My deepest thanks to my teacher David Ellenson for his invitation to speak to you this evening. Even though I am a product of the Cincinnati campus, I am deeply honored by the opportunity to “come home” and share some of my thinking with you all. I hope that the ideas and the challenges that I set before you this evening can serve as a fitting tribute to Fritz Bamberger’s memory and his years of dedicated service to the world of Reform Judaism, both in Germany and in the United States.

Boston College, where I work, is currently celebrating its sesquicentennial. Perhaps coherent with a 150th anniversary, this celebration is scheduled to last a full three semesters. Institution celebrating anniversaries often use them as opportunities to define and highlight their identity, to deepen it or perhaps even to shift it, and they design their anniversary programs accordingly. Boston College is a Jesuit and Catholic university, meaning that it was obvious how to begin the anniversary: with a celebratory mass – but where? At Boston’s favorite public venue – and my apologies for mentioning this in Yankees territory: at Fenway Park. Some twenty thousand attended, with an altar set up between home plate and first base.

How did I feel about this? To be honest, I didn’t go. It was on Shabbat right before Rosh Hashanah, so my thoughts were elsewhere. But more importantly, faculty were expected to march in academic regalia in procession behind the cross. The center of the event was the eucharist at which I would necessarily be a spectator. The mass included a wonderful, thought-provoking and inspirational sermon. But even the preacher ultimately excluded non-Christians when he related his message specifically to the meaning of “our baptisms.” This liturgy, then, was an expression of and a construction of a community –a specifically Christian community, one that reinforced a message that this university consistently, if sometimes subconsciously, conveys: that non-Christians are ultimately outsiders, at best welcome guests.

Jews expect to feel themselves outsiders when visiting a regular church service, or even in America’s public spaces when the Christmas music turns on, as it did this weekend. However, this question of inclusion and exclusion raises a larger issue with ethical implications that I want to apply to Jewish liturgy as well. To enter into the ethical questions, though, we need first to examine how Jews and Jewish rituals similarly construct communal identity. In this process, we can identify what sorts of exclusionary boundaries we too create. Having done so, we can evaluate whether or not we are comfortable with these results.

We live in an age that seeks to construct communities – think of social networking and how it has changed the meaning of “friends.” We are uncomfortable with exclusionary boundaries, in theory, and yet we want to define Jewish identity productively. Contexts in which such identity-construction takes place go beyond formal prayer services to include education of both children and adults, both formal and informal, at home, school, camp, and in any context which brings Jewish individuals into community. However, anthropologists will tell us that it is through ritual behavior that we humans create the context for the expression and transmission of our specific group identity. It is through ritual

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1 For a brief bibliography of places where I have published the ideas included in this lecture, please see the end of the text.
or ritualized behaviors that, in positive terms, we express who we are and, in negative terms, define who we are not or who and what stands outside our community.

I come to these questions bringing positive experiences learned at Boston College as well. First of all, I sit in a theology department, not in a department of religious studies. This means that, in marked contrast to the traditions of the Jewish studies world and my own training here at HUC, my colleagues value engaged scholarship. The questions asked are not the ones of Wissenschaft, of pure knowledge; rather, they are those of “faith seeking understanding.” I then ask, “how can my work in Jewish liturgy lead to understandings that might just impact the lived world?”

In addition, some categories of Christian theology challenge me to look more deeply into Judaism, to bring home what I learn reshaped in Jewish garb. As a minority culture living among Christians, Jews have frequently done this subconsciously – but in today’s world, it can be a conscious move as well.

So – another starting point for tonight’s exploration is the fundamental principle of Catholic liturgical theology: *lex orandi lex credendi*, “the law of prayer is the law of faith,” or more loosely, “what we pray is what we believe.” Jewish liturgy is our most public and regular statement of Jewish theology. However, this Latin phrase need not operate solely as a simple statement of equivalence. Rather, what we pray *shapes* or *forms* what we believe; conversely, what we believe ought to be reflected in our prayers, or we find ourselves in a state of cognitive dissonance.

A Jewish restatement of this needs to broaden the horizon to include Judaism’s focus on *mitzvot*: “the way we as a community act is a statement of our beliefs.” However, ritual and prayer are certainly a form of Jewish action, and because they consist mostly of words with their consequent ability to communicate meaning, prayer, *written* prayer at least, is particularly easy to study. Indeed, Reform Judaism from its first beginnings in Germany in the late eighteenth century showed sensitivity to our question: how does the theological statement embedded in the received liturgy construct communal boundaries? The answers were problematic for Jews newly seeking acceptance in western society.

In order to understand how and why liberal Jewish liturgies changed the way that they talked about the Jewish community and its boundaries, let us first survey some of what confronted them. How did their received prayers, those still found in traditional prayer books, many of them recited daily and multiple times each day, construct identity? How do they teach Jews to think about themselves? Such statements come in a number of forms. Some of these are fully, internally positive. We have a name: *ישראל בני*, the children of Israel, or *עם ישראל*, the people of Israel, or simply *Israel*. This name identifies us as a community whose membership is not primarily defined by faith or any entrance ritual, but rather by blood, by family relationship, by nationality, as one nation among many others. The boundaries of this community are somewhat permeable – there are mechanisms for adoption into it through conversion – but this is like becoming an American. As a consequence of this communal identity, most rabbinic prayers and all the central ones are voiced in the first person plural, and this “we” always refers to this larger entity *ישראל כלכל*, and not some subgroup of it.

Rabbinic liturgy does reflect positively on the particular relationship that this corporate body Israel has with God. God’s choice of Israel, echoes all over the place, of course, from the *בנִי בְּנֵי בִּרְאָותָם* – from all the nations – as in the Torah blessing, to the text of *הבדלה*, who makes a separation... between Israel and the nations--, to the somewhat more subtle, *אִשָּׁר לֶבַע נִשְׁאָרָם* -- who has sanctified us, made us holy, through divine commandments and commanded us. In some places, the purpose of this divine choice is explicit, to give us the Torah or the Sabbath, to command us to do something, or simply because God was pleased with us. From the perspective of the modern emphasis on building self-esteem, this sounds
pretty good. We all enjoy being liked, especially in the pre-Facebook sense of the term. However, as moderns, we need to and indeed have added the question: what does this imply about everyone else? When I teach Jewish liturgy to a class full of Christians, these sentiments cease to be so positive and become what many call “difficult texts.” This led Mordecai Kaplan to eliminate this language.

This difficulty emerges with greater clarity in the context of more explicit negative statements about those outside our community. These the traditional liturgy also offers in spades—though most are now unfamiliar in Reform contexts precisely because of discomfort with their messages. The simplest is the early morning blessing of identity, as Yoel Kahn calls it, praising God שילא שפתי י韭 — who has not made me a gentile, changed in all but Orthodox prayer books today to a positive, ישלח ישראלי, who has made me a Jew.

A particularly explicit text appears in the Shabbat morning קראות יום, sanctification of the day, the middle blessing of the תפילה, which states about the Sabbath:

For You, Eternal our God, did not give it to the nations of the world, and did not give it as a heritage, our Sovereign, to idol worshipers. In addition, no uncircumcised shall dwell in its rest, for You gave it lovingly to Israel your people, the seed of Jacob whom You chose.

We could add many more. But note here how God’s positive choice of Israel involves a negation of those outside the boundaries of the community.

This leads us to the more subtle statement of a series of prayers that could be universal, but instead construct a community that is just Israel. The minor talmudic tractate, Derekh Eretz, ends with a chapter known as Perek Shalom, “Chapter of Peace.” It offers nineteen statements beginning בינינו שילים, “Great is peace.” In the last of these Rabbi Joshua of Sikhnin cites Rabbi Levi: “יבחרו המפсалים והמשואות בשלום, "Great is peace, for all the blessings and prayers conclude with peace.

The examples listed are: the second blessing following the sh’mah in the evening that ends in our versions today, most explicitly on Shabbat, שלומך סוכת עלינו ופרוש — and spread over us the shelter of Your peace; then the priestly benediction, that ends ישם לך שלום — and may God grant you peace — which then, of course leads into the final blessing of the amidah whose theme itself is peace. Finally, this tradition notes that all the elements of the liturgy collectively end with peace, in the final line recited at the conclusion of the amidah and the conclusion of kaddish, addressing God במרומיו שלום奥运会 — the One who makes peace in the highest heavens.

In the received Ashkenazi texts, in each of these cases, God explicitly makes peace only for Israel. This, of course, reinforces the communal boundary, the extended but not infinitely extended “we” of the praying congregation. The same could be said of the traditional prayers for healing, whether in the weekday amidah or in the usual שברך מי texts. They encourage the naming of Jews, asking for their healing "among all the rest of the ill of Israel" but make it very difficult to name or even vaguely include those who are part of our other communities.

So much for people in general, though this list too could be lengthened. What about specific references to other religions? Here too, the more you look, the more you can find, and none of it is affirmative. The most obvious is the familiar hymn Yigdal. It restates Maimonides’ creedal statement, and decisions what to assert as statements of faith almost always arise out of opposition to something else, whether heresy within one’s own community or pressures on it from outside. Thus, Yigdal states about God, for example, אל אין גוף אל אין דמות — God is One and there is no unity like God’s — and אל אין היהודים vagina דמות — God has neither bodily form nor body — in rejection of Christian Trinitarian understandings of God. עוד אין יהודי במישך — there has never arisen another in Israel like Moses — and אין יהודים離れין אל מיתר דתים — God will not alter or change divine law — both reject Christian and Muslim claims to have received revelation that supersedes and is superior to that of Judaism.
Liturgical poetry from the Byzantine period through the High Middle Ages was full of such references, sometimes very explicit and even gruesome. Luckily, most has fallen out of use, though the poetry for the Ninth of Av retains some anti-Christian allusions.

One other text that many point to as another example, not a piyyut, and not censored because it is very allusive, comes from the Passover Haggadah, when its maggid stresses in an unusual double-layered midrash that it was God alone, not an angel and not any agent, who saved Israel from Egypt. Many suggest that this should be read in the light of Christian claims that salvation comes through Jesus.

What community will be included in the messianic redemption, though? All of humanity, or only Israel? While this is a fair question to ask, Judaism offers a huge range of answers, even within the liturgy. Any answer is, of course, speculative, but it will reflect Jewish attitudes to our neighbors. The texts that touch on this issue include the pieces of Jewish prayers about which Christians were the most sensitive, precisely because, in less than gentle ways, they placed Christians – or were understood to place Christians -- very much outside the messianic scenario.

Let’s begin with עַלְנוּ, an early poem composed for Rosh Hashanah. It may have responded originally to the polytheist Roman world, not to Christianity. In the twelfth century, though, Ashkenazi Jews began to recite it at every service, sometimes with vile anti-Christian expansions, thus giving it a clear intent.

This prayer has two parts. The first describes Israel’s relationship to God, opposing it to other people’s religious experience. We are obligated to praise God, it says. Why? Because God has not made us like other nations. This is consistent with the particularist themes we’ve already discussed. But the prayer then specifies the ways that we are unlike other nations. “God has given us a different portion and fate” – and the original poem continued – “because they bow down to vanity and emptiness and worship a God who does not save, but [in contrast] we bend our knees and bow down and thank the Supreme Sovereign, the blessed Holy One.” This is an outright rejection of the religious beliefs of some non-Jewish group, or perhaps all non-Jews, labeling it vanity or mere breath and emptiness, and claiming that their so-called divinity has no ability to save them.

While this may simply be an assertion of the truth of monotheism in a world of polytheists, taken out of that context, it easily addresses Jews’ new neighbors. In the High Middle Ages, there were Jews who noticed that the gematria, the numerical value, of the word פִּיר that I’ve translated “and emptiness” is the same as the gematria, 316, of ישו, the most common Hebrew name for Jesus. This line thus became pretty widely understood as explicitly anti-Christian. As Christians became aware of active Jewish anti-Christianity, this prayer was a regular object of their critiques, resulting eventually in the censors demanding the removal of this line from the sixteenth century on.

It seems, though, that in at least some places, what was printed in the prayer books was not determinative of actual practice. Many prayer books continued to mark the spot with some symbol. Beginning in 1703, repeated throughout that century, German governments ruled that Christian theologians literate in Hebrew needed to be stationed in every synagogue to assure that aleynu would be recited out loud with this line omitted. An early eighteenth century German Jew who converted to Christianity also informed his new co-religionists that in his youth, once he had been considered old enough to be discrete, he had been taught to recite this line from memory and to spit at this point – an ugly and graphic custom continued by some Hasidim.

Why would Jews seek to retain this line? Mostly likely, the reason is that the censorship left a prayer that made no sense: “who has not made us like other nations” leads into “but” or “and we bow down to God” without having described the contrast. This gap in meaning also explains today’s retrieval of this censored line in a growing list of Israeli and American orthodox prayer books. However, as far as I
have been able to determine, few Israelis who recite the restored text have any inkling of why that line was removed to begin with. Americans are probably using the ArtScroll prayerbook which includes a note, but only with the weekday morning service, suggesting that slander raised against the prayer by apostates caused its removal and denying that the gematria reflects its true meaning.

The second paragraph of *aleynu* was almost never censored, but for our purposes, it is also significant, as it turns to the role of other nations in the messianic agenda. It reads:

> Therefore we place our hope in You, Eternal our God, that we may soon see the glory of Your power [i.e., the beginning of messianic times. And what will happen then?]

> when you will remove abominations from the earth and idols will be utterly destroyed [i.e., idolatrous religions will disappear, creating a perfected world under God’s rule]

> [...], when all humanity will call on Your name, to turn all the earth’s wicked toward You.

> All the world’s inhabitants will realize and know that to You every knee must bend and every tongue swear loyalty.

> Before You, Eternal our God, they will kneel and bow down and give honor to Your glorious name.

> They will all accept the yoke of Your kingdom, and You will reign over them soon and forever...

Thus, this prayer envisions that in messianic times, the other nations will abandon their false gods and come universally into relationship with the God of Israel. This sounds inclusionary, but several crucial points remain uncertain. Will these nations in the process be absorbed into Israel and cease to be “other” to it, or will they retain their particularity? Could this author even envision that there would be peoples who worship the God of Israel, but through different paths? “Original intent” is a dangerous and insufficient interpretative lens, whether for constitutional law or for liturgy. Thus, we can indeed make contemporary interpretative choices and read this prayer as expecting the nations to worship God but through their own paths. This makes this prayer less “difficult”. It allows us to construct our community, while practitioners of other religions can retain their faiths, even in messianic times. This is significant, particularly when brought into dialogue with Christian expectations that Jews will convert at the end of time.

I come now to what to me is the most fascinating example (I published an entire book on it!), also the most complex historically, and the one that perhaps raised the most ire among Christians: the *birkat haminim*, known to some as למלשינים. The title of this prayer literally translates as “the blessing of the sectarians” but for most of its history, it functioned as an often explicit curse of Christians. This prayer appears only in the weekday services, in the the *T’filah*, where it is embedded in a series of petitions asking God for the necessary elements of the messianic drama. In a traditional prayer book, this messianic drama begins with the ingathering of the exiles. Once gathered, there will be a need for the establishment of a just government. In that context, we find our prayer, a petition for the removal of those factors that undermine that just society. This then leads to a prayer for God to bless the righteous and then for the specific elements of the messianic rebuilding. Thus, the *birkat haminim* is the only element of these prayers that looks to the boundaries of the Jewish community, that addresses issues of identity.

We know almost nothing about the origins of this prayer beyond a talmudic story whose historicity is increasingly considered questionable. Something definitely seems to exist by the third century, but in very inchoate form. Church fathers who spent time in the Land of Israel and intersected with Jews know something by the end of the fourth century, but they report only that this prayer curses
Christians. This suggests that the full text did not yet exist, as what we find in the earliest known texts would likely have evoked more extensive criticism.

By the relatively rich textual evidence from the Cairo geniza, best dated to the 11th century, we find a prayer that, in its Babylonian versions, contains all the elements that appear in the earliest European manuscripts, only a century or so later. This prayer consistently includes three body elements:

- a curse of נמשכים, apostates, probably just to Christianity, with the plea that they lose hope, likely referring to their afterlife and perhaps countering Christian promises of salvation;
- a curse that מינים immediately perish – מינים is the general word for sectarians, but it was almost always preceded in the geniza (but never in Europe) by the term נוצרים, a specific term for Christians or Jewish-Christians. In Europe, minim came to mean Christians;
- and a curse for the uprooting and humbling of זדון מלכות, the evil empire, or, more literally, the insolent empire, referring minimally to the powers preventing the messianic scenario but for Jews living under persecution, referring to their local governments, and in Europe, Christian authorities both church and secular.

The latest of these texts add a curse of Israel’s enemies as well.

Thus, this prayer operates in two modes: in lines three and four, it is a call for God to curse those outside Israel who are actively working to hurt Israel and to prevent its messianic fulfillment; probably more importantly, in its first two lines (although the second comes to apply to gentile Christians), it functions as a pre-emptive curse warning Jews not to transgress communal boundaries and to join those who reject Judaism – or perhaps, those heretics who reject the rabbis’ form of Judaism. It thus reinforces for Jews the “us” versus “them” mentality so common in rabbinic thought, but with two “thems”.

Beginning in the thirteenth century, this prayer was brought to the attention of Christians by precisely those it cursed, Jews who crossed the communal boundary and became Christians. It was discussed at the trial of the Talmud in Paris in 1240. In 1336 in Castile, the accusations of another apostate Jew led to an entire disputation devoted just to this prayer, resulting in its censorship there for a while. Other baptized Jews named prayers like aleynu as well, often as part of their efforts to find acceptance among their new co-religionists. Official Catholic censorship of Hebrew books began in 1553, in the context of the Counterreformation and ended in the eighteenth century, continuing for a while longer in Austria-Hungary. Protestants also censored Jewish texts, as did Czarist Russia until its demise.

This widespread Church censorship of all Hebrew books resulted in the replacement of every noun of the birkat haminim, hugely destabilizing this mandatory prayer text. Like aleynu, it isn’t clear how widely the performed prayers followed printed books, but in this case, it seems that by the late seventeenth century, the original language had been largely forgotten. Probably, the fact that printed books had become cheaper, placing the new text in everyone’s hands, made the replacement language more normative. This is opposed to aleynu where the place of the troublesome line was often marked eventhough the words were fully absent. With the new language, the birkat haminim turned ever more abstract in its address, replacing apostates with informers, minim with evildoers, often banishing enemies entirely, and replacing the insolent empire with “the insolent”.

However, only among kabbalists, whose influence was becoming very significant, does the intent of the prayer really change: these categories become code words for evil powers in the divine
sphere rather than for actual human actors. For non-mystics, though, was this prayer still casting aspersions about Jews’ Christian neighbors and building a wall between the communities? The memory that this prayer had been censored and the continuing attacks on it by Christians seems to have kept this intent alive.

The early leaders of the Reform movement, particularly in Germany, were very conscious of these various ways that their received liturgy presented non-Jews. In their time, few outside the Jewish community could understand Jewish prayers, and fewer and fewer Jews could. The barrier was primarily linguistic: synagogue prayer was conducted entirely in Hebrew and Aramaic. Translations into Latin characters were rare except for those made for former conversos in Amsterdam or published by apostate Jews or Christian Hebraists to defame the community.

As Jews entered modernity and sought to assimilate more and more into the surrounding society, another important shift occurred. In 1786, two prayer books were printed. David Friedlaender, who later became a fairly radical reformer, printed a traditional prayer book but with a full German translation albeit in Hebrew characters. Pressure from the German printshops in Berlin prevented the Jewish press there from publishing in anything but Hebrew type. The other prayer book appeared in Koenigsberg, in East Prussia, where Isaac Euchel published it fully in German characters, without any Hebrew. Both men intentionally made the meaning of the entire prayer book accessible to whole new categories of people: to assimilated Jews with limited Jewish education, and, in the case of Euchel’s volume, to Christians as well. In this, the prayer texts ceased to be an inner-Jewish conversation, and the question of how the prayers construct community, how they speak about who is in and who is out, took on new dimensions.

So, for instance, Friedlaender’s German text did not offer a literal translation of the *birkat haminim*, but rather moved it further towards abstract categories that could not be so readily applied to specific humans. In my English translation it reads:

- Let there be no hope for slander [instead of slanderers]
- Make all evil [instead of evildoers] distant immediately so that it will be annihilated
- Uproot the power of tyranny [instead of the insolent, or the tyrannical kingdom], so that it is broken, smashed, and weakened, speedily and in our day.

Euchel offered a more subtly altered translation, perhaps necessary because he had no Hebrew text and he was receiving criticism for his endeavor even before it appeared. However, he too named “arrogance” instead of the “arrogant” (or insolent) found in common Hebrew texts. More significantly, he provided extensive apologetic comments, especially for the *birkat haminim*. He claimed that the prayer was implemented in response to Jewish atheists who were seeking to lure other Jews away from God. Hence, even in its origins, it was not anti-Christian. Nevertheless, he acknowledged that the prayer had many evil consequences for Jews in previous eras, in spite of the fact that Jews are required to pray for the governing powers. His emphasis on “previous eras” functioned to set his own time apart and to make the claim that things have changed.

In support of his interpretation of the prayer, Euchel then related at length an incident from his youth. A pious teacher had berated another student for cursing someone, instructing that it was forbidden to curse anything and anyone. In response to the students’ questions about whether it was permitted even to wish for the punishment of evildoers, the teacher had responded that they should curse the sin but not the sinners and help the sinners themselves to repent. If the sinner does not reform, then one should avoid his company, but never persecute him. The teacher had applied this lesson directly to the *birkat haminim*, teaching that it was composed in response to the actions of
people whose evil was their lack of belief in God – i.e., it responded to their actions and not to the people themselves. Echoing here is an embarrassment about the prayer because its negative statements were understood to apply to those outside the Jewish community.

Why then continue to recite the prayer at all, or to recite it with problematic wording? In Euchel’s world, abolishing the prayer was not an option, leaving only these possibilities of retranslation and commentary. However, by the mid-nineteenth century, Reform Judaism emerged with a leadership open to a more radical response to their changing circumstances. Even its earliest synagogues, gathering in Berlin and Hamburg in the 1810’s, did not feel themselves bound to the traditional liturgical text. Their deeper engagement with the surrounding Christian society resulted in their feeling profoundly embarrassed by some of the prayers we’ve discussed. In their most extreme expressions, the Reform prayer books printed from the mid-nineteenth century on simply omitted problematic passages.

In defending the 1841 Hamburg Tempel prayer book, Rabbi Joseph Maier, for instance, wrote that he supported eliminating “all prayers and expressions, in which an element holds sway that opposes other beliefs, other opinions, or expresses enmity, -- those that have crept in over the course of sorry centuries,” and he advocated removing prayers “which declare an embittered feeling, a disposition generated by vengefulness, or an overall inhumane sentiment” because they teach Jews to hold on to such attitudes instead of inspiring them to love of God and neighbor. Several years later, in a report to the 1845 rabbinical conference, Maier addressed a series of contradictions between the modern mentality and the received form of the prayers. He again raised the issue of prayers that express “hatred of humanity,” and suggested that such prayers be repaired so that they instead express “true religious feeling” while still asserting the truth of Judaism. In other words, the community’s internal identity should be affirmed, but without slighting their neighbors.

One of the great leaders of German Reform, Abraham Geiger, wrote in 1869 that the reformed liturgy should express joy that the separation between Israel and the nations is lessening and it should hope for the unification of all humanity. Thus, “The exalted feeling of a noble spiritual vocation must avoid any appearance of overbearance, and must shun any side-glances at ‘other peoples’.” He consequently significantly revised his Hebrew text of the birkat haminim, which in his 1870 and somewhat more radical version read:

- May the errant return to You, (a prayer for their repentance, rather than a curse of the informers)
- And may all evil (not enemies) immediately perish, (the version of this line that was indeed becoming widespread in this time
- And humble insolence speedily in our day. (instead of the insolent)
- Blessed are You, Eternal, who breaks (the) evil and humbles (the) insolence. (again a turn to abstract categories, and the most radical change in that this is the part of the prayer that would have been considered most binding).

However, Geiger did not expect that many of those who attended his synagogue would actually use this Hebrew text. Instead, the vast majority would pray silently, using the German paraphrase that he provided. This text read in typical highblown nineteenth century language:

O let the reign soon appear where all humanity will rejoice in true understanding, where justice and love rule according to Your wish, where deceit and evil, jealousy and enmity have disappeared.
In other words, he collapsed the *birkat haminim* into the prayers surrounding it, removing any sense of Jewish particularism, and praying only for a just society for all humanity.

In Germany and in the United States, several rabbis similarly collapsed the entirety of the petitions of this daily prayer into a paragraph or two, usually not in Hebrew at all. Rabbi David Einhorn, whose prayer book was widely used in the United States, simply alluded to the *birkat haminim* with the prayer that “the reign of wickedness may vanish like smoke.” Even this allusion did not appear in its replacement, the CCAR *Union Prayer Book*. The same was true of Mordecai Kaplan’s Reconstructionist prayer book. Kaplan of course went further than the Reform rabbis and removed all references to Israel’s chosen status as well.

However, in the last few decades, liberal Jews of all stripes have returned to tradition and reintroduced at least as an option both full forms of the aleynu, but without its censored line, and some form of the *birkat haminim*, quite frequently drawing explicitly on Geiger’s text and on the motivations behind it. Reform Jews in England and Israel were the first, followed in the 1990s by American Reform and Reconstructionist Jews. However, the text reintroduced leaves nothing for which to be embarrassed, for it is fully a denunciation of wickedness, to the point that this word echoes to the point of redundancy in the English of *Mishkan T’filah*, where it reads:

- And for wickedness, let there be no hope,
- And may all the errant return to You,
- And may the realm of wickedness be shattered.
- Blessed are You, Adonai, whose will it is that the wicked vanish from the earth.

Jews, of course, can be wicked too, so this constructs only a moral ideal for the praying community and is fully inclusive.

The same trajectory cannot be traced for all the other prayers that I listed at the beginning – and I’m not sure that it should. We still need at least to express a positive statement in our liturgy of who the Jewish community is and what it stands for. However, I offer these reflections in light of a statement issued by the International Council of Christians and Jews in 2008 that sought to point a way forward for interreligious relations. Regarding Judaism, it called for re-examining our texts, including liturgy, for elements that neglect to recognize the transformations in Christian teachings about Jews and still respond to a world in which Christians were our oppressors. It calls on us to confront these elements of our heritage, to understand them in their historical context, and where possible, to re-interpret, change, or omit them.

What I have tried to offer this evening is precisely such an examination and assessment. Orthodox Jews can only reinterpret but not omit; however, for Reform Jews, the situation is otherwise. Some of this work was done already in the 19th century, but the task requires continual thought. As liturgies are revised, the question needs to be asked: who is the community gathered for prayer, what is it saying through the words of its prayers and their performance about itself and about those outside the community, and what message is being conveyed to the non-Jews present. Ritual defines communal boundaries; the challenge is to ensure that our theology of community and the ritual expressing and teaching it are coherent with each other.
Select Bibliography of Ruth Langer’s relevant publications (most recent first):

*Cursing the Christians?: A History of the Birkat HaMinim* (Oxford University Press, 2012)


