

One Is Silver and the Other's Gold:" Precious Gifts of *Mishkan HaNefesh*

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Rabbi Barry Block

"Make new friends, and keep the old. One is silver and the other's gold." We all heard and likely sang that ditty as children. We were not thinking of prayer books. By contrast, I wasn't thinking of friends when I came up with the title of tonight's sermon, congratulating my oh-so-clever self for crafting a topic that plays off the beautiful bindings of *Mishkan HaNefesh* with a familiar phrase.

For many people, though, a prayer book is an old friend. I recall a matriarch of our congregation, a woman who has since died, who was ill and unable to attend services here at Temple on the High Holy Days. When I visited, she showed me the prayer books that she and her family had used for a private service on Rosh Hashanah eve, and planned to use again on Yom Kippur. I needn't tell you that was *Union Prayer Book*.

I suspect that those High Holy Days were the most meaningful of that family's life. They came together to welcome the New Year, while their mother and grandmother was still able to enjoy her family and celebrate with a smile. Only immediate relatives were present, with one friend: that prayer book, which had been a part of their lives for generations, linking them to all who had come before, and to their memories of Rosh Hashanah here in this Sanctuary – and earlier, at 5th and Broadway.

For many, *Union Prayer Book* was and remains a friend. Though a generation or more has passed since that book was used for regular High Holy Day services here, many return to its special place in our homes, to seek comfort and guidance.

Gates of Repentance was a hip, contemporary friend for its era. That decade, the 1970s, was characterized by low regard for anyone over 30; and *Union Prayer Book* was far older than that. Radical change was in the air in the years immediately following the moon landing and Vietnam War protests, the Civil Rights Movement and the dawn of Women's Liberation. While young adults of that era embraced the change, throwing off archaic language – you know, all those thee's and thou's – offering more accessible English for a new generation, others mourned the loss of an old friend.

The 21st Century is sometimes called post-modern, meaning in part that we embrace advances without throwing away the gems of the past. *Mishkan*

HaNefesh preserves more of Jewish tradition than any previous Reform prayer book, while also embracing more of our Reform heritage than *Gates of Repentance*.

On the one hand, *Mishkan HaNefesh* includes more traditional Hebrew than its predecessors. On the other hand, the Hebrew is all transliterated on each page as it appears, making it more accessible, as we have become accustomed with *Mishkan T'filah*.

Another example of embracing both traditional and Reform practice is in the scriptural readings. Those of us who've been Reform for as long as we've been alive, or at least for as long as we've been Jewish, may imagine that the Binding of Isaac is the traditional Torah reading for Rosh Hashanah morning. That's only partially true. In Conservative and Orthodox synagogues, that section is read on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, which we call "the day after Rosh Hashanah." *Mishkan HaNefesh* offers choices. This year, for example, we will read the traditional selection for the first – and in our case, the only – day of Rosh Hashanah, which is about the birth of Isaac. Then, we will immediately turn to a Haftarah designated by our Reform forbears, a selection from the Book of Nehemiah about an ancient Rosh Hashanah.

The evocative English of *Mishkan HaNefesh* is its greatest strength, whether in translations of traditional prayers or in the more interpretive sections on the left side of the page. This evening, we have found inspiration in prayer and poetry that is mostly new to us. During the concluding portion of the service, though, for the Adoration and Kaddish, I have selected English readings that have long been beloved, including one reading from *Union Prayer Book* and another from *Gates of Repentance*. And on Kol Nidre night, when we pray for peace, our words will be, "Grant us peace, O Eternal Source of peace . . .," a paragraph that many among us could recite from memory.

The editors of *Mishkan HaNefesh* solved some nettlesome problems with grace. For some years, we have been awkwardly changing the words when *Gates of Repentance* refers to God as "He." As with *Mishkan T'filah*, that problem has been solved in ways that are never noticeable.

The most important words on the High Holy Days are *Avinu Malkeinu*, previously translated, "Our Father, our King." Here at B'nai Israel, we haven't been translating those words at all in recent years, but simply repeated the Hebrew, *Avinu Malkeinu*, at the beginning of each English line. That solution has

been less than satisfying, particularly for those who don't know the meaning of Hebrew words. "Our Parent, our Sovereign" might have worked had that always been the translation, but those words sound forced to our ears. The solution in *Mishkan HaNefesh* is a thing of beauty: "Avinu Malkeinu, Sh'ma Koleinu, Avinu Malkeinu – Almighty and Merciful – hear our voice." "Almighty and Merciful" is evocative alliteration, reflecting the opening "a" and "m" sounds of *Avinu Malkeinu*. More significant, the meaning is conveyed, even if not literally. We call upon *Malkeinu*, our Sovereign, to acknowledge God's power to judge us when we have sinned. We call upon *Avinu*, our loving heavenly Parent, asking the Holy One to be merciful when we have gone astray.

Last year, we prayed from a final draft version of *Mishkan HaNefesh* on Rosh Hashanah morning, so we experienced the shofar more meaningfully than ever. In Orthodox synagogues, the shofar is sounded during the *mussaf* service. *Mussaf* means "additional," and it refers to a repetition of prayers, duplication eliminated by our Reform founders. Reform prayer books placed the shofar after the Haftarah reading, since traditional *mussaf* follows the Torah service. The shofar ritual has three parts – the first, emphasizing God's sovereignty; the second, asking God to forgive us by recalling the merit of our ancestors; and the third, pointing toward a messianic future. Now, if I asked you to repeat those three sections back to me, after I just told them to you, few could do so. I stated them too quickly, in succession, eliminating the opportunity to concentrate on each one with meaning. Similarly, when the entire shofar ritual is compressed into one part of the service, whether in *mussaf* or after the Haftarah, each part loses its significance. *Mishkan HaNefesh* liberates us both from a tradition that is no longer meaningful to us and a decision of our 19th Century Reform founders. We now separate the three sections, giving each its own special place in the service.

One is silver and the other's gold. *Mishkan HaNefesh* enables us to make a new friend while keeping the old. It preserves our birthright, the old friends that are our Jewish tradition and our Reform heritage, with prayers from the ancient and medieval High Holy Day *machzor* and words from *Union Prayer Book*. It provides new poetry, a new friend, inviting our spirits to soar. *Mishkan HaNefesh* is art in our hands. The look and the feel of these gold and silver volumes are classic wonders, worthy to be cherished for generations, even in a future when these are the beloved old books on the shelf from a previous era.

We have received a magnificent gift, from Peggy and L.R., and from the Central Conference of American Rabbis. Let our hearts, full of gratitude, find precious gems in the silver and in the gold.

Amen.