

**The Making of a Prayerbook  
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For the past five years, I have been involved in producing this new prayerbook, Siddur Eit Ratzon. What I would like to do this evening is share with you some episodes of this adventure – the issues that arose and the decisions that were made, the challenges of translating a familiar text, the spiritual insights that I found, and the prayers and commentaries that I composed. I thank the Bildner Center for providing me this opportunity to share my experiences with you and I thank you all for coming this evening.

1.

Let's start at the beginning: Why did I make a Siddur?

*“As a young man, I was intrigued by the tradition that each person should undertake to write a Torah. At the time, I imagined that this could only be achieved by learning calligraphy ... When I was older, my vision of writing a Torah had changed. I was no longer interested in copying a text, but in finding a way to transmit my own understanding of our traditions. Then one day, nearly ten years ago ... I understood that the Torah I intended to write should be in the form of a Siddur.”*

That quotation from the introduction is true ... and it's not true. The reason that I actually made a Siddur was that our group, the Highland Park Minyan, could not find a suitable prayerbook. We wanted a Siddur that, on the one hand, was traditional, and that, on the other hand, had translations that matched our sensibilities and connected with our concerns, provided alternatives that corresponded to the differing theologies of our members, and offered assistance to those who need help navigating the prayerbook or were struggling with the traditional prayers. And we needed several hundred copies of such a Siddur for a bat-mitzvah that was scheduled for May 2000.

What I tried to create was a Siddur that met the needs of our group and that, at the same time, was the Torah that I really wanted to write.

Siddur Eit Ratzon is a prayerbook for those who take prayer seriously and also ask serious questions about prayer, for those who are seeking spirituality and meaning beyond what they have found in conventional prayerbooks. It is both for those who doubt and for those who believe, and particularly for those who both doubt and believe – a group in whose company I belong.

2.

The title of the Siddur, Eit Ratzon, reflects this dual quality. It comes from the following verse of Psalm 69:14: “Va'ani t'fillati l'cha Adonai eit ratzon” – this verse

appears on page 9. The literal translation is “va’ani – as for me, t’fillati l’cha – my prayer to You Adonai, eit ratzon – a time of willingness or a time of acceptance”. What “eit ratzon” means is not exactly clear, but the verse is usually translated as: “May this be an acceptable time for my prayer, O God.” I translate it instead as: “In Your eyes, every moment is the right time for prayer.”

One reader called the Siddur an unusual combination of “frum and free”. What is frum, or ultra-religious, about this translation? – the idea that whenever we call out to God, God is present. What is free about the translation? – the idea that God does not decide, as with Cain and Abel, that one person’s prayer is acceptable and that another person’s prayer is not, and, more generally, that God does not provide individual responses to individual prayers. As I write in the introduction:

*“We often assume that if God is listening to our prayers then God will do our bidding. The perspective of this Siddur is the opposite: God will never do our bidding. God is not a cosmic candy machine that gives us whatever we wish, neatly packaged, when we insert the appropriate prayer.”*

The perspective of this Siddur is that God provides all sorts of blessings, continually and unconditionally. We have only to ask and the blessings are there. If we don’t ask ... they are still there. The difference is that we don’t notice the blessings, we are simply not tuned in to them.

3.

The perspective that God’s blessings are always with us is clearly stated in Psalm 23 (on page 123).

*“Miz-mor l’Da-vid – a song of David.*

*Adonai ro-i lo ech-sar – With you as my shepherd, Adonai, I have everything I need.*

*Bin-ot de-she yar-bi-tzei-ni – You provide me food from lush pastures.*

*Al mei m’nu-chot y’na-ha-lei-ni – You lead me to drink from peaceful waters.*

*Naf-shi y’sho-veiv – You restore my soul when I am in distress.*

*Yan-chei-ni b’ma-ag-g’lei tze-dek – You provide me guidance and direction.*

*L’ma-an sh’mo – Because that’s what a shepherd does.”*

I don’t really have an intimate knowledge of what shepherds do, but my sense is that shepherds don’t tell you that today you’ve been a bad sheep, go jump off a cliff. Shepherds take care of their sheep, continually and unconditionally. Psalm 23 reminds us that God is in the shepherd business, providing us all with that we really need.

You may have noticed that I translated these verses a bit differently. You may be used to the King James translation where “lo echsar” is translated “I shall not want” and “l’ma-an sh’mo” becomes “for His name’s sake”. I never understood what “for His name’s sake” meant, until I learned many years ago that in the Bible the word “shem – name” refers to what we might call one’s “essence”; a name is important because it reflects essential qualities of what is being named. The psalmist enumerates what God does as shepherd and summarizes by saying “l’ma-an sh’mo – Because that’s what a shepherd does.”

The phrase “l’ma-an sh’mo” also appears in the beginning of the Amidah (near the bottom of page 58).

“V’zo-cheir chas-dei avot, u-mei-vi go-eil liv-nei v’nei-hem l’ma-an sh’mo b’a-ha-vah.” (I’ll translate that in a moment.) Here, and elsewhere, God’s essence is

redemption. When God tells Moshe in Exodus 6:3 – “u-sh’mi Adonai lo yadati lahem – My name Adonai was not known to the children of Israel”, the message to Moshe is that they had never experienced God as redeemer, so that they were unable to imagine the God of their ancestors as an agent of liberation.

So I translate this verse as: “You remember the loving acts of our ancestors, and will lovingly bring a redeemer to their children’s children, (l’ma-an sh’mo) for redemption is Your essence.”

#### 4.

This verse and its translation illustrate three other decisions that I made. The Hebrew is in third person – “zo-cheir ... u-me-i-vi – God remembers ... and will bring”. I systematically changed English references to God to the second person – “You remember”. This was done for two reasons. One is that I wanted to use gender-neutral terminology in referring to God, and third-person pronouns in English are hardly gender-neutral. The second reason is that I wanted to decrease the distance between us and God, to enable the prayers to become more personal. As I looked at the Hebrew text more closely, I saw that many of the prayers did indeed speak of God in the second person, and that the psalmist often switched back and forth – in Psalm 145, for example, the text switches gender nine times. So referring to God in the second person seemed like a very natural decision.

A second feature of this verse is that although it refers to our ancestors, the Hebrew is “avot – fathers”. I inserted here, and elsewhere, the Hebrew word for mothers – “im-ma-hot” – because, although one can argue that the mothers are included in the Hebrew word “avot”, nevertheless it is important in our day to make explicit reference to the matriarchs.

Thirdly, the verse refers to “a redeemer – go-eil”. Many of us have difficulty with the traditional terminology because God’s redemptive promise is personified here ... in a Messiah, which is a limited and limiting way of viewing redemption. In this siddur, both the Hebrew text and the translation offer the alternative of interpreting God’s promise as “ge-u-lah – redemption”, affirming that “through our partnership with God, the Jewish people, indeed the whole world, can be redeemed, and that better days lie ahead.”

#### 5.

This is perhaps a good time to say a few words about the structure of the Siddur. As you can see from this page, the text has four columns – on the left are the traditional Hebrew text and its transliteration into English characters, and on the right are a new translation and a new commentary.

I call the Hebrew text traditional. It is sometimes amended (by adding the matriarchs on this page, for example) and sometimes alternatives are given (as with go-eil and ge-ulah), and some Hebrew prayers are omitted (including a number of psalms in the preliminary part of the service), but other than that, it is indeed the traditional text.

The items in the commentary column range from information about where in the service we are, to explanations of individual phrases, to discourses on the Siddur’s perspective on broad philosophical issues. A critical feature of the commentary is that it is confined to the right-most column and doesn’t extend beyond the page. I could have written lots of commentary on many passages of the Siddur, but I decided that forcing the reader to turn several pages in order to find the continuation of the Hebrew text would be a burden. So the commentaries are brief and carefully selected.

6.

A different decision had to be made with the translations. I decided that having a line-by-line translation was not my highest priority. Line-by-line translations can be valuable in helping the reader learn the meaning of the Hebrew words. My priority, however, was not the meaning of the *words*, but the meaning of the *prayers*. And because Hebrew and English have different structures, a list of English words that individually reflect the meaning of the corresponding Hebrew words may not convey accurately the meaning of the Hebrew sentence or paragraph. My goal was to convey the meaning of the prayers, and sometimes that could not be done using a line-by-line translation.

A second principle was that the translation had to make sense ... at any rate, it had to make sense to me, it had to be something that I could say with some conviction. When, as a result of this commitment, I had to diverge substantially from the literal meaning of the text, I did include the literal translation in the commentary column, as you can see at the bottom of page 54, our next stop.

Translating the prayers in the Siddur has been a unique adventure. When you translate any text, you have to examine every single phrase, and indeed every single word, and decide how it should be translated. The uniqueness of *this* translation experience derives from the fact that I have recited every one of these prayers literally thousands of times over the past 50+ years, as have many of the people in this room. What I learned, again and again, was that there were words that I had never looked at closely and that there were sections of the prayers where I had never thought carefully about what the authors had tried to convey. As a result, I was repeatedly surprised.

7.

For example, at the top of page 54, we see the phrase “Adonai eloheichem emet”. After the three paragraphs of the Sh’ma are recited silently, the leader of the service indicates that the congregation should go ahead to the next prayer by saying aloud “Adonai eloheichem emet”, the last two words of the Sh’ma and the first word of the next prayer. That’s actually quite unusual ... the usual signal to go on to the next prayer is for the reader to recite the last sentence of the previous prayer. Why is a different signal used here?

All those times that I heard those words and said those words, I wasn’t really listening. The actual end of the third paragraph of the Sh’ma is the declaration “Ani Adonai eloheichem – I am Adonai Your God.” By dropping off “Ani” and saying just “Adonai eloheichem”, the reader is changing the meaning of the verse, proclaiming instead that “Adonai is *your* God”, that the God of the universe is also your personal God.

What chutzpah! Changing the meaning of the text. And what a powerful statement! “Adonai is *your* God!” And the prayer that follows is the author’s attempt to convey the wonder and power of that statement. It starts with the adjective “emet – true” and continues with a string of no less than sixteen adjectives – emet, v’ya-tziv, v’nachon, v’kayam, etc. – to describe this discovery. The adjectives are often dutifully translated. How do most people experience the prayer, if they pay attention to it at all? It is repetitive and boring. Strings of adjectives have long been passé as a literary technique.

Here is my attempt to capture the “Wow!” that the author experienced and then tried to convey.

*“Wow! This teaching is so amazing, I cannot find enough words to describe it. It is definitely true and always will be. It provides reliable direction to my life. I love it – it is dear and precious and pleasant to me. It is awesome and powerful. It is sweet and beautiful. It is true! You are the eternal Ruler, and You are our God. You are the Rock of Jacob and You are the Shield that saves us.”*

What is it that’s declared to be “true”? I assumed that it was the Sh’ma, the central focus of this portion of the service. But that’s not it, as you can see from the exclamation “It is true!” that occurs four more times on this page and on the next. What is declared to be true is that Adonai is *our* God, just as Adonai was the God of our ancestors.

8.

You will notice on the top of this page that there is a box that refers to the morning prayers as a spiritual journey and that indicates that, at this point in the service, we are at Stage 6. Here is what the text in the box says:

*“The spiritual aim of the morning prayers is to bring us to the realization that God, however understood, can make a difference in our lives. This realization comes in six stages that are dramatically structured as preparation for the personal audience with God that we call the Amidah. In the first three stages, we positioned ourselves appropriately for the Amidah, and our present task is to conceptualize our partner in the Amidah. Having recognized the many images of God, and, in the Sh’ma, the unity of those images, the next stage is “realizing that God can make a difference in our lives, that faith can change our lives for the better.””*

This portion of the service emphasizes God’s role as redeemer, but the focus is through the lens of “Adonai eloheichem – Adonai is your God.” The historical redeemer of the people Israel – go’al Yisraeil – can make a difference in our lives.

9.

The idea that the morning service can be seen as a spiritual journey is of course a traditional idea, and indeed the service is consciously structured that way. The spiritual journey is described in many books about prayer, but this Siddur is perhaps unique in that it incorporates discussions of the spiritual journey into the prayers.

What is the goal of this spiritual journey and when do we reach it?

*“When we come to the Amidah, we have reached the moment for which we have been preparing, the moment for which we have been praying. We have arranged within our minds and within our hearts who we are, who God is, and how we relate to one another. We have established intellectually that God can make a difference in our lives, that God’s blessings, guidance, and assistance are always available to us. And we have proclaimed, immediately before the Amidah, that God is ga-al Yisrael, redeemer of Israel, the one who makes a difference in our lives, collectively and individually.”*

We come before God in the Amidah, and we are given an opportunity to personalize that proclamation, to bring God into our own lives. How do we bring God into our lives? The traditional device for doing this is the petitionary prayers. These prayers appear in each weekday Amidah, but are absent from the Shabbat Amidah. The rabbis evidently felt that it was inappropriate to petition God on the Shabbat and so the petitionary prayers are replaced in the Shabbat Amidah by a single prayer about Shabbat.

What a dilemma! How can I write a Siddur that prepares davenners for their audience with God and then, just when they're ready for that audience, just when they've reached the climax of the spiritual journey, tells them to come back tomorrow!

In a few minutes, I will describe my solution to this dilemma. But first I'm going to digress a bit, because once I understood my dilemma, I also understood the dilemma that this poses for our community.

10.

Many Jews say the Amidah only on Shabbat and thus rarely, if ever, recite the petitionary prayers. That means that they (or we) do not have the opportunity to bring God into their lives (or our lives) through the traditional prayers, that we are denied the traditional way of tapping into the strength of the One that is the source of all strength.

I suggest that it is time to acknowledge this reality and reinstate the opportunity for petitionary prayer in the Shabbat Amidah. There is precedent for this suggestion in the tradition: knowing that the Rabbis frowned on such prayers didn't stop our ancestors, and doesn't stop our contemporaries, from saying the "mi shebeirach" prayer for healing on Shabbat.

I should note again that my perspective on petitionary prayer is not traditional. As I mentioned earlier, I reject the "cosmic candy machine" view that if you insert the correct prayer in the slot, your request will be fulfilled, that if you pray wholeheartedly for victory, your team will win the football game. My perspective is rather that "God's blessings, guidance, and assistance are always flowing to us, that no special effort on God's part is required to direct that flow to us. However, we must position ourselves to receive that flow – and that is to acknowledge our need for that blessing, to say "God, please help me!" When we ask for God's help, God's help is present! In that sense, petitionary prayer always works. Do we always get what we want? Clearly not. But through prayer, through speaking to God, we can find the spiritual resources to deal with life's problems."

From this perspective, we are not asking God to do anything that is inappropriate for the Shabbat, we are asking only that God be present as we pray, as God already is. This kind of "petitionary prayer", where we acknowledge our need for the help that God always provides, for God's assistance in moving ourselves into God's presence, to me sounds quite appropriate for Shabbat.

11.

How did I solve my dilemma? I wrote a new prayer, in English and Hebrew, and placed it directly after the Shabbat blessing in the Amidah.

*"Ribbono shel olam, Creator of the universe,  
We acknowledge Your influence in our lives by bringing before You our needs  
and our hopes, our concerns and our aspirations.  
When we are perplexed, help us find clarity –  
for You grace us with understanding.*

*When we feel guilty, help us find forgiveness –  
 for You forgive us abundantly.*  
*When we have lost our way, help us find direction –  
 for You guide our steps.*  
*When we feel far from You, help us feel nearer –  
 for You want us to return to You.*  
*When we are broken, help us find healing –  
 for You heal those who are in distress.*  
*When we feel desperate, help us find hope –  
 for You bless every one of our years.*  
*When we feel overwhelmed, help us find peace of mind –  
 for You restore serenity to our souls.*  
*When we feel fearful, help us find courage –  
 for You raise up those who are bowed down.*  
*When we are tired, help us find strength –  
 for You give strength to the weary.*  
*You are the Source of clarity and forgiveness,  
 of direction and return,  
 of healing and hope and serenity,  
 of courage and strength.*  
*When we stand in Your presence  
 we acknowledge and experience all these blessings.*  
*We praise You for always being receptive to our prayers,  
 for compassionately listening to all of our prayers.”*

Those of us who have grown up in traditional religious settings may find it difficult to recite ourselves a prayer like this on Shabbat. But I think we should seriously consider that we can give an important spiritual gift to others if we provide them the opportunity to speak to God in this way on the one day they come to prayer services.

12.

The announcement of this session said that I would focus on the challenges of making the spiritual insights of the authors of the prayerbook meaningful to a generation of questioners and searchers. Let me share with you some of these insights and how they are highlighted in the Siddur.

What can we do with these lines of Psalm 91? (See page 24)

*“You will not fear the terrors of darkness  
 or the arrows of daily life.  
 The plague of certain death,  
 or the torments along the way.  
 A thousand may fall at your left side,  
 ten thousand at your right,  
 but these terrors will not reach you ...  
 For God will assign angels  
 to guard you wherever you go.  
 They will carry you in their hands,  
 so that your feet will not be hurt by stones.  
 You will trample lions and scorpions  
 you will overcome all sorts of adversaries.”*

There are many people in our world who, despite all evidence to the contrary, believe that they have guardian angels who protect them from all danger. This is not the way that most of us experience the world; this is not our reality. What sense then do we make of these verses? Here is the “kavvanah” that I inserted:

*“Did the author of this psalm believe literally that “no harm will befall you” if you trust in God? Did the author test this belief by seeking out “lions and scorpions” to trample? Probably not.*

*The consequence of faith is not the absence of plague and arrows, but the absence of fear. The “terrors of darkness” will still be there, as will the “arrows that fly by day” in each of our lives. They will still be there, but if you position yourself beneath God’s “protective wings”, then “you will not fear the terrors of darkness”; indeed, you will be able to deal with them.*

*The promise of Psalm 91 is that if you “dwell in the shelter of the Most High”, then you will be able to go through the difficulties of life without letting them get to you – “it shall not reach you – eilecha lo yiggash.””*

I submit that this is a powerful message that can be drawn from Psalm 91, and that this is a message that many of our contemporaries need to hear. But is this what the psalmist really means? Maybe yes, maybe no. But the literal meaning is not one that I can take seriously. *This* explanation is at least meaningful. This Siddur is not for those who believe in the literal meaning of these verses; it was written for those do not.

13.

We turn now to page 18 and Psalm 30. Here David speaks of a time when he felt as powerful as a mountain, but then sank into a terrible deep depression. God had been his constant companion, but David became complacent, even boastful in his self-reliance: “Bal emmot l’olam – I would never be shaken”. So one day David looked around and found that God was absent from his life: “Histarta panecha,” David says “You hid Your face, and I was terrified, hayiti nivhal”. But we know, and David knew also, that it was not God who was hiding, it was not God whose face was turned away. It was David’s. So the translation should be “When I could no longer see Your face, I was terrified.” David calls out to God for help: “Sh’ma Adonai v’choneini, Adonai he-yeih ozeir li. Listen to me God, help me.” What help is he seeking, what help does he receive? What he is seeking is God’s presence in his life, which is not up to God, but up to David. So I translate this line as: “Help me, God, let me once again sense Your presence, let me feel Your support.” And when one seeks God’s presence, God is present. And so David says: “Hafachta mis-p’di l’machol li, pittachta sakki vata-azreini simcah – You have turned my sadness into rejoicing, You undid my sack of mourning and wrapped me instead in joy.” When David let God back into his life, his depression lifted.

14.

I have learned that prayer is not so much about belief as it is about positioning. “B’orcha nireh or – in Your light, we see light.” When we move *toward* Your light, when we move into Your light, our darkness is dispelled, and

we experience Your light. In Psalm 91, if you position yourself under God's sheltering presence, you realize that you need not be afraid. In Psalm 30, when David turns his face, does t'shuvah, as it were, God's presence is again apparent.

Many years ago, while I was leading a guided meditation on Psalm 92, I realized that flourishing like a palm tree and living in God's house were not the *rewards* of the tzaddik, but the *choice* of the tzaddik. Let's go back to Psalm 23. It ends "V'shavti b'veit Adonai l'orech yamim – and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." The psalm is recited at funerals because of the sense that this last verse refers to those who are departed. But that's not what "the house of the Lord" means in the psalms. It refers clearly to the here and now. "Ashrei yoshvei veitecha, od y'hal'lucha selah – happy are those who dwell in Your house, for they can always praise You."

What does it mean then to live in God's house? Psalm 23 describes it so beautifully:

*"Living in God's house means ...*

*... trusting that God is with us at all times, so that we need not live in fear – lo ira ra, ki attah imadi.*

*... rejoicing in God's blessings even when our enemies are all around us – neged tzo-re-rai.*

*... seeing the cup neither as half-empty nor as half-full, but rather as overflowing – kosi r'vayah.*

*... looking over our shoulder and being surrounded by blessings, not curses – ach tov va'chesed yir-d'funi.*

*Can you imagine a more amazing gift than being able to live in God's house. And the choice to do so is up to us.*

15.

The Amidah is the culmination of the spiritual journey of the morning prayers, and so the conclusion of the Amidah should somehow reflect the path that we have traveled on that journey. But the traditional conclusion of the Amidah is rather prosaic. So I wrote what I thought would be an appropriate conclusion, and I'd like to conclude my presentation by reading that conclusion. It is a reflection on God's presence and on how we can position ourselves to experience God's presence:

*"Elohai, my God:*

*As I leave Your presence*

*I remind myself that it is I,*

*not You, who is leaving,*

*for You are always present in my life.*

*When I take a deep breath,*

*I can find you again,*

*for You are only a breath away.*

*When I picture Your light, and turn toward it,*

*my darkness is dispelled,*

*for in Your light I see light.*

*When my soul utters a prayer,*

*I know that you hear me,  
for You are always receptive to prayer.*

*Elohai, my God:*

*Help me recognize and acknowledge  
all the blessings that You provide;  
for when I express my gratitude  
I am reminded of Your presence.*

*Help me remember that You created everything,  
that the world does not revolve around me;  
for when I express my humility,  
I am reminded of Your presence.*

*Help me ask You for guidance and assistance,  
and affirm that You make a difference in my life;  
for when I express my dependence,  
I am reminded of Your presence.*

*Shiviti Adonai l'negdi tamid.*

*Help me keep Your presence directly in my field of vision  
at each and every moment.*

*V'shavti b'veit Adonai l'orech yamim.*

*Help me choose each day to live in Your house,  
to feel Your presence all the days of my life.*

*Yih-yu l'ratzon imrei fi, v'hegyon libi l'fanecha,  
Adonai tzuri v'go-ali.*

*You are my Rock, source of my strength.*

*You are my Redeemer, source of my hope.*

*And You accept, with love and joy,*

*the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart.*

*And that is so. Amein*

Thank you very much.