “quotation rather than affirmation.” That aphorism apparently first appeared in writing in Rabbi Alan W. Miller’s excellent book, *God of Daniel S.: In Search Of The American Jew*. There Miller writes as follows:

A prime element in the act of worship is *davvening*, or the rote repetition of traditional prayers from the past. When these traditional prayers were first written they were meaningful affirmations for their authors. The author of the 23rd Psalm, for example, if not a shepherd himself, lived in a culture where shepherds and sheep were as common sights as cabs on Fifth Avenue are in New York today. In a prevailing idiom and metaphor culled from everyday life, he expressed his faith in God and the cosmos, in God conceived of as a Supreme Father. “He restoreth my soul.”

When the modern Jew recites the 23rd Psalm, or any other Psalm or combination of verses from the Psalms

or from the Bible, he does not affirm, at first hand, but rather quotes at secondhand. All the Hebrew davvened, or prayed, in the modern synagogue, save in those rare instances where modern Hebrew prayers have been introduced into the act of worship, is quotation, not affirmation. The traditional Hebrew sections of the synagogue service are all in quotation marks, whether the praying Jew is aware of this or not.

Davvening is a basic element in Jewish worship because only by identifying with his past can the Jew gain strength in the present to strive toward the future. An awareness that countless generations expressed a basic faith in the cosmos, and strove to overcome the defects in themselves and in their society through an ongoing relationship with their ethnic group, is a source of strength in present trouble. The traditional prayer book reflects the three stages through which Jewish civilization has already passed, the biblical, the ecclesiastical and the rabbinic. Strength in an age of radical and often disturbing transition is gained from an awareness that the Jewish people has undergone metamorphosis in the past but still maintained its identity in change by reconstructing its sancta. Davvening is a prime sanctum of Jewish life.

*What seems to have gone largely unnoticed is the tension between the “don’t say it if you don’t believe it” strand and the “quotation rather than affirmation” strand in the Reconstructionist approach to liturgy. If we are (or should be) silently prefacing each traditional Hebrew prayer with words like, “Our ancestors prayed as follows,” and then placing quotation marks around the prayer text, then the truth,*

*validity, or believability of the words of that prayer text become, for us, essentially irrelevant. Two generational changes have made grappling with this tension more pressing, and I believe that both changes seriously weaken the arguments of the “don’t say it if you don’t believe it” school.*

*First, almost all of Kaplan’s teachings, including those about liturgy, grew out of his experience with, and were originally directed to, immigrant and immediate post-*

*immigrant generations of American Jews of Eastern European origin, almost all of whom were, if not Hebraically literate in an academic sense, extremely familiar with traditional Hebrew liturgy. Those for*

*whom the changes reflected in Reconstructionist liturgy were vitally important could still enter a traditional synagogue and participate easily (if not emotionally comfortably) in the prayer service. Today, neither childhood immersion nor adult study has provided the great majority of Reconstructionists with the knowledge of traditional liturgy that the previous generations of Reconstructionists possessed. The level of Hebrew literacy among non-Orthodox Jews is probably at an all-time low. (Here, I am simply making descriptive statements, not criticizing.)*

*The second generational change, which has been noted and discussed far more than the first, concerns our level of comfort with certain kinds of myths and metaphors. As we have moved from the modern into the post-modern age, our understanding of the meaning of “truth” has become different from, and frankly more subtle than, that of our Reconstructionist forebears. For Kaplan and his contemporaries, the term “myth” was essentially equivalent to “falsehood,” with a connotation about as negative as the connotation of “superstition” or “lie.” In contrast, for Reconstructionists in the 21st century, particularly for the best-educated and most knowledgeable among them, myths, particularly the foundational myths of a people, operate on an entirely different level than do, say, the propositions of natural science, thus opening up the possibility of finding a myth to be “truthful” in a powerful, if non-literal, sense. For example, the story of the Exodus from Egypt can be judged to be “true” precisely because it has for thousands of years functioned effectively in providing the Jewish people with its sense of identity, regardless of the story’s historical veracity.*

*Moreover, Reconstructionists today can (or should be able to) appreciate the metaphorical power of sympathetic invocations in the liturgy of such national archetypes as the Davidic monarchy or the Temple cult, despite the serious problems posed by those institutions as historical realities — and having nothing to do with an actual desire for the restoration of the institutions. In short, a fervent commitment to intellectual honesty demands far less of us today with regard to liturgy than it did of Kaplan. (To say that Kaplan had an insufficient appreciation of the power of myth and metaphor, however, would be unfair; although many of his ideas were remarkably ahead of his time, Kaplan’s fundamental intellectual framework, like that of any other thinker, could not transcend the socio-historical context of his forma-*

**OUR  
UNDERSTANDING  
OF THE MEANING OF “TRUTH”  
HAS BECOME DIFFERENT FROM,  
AND FRANKLY MORE  
SUBTLE THAN, THAT OF OUR  
RECONSTRUCTION-  
IST FOREBEARS.**

tive years, which in Kaplan's case might best be characterized as Victorian.)

**The editors of the Kol Haneshamah prayer** books were clearly aware of the evolution of the concept of intellectual honesty in liturgy since the creation of the first Reconstructionist prayer books, and, to a limited extent, they responded to it. Thus, for example, they reinstated the reference to the splitting of the sea in the *Mi Hamocha* prayer. They also included the traditional version of the declaration recited when the scroll is lifted after the Torah reading, "*V'zot ha-Torah*" ("This is the Torah that Moses placed before the Israelites, according to the command of Adonai, through the agency of Moses"), as an alternative to the previous Reconstructionist version ("This is the Torah. It is a Tree of Life to those who hold fast to it. Those who uphold it may be counted fortunate!"). In so doing, they recognized that a Reconstructionist today who is convinced that the Torah was written and edited by human beings over several centuries, beginning long after Moses lived (if he in fact ever lived), can or should be able to recite the traditional version of "*V'zot ha-Torah*" without feeling hypocritical or uncomfortable at all. This is so both because the words of our ancestors are being quoted rather than affirmed and because, to the extent that the content of the quotation is still of concern, those words can be understood as mythic imagery rather than as the assertion of historical facts.

Rabbi David Teutsch explicitly makes this point in his "Commentary" on "*V'zot ha-Torah*" on p. 406 of *Kol Haneshamah: Shabbat Vehagim*, but he does not acknowledge its broad applicability to other liturgical formulas. As noted above, the *Kol Haneshamah* editors left in place the great majority of the liturgical changes contained in "Kaplan's" prayer books. In short, in deciding which portions of the traditional liturgy to restore and which to leave redacted, they were unwilling, or unable because of political pressures, to apply their sophisticated liturgical philosophy in a consistent or complete manner.

**Taken together, these two generational changes** give rise to a fundamental paradox of Hebrew liturgy for the Reconstructionist movement today: If most Reconstructionists do not know the differences between the Reconstructionist and traditional versions of almost any of the modified prayer texts, and if those Reconstructionists who understand exactly what changes have been made

to the traditional liturgy, and the reasons for those changes, are precisely the ones who are most comfortable preserving the traditional versions for the reasons outlined above, then for whom, and for what purpose, is the liturgy being reconstructed?

Another paradoxical aspect of reconstructing a traditional prayer text is that doing so may deprive it of historical resonances that are particularly appealing to modern rationalists, and especially to Reconstructionists because of our emphasis on the historical layers of Jewish civilization. As an example, consider the "*Avodah*" blessing in the *Amidah* (the seventeenth blessing on weekdays and the fifth on Shabbat), sometimes referred to as "*Retzey*," which in the traditional *siddur* reads (other than on certain holidays) as follows:

רָצָה, יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ, בְּעַמְךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל  
וּבְתַפְלָתָם, וְהִשָּׁב אֶת הָעֲבוּדָה  
לְדַבֵּיר בֵּיתְךָ, וְאֲשֵׁי יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְתַפְלָתָם  
בְּאֵהָבָה תִּקְבַּל בְּרָצוֹן, וְתֵהִי לְרָצוֹן  
תָּמִיד עֲבוֹדַת יִשְׂרָאֵל עִמָּךְ. וְתַחֲיֶינָהּ  
עֵינֵינוּ בְּשׁוּבְךָ לְרָצוֹן בְּרַחֲמִים. בְּרוּךְ  
אַתָּה, יְיָ, הַמַּחְזִיר שְׂכִינָתוֹ לְרָצוֹן.

<sup>1</sup>Find favor, Adonai our God, in your People Israel and in their prayer. <sup>2</sup>And return the sacrifice to the Holy of Holies. <sup>3</sup>In favor accept the fire-offerings of Israel and their prayer in love. <sup>4</sup>And may the service of Israel your People always be favorable. <sup>5</sup>May our eyes behold your return to Zion in mercy. <sup>6</sup>Blessed are You, Adonai, who restores his divine presence to Zion. (Translation from Lawrence A. Hoffman, editor, *My People's Prayer Book: Traditional Prayers, Modern Commentaries, Vol. 2 — The Amidah*.)

Because discomfort with the sacrificial system of Biblical Judaism has been so widespread among non-Orthodox Jews, the *Avodah* blessing may be the most frequently reconstructed of all Jewish prayer texts in modern times, across denominational lines. Historically, Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist prayer book editors all simply excised the phrases "And return the sacrifice to the Holy of Holies" (clause 2) and "the fire-offerings of Israel" (in clause 3) and made no other changes to the blessing.

More recently, however, different emendations of the *Avodah* blessing have been made in both Conservative and Reconstructionist Hebrew liturgies. The current Conservative movement prayer book, *Siddur Sim Shalom*, restores "And return the sacrifice to the Holy of Holies," deleting only the words "the fire-offerings of Israel," thus basing its version of the blessing on a distinction that seems

far too subtle for almost any worshipper to appreciate. The current Reconstructionist version of the blessing, in the *Kol Haneshamah* series, does not put back any of the words previously excised but substitutes “*lahav tefilatam*” (literally, “the flame of their prayer”) for “*tefilatam*” (their prayer) in clause 3 above, apparently making a metaphorical/ Hasidic allusion to “the fire-offerings of Israel.” Again, no one can accuse the editors of being heavy-handed.

**The problem with all of these linguistic** reconstructions of the *Avodah* blessing is that they deprive us of the ability to appreciate Lawrence Hoffman’s historical reconstruction of the blessing (see *My People’s Prayer Book*, pp. 155, 161-163). Hoffman brilliantly argues that a close reading of the traditional text shows that it in fact has at its core an identifiable original version of the blessing, written before the destruction of the second Temple in the year 70 C.E., in which a functioning sacrificial system is assumed. Hoffman posits that amendments were made to that original blessing sometime after the year 70 so as to reflect the facts that sacrifices were no longer being offered and that, in accordance with the direction of the rabbis, prayers were being offered as sacrificial substitutes. In other words, the traditional text of the *Avodah* blessing is itself a linguistic reconstruction of an earlier version!

Perhaps the most interesting part of Hoffman’s theory concerns clause 4 of the traditional blessing above, in which, as he points out, the word “*tamid*” can function either as an adjective (“always”) or as a noun (the term of art for the daily sacrifice in the Temple). Thus, Hoffman argues, the words that ordinarily would be translated, “And may the service of Israel your People always be favorable,” or something similar, could also be translated, “And may you find favor in the *tamid*, the sacrificial service of Israel, your People.” That line in the blessing can then be seen as a sort of fulcrum on which rest the two different components of the *Avodah* blessing, one looking chronologically backwards to a time when the Temple stood, and therefore of Jewish sovereignty in the land of Israel, and the other dealing with present reality but also beginning to look forward to a messianic age.

In sum, redactions of the traditional *Avodah* blessing mask its latent beauty and obscure its reflection of the monumental achievement of Rabbinic Judaism: Preserving the appearance of continuity between the old forms of worship and the new, even in the face of the literal destruc-

tion of the foundations of the former. By making clear that we are quoting the words of the blessing rather than affirming its content, we can retain the power and elegance of the traditional form without in fact calling for the rebuilding of the Temple or the restoration of the sacrifices.

**Similarly, I would argue, references in the** traditional liturgy to the restoration of the Davidic monarchy, which have generally been carefully removed from Reconstructionist liturgy, should be reinstated. A prime example is the third blessing after the Haftarah reading (“Bring us joy, Adonai our God, through Elijah the prophet Your servant and the kingdom of the House of David Your anointed one . . .”), in which the messianic age is implicitly viewed as a continuation of King David’s rule. (According to mainstream tradition, of course, the messiah will be a direct descendant of David.) My premise, which I believe is uncontroversial, is that messianism must be a component of any authentic form of Rabbinic Judaism. (By “messianism,” I mean the belief that the current, fundamentally flawed state of the world will not last forever and that universal justice and peace will ultimately be established, but not necessarily belief in a personal messiah.) Through more than 2,000 years of mainstream Jewish tradition, both in liturgy and in other writings, the messianic age has been linked metaphorically to the mythic utopia of David’s monarchy. The value of maintaining that chain of archetypal imagery seems to me far greater than any theoretical benefit to be derived from breaking it.

Similar arguments can be made for “unreconstructing” various other parts of the liturgy, including some areas, such as references to the resurrection of the dead, where restoration of traditional wording would have been unthinkable for previous generations of Reconstructionists. Because most Reconstructionists today, unlike their predecessors, can relatively easily reinterpret references to the resurrection of the dead in a metaphorical manner, and because they can say words like “*mehayey hameyitim*” (“who revives the dead”) without choking on them, reinstatement of the traditional language in Reconstructionist Hebrew liturgy should be considered.

**I am not, however, advocating a wholesale** undoing of Reconstructionist liturgical emendations. For example, a compelling case can be made for continuing our practice of removing from the liturgy the most blatant public declarations



of the chosenness of the Jewish people — in the first paragraph of *Aleynu*, in the blessing before the Torah reading and in *Kiddush* for Shabbat and holidays, and I, for one, would not want to restore the traditional language in these instances. (One reason that I am comfortable maintaining idiosyncratic Reconstructionist language in these three prayer texts is that the changes are few enough that we can, and should, expect all Reconstructionists to be familiar with the traditional language as well.)

Also, most of the arguments for reversing previous deletions (or rearrangements) of traditional liturgical language have little or no applicability in the case of additions to traditional prayer texts, the most important of which are the inclusion of the matriarchs in places where only the patriarchs were traditionally mentioned and the inclusion of “*kol yoshvey tevel*” (“all of the inhabitants of the earth”), together with the Jewish people specifically, as the desired beneficiaries of prayers for peace. (Interestingly, the Conservative movement appears to have found this distinction between liturgical additions and other amendments to be valid as a halachic matter as well.)

*If I am correct that, for the reasons suggested above, we cannot expect Reconstructionists today to be familiar or comfortable with more than one Hebrew liturgy, then that is another important reason to make as few changes to traditional prayer texts as reasonably possible.*

Preserving the sense of unity of the Jewish people to the greatest extent possible is a central value of Reconstructionism. Having a common liturgical language is a powerful unifying force for Jews across denominational and national boundaries, as well as through time. Anyone who has had the uplifting experience of going to synagogue in a foreign country and being able to participate actively and comfortably in the service understands the importance of shared prayer texts in making one feel a part of *k’lal Yisrael*, and just how moving that feeling is. Anyone who has had the depressing experience of being in such a synagogue setting with a child who is bewildered by the service because he or she is only familiar with Reconstructionist liturgy has learned the same lesson about shared language. (These experiences can, of course, take place much closer to home, such as at a friend’s non-Reconstructionist bat or bar mitzvah service.)

With regard to liturgy, I have an important ally: My position is similar to the one advanced toward

the end of his life by no less a figure than Rabbi Ira Eisenstein, z”l, Kaplan’s son-in-law and in many ways the father of the institutional Reconstructionist movement. Rarely does one encounter a scholar’s footnote that is as startling and as powerful as footnote 323 in Eric Caplan’s encyclopedic study of Reconstructionist liturgy, *From Ideology To Liturgy: Reconstructionist Worship And American Liberal Judaism*:

It is interesting to note that in later life, Ira Eisenstein no longer endorsed the concept of changing the traditional Hebrew text of prayers to reflect modern belief. “I’ve become . . . less concerned with the actual language of prayer. . . . If you change this word and you change that word, it doesn’t solve the problem. For example, instead of saying *אשר בחר בנו מכל העמים* [“Who has chosen us from all the peoples”], you say *אשר קרבונו לעבודתו* [“Who has called us to his service”]. But in the meantime you say *ברוך אתה* [“Blessed are you”], and you ask yourself who is the ‘you’ you are talking about. Well, it’s really a metaphor. Well, if one’s a metaphor, the other is a metaphor. Leave it alone . . . I would treat the traditional prayerbook as an exercise in reminiscence. We come together and for a few minutes we put ourselves into the world of our ancestors, the world of our fathers, and see how it feels, how it sounds, that’s all. And now if you want to pray — there’s a difference between davening and praying, I make that distinction — pray from our own inside, how we feel, what we’d like to say, if we can use some traditional language, fine, otherwise make up your own prayers and they can be gender-free, and not supernatural and all the rest of it. But you can’t make over a text like that. It was an awful decision that I came to after all these years.” (Personal interview, June 25, 1993.)

Rabbi Eisenstein made similar comments in the Winter 1994-1995 issue of *Reconstructionism Today*. Rabbi Eisenstein and I are both essentially arguing that Kaplanian Hebrew liturgy may, to a greater or lesser extent, fail the fundamental Kaplanian test for determining whether a ritual practice should be maintained; that is, it may no longer function effectively in creating a meaningful Jewish life for the individual Reconstructionist or in helping the Reconstructionist community to realize its highest ideals.

If such a determination were made (and I am intentionally sliding over the questions of who gets to decide and exactly how), then the next series of Reconstructionist prayer books not only could, but should, look very different from either of its predecessors. 