

KOL HANESHAMAH:
MAHZOR L'YAMIM NORA'IM
STUDY GUIDE

BY
DR. SHERRY LINKON AND
RABBI STEVE SEGAR

PUBLISHED BY THE JEWISH RECONSTRUCTIONIST FEDERATION
EREV HANUKAH 5763

MADE POSSIBLE BY A GRANT FROM THE
YAD MORDECAI KEREN TORAH FUND
ESTABLISHED BY SIDNEY (Z"l) AND DOROTHY BECKER (Z"l)

DR. JEFFREY SCHEIN, PROJECT DIRECTOR
RABBI GAIL DIAMOND, SERIES EDITOR
RABBI SHAI GLUSKIN, JRF DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION

TABLE OF CONTENTS

To all those using this curriculum:

The period of the Days of Awe in the Jewish calendar presents unique challenges and opportunities for connecting or reconnecting with the Jewish tradition and the Jewish community. It is during these days that the largest numbers of Jews attend synagogue services, and yet, many of those who do are ill equipped to really engage with this experience in a meaningful way. It is thus difficult for them to open themselves up to the power and potential for transformation that this period contains. One of the main stumbling blocks has been the text of the High Holiday prayerbook itself. Its sheer size and opaqueness are enough to frustrate even someone who comes into a synagogue during the High Holidays with the best of intentions.

The publication of the *Kol Haneshamah* mahzor was an extremely significant contribution toward ameliorating this problem. Like the *Shabbat* siddur in the *Kol Haneshamah* series, it comes enriched with commentary, transliteration and kavannot (contemporary interpretations of prayer texts which help to draw people into the worship experience) that go a long way toward creating spiritual and intellectual accessibility for many who might otherwise refrain from attempting to enter into the experience of the Days of Awe.

However, even with all of the entry points and enhancement that the *Kol Haneshamah* mahzor contains, it remains a spiritual tool of such subtlety and complexity that there is nevertheless a need for teaching and guidance in its use. It is in this spirit that we accepted the invitation to create a multilevel and flexible curriculum for the study of the mahzor. It is our hope that what we have put together will be helpful to people on various points of their Jewish journeys, and that it will contribute in some small way to the possibility of meaningful prayer experiences for members of our movement and for the Jewish world at large.

Dr. Sherry Linkon and Rabbi Steve Segar

Erev Hanukah 5763

INTRODUCTION

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY GUIDE:

The eleven sessions outlined here are intended to form a flexible curriculum that can be adapted to your group's needs and interests. While the whole series can work as an extended study program, most of the sessions can also stand alone. Some of the sessions can be expanded to allow for more in-depth discussions over two or more meetings. The section on text-study strategies at the end of the curriculum offers templates that can be used multiple times with different texts.

Your group may wish to select two or three sessions to tailor the program to fit your schedule and your preferences. For example, sessions one to three introduce key issues in High Holiday prayer and can be used as a short series. Sessions five and six can be used as an introduction to the Reconstructionist mahzor itself. Some groups may prefer to focus on text study and use various strategies from the closing section in a series of two or three sessions.

The first step in organizing your group's study of the Reconstructionist mahzor is to determine your goals. If your group is interested in gaining familiarity with the book itself, then sessions four and five, together with one or more of the text-study sessions, make a good series. If participants are more interested in High Holiday themes, sessions three and six work well, along with any of the text-study sessions. In the Reconstructionist Havurah of Cleveland, we found that a series of discussions about the purpose and experience of prayer (sessions one to three) led into a productive conversation about what we want from High Holiday services, helping our group to develop a shared set of guidelines for the lay members who would lead those services. Alternatively, as your community prepares for the High Holidays, you may want to use just one of the text-study strategies to explore one specific text or a series of related texts.

Each session includes a brief discussion of goals, a list of readings, questions for discussion, and a suggested format for the session. In any of the sessions, you should feel free to tailor the suggested outline to suit your own preferences. It is wise to approach each session with some flexibility; often, discussions move in unexpected directions. Sometimes, staying on task is important, but often, the unexpected turns lead to the most interesting insights.

Session openings are designed to help participants to become comfortable with each other and focus on the issues at the heart of the session. We have not included suggested closing strategies, except in sessions where a specific approach seemed especially useful.

As with any aspect of leading a study group, how you handle closings for the sessions depends largely on your own preferences. Ideally, the end of each session will leave participants with a sense both of having completed a thoughtful discussion and of being ready for more at the next round. Some facilitators simply bring the discussion to a close at the appropriate time and end with brief comments about the next session – its themes, but also the logistics of time, place, and any advance assignments.

Additional strategies can help participants reflect on what they have learned. For example, you might give participants an index card and ask that they write the most important insight from the

discussion on one side and a question that they would like to explore further on the other side. You might ask the participants to sit quietly for a moment and think about one word or idea that summarizes their thoughts at the end of the session, and then go around the circle, allowing each person one final comment. If your study series occurs during the weeks leading up to the High Holidays, you might choose to close each session with a holiday song. This approach links study with experience and encourages familiarity and comfort with holiday music.

READINGS:

We chose readings for this study series to help facilitators and participants prepare. Some of the readings will be most useful to you as a study leader. A few of the sessions are built on discussion of readings. For these sessions, you will need to decide whether to assign the readings in advance or to be read aloud in class. Some groups prefer to read together, focusing on paragraphs selected by the facilitator or participants for in-depth attention. You can ask participants to read aloud, with everyone following along, as a way of beginning a discussion. Another option is for participants to work in small groups, closely reading and discussing brief sections of any of the readings. In each section, in the handout for participants, we provide copies of some readings and citations for others. We have also provided a brief overview of each reading and some suggested discussion questions.

A BRIEF TOUR:

The series begins with two sessions that focus rather generally on the purpose and experience of prayer. Session one invites participants to consider their own assumptions, expectations, and preferences about communal prayer. Session two examines some of the challenges that contemporary Jews, especially Reconstructionists, often find with communal prayer. While this approach may not seem to be directly tied to study of the mahzor, we found with our group that we needed to develop some common ground of understanding about prayer before we could look specifically at either the High Holidays or the mahzor. Your community may already have a strong sense of its attitudes toward and expectations of prayer, and you may wish to begin with a more focused session.

Session three explores High Holiday prayer specifically, raising questions about how High Holiday prayer is both similar to and different from prayer during other times. The activities, readings, and discussion questions consider spiritual, social, and practical issues, with an emphasis on how Reconstructionism approaches these concerns.

Sessions four, five, and six focus on the mahzor itself. Session four examines the “backstory,” inviting participants to consider how and why prayerbooks are created, with a focus on the history and purpose of the Reconstructionist Prayerbook Commission. Session five looks at the structure of High Holiday services, exploring how the organization of both the service and the mahzor shape the prayer experience. Session six looks more closely at the mahzor itself, asking how it reflects Reconstructionist ideas.

The last section of this study guide offers models for text study, each illustrated by materials from the mahzor. For each one, we have suggested additional readings from the mahzor that might work well, but you could use these strategies with any liturgical text.

The sections on Liturgy Comparison and Literary Analysis both focus on how the language and imagery of prayer affect its meaning - the first through comparisons among different variations of the same reading and the second through reading prayers almost like poems. High Holiday Themes traces a key spiritual theme through the mahzor, considering how it develops as we move through the process of reflection and repentance. Life Lessons invites participants to consider how the High Holiday liturgy might guide our daily lives, while Wrestling with Difficulty encourages us to look more closely at the images and ideas in the mahzor that we find most challenging.

As with any adult study program, this curriculum will probably be most effective with a relatively small group, which can provide a sense of intimacy and safety. Contemporary Jews are often surprised to discover how personal and emotional the experience of discussing prayer can be. For larger groups, study leaders might consider using small break-out clusters to provide participants with a more intimate conversation before or after the full-group discussion.

The sessions in this curriculum may result simply in a series of engaging conversations. They may also help participants prepare for the High Holidays or even provide the basis for concrete planning for your group. If you use the discussions for enrichment, the series might end with an open-ended conversation about what participants have gained, their responses to the program, and their ideas for improving future adult education programs. This kind of conversation works best if you invite participants to come to the last session prepared to speak briefly about their experience in the study series, and we encourage you to also ask for written comments on the program. Any of the sessions here would also work well as preparation for the High Holidays, and a closing conversation might invite participants to reflect on how their study has affected their individual views of the Days of Awe and the liturgy associated with it.

It is also possible to use this series in a more practical way, to guide your group as it makes decisions about how to conduct its High Holiday services. We originally designed this program for our own congregation, the Reconstructionist Havurah of Cleveland, to help us develop a shared approach to using the mahzor. One of the insights of our shared study was that members of our havurah came to services with different preferences, and we gained understanding of the complexity and difficulty of leading a service that would serve the needs of a diverse community. Acting on this insight, we devoted time in the last two sessions to drafting and reviewing a list of recommendations to service leaders. Our list of suggestions was designed to help service leaders understand the multiple perspectives and preferences of havurah members. In this way, our shared study left a legacy to our havurah, but this process also allowed participants to articulate what they had learned in very practical ways.

The study series we originally led and the conversations we had while preparing this curriculum guide were thought provoking, wide-ranging, and engaging. For many Jews, the High Holidays serve as the centerpiece of communal prayer life, and this period in the Jewish calendar raises many themes that are central to Jewish life, culture, and thought. Because the holiday period and

the mahzor itself offer so many possibilities, we found that every session was multilayered, with many options for focus, themes, and questions to explore. At the same time, because the High Holidays are viewed with such awe, and perhaps because the Reconstructionist mahzor is such a weighty book, we sometimes feel intimidated by it. Yet, when approached with a sense of curiosity and an understanding that the goal is not so much to find answers as to explore ideas, studying this text can be fulfilling and enjoyable. We hope that this guide will point the way to some provocative starting points, but we also hope that you will feel free, as we did in our planning discussions, to explore the paths that interest you and your group.

SESSION ONE: WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF PRAYER? WHY DO WE PRAY COMMUNALLY?

GOALS:

This first session will help participants to get to know each other, to reflect on their own experiences with and attitude towards prayer, and to begin constructing a pool of shared ideas upon which future sessions will expand. It's not important that you reach consensus, in this or any other session, but it is important for members to examine critically their own positions and to listen closely to others.

READINGS:

The handout explores Reconstructionist ideas about the purpose of prayer through a set of quotes from various commentators.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- 1. Why do we pray?**
- 2. Why do we pray together?**
- 3. How do we create communal ways of praying?**

SUGGESTED SESSION OUTLINE (FOR FACILITATORS):

INTRODUCTIONS:

Even in groups where most people know each other, an opening round of introductions, perhaps augmented by brief storytelling or personal reflections, will set a positive, intimate tone for the discussion. By using a prompt related to the topic of study, these introductions can also help participants express their interests, expectations, and concerns. Participants might be asked to describe a meaningful prayer experience, or to pose a question about prayer that puzzles them – something more than saying their names.

It may be helpful in this opening round not to encourage interaction or extended responses, but rather to be sure that each individual gets a chance to tell his or her story.

BACKGROUND AND FOCUSING QUESTIONS:

Program leaders may want to explain briefly why the group decided to hold an adult education series on prayer. Is this a response to specific issues or experiences within the congregation, or is this intended as preparation for the High Holidays, or is it something else altogether?

Read and discuss the “Commentaries on why and how we pray” handout. The quotes offer a very brief and incomplete introduction to some key Reconstructionist discussions about prayer, and the selections are intended to provoke intellectual and even emotional responses. The readings do not function as sources of deep understanding; rather, they serve as jumping-off points.

In small groups, or going around the whole group if it is small enough, create a list of “what works for me” in prayer. Identify where participants agree and where they differ. How do the commonalities fit with the ideas raised in the commentaries? Do the commentaries offer any insight into how groups should respond to conflicts over prayer?

CLOSING:

If your group uses this session as the first in a series, rather than as a stand-alone session, you could end the discussion by generating a list of questions for further exploration. Use a large pad of paper, preferably on a stand so everyone can see, and ask participants to suggest questions that they hope to explore through the rest of the study series. Write every question on the page, placing a check mark next to any mentioned by more than one person. The facilitator can then close the session by suggesting which of the questions listed relate most closely to the next session’s topic.

SESSION TWO: GOOD PRAYER DOESN'T JUST HAPPEN

PREPARATION:

Session two is based on a discussion of four articles about prayer. You will need to decide whether you wish to assign some or all of the articles as homework before the class or as texts to be read in class.

GOALS:

For many Jews, perhaps especially for Reconstructionists, prayer poses some challenging problems. We may struggle with the language of prayer, or resist certain practices, or simply feel uncomfortable with the act of prayer. Communal prayer complicates this, since individuals bring different, often conflicting feelings and expectations to the experience. The primary goal of this session is to help you understand that individual and shared struggle is a part of prayer. Viewing struggle as a positive part of the process may help us develop a fuller, more thoughtful relationship with our own spirituality and prayer practice.

READINGS:

4. "How can Reconstructionists Pray?" Jacob Staub, *Reconstructionism Today*
5. "Prayer for the Perplexed." Elliot N. Dorff, *University Papers*
6. "The Heart's Work." Barry Holtz, [REDACTED]
7. "Reinventing Synagogues and Prayer." Sidney Schwartz, *Reconstructionism Today*

In "How Can Reconstructionists Pray?" Jacob Staub approaches the problem of prayer by first acknowledging some misconceptions about Reconstructionism, but then quickly turning to ideas about God, and then to a list of reasons why Reconstructionists pray. He goes on to explore how those who might be skeptical about or uncomfortable with prayer might use the *Modim* and the morning blessings as focusing points for developing a more fulfilling prayer practice.

In "Prayer for the Perplexed," Elliot N. Dorff addresses contemporary Jews' possible discomfort with some aspects of prayer head on, including the difficulty some Jews have with Hebrew and the contemporary tendency to resist formal structures. He focuses on the skills required for prayer, strategies for getting started, and the spiritual benefits of prayer. Like Staub, he offers reasons for praying that reflect human needs as well as religious beliefs. Dorff's discussion is useful, in part, because he is not a Reconstructionist, and some of what he says may spur discussion of the difference between Reconstructionist approaches to prayer and approaches that study group members may have grown up with.

"The Heart's Work," by Barry Holtz, takes a different and extremely useful approach. While Staub and Dorff acknowledge the difficulties often associated with prayer, Holtz suggests that wrestling with those difficulties may, in fact, enhance our prayer experiences. In our view, this reading was the single most useful element of our study series. It helped participants rethink to their struggles in terms of strategies for responding to them.

Sidney Schwarz discusses the concepts of "keva," liturgical tradition and structure, and "kavanah," the spirit and soul of prayer, arguing that synagogues need to pay closer attention to

the latter. His article “Reinventing Synagogues and Prayer” examines the gap between what synagogues offer and what their members are seeking. It provides a useful opening to discussions about why people pray and how prayer might meet emotional and spiritual needs.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- 8. How do the challenges described in the reading compare with your own experiences?**
- 9. How does the reading clarify your own experience of difficulty? Does it offer an explanation for your experience? Does it suggest a strategy that might help?**
- 10. Difficulties with prayer are in many ways very individual, and yet they also pose a challenge to congregations. One person’s obstacle might be another person’s entryway. What guidance do you find in the reading for dealing with the difficulties of prayer on an individual and communal level?**

SUGGESTED SESSION OUTLINE (FOR FACILITATORS)

OPENING ACTIVITY:

In small groups, or going around the whole group, ask individuals to identify one thing that makes prayer difficult for them. For now, just create the list, noting any problems that are experienced by more than one person. The list can be posted on a large sheet of paper, but this is not necessary. The point is simply to put some of the difficulties on the table, in part, simply to remind everyone that discomfort with prayer is a common, shared experience, even though the details of our struggles may differ.

The group may wish to take some time to discuss the two or three most common difficulties, or you may want to return to these after looking at the readings.

DISCUSSION OF READINGS:

For this session, it is important that the discussion address more than the attitudes and experiences participants bring with them. The goal is to help people develop strategies for thinking about their own difficulties with prayer – that is, not simply to voice them but to begin to find ways of addressing them. Discussion of the readings will provide new insights and alternative viewpoints. We recommend choosing two of the four readings, because this will provide participants with alternative ways of thinking about the problem of prayer. Staub and Dorff work well together, as do Holtz and Schwartz.

CLOSING:

Almost any closing strategy would work for this session.

SESSION THREE: FOCUSING ON THE HIGH HOLIDAYS

PREPARATION:

This session includes discussion of two readings. You will need to decide whether to assign them for homework or to be read in class.

GOALS:

This session focuses on how prayer during the High Holidays is both similar to and different from the experience of weekly Shabbat services. How do the social, theological, and spiritual issues related to High Holiday prayer support individual and communal reflection? What challenges do they create for individuals and for those leading services? In addition, this session offers resources and helps groups to explore Reconstructionist ideas about the High Holidays.

READINGS:

11. **“God as Comforter: How can an impersonal God be the source of forgiveness?”**
Jacob Staub, *Reconstructionism Today*
12. **“Minyan on Kingship.”** *Reconstructionism Today*

For this session, we have provided two readings that identify key themes of the High Holidays. The first is Jacob Staub’s essay “God as Comforter: How Can an Impersonal God Be the Source of Forgiveness?” His High Holiday commentary from *Reconstructionism Today* explores one of the key challenges of Reconstructionist theology - the problem of seeking forgiveness and redemption from a God that is not imagined in anthropomorphic, personal, supernatural ways.

Another take on this issue is presented in the “Minyan on Kingship,” a set of brief commentaries by Reconstructionist rabbis on “Avinu Malkenu,” originally published in *Reconstructionism Today*. Each commentator discusses his or her own strategies for thinking about this prayer, which defines God in terms that seem counter to Reconstructionist theology and more generally to the beliefs and needs of many contemporary Jews.

Questions for discussion:

- 13. The readings focus on Reconstructionist theology and how it can seem to conflict with some key ideas in High Holiday liturgy. To what extent do theological issues – ways of thinking about God and about the relationship between humans and God – affect your experience and expectations of High Holiday prayer?**
- 14. The High Holidays can be a stressful time, as we reflect on our own struggles during the past year and imagine how we will do better next year. Many Jews come to High Holiday services with high expectations, seeking an especially powerful spiritual experience. How do the heightened expectations and emotional difficulties of the High Holidays affect you?**
- 15. Some of the differences between High Holiday prayer services and other services are based primarily on what we might think of as social elements – how many people attend, who attends, the presence of visitors (both family members and newcomers to the community). How do these differences affect your prayer experience? How does your congregation adjust to these differences?**

SUGGESTED SESSION OUTLINE (FOR FACILITATORS)

OPENING ACTIVITY:

If your group has completed either session one or two, start this third session by asking participants to work in trios (preferably not with their life partners) to create a list of the similarities and differences between High Holidays services and weekly Shabbat services. Also ask each trio to identify which of the similarities or differences they find most enriching and which they find most difficult. Have each group present its list. As in previous sessions, these lists provide common ground for further discussion, either by having participants work from the lists or by having them connect the lists to the readings.

If your group is using this session as a stand-alone study program, or if this is the group's first meeting, you might begin with a more individual, general prompt. Ask participants to introduce themselves and share one reflection or experience related to the High Holidays. For example, you might invite participants to tell a story of an especially powerful (positive or negative) High Holiday experience, or have them ask a question they would like the group to explore about the High Holidays.

DISCUSSION:

The readings for this session focus on theological and spiritual issues related to the High Holidays, and the discussion questions will help your group explore these. You could also spend some time exploring the social conditions that shape the High Holiday experience: the presence of extended family members, the expanded size of most congregations during the holidays, the presence of visitors and less active members, and, for some congregations, a change of location. All of these conditions, coupled with the intensity of going through several services, can raise strong emotions in a short period of time. How do these conditions affect people's experience of prayer? In what ways, if any, do they relate to the theological and spiritual issues of the holiday liturgy?

CLOSING:

This might be a good session to close with a song, or perhaps with two versions of a commonly chanted prayer – the version used during most of the year and the version used during the High Holidays.

SESSION FOUR: WHERE DO MAHZORIM COME FROM?

PREPARATION:

For this session, you will need copies of the Reconstructionist mahzor for all the participants. The session also includes options for discussion of six possible readings. You will need to decide which of these readings to use and whether to assign reading before class. The questions for discussion are based on having the participants learn about the process by which the mahzor was created. They can do so easily by reading either of the first two readings.

There is an additional preparatory activity for this lesson. Ask students, before they come to the session, to scan through the mahzor and identify aspects of the liturgy or of the book itself that puzzle them.

GOALS:

One of the most central study techniques in Reconstructionism is to see Jewish cultural history as well as contemporary values and experience as sources to guide our critical thinking about how to shape Jewish religious life today. This session will help you understand that the High Holiday mahzor is an evolving text created in response to the social and spiritual concerns of those who use it. Indeed, the mahzor itself is an example of this evolutionary process; originally, it was included in the standard siddur. As the siddur grew larger, a separate prayerbook was created for the High Holiday liturgy.

Your group might focus your discussion generally on the evolution of prayer, by looking at how and why various Jewish groups have chosen to revise the prayerbook. Or you may look specifically at the processes and decisions made by the Reconstructionist Prayerbook Commission in preparing its series of prayerbooks, culminating in the mahzor.

READINGS:

16. "Introduction and Guide to Service Leading." David A. Teutsch, *Kol Haneshamah Mahzor Leyamim Nora'im*
17. "Working with the Prayerbook Commission." Lillian Kaplan, *Reconstructionism Today*
18. "Prayer and the Prayer Book" by Alan Mintz from *Back to the Sources*, edited by Barry Holtz, pp. 256-290.
19. "Let every living thing Yah's praises sing." Eric Friedland, *Judaism* volume 39, Summer 1990.
20. "The New Liturgies." Arnold Jacob Wolf in *Judaism* volume 46, Spring 1997.
21. "Rabbi Wayback: A Play." Daniel Mordechai Silberman Brenner.

David Teutsch's "Introduction and Guide to Service Leading" at the beginning of the mahzor provides a useful overview of the process and considerations that went into the development of this prayerbook. Not only does it identify some specific choices made by the committee, it also positions this mahzor in the context of the larger Reconstructionist project of developing a prayerbook series.

For the purpose of comparison, you may want to read the introductions to earlier volumes from the Reconstructionist Press series or the introductions provided here from *Gates of Prayer* (1975) and *Gates of Repentance* (1978), both published by the Reform movement.

Lillian Kaplan's reflection on the process of developing the mahzor, "Working With the Prayerbook Commission," offers a historical perspective from a deeply involved lay person. Kaplan comments on her personal relationship with prayer and Reconstructionism, reminding us that the very outward-directed task of making decisions about the mahzor was influenced by individuals' perspectives. She also provides a fairly detailed discussion of how the Prayerbook Commission operated, including a list of the guidelines it followed and several key debates.

"Prayer and the Prayerbook" by Allan Mintz provides a larger context for understanding the development of prayerbooks. Mintz discusses the long history of liturgical development, but he focuses on specific sections of the siddur, noting how various sections function and how they have been revised over time.

We have also included copies of two reviews of revised prayerbooks. Eric Friedland reviewed the original *Kol Haneshamah* prayerbook from 1990 in, "Let every living thing Yah's praises sing," in *Judaism* volume 39, Summer 1990. Arnold Jacob Wolfe looked at a variety of recently published prayerbooks in 1997, in a review of "The New Liturgies" in *Judaism* volume 46, Spring 1997. Together, they provide a glimpse of how the Reconstructionist prayerbooks have been viewed by readers outside the movement.

Daniel Mordecai Silberman Brenner provides a lighthearted look at the history of Jewish prayer, including a visit with Rabbi Amram as he begins work on the first siddur, in "Rabbi Wayback: A Play."

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

22. How have you assumed that prayerbooks are created? What did you learn about the process from the readings for today's session?
23. How did the process used and decisions made by the Reconstructionist Prayerbook Commission reflect the Reconstructionist idea of the complex relationship between tradition and change?
24. How do the comments by members of the Reconstructionist Prayerbook Commission compare with what you read in the introductions to other prayerbooks? In what ways does the Reconstructionist approach reflect Reconstructionist philosophy?
25. How would you have solved some of the problems that the Reconstructionist Prayerbook Commission faced? For example, how would you balance Hebrew and English? How would you handle the issue of gender in prayer? How much of the Hebrew should be transliterated? For which readings is it most important to have transliterations? How many options would you provide in the Pesukei Dezimra section of the mahzor? The Jewish Reconstructionist Federation mahzor has 80 pages devoted to this. Is this too much? Is it not enough? What songs would you include in the mahzor?

SUGGESTED SESSION OUTLINE (FOR FACILITATORS)

OPENING ACTIVITY:

Begin the session by having participants present their puzzles. Do not attempt to solve the puzzles. Instead, encourage participants to ask questions about the mahzor and engage them in an inquiry about how and why prayerbooks are developed.

DISCUSSION:

Choose one or two of the following strategies; you probably won't have time to do all three in one meeting.

"I always assumed . . ." : Once participants have shared their puzzles, spend some time discussing the assumptions they have had about how prayerbooks are created. Who writes them? What guidelines do we imagine prayerbook developers follow? Why would individuals or, more often, groups of Jews decide to create a new version of a prayerbook?

The mahzor as a case study in reconstructing Judaism: A discussion about the creation of prayerbooks provides a useful opportunity to emphasize the process of reconstructing Judaism as well as the idea that Judaism has always been evolving. Such discussion might occur on the theoretical level, by raising the question of how closely participants believe the mahzor should adhere to traditional practices or by responding to the readings, which highlight the idea that prayerbooks are created by groups of Jews who seek to make the practice of communal prayer fit their beliefs about G-d, the Jewish people, Jewish ethics, and Jewish culture. Consider the "Introduction" to the JRF mahzor as well as the selections from statements about other prayerbooks. What do these statements tell us about why Jews would decide that new prayerbooks were necessary? What do they tell us about the decision-making practices involved? Take a look at a few of the commentaries in the mahzor that comment on specific decisions made by the group that developed it. See the notes and commentaries on pp. 324, 352, 545, 576, 611, and 716 for examples.

What would you do? Another approach would be to invite the participants to imagine themselves as members of a committee that has been asked to create a new mahzor. What issues and difficulties would they face? Some common issues include the structure of the book, how to handle the Hebrew and English (layout, transliteration, translation, how closely to follow the original Hebrew, whether to make any changes in the Hebrew), whether and how to build in flexibility, how to handle specific texts that raise difficulties for contemporary Jews, and so on. How would the group determine the best balance of tradition and innovation? How do they believe such decisions should be made?

This discussion could be framed on the level of the whole mahzor, or discussion leaders might decide to focus on one specific section. Here are a few possibilities:

- How much of the Hebrew should be transliterated? For which readings is it most important to have transliterations?
- How many options to provide in the Pesukei Dezimra section of the mahzor? The JRF mahzor has 80 pages devoted to this – is this too much? not enough?
- What songs would you include in the mahzor?

CLOSING:

At the end of the session, invite participants to reflect on whether their puzzles have been solved. Ask a couple of people to comment on where they stand with their own puzzles. What have they learned? What remains unclear? This will help participants to understand that many questions about the mahzor do not have definite or direct answers. Rather, the very process of exploring the questions helps us to understand the liturgy and the prayerbook itself more deeply.

SESSION FIVE: THE STRUCTURE AND GEOGRAPHY OF THE MAHZOR

PREPARATION:

The readings for this session provide useful background but are not crucial to the planned discussion. You will need to decide whether to assign them as optional readings for homework and/or to use them in class discussion.

GOALS:

One of the greatest challenges to achieving meaningful High Holiday prayer is the sheer volume of liturgy, including some less common liturgy that we encounter during this season. Many prayers and liturgical poems appear during these services that are absent from every other service of the year. Even for those who attend Shabbat services regularly, the size and complexity of the mahzor could feel like a barrier to deep reflection rather than the tool it is meant to be. This session will help you become familiar with the structure of High Holiday services and the organization of the mahzor. Developing a “mental map” of a service provides a sense of the big picture, and that will help you feel more comfortable with both familiar and less familiar liturgy.

READINGS:

26. “The Meaning of the Yamim Nora'im,” from *Entering the High Holy Days*, Reuven Hammer, pp. 21-36.
27. *Jewish Worship*, Abraham Milgram, pp. 231-60 on the Liturgy of the High Holy Days
28. “Prayer and the Prayer Book” by Alan Mintz from *Back to the Sources*, edited by Barry Holtz, pp. 256-290.

The first two readings, by Hammer and Milgram, offer helpful background on the meaning and structure of the High Holiday liturgy, while the chapter by Mintz contains a good overview of the development of the basic format of Jewish liturgy in general. These readings together will enhance and ground the discussion of comparisons between High Holiday and Shabbat liturgy. They will also support the process of becoming familiar with the layout of the *Kol Haneshamah* mahzor.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

29. Look at a Shabbat prayerbook and the mahzor, and compare the section headings and the collection of prayers and readings in each section. What patterns do you notice? Why do you think these patterns exist?
30. How does the Amidah differ in the various High Holiday services? What purpose do you think these differences serve?
31. How do the similarities and differences between High Holiday and Shabbat services affect your experience of prayer?

SUGGESTED SESSION OUTLINE (FOR FACILITATORS)

NOTE:

The activities suggested for this session can be extended over two sessions. We have packed a lot of material into this session, and, depending on your group's size and how talkative and confident members are, this may require more than one meeting. Alternatively, you could choose to focus either on the comparison between Shabbat and High Holidays or on the study of differences in the Amidah between the various High Holiday services.

OPENING ACTIVITIES:

Be sure that everyone present has a copy of the mahzor. Use the questions on worksheet 1 to hold a "Mahzor Scavenger Hunt." This brief activity invites participants to page through the mahzor and to use the guides it includes – the Table of Contents, the index, and page footers.

COMPARING SHABBAT AND HIGH HOLIDAY SERVICE STRUCTURES:

Begin by asking participants to comment briefly on the differences between Shabbat and High Holiday liturgy. What differences stand out in their minds?

Then ask participants to work in small groups – two or three people per group – to create an outline of the Rosh Hashanah morning service, using the "Shabbat Morning Outline" on worksheet 2 as a guide. This activity will help participants recognize that both High Holiday and Shabbat services follow the same structure, and that the differences reside in how each section is developed.

Turn next to those differences. Divide the group into trios or pairs, and ask each group to take a closer look at one of the services and identify how it differs from the comparable Shabbat service (compare Kol Nidre with Friday night services, Yom Kippur morning services with Shabbat morning services, etc.). Identify additions to common sections like the Amidah and any sections that are unique to the High Holidays (such as the Shofar service or Musaf for Rosh Hashanah or the Avodah service on Yom Kippur). Ask each group to create a list of the differences it found on a large sheet of paper that can be posted for everyone in the group to see.

End this section of the session with group discussion speculating on the reasons why these differences exist and how they affect the experience of prayer.

FOCUS ON THE AMIDAH

High Holiday liturgy includes a number of different versions of the Amidah, depending on whether it is silent or spoken and which service it appears in. Different versions of the Amidah provide a useful study opportunity in two ways. First, exploring how the instructions guide readers through the text can help participants gain familiarity with the organization of the text. Second, exploring the different versions highlights the changing themes and focuses of the eight core services.

First, explain to the group that in a traditional prayerbook, there will be no fewer than eight versions of the Amidah for Rosh Hashanah and an additional nine versions for Yom Kippur. The Reconstructionist mahzor includes fewer versions but accommodates different variations by providing instructions that point congregants to different paths through the readings. See pp. 109, 333, and 755 for examples of these directions.

Building on the introductory exercise in which the locations of the various versions of the Amidah were identified, ask participants to work with a partner to compare two versions of the Amidah in a more in-depth way. Ask the pairs to identify differences in language and content and to discuss the ideas and/or feelings that the different versions evoke. Each group should report to the larger group about what it found and how the differences relate to the context in which each version appears. Most of the significant disparity in language can be found in the third and fourth blessings of each of the Amidot, although other sections offer possibilities for contrast as well.

Again, end the section with a general discussion of why the differences exist and how they affect the experience of prayer.

SESSION SIX: THE UNIQUENESS OF THE RECONSTRUCTIONIST MAHZOR

PREPARATION:

For this session, some of the readings from session four are discussed. If you did not previously assign the “Introduction” to the *Kol Haneshamah* mahzor or Lillian Kaplan’s “Working with the Prayerbook Commission,” from *Reconstructionism Today*, you may wish to assign them as homework for this session. The session also calls for using mahzorim from other movements, so you will wish to have them or copies of pages from them on hand.

GOALS:

The publication of the Reconstructionist Mahzor as part of the *Kol Haneshamah* prayerbook series is arguably one of the greatest achievements of our movement since its inception. The mahzor is certainly the most massive and overwhelming collection of liturgy that exists within Judaism, and may be the most complex as well. Potentially, this mahzor can be a tool used by Reconstructionist communities and their individual members to open up our tradition’s spiritual wellsprings that are present but often obscured during this powerful time of year. This session is aimed at helping you to come to a deeper appreciation for how much this mahzor has to offer, as well as how the structure and content of the text embody core Reconstructionist principles.

READINGS:

32. “Introduction.” *Kol Haneshamah Shabbat v’Hagim*, edited by David A. Teutsch
33. “Introduction.” *Kol Haneshamah Mahzor Leyamim Nora’im*, edited by David A. Teutsch
34. *Jewish Worship*. Abraham Milgram, pp. 224-260
35. *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice*. Isaac Klein, pp. 218-220

The introductions in the *Shabbat Vehagim* siddur and the mahzor, Lillian Kaplan’s “Working with the Prayerbook Commission,” from *Reconstructionism Today*, *Jewish Worship* by Abraham Milgram, and *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice* by Isaac Klein.

The introductions to the siddur and mahzor offer a summary of the particular goals that the publication of this series of prayerbooks is intended to achieve. Kaplan’s piece gives a more personal perspective on this process and expands on the ideas presented in the two introductions. The readings from Milgram and Klein help to provide a picture of the traditional service out of which the *Kol Haneshamah* series was created.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- 36. How do the different mahzorim approach issues of diversity and inclusion? How do you feel about the various approaches? How do the differences affect your own experience of prayer?**
- 37. Read David Teutsch's comments about the Yom Kippur Musaf/Avodah service on p. xxii in the "Introduction" to the mahzor and compare it with discussions of this service in Milgram (pp. 252-254) and Klein (pp. 218-220). How do you think the Reconstructionist approach would affect your experience of Yom Kippur, as compared with more traditional approaches?**
- 38. Review the sample pages from other mahzorim with the same sections in our mahzor. The first sample is the signature prayer of Rosh Hashanah morning, "Ha Meleh" (pp. 269-270 in our mahzor). Look also at the Kol Nidrei prayer (pp. 691-698). What differences do you notice? How would you explain the differences? How do you think the differences would affect your experience of prayer?**
- 39. As an individual, what differences among traditional, Reform, and Reconstructionist mahzorim matter most to you? Why?**

SUGGESTED SESSION OUTLINE (FOR FACILITATORS)

OPENING ACTIVITY:

Ask participants to begin by identifying one aspect of Reconstructionist prayerbooks that differs from other prayerbooks they have used and to comment briefly on their response to the difference they mention. This brief warm-up identifies some of the differences that are most obvious and significant for the study participants, and it can provide a touchstone to refer back to as the discussion progresses.

DISCUSSION STRATEGIES:

Choose no more than two of these. The first and second exercises focus on language and texts, while the third examines a more structural issue. One from each category would make a nice combination.

EXERCISE 1

View the sample pages from a traditional mahzor, the Reform movement mahzor and the Reconstructionist mahzor. Examine and analyze the similarities and contrasts among each of the texts. One possibility is to look at the first signature prayer on Rosh Hashanah morning, “Ha Melech.” This can be found on pp. 269-270 of the Reconstructionist mahzor, pp. 169-170 of the Birnbaum (Orthodox) mahzor and p. 97 of the Reform mahzor, *Gates of Repentance*. Things to notice include the presence and types of extraliturgical material, the way in which the Hebrew and English sections are laid out, attention to aesthetics, accessibility, etc. Similarly, you may want to compare the texts of the Kol Nidrei prayer found on pp. 691-698 in *Kol Haneshamah*, pp. 489-492 in the Birnbaum mahzor and pp. 250-253 in *Gates of Repentance*.

EXERCISE 2

One of the hallmarks of contemporary Reconstructionist liturgy is its sensitivity to issues of diversity and inclusiveness across the movement. Examine any page of the mahzor and ask participants to locate as many dimensions as possible to the page that reflects our commitment to these values of diversity and inclusivity. Pages that yield especially strong examples of this are in addition to the “Ha Melech” and “Kol Nidre” sections mentioned in Exercise 1, the introductory pages to the “Malchuyot” section from Rosh Hashanah Musaf service (pp. 607-616) and the entire Yizkor service (pp. 1005-1033). Questions could be raised about whether there are ways in which this text could be even more inclusive than it is and whether there are any trade-offs or losses incurred because of this commitment to diversity.

EXERCISE 3

Compare our new version of the Musaf/Avodah service on Yom Kippur with the traditional version as it is described Milgram’s book *Jewish Worship* (pp.252-54) and Klein’s *Guide to Jewish Practice* from the bottom of p. 218 to the bottom of p. 220. What impact, if any, do you think the way this service is structured might have on the experience of Reconstructionist worshippers as compared to the traditional structure?

TEXT STUDY STRATEGIES (FOR FACILITATORS)

This section of the study guide provides five models of text study, each using a different approach with a different text. You could use two or three on a single text for a single in-depth text-study session. You could also use any of these strategies to study a single text as part of any of the previous sessions. For example, you could use one of these strategies in your examination of “Ha Meleh” in session six or for a discussion of “Avinu Malkenu” as part of session three. We have recommended a few texts for each strategy, but you can apply these study strategies to other texts from the mahzor or any prayerbook.

LITURGY COMPARISON

In many cases, the Reconstructionist mahzor offers multiple versions of a single reading or prayer, often with helpful commentaries. A good example is the “Avinu Malkenu”, pp. 451-460, for which the mahzor provides two translations and two alternative or supplemental readings. This material can be supplemented by using prayerbooks from other publishers or other times. Regardless of the cluster of readings you choose, it is useful to begin a comparison by identifying the most obvious differences between texts. Sometimes, the difference is in the translation of a single word, but often the differences are more substantial – how a text is arranged on the page, how key phrases are translated, whether the writers used traditional or contemporary style, how G-d is addressed, and so on. In order to move the discussion beyond identifying differences, focus on two key questions:

- How do the differences of language, structure, or approach affect the meaning of the text?
- How do different meanings affect the experience of prayer?

LITERARY ANALYSIS

Approach the reading as you would a poem, asking questions about its language, imagery, voice, and structure. Most poems have many meanings, and one of the great pleasures of reading poems is uncovering their multiple meanings and considering how those meanings relate to each other. Even a single word may have many meanings, and exploring them all can enhance your understanding of the poem. In addition, the poet constructs phrases and stanzas carefully. The line and stanza breaks and the overall structure of a piece often fit effectively with the poem’s ideas or feelings. Throughout a poem, images are often related, creating a deeper understanding of the poet’s ideas through repetition and development. The sounds of words matter, often echoing or perhaps contrasting with what they seem to say. Poems often address a stated or implied audience. Think about who is speaking, and who is listening. What is their relationship like? How does the speaker’s voice define that relationship and set a tone for the poem as a whole?

Look, for example, at the Shofarot reading that begins on p. 653. Consider the following questions:

- Why is the opening section here addressed directly to God, rather than written about God? How does that diction affect the image of God that the poem creates? What effect does it have on the readers, who speak to God about God speaking to them?
- What do you make of the contrasts in this reading? The second person, “you,” implies familiarity, while the image of God being revealed suggests the emergence of something new or perhaps forgotten.
- How do the images of power shape your sense of God in this reading? Some of the images here imply a certain amount of natural violence: flame, thunder, and lightning. God’s presence “shakes” the world, causing “trembling.”
- “Lightning” is repeated three times between p. 653 and p. 657. What do you associate with lightning? Lightning might bring to mind an image of something flashing, the sudden illumination provided by a streak of lightning, but it can also do violence, destroying or at least shocking whatever it strikes. Lightning is related to electricity and to power, as well as to the clash of two bodies of air in the sky – a powerful, illuminating flash that seems to come from nothing. Even in the midst of a lightning storm, the flash of lightning can surprise and frighten us. How do all of those associations relate to your image of God? If we think of our knowledge of God coming in the form of lightning, what does that suggest to you? Why is that kind of knowledge of God appropriate for the High Holidays?
- As you read through this piece, consider the effect of the repetition of “And it is said” and the development of the image of God emerging in sound. Why would the mahzor authors choose to recite so many versions of the same general image? How do the different versions differ? How does the refrain “And it is said” relate to the central ideas here about God being made manifest through sound?
- If someone in your group has a good grasp of Hebrew, you might compare how the readings are translated. What does understanding the original language add to your understanding of the words in English?

HIGH HOLIDAY THEMES

Several key themes emerge in the High Holiday mahzor, and one good entry point into understanding specific texts is to consider how several texts address a common theme. For example, you might compare ideas about forgiveness from the Selihot reading (pp. 781-791) to the additions in Asher Bidvaro (pp. 63,65) in the Rosh Hashanah Ma-ariv service, to the Zichronot section of the Rosh Hashanah Musaf (p.643) to the Vidui readings in the Yom Kippur morning service (pp. 423-34) to the confessional readings in the silent Amidah for the Ne’ilah service (pp. 1133-1139). Another possibility would be to look at the theme of the Divine-human relationship as it gets addressed in the two parts of “ki anu amecha” (420-21), “ki hiney hahomer” (pp. 801-804), “Unetaneh tokaf” (pp. 347-354) and “Adon Olam” (pp. 1223-24).

LIFE LESSONS

For many Reconstructionist Jews, prayer serves to help us reflect critically on our own lives, and this is especially true during the High Holidays. How does your understanding of a prayer change if you take it as a guide for how to live? How would your life change if you took the words of the prayer seriously? What issues, reflections, or understandings does this prayer lead you to? This approach might work well with the “uvechen” reading on pp. 363-366, “ki hiney hahomer” on pp. 801-804, or “Hineni” on pp. 851-854.

WRESTLING WITH DIFFICULTY

In his essay (see session two), Barry Holtz suggests that we not try to dodge or smooth over the difficulties we encounter with prayer, but rather dig deeper into them. The first step is to identify the sources of difficulty. Why does this reading make you uncomfortable or simply leave you cold? Then, explore ways of wrestling with the prayers. Holtz suggests four strategies: mental editing, focusing, associative reverie, and reading “beyond the words.” How would your experience with an especially difficult reading change if you applied these strategies? For this approach, consider again “Unataneh token” on pp. 345-352 or “ki hiney hahomer” on pp. 801-804.

WORKSHEET 2
COMPARISON OF SERVICE STRUCTURES: SHABBAT,
ROSH HASHANAH AND YOM KIPPUR

EVENING SERVICES

Shabbat	Erev Rosh Hashanah	Erev Yom Kippur
Kabbalat Shabbat: Candle lighting, Song of Songs, Psalms 95-99 and 29, L'cha dodi, and Psalms 92 and 93		
Shema and its blessings		
Amidah		
Kiddush		
Aleynu		
Mourner's Kaddish		
Closing Songs		

MORNING SERVICES

Shabbat	Rosh Hashannah	Yom Kippur
Morning blessings		
Verses of praise		
Shema and its blessings		
Amidah		
Torah service		
Conclusion: Aleynu, Mourner's Kaddish, and closing songs		

The Musaf service on Shabbat consists only of an additional Amidah. Based on the Table of Contents, list the other parts that are added to the Musaf services on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, respectively.

MAHZOR SCAVENGER HUNT

1. Find the first page of the Rosh Hashanah morning service.
2. Find the first page of the Yom Kippur morning service.
3. How much of the morning service is shared by the two services? Where do they diverge?
4. Besides the alternative Amidot, how many different versions of the Amidah are there in our mahzor?
5. Which services share the same version?
6. Which of the main Days of Awe services (i.e., Rosh Hashanah evening, Rosh Hashanah morning, Rosh Hashanah Musaf, Rosh Hashanah Minhah, Yom Kippur evening, Yom Kippur morning, Yom Kippur Musaf, Yom Kippur Minhah and Yom Kippur Ne'ilah) is laid out in the most numerically contiguous way?
7. Which one requires the most jumping to various sections of the book?
8. How many versions of the Shema and its blessings are there in the mahzor?
9. Which services share the same version?
10. Using the Table of Contents and the rubrics at the foot of each page, find the Ahavat Olam prayer within the Shema and Its Blessings sections for Rosh Hashanah Eve and Yom Kippur Eve. Notice one way in which they are similar and one way in which they differ.

MAHZOR SCAVENGER HUNT: ANSWER KEY FOR FACILITATORS

1. Page 139
2. Page 139
3. They share the first three sections and diverge at the Amidah.
4. Eight
5. The Yom Kippur Eve service is the same text that is used as the silent Amidah for the rest of the services on Yom Kippur except for N'eilah. The Amidah for Rosh Hashanah Eve is the same one that is used for Minhah on Rosh Hashanah afternoon. The Amidah for Yom Kippur morning and Yom Kippur Musaf have significant overlaps.
6. Neilah
7. It is a toss up between Yom Kippur morning and Yom Kippur Minhah.
8. Three
9. Rosh Hashanah morning and Yom Kippur morning
10. Pages 71-74 and 711-712. The Rosh Hashanah version is longer by two pages and has extra commentary and an added section to the prayer. The first few lines of the Hebrew and English are the same, as is the commentary below the line on the first (or only) English page.

BIBLIOGRAPHY