

# Prayer By and For the People

Angela Warnick Buchdahl

With the recent publication of *Mishkan T'filah*, the Central Conference of American Rabbis introduced the third major prayerbook in American Reform history. Like its predecessors, the *Union Prayerbook* (published in 1895, revised in 1918 and 1940) and the *Gates of Prayer* (1975), *Mishkan T'filah* offers insight into the theology and practice of the Reform movement in its time. Unlike its predecessors, which were assembled exclusively by the rabbinic leadership, *Mishkan T'filah* was conceived

and developed in a broad, democratic process that incorporated the perspectives and opinions of lay leadership at every stage of its evolution. participation, and gender-sensitive language. Worshippers wanted opportunities for individual meditation as well as communal prayer. Unlike the *Gates of Prayer*, which innovated by offering ten different services that reflected different themes or theologies (e.g., humanist, kabbalist, and Zionist services), *Mishkan T'filah* seeks to offer a polyvocal prayer script that allows for complex and differing conceptions of God within a single prayer service.

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The prayerbook incorporates a wide range of contributions to reflect the diverse set of liturgies and practices that have flourished in recent years within the movement. With the advent of desktop publishing and the desire for customization, many congregations created their own prayerbooks, reflecting individual communities' *minhagim* and ideology. A uniform Reform *minhag* suffered greatly as a result. For example, Reform Jews who attend services in another Reform synagogue might find the worship completely unfamiliar.

A critical aim of *Mishkan T'filah*, therefore, was to create more standardization within the movement while allowing for enough choice to entice the individuality of a range of synagogues. The editors of *Mishkan T'filah*, with input from clergy and lay leaders, have risen to this challenge with thoughtfulness and insight.

The project began with an extensive survey of lay worshippers that found an increasingly sophisticated and educated laity who wanted a genuine encounter with traditional texts, including faithful (not interpretive) translations, God language that was more inclusive of different theologies, transliteration of all prayers to facilitate par-

The format of *Mishkan T'filah* reveals its innovation. On every right-hand page is the *keva*, the Hebrew text, including transliteration and translation of the Hebrew. On the left-hand pages are accompanying *kavannot*, interpretive translations of the prayer, and meditations in English. Both pages end with a *hatima*, or prayer signature, which reunites the community following the experience of individual prayer. Along the side of the page are headings that indicate where the worshipper is within the full service.

The editors have struggled to balance articulating a clear Reform theology with including more traditional texts. For example, the *gevurot* prayer now includes both the familiar Reform formulation of *m'chayei hakol*, (“who gives life to all”) and also in brackets the more traditional *m'chayei metim*, (“who revives the dead”) as an option. While the editors include many perceptions of God in the liturgy, they have omitted the God of Retribution discussed in the intermediate paragraphs of the *Sh'ma* prayer, although these paragraphs appeared in earlier drafts of *Mishkan T'filah*.

The essential foundation of Reform Judaism — its emphasis on ethical action and social justice — is still the overriding theological message of the *Mishkan T'filah* liturgy: God demands something of us. This message is present throughout the interpretive readings and is best encapsulated in the prayerbook's introduction to the *Amidah*: “Pray as if everything depended on God. Act as if everything depended on you.” The Reform message is as strong as ever, and this prayerbook will help unify Reform Jews to pray together with that message in mind.

Rabbi/Cantor Angela Warnick Buchdahl, a graduate of both the Rabbinical Program and School of Sacred Music at Hebrew Union College, serves as Senior Cantor of Central Synagogue in New York City.

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