

THE SOUL OF THE JEW

Minhag Ami – My People's Prayer Book

Jean Bloch Rosensaft

The graphic layout of My People's Prayer Book pays homage to a tradition of Jewish texts in which generations of commentators inhabit a single page. A prayer text is set in the middle of the page and surrounded by commentaries, in the graphic style of the Talmud.



יְבָרֵךְ אֶתְּךָ, יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ, מִלְּקֹדֶשׁ הַעוֹלָם, יוֹצֵר אוֹר וּבוֹרֵא חֹשֶׁךְ. עֹשֶׂה שְׁלוֹם וּבוֹרֵא אֶת הַכֹּל.
 הַמַּאִיר לָאָרֶץ וְלַדָּרִים עֲלֶיהָ בְּרַחֲמִים, וּבְטוֹבוֹ מְחַדֵּשׁ בְּכָל-יוֹם תְּמִיד מַעֲשֵׂה בְּרֵאשִׁית.

¹ Blessed are You, Adonai our God, ruler of the world, who forms light and creates darkness, makes peace and creates everything, illumining the earth and those who dwell there in mercy; in his goodness forever renewing daily the work of creation. ²How numerous (p. 46)

“The *siddur* [prayerbook] is both the best and the least known book in the Jewish library,” says Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, Barbara and Stephen Friedman Professor of Liturgy, Worship, and Ritual at HUC-JIR/New York. “Throughout history, this has been the only Jewish book that the average person owned, carried, and regularly read. My teacher, Professor Henry Slonimsky, ז”ל, used to say “The *siddur* is the soul of the Jew.”

Hoffman explains that the prayer book is “our Jewish diary of the centuries, a collection of prayers composed by generations of those who came before us, as they endeavored to express the meaning of their lives and their relationship with God. If you go back in Jewish history and know the story of the prayers, you can learn what it was like to be a Jew in every age.”

His aspiration to teach about the *siddur* developed into the concept for a cross-

denominational commentary on the traditional prayer book that could be both scholarly and accessible to a lay audience. His proposal captivated the imagination of Stuart Matlins, publisher of Jewish Lights and a member of HUC-JIR’s Board of Governors.

That first volume of *My People's Prayer Book*, published in 1997, has developed over the past eight years into a series of 9 books, edit-

ed by Hoffman and published by Jewish Lights. Several volumes are already into their sixth printing and plans have begun to complete the series and to publish the *siddur* in its entirety. “Over 50,000 copies of these volumes have been purchased to date,” notes Matlins. “This tells us something profoundly important about the state of the American Jewish community. Never before in the history of our people have we had such a large group of secularly well-educated people with outstanding learning skills, who are now turning those skills into learning about Judaism.” The series is a staple for many congregations’ libraries and synagogue-wide study groups, in addition to individual learners.

My People’s Prayer Book annotates the breadth of traditional daily and *Shabbat* prayers with modern commentaries composed by scholars representing the full spectrum of contemporary Judaism, including feminist, halakhic, Talmudic, linguistic, biblical, Hassidic, mystical, and historical perspectives. “I contacted scholars who are worshippers as well,” Hoffman notes. “The contributors come with a diversity of expertise, so that you hear many voices. Orthodox scholars like Daniel Landes (in Israel) and Marc Brettler (from Brandeis) converse across the page with Larry Kushner (in San Francisco) and several members of our own faculty, including our President, David Ellenson. The series is exemplary in modeling a pluralism that transcends the increasing polarization of the Jewish community in our day. This is sacred work that will have a lasting significance and will be read generations from now.”

In his introduction to Volume 1, *The Sh’ma and Its Blessings*, Hoffman describes the development of the *siddur* liturgy “First,

My People’s Prayer Book

The 9-volume series
(to date)

- 1 The *Sh’ma* and Its Blessings
- 2 The *Amidah*
- 3 *P’Sukei D’Zimrah* (Morning Psalms)
- 4 *Seder K’riat Hatorah* (The Torah Service)
- 5 *Birkhot Hashachar* (Morning Blessings)
- 6 *Tachanun* and Concluding Prayers
- 7 *Shabbat* at Home
- 8 *Kabbalat Shabbat* (Welcoming *Shabbat* in the Synagogue)
- 9 Welcoming the Night: *Minchah* and *Ma’ariv* (Afternoon and Evening Prayer)

mostly *ad hoc* oral improvisation (*kavanah*) around a structural core (*keva*) by a rabbinic elite that drew plentifully on language of the Bible; then growing regulation, as standardization became the norm; then poetry (called *piyyutim*) by verbal artists who did with words what Byzantine builders of churches were doing with mosaic stone. There were no books yet; everything depended on oral performance.” Hoffman likens the early development of the *siddur* to jazz artistry: “What the melody line is to jazz, the thematic development is to rabbinic prayer; what the improvised notes are to jazz, equally improvised words were to prayer.”

In fact, according to Hoffman, the *siddur* is not really a book at all. “It just looks like a book because it has covers. There was no prayer “book” at all until the 9th century, when *Seder Rav Amram* established his Babylonian Jewish practice as the norm

worldwide. Even then, until the invention of printing, the average person didn’t have anything written to pray from. But that didn’t mean that they didn’t pray.” Rather than a book, Hoffman looks upon the *siddur* as “a script for a sacred act, a sacred drama in which we all have our lines. Prayer is about taking the lines of our people and making them our own, thereby taking ownership of Judaism.” Matlins concurs, “This is our script for our conversation with God, when we can’t find our own words.”

Hoffman describes the impact of moveable type in the 15th and 16th centuries, which effectively standardized the liturgy, doing away with centuries of localisms and creative experimentation. The many new prayer books composed by Reform rabbis in 19th-century Germany depended on the printing press also, but represented a return to the tradition of liturgical innovation, based on deep-seated learning of the entire Jewish heritage.

The *siddur* text in the series is the most commonly used Ashkenazi version, but commentaries frequently cite Sefardi (and other) alternatives. “This is a study prayer book, designed to enable readers to better appreciate the prayers that they customarily encounter but know little about,” explains Hoffman. “*My People’s Prayer Book* seeks to satisfy those who know there is wisdom and solace in Jewish prayer but who find the prayer book inaccessible or even baffling.”

Dr. Joel Hoffman, Lecturer on Hebrew at HUC-JIR/New York and scholar of theoretical linguistics, was in charge of the translation and the commentary on the translation. His translation and notes attempt as much as possible to give the English reader the

Contributors to *My People’s Prayer Book*:

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Susan L. Einbinder, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Hebrew Literature, HUC-JIR

David Ellenson, Ph.D., President; Grancell Professor of Jewish Religious Thought, HUC-JIR

Marcia Falk, Ph.D., poet, translator, Judaic scholar, and author

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same experience that the Hebrew reader would have had reading the Hebrew when it was written – whether biblical prayers, classic rabbinic liturgy, or medieval poetry.

“We try to reproduce a tone and register, similar to the original text, formal but not archaic,” he describes. “We use prose or poetry, depending on the Hebrew. Where the Hebrew uses obscure words, we try to do the same; where it uses common idiom, we try to use equally common idiom. Parallel structure and other literary devices found in the Hebrew are replicated in the English. We have not doctored the text to make it more palatable for modern consciousness. Blatant sexism is retained, for instance, wherever we think the author intended them. We rely on the commentaries to demonstrate how we moderns have dealt with them.” Dr. Marc Brettler, Associate Professor of Hebrew Bible at Brandeis University, actively participated in the collaborative process of the translations.

Each volume begins with introductory essays that demonstrate the gamut of scholarly perspectives, explore issues facing Jews today, and offer contemporary responses to those issues. In the second volume, *The Amidah*, for example, Rabbi Daniel Landes writes about the theology of petition. In the seventh volume, *Shabbat At Home*, Dr. Michael Chernick explains the *seudah shlishit*. The following volume, *Kabbalat Shabbat in the Synagogue*, includes Sharon Koren’s masterful introduction to *Kabbalah* and Wendy Zierler’s feminist literary responses to the *mishnah* on childbirth and lighting candles. Chernick, Koren and Zierler all serve on the HUC-JIR faculty in New York.

HUC-JIR’s faculty is heavily represented in the contributors and essayists for these volumes, showcasing the scholarship as well as the pluralism of the faculty. “The collegial relationship among the HUC-JIR faculty makes a big difference,” acknowledges Zierler. “We hear about each other’s interests and research, which spark opportunities for collaborative projects. I taught a class for Larry Hoffman’s alumni study group in which I discussed the *mishnah* that women die in childbirth for three sins, one being the failure to light the *Shabbat* candles. We studied rabbinic statements that candle lighting originates with Eve’s sin, which extinguished the light of the world and obligates Jewish women to rekindle that light. The class looked at the traditional sources and how two Jewish women writers of the 18th and 20th centuries, respectively, rewrote the sources. Hoffman then asked me to contribute an article on this subject.”

Nothing like *My People’s Prayer Book* exists anywhere. There are a number of classical works on the history of liturgy. The best-known work, by Ismar Elbogen in 1913 in Germany, “is an extraordinary work that has been translated into Hebrew and English, but is somewhat technical, outdated, and focused primarily on the author’s interest in the history of liturgy,” says Hoffman. “The 21st-century reader has other interests – ranging from each prayer’s halakhic background and the philosophy behind the *halakhah* to new feminist approaches.”

Hoffman notes that this is not a book that you read from cover to cover. “This is a book where you fall in love with a certain page of the *siddur*, and follow the commentaries as you please. The commentators take a common story but

refer to it through their own perspective, with historical background and liturgical analyses. If commentators agree in their analyses of a certain prayer passage, it reinforces a common understanding, but reflects different reasoning.”

These volumes are a staple for HUC-JIR’s rabbinical, cantorial, and education students throughout their studies, and a lifelong resource for their careers as teachers of congregations. Furthermore, the faculty’s research for their commentaries and essays filters into their classroom teaching and mentorship. Students have contributed, as well, through their work for Dr. Joel Hoffman’s elective course on the theory and practice of translating Hebrew.

“*My People’s Prayer Book* is not simply academic data, however,” adds Hoffman. “These books are fonts of knowledge and wisdom, recognizing that knowledge becomes wisdom when text meets life.”

He is hard at work on the next volumes in the series, one on the morning and *Musaf* prayers for *Shabbat* and another on the *Birkat Hamazon* and blessings for special occasions. Publisher Matlins says, “Of the 250 books that Jewish Lights has published to date, the *My People’s Prayer Book* series is one of the most important. It is a direct result of my relationship with HUC-JIR and its faculty.”

“The siddur is the lived text of the Jewish soul – we live in it and we pray in it,” says Hoffman. “*My People’s Prayer Book* represents HUC-JIR’s mission at its finest through the scholarship of the faculty contributors across the disciplines, and the passion of publisher Stuart Matlins, a devoted member of the Board of Governors.” ■

Contributors to *My People’s Prayer Book*:
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