

Eric Caplan, Revisiting *From Ideology to Liturgy*, The Mordecai M. Kaplan Center for Jewish Peoplehood, December 12, 2021.

Kaplan diaries, October 30, 1942

In these remarks I want to meet what is perhaps the most devastating criticism. It comes from those who look to Reconstructionism to revolutionize Jewish life. They feel that we ought to concentrate on the more fundamental problems like the organization of the Jewish community, increasing the demand for Jewish education, raising the ethical standards of Jewish living. To expend effort on liturgy and ritual is to dissipate our limited energies and to divert attention from the tasks which dare not be postponed....

To live as a Jew should mean to express oneself religiously and ethically. At the root of all religious self-expression is worship; at the root of expressing oneself ethically is being honest with oneself. Before we can hope to revolutionize Jewish life as a whole we must try to revolutionize our own personal lives. That calls for engaging in meaningful worship and being perfectly honest with ourselves....

Point your mental finger, so to speak, to that which you regard as your innermost, truest, and best self, that self which is you in your most luminous moments. Let us give it a name. Let us call it "soul," for that in fact is what the soul actually is. Now, this soul is in all literatures a ray of the all-pervading light we call "God." In genuine worship we address directly not God but our best self, the soul within us, and ask it to communicate our thanks, our fears, our hopes, our deepest yearnings, to God of whom it is a part....

Now we can understand where the connection between worship and being honest with oneself comes in. Since in worship we address our truest self, nothing would seem more cynical and degrading than to abuse that sacred communion by uttering words which have no meaning to that self, or expressing wishes which we do not really entertain. I dare say that this is where all dishonesty begins. Once we are not honest with our best self, we find it easy to be dishonest with others.

Mordecai M. Kaplan, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*

Transvaluation consists in ascribing meanings to the traditional content of a religion or social heritage, which could neither have been contemplated nor implied by the authors of that content....

Revaluation consists in disengaging from the traditional content those elements in it which answer permanent postulates of human nature, and in integrating them into our own ideology. When we reevaluate, we analyze or break up the traditional values into their implications, and single out for acceptance those implications which can help us meet our own moral and spiritual needs; the rest may be relegated to archeology.... They need not necessarily be such as the ancients themselves would have been able to articulate, but they should have psychological kinship with what the ancients did articulate....

The transition from traditional Judaism to the Judaism of the future can be effected only in the glaring light of complete awareness of the change involved. The problem of maintaining the continuity of the Jewish religion can be solved only in one way, and that is by being convinced that the continuity is genuine. Such conviction is compatible only with the certainty that whatever ancient meanings or values we choose to conserve and develop are read out of, and not into, the traditional teachings or practices. For that reason we have to avoid transvaluation and resort to reevaluation.

Kaplan diaries, October 2, 1942

A week from tomorrow we shall start the new order of religious service at the SAJ.... We have been carrying on for over twenty years with a type of service which virtually retained the whole of the traditional context. We merely eliminated the undue repetition of Kaddish, the repetition of the Amidah, and they have added some occasional prayers in English. Despite it being a vast improvement on the type of service conducted in other synagogues, according to the testimony of those who attend our service for the first time, the novelty would soon wear off, and for those who come frequently the main motive in attending is the interest in the sermon, as is the case with the other types of service. . . .

Kaplan diaries, April 23 1942

Last Tuesday night the SAJ Board of Trustees met at Thomson's home [at] 180 E. 79th Street to continue the discussions of the changes to the service proposed by Ira [Eisenstein] and me. The meeting, which was the third devoted to that subject, was very well attended. The fact that [Albert] Rosenblatt had conceded that we may eliminate the Musaf [additional service] helped matters. I in turn compromised on having the entire Sidrah [portion of the week from the Torah] instead of only part read in the Sabbath morning's service. Ira and I presented the following plan: The service should begin at 10:30. Shaharit [first part of morning service] to last to 11:00. Reading of the Torah including comments to 11:50; sermon to 12:15; the special occasion service to 12:30. The musical renditions to be in charge of a professional choirmaster aided by a small choir. Emphasis is to be placed on having the service begin with a full attendance and its being rendered as intelligible and significant as possible.

Janet Marder in *Divrei Mishkan HaNefesh: A Guide to the CCAR Machzor* (p. 57).

In general, we retrieved a great deal of language that had been excised from earlier American Reform prayer books—understanding that all the liturgy is poetry and metaphor, and that we no longer are restricted by the late nineteenth-century Reform criteria that prayer had to reflect what we believe with certainty in the most literal way, or be somehow verifiable. Robust commentary and an emphasis on expansive interpretation allows us to reclaim these classic words in new ways. That explains why twenty-first-century Reform Jews can say the words *Mashiach ben David avdecha* and mean by them a variety of understandings. But we also had to balance that new twenty-first-century hermeneutic with a respect for a certain American Reform nusach in other parts of the service, much of which is also determined by the music. It means that in the end, much of the traditional/classic language was restored in this machzor, but not in every prayer.

Leon Morris in *Divrei Mishkan HaNefesh: A Guide to the CCAR Machzor* (p. 140)

Widespread positive experiences with text study have resulted in an appreciation even for texts that are difficult and challenging in light of contemporary attitudes. Increasingly, twenty-first-century American Jews value opportunities to confront such texts directly and to play a role in trying to derive relevance and meaning from them. The history of reforming the prayer book embraced an approach that assumed that laity would be put off by such texts, or simply would not know what to do with them. Such passivity regarding the texts was part of a wider context for Reform worship in which worshipers were largely observers in a service that was mostly read to them by their rabbis. In contrast, today's Reform Jews would privilege interpretation over revision. They want to struggle with, and make meaning from, the classic words themselves, rather than have it done for them by others.

Of course, there will be parts of the traditional liturgy that will cause pain or offend—selections that even the most robust commentary will not be able to rescue. In these cases, the best choice may indeed be to remove it from our prayers. But such instances are few and far between, and liturgical reforms such as these represent a miniscule number of changes Reform has made to the prayer book over the years....

From the Introduction to *Machzor Lev Shalem*

We believe the translation ought to reflect the Hebrew original as closely as possible, allowing the English reader to experience the text without a filter, and allowing the congregant who has some basic familiarity with Hebrew to find familiar words. When the Hebrew text is jarring, which it sometimes is, the English translation ought not to smooth over the difficulty.

"Denominational Perspectives on Liturgy," *Imagine the Possibilities: A Conference on the Future of Jewish Liturgy and Prayer*, The Mordecai M. Kaplan Center for Jewish Peoplehood and Mechon Hadar, New York, May 17, 2015.

Jan Uhrbach (Conservative): Denominations have resources, and I don't mean just financial resources, I mean intellectual resources and a depth of bench—pun intended—that individual communities lack....

The prayerbook in the Jewish tradition has a peoplehood function. It's not just about the service that you are *davening* in that particular morning or evening. It is an anthology of our collective yearnings and pains and joys and understandings of God and strivings and it serves to form a people. And when we are too atomized in our liturgy, we will lose that sense of peoplehood. So, on the one hand, it's wonderful that people are creating all their own siddurim. But it could result in a sense in which, if you are within one particular community, you don't know how to participate in the service; if you go to another community... and that's an enormous loss...

At the same time though, each of us has balanced that with creating books in which a particular community can structure their own service, can make liturgical choices—we want that.... But we are looking at the same text and making choices within that."

Reena Spicehandler (Reconstructionist): I think there probably will come a time where the Reconstructionist movement is ready to begin the project again....

You know this book, as I get older, it is harder to hold this book for a long period of time. It's heavy, it's uncomfortable....Having a tablet would be so much more convenient. Not only that, as the print seems to get smaller and smaller, if you have a tablet, you can enlarge it. So I can see that there are really wonderful advantages. On the other hand, you really don't want people going on the Internet in the middle of the service. You could preload, but even then, what does that do to your kavvanah? Although someone might say, "Oh wow! I want to read this amazing kavvanah I just found." Who knows. I'm not the person to do it, but I'm the person to say, I wonder what it's going to look like. Because I think that there will be changes, amazing changes, once we start using the new technology.

Peter Knobel (Reform): First of all, I really loved, Jan, the way you phrased it. I think the whole question of the resources which denominations can bring. And I don't think that's going to change. I was extremely surprised at, I'm going to use a terrible term, the penetration of the market for *Mishkan T'filah*. I really thought it would not have a large penetration because of all of the desktop publishing that was done.

When it comes to the use of technology, it's going to be the resources, ultimately, of the denominations that are going to create the kind of opportunities. [gives the example of visual tfillah] That's really based on *Mishkan T'filah*....

I think that we are going to see very different kinds of worship. And we're going to see very different ways of putting together a siddur. But I want to emphasize the word siddur....When I was a teenager I really thought creative worship was the greatest thing. But, the truth of the matter is, as a people, we are liturgical.... So I think this whole question of history, of peoplehood, the question of order, are all going to continue to dominate.

Urbach: I think, not only because of the electronic age, but because we are in such an anti-hierarchical, radical, sort of leveling the playing field culture, we have stopped valuing the significance of aesthetics. And our prayer is suffering. It matters.... A loose-leaf is not appropriate for prayer. It's not the same as a beautifully bound and printed book. And a tablet also lacks that certain aesthetic. It opens up certain opportunities, but it lacks that aesthetic and the aesthetic matters.... The book matters. And the triggers for the way our consciousness works matter. When you use a tablet, all of the triggers are for surfing; they are not for depth. When we enter prayer, we want to trigger ourselves for a depth encounter. And a tablet is never going to do that. I see the value of bringing electronics but there is a danger as well, in the prayer experience, of what that does; When we allow that technology to supplant, rather than supplement, the book.

Spicehandler: I agree with everything that you said... but I'm trying to open up my mind to the idea that young people today may view books very differently.