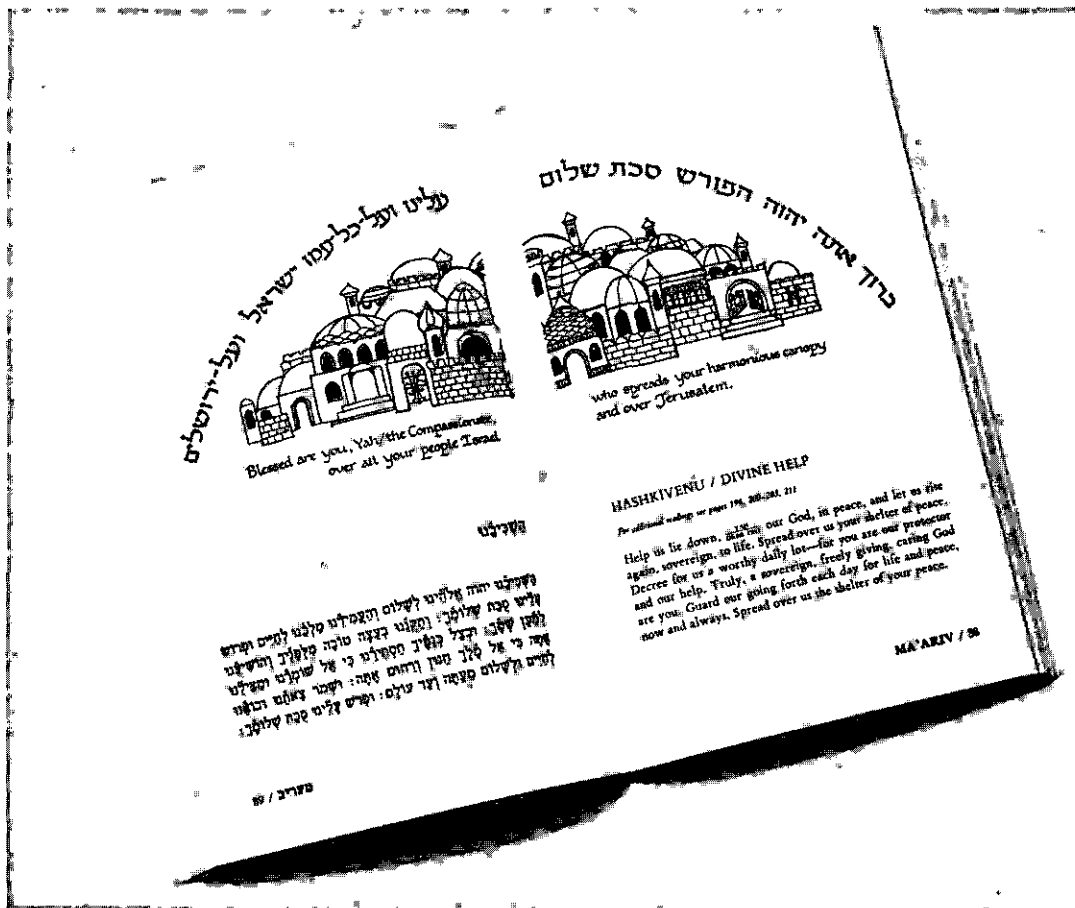


Reconstructionist Liturgy

Arthur Green

Communal worship plays a central role in the life of Reconstructionist Jews. Reconstructionism views prayer as the expression in words of humanity's deepest longings and highest aspirations. Through the ancient and hallowed words of liturgy, the individual joins private hopes, fears, and dreams with those of the community and those of the entire Jewish people. Liturgical prayer thus represents the confluence of individual spirituality and the values and ideals of Jewish peoplehood. The liturgy expresses the Jewish people's stretching forth toward that which we call God. For some Reconstructionists this is the sum of humanity's highest values and aspirations, taken as a whole. For others it is a force within the natural world, or the spiritual essence of reality itself, inadequately conceived by us humans in personified terms. The divinity of prayer life lies in its embodiment of this human struggle to reach for godliness, rather than in any simplistic notion of a God who hears and answers prayer. It is fulfillment and inward responsiveness that the worshiper seeks as prayer's "answer."

Reconstructionist liturgy throughout its history has attempted to provide the contemporary worshiper with a richly traditional prayer-text, but one that will not offend contemporary moral sensibilities. It has also sought to augment the traditional liturgy with various additional readings, both in Hebrew and in the vernacular, that offer a more contemporary vehicle for religious expres-



Hashkivenu prayer, illustration by Betsy Platkin Teutsch, from Reconstructionist prayer book. (Courtesy Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, PA)



Shiviti designed especially for meditation, by Betsy Platkin Teusch, for *Kol Haneshamah*. (Courtesy Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, PA)

sion. Emendations in the traditional text include deletions of references to the Jews as God's chosen people, to the reinstatement of animal sacrifice, and to the resurrection of the dead. Such basic liturgical motifs as Creation, the giving of the Torah, and Messianic redemption, which Reconstructionists affirm in non-literal ways, have a more complex nuanced place in the history of the movement's liturgical efforts. Reconstructionist liturgy began as the service of the Society of the Advancement of Judaism (SAJ), the original Reconstructionist synagogue where Mordecai M. *Kaplan served as rabbi from 1922. Kaplan saw the SAJ as an experimental synagogue where his own conceptions of Judaism would be tried out. These included additional readings to the service as well as frequent reinterpretations of the liturgy from the pulpit. Great emphasis was placed on communal singing and ordered participation by the entire congregation.

In 1942, Kaplan published *The New Haggadah*, the first major printed work of Reconstructionist liturgy. The text constituted a rather radical departure from the traditional *Seder*, both in structure and in content. The figure of Moses, absent from the traditional Haggadah, is here reintroduced, and the liberation from bondage is celebrated largely as a formative event in the history of the Jewish people. While religious language is still used, this *Haggadah* reflects Kaplan's deep Zionist commitment, and it shows the first influence of the various experimental kibbutz *haggadot* on Diaspora Jewry. *The New Haggadah* proved extremely popular among wide circles of North American Jews, and has gone through 28 printings in three editions.

Beginning in 1945, the Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation published prayer books for the Sabbath, for the High Holidays (1948), for the three festivals (1958), and for daily use (1963). These prayer books, edited by Kaplan along with Ira Eisenstein, Eugene Kohn, and Milton Steinberg, generally reflected practice at the SAJ. They were somewhat more traditional than the *Haggadah* and reflected an attempt to balance Kaplan's essentially traditionalist tastes with his awareness of the needs both for theological change and for a style of worship that suited his congregants. In addition to new readings, some of which were composed by Kaplan himself, the Reconstructionist prayer book took the lead in seeking out Hebrew poetry, both medieval and modern, that could be adapted for use in the contemporary synagogue setting.

In 1982 the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot convened a new Prayer Book Commission, charged with the task of beginning a new series of liturgical publications. This charge reflected a growing feeling in the movement's younger generation that the language and style of the 1940s prayer books were no longer appropriate. Rather than a mere updating of the original Reconstructionist liturgy, the commission determined in 1987 to go forward with publication of a new liturgical series. David Teutsch served as chairman of the commission and editor-in-chief of the entire project. Arthur Green, president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, was named editor of the Hebrew text, and Joel Rosenberg, well-known poet and professor of Hebrew Literature at Tufts University, was engaged as translator. The first volume, a Friday evening prayer book entitled *Kol ha-Neshamah*, was published in 1989. It was followed in 1991 by *Shirim u-Verahot*, a prayer and song book for home usage. A full Sabbath and festival prayer book is slated to appear in 1992.

These latest liturgical efforts are distinguished both from prior Reconstructionist liturgy and from other non-Orthodox prayer books in a number of ways. They represent a full and rich rendition of the traditional text. Various traditional practices eliminated by other modern prayer book editors have here been restored as options for the contemporary worshiper. These include the recitation of the Song of Songs before *Kabbalat Sabbath* (on Friday evening), the sanctification of the new moon, and the inviting of *ushpizin* (spiritual "guests") into the *sukkah*. These and other practices are interpreted in symbolic ways. At the same time, the daring moral stance taken by Kaplan in the 1945 prayer book has been upheld and continued. The new liturgy continues the omission of references to the election of Israel as a claim that could too easily lead to a sense of Jewish chauvinism. In the same tradition, the new translation of the liturgy constitutes the first fully non-sexist English version of a traditional Jewish prayer book. The text is accompanied by extensive commentary, written by a number of Reconstructionist rabbis and teachers. This is the first modern prayer book with a commentary that is devotional rather than historical/explanatory in tone.

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