

“We Are Bound to Tradition Yet Part of That Tradition Is Change”: The Development of the Jewish Prayerbook¹

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The traditional Jewish liturgy in its diverse manifestations is an imposing artistic structure. But unlike a painting or a symphony it is not the work of one artist or even the product of one period. It is more like a medieval cathedral, in the construction of which many generations had a share and in the ultimate completion of which the traces of diverse tastes and styles may be detected. (Petuchowski 1985:312)

This essay explores the dynamics between tradition and innovation, authority and authenticity through a study of a recently edited Jewish prayerbook—a contemporary development in a tradition which can be traced over a one-thousand year period. The many editions of the Jewish prayerbook, or *siddur*, that have been compiled over the centuries chronicle the contributions specific individuals and communities made to the tradition—informed by the particular fashions and events of their times as well as by extant traditions. The process is well-captured in liturgist Jakob Petuchowski’s ‘cathedral simile’ above—an image which could be applied equally well to many traditions but is most evident in written ones. An examination of a continuously emergent written tradition, such as the siddur, can help highlight kindred processes involved in the non-documented development of oral and behavioral traditions.

Presented below are the editorial decisions of a contemporary prayerbook editor, Rabbi Jules Harlow, as a case study of the kinds of issues involved when individuals assume responsibility for the ongoing conservation and construction of traditions for their communities. Harlow struggled with the tensions between past and present as he made his contributions to Jewish liturgy, but he maintains that the adaptation of traditional liturgy to the exigencies of contemporary life is inherent in the liturgical tradition itself. Information on Harlow’s editorial decisions was culled from his essays and from personal interviews with him.²

“There is and there is not such a thing as the traditional Jewish prayerbook,” writes Petuchowski. “There are various ones in different countries and communities, not one of them quite identical with another. They all represent the traditional Jewish prayerbook” (1985:324). Liturgy, like other traditions, exists in its variants. Petuchowski explains that despite this liturgical pluralism, all the prayerbooks contain the *matbeah shel tefillah*—a core of prescribed texts set down by the rabbis of the Talmudic period. The texts, which constitute the core of every service, include passages from the Bible arranged for prayer by the rabbis of the second to sixth centuries as well as these rabbis’ own liturgical formulations. Prayerbooks today are comprised of these biblical and rabbinic texts along with additions and modifications made to them throughout the centuries.

The earliest known Jewish prayerbook was compiled in ninth-century Babylonia. As noted above, an established body of Jewish prayer, much of it based on biblical scriptures, had existed since at least the second century. The *mishnah*, a rabbinic document from the second century, contains in it the order of the service used in the ancient Temple in Jerusalem. Since the service was largely codified by then, it is likely that the practice had been followed for some time prior to the second century. In the ninth century, a community of Jews in Spain disagreed over the proper order of recitation of prayers and wrote to the renowned Jewish legal authority Rav Amram Gaon in Babylonia asking him to settle the dispute. The letter he wrote in response to them, detailing the proper contents and order of the service, became known as *Seder Rav Amram* (the order of Rav Amram). Rav Amram did not arbitrarily decide upon an order, but based much of his response on the decisions of the Talmudic rabbis, thus continuing the early rabbinic tradition. In tenth-century Egypt, Rav Saadiah Gaon compiled the second Jewish prayerbook or *siddur* (literally “arrangement”).

The *siddurim* (plural of *siddur*) of Rav Amram and Rav Saadiah were built on the efforts of the earlier rabbis with added commentary, new prayers and poetry. In the generations that followed, various editions of the *siddur* were compiled yet almost all retained the *matbeah*—the basic core of classic texts.

In twentieth-century America, the Conservative movement of Judaism launched a program for Jewish liturgical development.³ Leslie Brisman describes the essence of the Conservative movement as “the love of tradition and the acceptance of change, the reverence for cultural continuities and the search for spiritual contemporaneity” (1986:11). The movement felt it needed a traditional *siddur* that was relevant in the modern world. In 1927 it published a *siddur* that included a prayer for the government appropriate for a democratic society, as opposed to a monarchy—the governance system under which Jews and non-Jews had lived for centuries. Most significantly, the traditional petition for

the *restoration* of animal sacrifice in a rebuilt Temple (sacrifice was the means for ritual atonement for sin in the time of the Temple) was changed to a *recollection* of the sacrificial service which had been central to worship in ancient times. This extremely controversial change in the liturgy is based on the ideological assumption that even if the Temple were rebuilt, the contemporary Conservative Jew would not desire to offer animal sacrifices therein. These two changes were retained and further developed in siddurim published in 1946 and 1961.

Rabbi Jules Harlow is a liturgist who has been actively involved in editing prayerbooks for the Conservative movement.⁴ A major part of Harlow's work on behalf of the Rabbinical Assembly, the international organization of Conservative rabbis, has been to reflect and respond to the realities of the modern world within the traditional prayer service. "Liturgy must respond in some way to life today if life is to respond to liturgy," he writes, "it must reflect the crucial events of our time" (Harlow 1965:42). Still, he says, "In general I'm conservative, small 'c' conservative⁵. I don't think we should change except when it's necessary" (1990).

Harlow served on the committee for the siddur published by the Rabbinical Assembly (RA) in 1961 and served as the editor for *Siddur Sim Shalom* published by the RA and the United Synagogue of America in 1985. He also edited a *mahzor*, a prayerbook for the High Holy Days—*Rosh Hashana* and *Yom Kippur*⁶—published by the RA in 1972. Harlow sees his efforts in both conservation of, and innovation in tradition as modeled after the efforts of his predecessors; "We feel bound by [the] basic outlook, approach, decisions [of the early rabbis], but part of their approach is development and change, so we feel we are heirs in developing and changing as well as sticking to the matbeah. They remain the liturgists par excellence because they were really bold and creative" (Harlow interview 1990).

The RA had two main goals in mind when it decided to publish new editions of the siddur. First, it wanted to produce a new English translation. Traditional Jewish prayers are written and usually recited in Hebrew. Most American Jewish prayerbooks present both the Hebrew text and its English translation. Many Jews today cannot read Hebrew and many of those who do read it, do not comprehend it. The RA felt that since some Jews are dependent on the English translation for understanding what they are saying, the quality of the English should enable it to be used independently of the Hebrew as a devotional text. The RA wanted the new translation to enable those who pray in English to feel at least some of the emotional impact and spiritual dimensions that a congregant who understands Hebrew feels just by praying in Hebrew. Also, many prayerbooks have retained a stilted Jacobean English translation. Harlow points out that "classic texts periodically require fresh translations if they are to become part of the life

experience of succeeding generations" (Harlow 1971:65). The prayerbook is a classic text that Harlow endeavored to render into contemporary English.

A subsidiary purpose for the new edition, inspired by the goal of making the service more accessible to and approachable by all congregants, was to encourage individual and personal prayer.

Print sanctifies, canonizes and rigidifies. In the prayerbook it implies that only what's in print is acceptable prayer . . . one way of involving people in prayer is by pointing out that their own words are legitimate contributions to the life of prayer and should be included in the service. (Harlow 1971:63)

At one time that [personal prayer] was traditional. At certain points in the service, not everywhere or anywhere, it is *halakhically* (according to Jewish law) acceptable and encouraged for each person to add his or her own words. Those words, at designated places, are just as halakhically acceptable and as spiritually significant as the words of any ancient, medieval, or modern authority. . . . We are trying to revive a traditional practice which for the most part has fallen into desuetude. (Harlow interview, 1990)

The new editions of the prayerbooks indicate points in the service at which it is appropriate and permissible to utter personal prayer. It is in the nature of traditions to ebb and to be revived; 'revival' does not necessarily denote lack of authenticity.

The second goal of the RA in publishing new editions of the prayerbooks was to make additions to the Hebrew text which would present a liturgical response to modern realities. As Harlow puts it, "Reality changes so your prayers have to change; or even when your *perception* of reality changes, your prayers have to change."

Two of the outstanding ones (modern realities) are the establishment of the State of Israel—the reality of a State of Israel in the land of Israel, and unfortunately, the reality of the Holocaust. How do you respond to these two events? By silence?—which had essentially been the way. . . .

How can you meet on the High Holy Days or actually any other day and not reflect the reality that something has changed in the Middle East?

For centuries Jews prayed, "Please God may there be a restoration of a Jewish Commonwealth in the Holy Land." And then, thank God, the prayers are answered and in the late forties you have what Jews have been praying for, for centuries—an independent Jewish State in the Land of Israel. And you just go on with your prayers and services as if

nothing had changed. Well, that's unacceptable. . . . You had some special services here and there but not made integral. The responses were not liturgically composed in the framework of classic Jewish liturgy.

So how do you respond to (these two events)? Not with an announcement "Today we remember those who were killed." But with liturgy. So we had to fashion a liturgy to respond to those two events. (Harlow interview, 1990)

The tragedy of the Holocaust is integrated into *Eileh Ezkerah* (These I Recall), the Yom Kippur martyrology which details the torturous slaughter of ten great sages during the Hadrianic persecutions. The first time that a liturgical response to the reality of the State of Israel in the land of Israel was framed was in the 1960s. Harlow was working with Rabbi Gershon Hadas on the 1961 edition of the siddur.

We went through several versions and then the way we realized we had to do it was to find a classic liturgical response to miracles, expressing gratitude for miracles. And so we took the framework of the *al hanisim* (for the miracles) prayers which are responses and expressions of gratitude to God for the miracles which led us to the events which we commemorate with Purim and with Hannukah. So we took that framework—the language of it and the style of it—and we adapted it for *Yom Haatzmaut* (Israel Independence Day).

We chose the *al hanisim* prayer because that is a classic liturgical framework. After we tried formulating something ourselves, we realized—it's going to fail—we want to make not an additional reading, but part of the *matbeah*, part of the fixed form of daily prayer and this is the classic way to do it. There's a formula for celebrating other miraculous events that took place. And we took that formula. And we just took the style and the language and we just applied it to that specific event. (Harlow interview, 1990)

Harlow and Hadas created new texts in accordance with the conventions of extant texts.⁷ Their innovations were within the bounds of tradition. Whenever Harlow made a change, he looked for a precedent for such a change in earlier siddurim.

Although some communities today criticize Harlow and the RA for being too radical—and one critic actually claims that one who prays from *Siddur Sim Shalom* does not fulfill the obligation to pray—Harlow is quick to point out that although these classic texts have been used for centuries, changes have been made throughout the centuries as well. "It's not true that a prayerbook dropped out of heaven at one point and that it was never changed until the twentieth century or the nineteenth century" (Harlow interview, 1990).

We are allowed to make changes. Look—the changes we've made in the Hebrew text of the prayerbook are rather minimal. It's more than interesting to note that if a Jew from ninth century Babylonia in some miraculous way were on earth today, a Jew who knew the *davening* (praying)—remember there were no books then—a Jew who knew the service—*ninth* century Babylonia—and he looked at the Hebrew text of Siddur Sim Shalom that came out in 1985, he would be familiar with almost all of the Hebrew text of that service. Now he would expect to see *naaseh v'nakriv* (we will sacrifice) and he'll see *asu v'hikrivu* (our ancestors used to sacrifice) which was a change made in 1927. However, *some* of the changes, some of the things, the texts, that he would not recognize from the ninth century, he would not recognize because they were introduced in the eleventh century, or in the thirteenth century or in the sixteenth century. So there has always been a development of the tradition. (Harlow interview, 1990)

Some people say that Harlow or any modern Jew does not have the authority to make changes.

Rabbi Soleveichik who's a great authority, an Orthodox authority, has written about the prayerbook and prayers and he certainly could not or would not deny that—what I just said about the ninth century Jew who wouldn't recognize texts that were added in the eleventh, thirteenth and sixteenth centuries—and yet that same Rabbi Soleveichik says, "I'm not"—and he's an authority—"I am not about to make changes. I don't think we should make any changes in the prayerbook today." Well, that's another point of view with which I don't agree. . . . When push comes to shove, Dr. Soleveichik is a much bigger authority than Harlow . . . however, when it comes to liturgy there are those in the community who follow what Harlow—for better or for worse—has decided. (Harlow interview, 1990)

It is interesting to note that the identification of an individual as an authority figure can change radically over time. Moses Maimonides, or Rambam, a Jewish philosopher and codifier of medieval Spain, is generally recognized today as a great authority; but in his time he was excommunicated by some. In addition his creedal formulation expressed in the *Yigdal* prayer, which was contested at one time, is now an accepted part of the prayer service of traditional Jewry as a whole.

Conceptions of authenticity of tradition are affected by notions of authority. People value traditions that are validated by an authority whom they accept. Some scholars (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, and Handler and Linnekin 1984, for example) challenge the authority of some traditions, contending that they

were invented and calculatingly introduced into communities by powerful, manipulative, outside forces for political purposes. But authority should not be portrayed solely as an evil, dominant force which imposes itself upon unwilling subjects. People often seek out authority—as in the case of the Spanish community who asked Rav Amram to outline the appropriate order of prayers for them.

People also reject recognized authority when its edicts do not correspond, at any level, with their own sense of what is good or proper. Included in Rav Amram's response was the suggestion that the community delete a certain liturgical piece that he considered archaic and foolish. However, the liturgy was significant to the people and they chose to disregard his opinion in that matter. The liturgical piece in question, *Kol Nidrei*, is being said to this day and, in fact, holds a central role in the Yom Kippur liturgy.

An authority is an authority by virtue of the fact that people choose to follow it. Ideas and customs formulated by individual members of a group become traditional because at some level they are appealing to the group (though they might seem irrational or even repulsive to outsiders). The etymology of 'tradition' explicitly identifies 'transmission' as a key component of the phenomenon. 'Acceptance' of that which is transmitted must also be part of the definition.

Harlow maintains that it is in the liturgical tradition to change, alter, and add texts. And indeed in the rabbinical document *Pirkei Avot* 2:18, Rabbi Simon taught "Do not make your prayer a matter of fixed routine," that is, innovate something in prayer every day. Harlow reiterates that, "We are bound to tradition yet part of that tradition is change" (Harlow interview, 1990).

We are the guardians of tradition. That implies a responsibility. There is a basic obligation to transmit the tradition. We have to preserve it because we hope it will sustain future generations. . . . Tradition implies a past and a future. The word 'tradition' in English (taken from Latin) and the word '*masoret*' in Hebrew both mean delivering something to somebody, passing something along. And of course it implies receiving, not rejecting, that which has been given. . . . Tradition keeps us going as a distinct people. . . . The basic text is the Bible which was a revelation from God. We are obliged to take care of the gift if we respect the Creator, we're beholden to honor it. We received a gift and we have an obligation to say thank you and to treat it well. . . . Those of us who understand change and development to be part and parcel of Jewish tradition believe that, in the words of a *midrash* (a rabbinic tale), it is necessary for each generation to add a new song if the well of tradition is not to run dry. (Harlow interview, 1990)

Although Harlow does not consider himself to be a scholarly peer of Rav Saadiah Gaon, he does point out that the people to the right of him who do not think he has the authority to make changes do accept the authority of tenth-century Saadiah who also made changes. Time-depth lends authority to innovation in tradition. The present is continuously incorporated into traditional forms; but while changes made throughout the centuries or even decades before an individual is born are often accepted as authentic parts of the tradition, changes made during that individual's lifetime are often seen as radical and disturbing.

It is not just actual time-depth but also perceived time-depth that lends authenticity to tradition. It is not uncommon for a practice that is only one generation old to be accepted as authentic tradition and for the revival of an ancient tradition to be viewed as inauthentic. When an innovation in tradition is transmitted in the same mode as other traditional items, the second generation grows up with the notion of it as 'authentic'; as part of 'the way we have always done things.' And it is possible for a revived ancient tradition, not recognized as such by the masses, to be perceived of as radical innovation. It seems that many people have an emotional attachment to, and investment in, an item of tradition as it was when they first encountered it.

One of the factors which has determined the way in which several generations have first encountered the siddur and therefore has determined their conception of a traditional siddur, is the invention of the printing press. Harlow explains that "in tradition there has been flexibility, but since the printing press there has been less flexibility because what is printed becomes holy" (Harlow interview, 1990). Certain parts of the service were originally designated for personal prayer, for the "free outpouring of the human heart before God" (Petuchowski 1985:312). Early siddurim included the personal prayers of renowned rabbis as optional recitations at these points in the service. Over time, some of these became canonized as parts of the "official" service. Petuchowski elaborates on this phenomenon:

One generation's spontaneity becomes another generation's routine. The ideal of Jewish prayer is the free outpouring of the heart before God. The exigencies of communal worship demand fixed times of prayer and the crystallization of common prayer formulae. The history of Jewish liturgy is a history of the attempts to satisfy those two apparently contradictory claims. The fixed prayer routine always gets the upper hand in the sense that prayers which were meant to supplement the official prayer routine with the free outpouring of the individual human heart end up as the components of a later generation's fixed prayer routine. (1985:312-313)

In the prayerbooks that Harlow has edited, there is a move away from a completely fixed prayer routine; alternative readings are provided and personal prayer is encouraged at certain points in the service. Also, in addition to medieval philosophical statements and liturgical poetry, Harlow includes statements of modern Jewish philosophers like Martin Buber and Abraham Joshua Heschel as well as contemporary creative endeavors of modern poets. Petuchowski writes that the modern Conservative liturgy "is traditional in the way Jewish prayerbooks used to be traditional before the invention of the printing press and before the ossification process set in" (1972).

Harlow's work expresses his and the RA's belief that members of the Jewish community are not only heirs to a "beautiful tradition" but also its trustees and developers. He points to tradition itself as one source of this attitude.

A midrash (a rabbinic tale) speaks of a king who gave gifts of flour and linen to two servants, saying that he would be coming back to visit them in a few weeks. When he returned, one servant presented the king with a delicious cake and a handsome tablecloth made from the flour and the linen. The other servant proudly showed the king the same flour and linen, preserved exactly as they had been received. We can see the midrash's prejudice when it asserts about the second servant: *Oy l'otah boosha! Oy l'otah kleemah!* [Alas! How shameful! Alas! what a disgrace!] (Harlow interview, 1990)

Traditions are modified both over time and through space, in the different centuries and countries in which people embrace them. There is a pluralism in tradition. Variations of a single tradition, each containing the same basic core (such as the *matbeah*), can exist contemporaneously. Intriguingly, despite this acknowledged pluralism in tradition, the form in which individuals first encounter a tradition is often the only form they consider to be truly authentic. Traditions are emotionally charged phenomena and though in reality traditions are not set in stone, in many people's minds and hearts they are. Harlow recognizes the value that both tradition and innovation can have in enriching people's lives:

It is presumptuous for anyone to ignore the experience of the past, the wealth of our tradition, and to attempt life or liturgy as if nothing else had ever been. [Yet] to quote Willard Sperry, "It is perilous and fatal for a man to treat his own life as an imitation and replica of some other life."⁸

... This tension between past and present is involved in every decision which the liturgical editor makes. (Harlow 1965:42)

In the early 1980s there was a flurry of scholarly activity surrounding the phenomenon called “tradition.” Sociologists and folklorists alike struggled to understand more fully this term that they had frequently referred to in their writings but had never satisfactorily defined. Much of the rethinking of “tradition” consisted of examining customs and oral expressive forms perceived as traditional and questioning their authenticity.

Studies like that of Hobsbawm and Ranger made a distinction between “old” traditions and “invented” traditions; scholars questioned the authenticity of some traditions by pointing to their relatively recent origins. But traditions attacked as being consciously “invented” in relatively recent times need not be declared inauthentic simply because they are not as ancient as commonly supposed or because their developers are not anonymous. The fact that a scholar can trace an item of tradition to the time, source, and purpose of its invention does not negate its authenticity. After all, traditions necessarily evolve or are invented at some point and for some reason. The studies that look critically at the “invention of traditions” do not succeed in discrediting them, but rather they simply illustrate how and why traditions come into being.

Once a tradition is invented, it is continuously both conserved and constructed; communities preserve their past, incorporate their present, and anticipate their future in their traditions. This essay has examined the admittedly conscious construction of a written tradition in an effort to demonstrate that invention of, innovation in, and modification of tradition are natural aspects in the making of written, oral, and behavioral traditions.

Notes

1 This essay was originally written in 1990 as an exercise for a class at Indiana University entitled “The Idea of Tradition,” taught by John Johnson. A version of the essay was delivered at the annual meeting of the American Folklore Society in 1992.

2 Thanks are due to Navah Harlow, my mother, for her assistance with these interviews.

3 This essay’s examination of Jewish prayer in the twentieth century deals solely with Conservative liturgy. It should be noted that the Orthodox and Reform movements of Judaism also have developed Jewish liturgy in the current century, in directions compatible with their respective ideologies.

4 In addition to his active involvement in Jewish liturgy, Rabbi Harlow is also actively involved in my life—as he is my father.

5 Harlow identifies himself as "small 'c' conservative" as distinct from the capital 'C' of the Conservative movement of Judaism.

6 *Rosh Hashana* is the Jewish New Year and *Yom Kippur* is the Day of Atonement.

7 The notion of framing responses to modern reality in classical liturgical style is not dissimilar to the compositions of the Yugoslavian *guslars* of Albert Lord's *The Singer of Tales* (1960). Although the *guslars* composed their epics orally and Harlow and his colleagues' compositions are in written form, both groups of men created new phrases based on their familiarity with traditional formulas. The singer of tales is both 'the tradition' and an individual creator. His art consists of composing phrases in the traditional style for the idea which he wants to express at a given moment. Hadas and Harlow used the traditional *al hanisim* formula to help them express ideas regarding the State of Israel. Both groups of men display their creative skill within the conventions of tradition.

8 Willard L. Sperry was a theologian and Congregationalist minister. The complete quote to which Harlow refers is found in Sperry's book *Reality in Worship*.

It is perilous and fatal for a man to treat his own life as an imitation and replica of some other life, a thoroughly second hand and therefore a second rate affair. A man is under bonds to treat his life as a profoundly original fact (Sperry 1926:37).

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