In the last issue of *Reconstructionism Today* (Volume 14, No. 2, Winter 2006-2007), Daniel Cedarbaum, the immediate past president of the JRF, set forth his views on our liturgy (“Reconsidering Reconstructionist Liturgy: The Kaplanian Paradox”). I find his views significantly at odds with my own, and with those of many other members of our movement with whom I’ve exchanged e-mail and conversation on this topic. I’d like to explore some of these ideas further.

Dan writes:

> Almost 20 years ago, a knowledgeable Conservative Jew chided me in a way that has troubled me ever since. “You Reconstructionists,” he said, “believe that you can distinguish a denomination on the basis of liturgical changes, like substituting ‘mevi ge’ulah’ (bringing redemption) for ‘mevi go’el’ (bringing a redeemer/messiah) in the first paragraph of the Amidah. Do you really think that more than a handful of people even notice these changes, much less think that they are important?”

Allowing license for hyperbole, I think he was making an important point.

I don’t think so; I do believe, though, that starting with this anecdote to a great extent trivializes the entire issue of liturgical change and innovation. I don’t believe that Reconstructionists try to “distinguish our denomination” on the basis of a few differences in words. Rather, the liturgical changes found in *Kol Haneshamah* and its predecessor Reconstructionist siddurim represent the endeavor of thoughtful liturgists, beginning with Mordecai Kaplan, to find language for prayer that would feel authentic to those praying.

Dan begins his discussion by talking about Kaplan’s “If you don’t believe it, don’t say it” approach to prayer. It is this approach, he explains, that in the name of intellectual honesty caused Kaplan to remove from the liturgy references to resurrection of the dead, a personal messiah, a desire for the restoration of the sacrificial cult in the Temple, and the “chosenness” of the Jewish people. But he goes on to point up the supposed “paradox” on which he has based this article:

> Kaplan also believed that prayer must not be allowed to somehow “substitute” for action, that the affirmation of values which may be represented by the words spoken in prayer should not “convince” the worshipper that “he [sic] has worked for the realization of those values . . .”

I do not, in fact, see a paradox here. Kaplan does not state, at least not in the excerpt quoted in Dan’s article, that all davenning should be “quotation rather than affirmation.” Indeed, in the Introduction to the second edition of the *Sabbath Prayer Book* published by the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, the editors (Rabbis Kaplan, Eugene Kohn, Ira Eisenstein, and Milton Steinberg) write:

> . . . There is, we are convinced, a great need for a worship text adapted to the outlook of Jews who are devoted to the Jewish tradition, and also to the truths and aspirations of the modern spirit. A prayer book capable of ministering adequately to the needs of such Jews must conform to the following four principles . . .

> Fourth: it must exhibit courage as well as reverence, the courage to set aside or modify such prayers or phrases as are unacceptable to modern men [sic], whether intellectually, morally, or aesthetically. Otherwise integrity in worship becomes impossible, if indeed worship is not discouraged altogether . . .

Further, I cannot agree that most people who are in synagogue believe that they are “quoting” rather than “affirming.” It’s certainly true that Jews find themselves identifying with the history of the Jewish people as they pray. There is an emotional power in knowing that you are engaging in an activity that is much like the activities in which our ancestors also engaged. But my experience as a service leader tells me that people want to “relate” to the text, rather than “quote” it; they want to find a personal connection to the prayers, be it emotional, intellectual, or moral, as they pray.

Were this not the case, I don’t believe that the strong movement toward feminist/feminized liturgy, with results now reflected in Reconstructionist, Reform, and even Conservative siddurim, would have happened over the last 30 to 40 years. If we were all convinced that we were “quoting” rather
than “affirming,” reading the siddur would be a lot more like reading from the Torah. When the Torah is read, very few of us, I think, feel inclined to change the words. We are “quoting” an ancient text, we know that’s what we’re doing, and we work to find or create interpretations of this text to which we can relate today. Certainly, parts of our “traditional” prayer text also qualify as ancient, and we certainly create new interpretations, but we do not, generally, approach the text in the same way. We want to be able to affirm.

Dan continues with a discussion of two generational changes from Kaplan’s time to our own, which he believes weakens the “don’t say it if you don’t mean it” approach. The first is a lack of Hebrew and liturgical literacy among non Orthodox Jews. He writes:

Today, neither childhood immersion nor adult study has provided the great majority of Reconstructionists with the knowledge of traditional liturgy that the previous generations of Reconstructionists possessed. The level of Hebrew literacy among non-Orthodox Jews is probably at an all-time low.

There is some real truth here. Kaplan’s concern was that his generation knew and understood the liturgy, and would reject Judaism as their exposure to modern American and scientific ideas rendered it increasingly “unbelievable.”

For today’s Jews, the issues are different. I certainly know many Reconstructionists (and Jews of other denominations as well) who have little or no Hebrew knowledge or training. How should we react to the presence in our congregations of so many people whose Hebrew literacy is virtually non-existent?

Not, I suggest, by asking people to say things that they wouldn’t want to say if they understood them! Ideally, we would provide the educational possibilities for both children and adults that would allow all Jews to be comfortable with Hebrew and with liturgy. I would argue further that we have an obligation to make sure that the Hebrew and the English in our siddurim say the same thing; this way, people will know what they are reading as they learn.

The second generational change, Dan explains, is that as post-moderns, our understanding of “truth” and “myth” is “more subtle” than that of our “Reconstructionist forebears.” Therefore, we can talk about Torah from Sinai, or the crossing of the Sea of Reeds, and recognize these stories as having a mythic “truth” whether or not they are historically correct.

Dan then says,

Reconstructionists today can (or should be able to) appreciate the metaphorical power of sympathetic invocations in the liturgy of such national archetypes as the Davidic monarchy or the Temple cult, despite the serious problems posed by those institutions as historical realities—and having nothing to do with an actual desire for the restoration of the institutions. . . .

As an avid reader and student of the myths and legends of many peoples, including our own, I can certainly appreciate metaphors. But for the same people Dan describes earlier, those who are unfamiliar with liturgy, what would make it clear what’s “real” and what’s intended as metaphor alone? For the average “Jew in the pew,” what’s in the siddur is what they see. How do we think most people will know that when an Orthodox siddur says, “accept our offerings,” it means it, but if our siddur says it, it doesn’t really? If people do not understand Reconstructionist thinking when they enter our movement’s synagogues, how will they learn about it if the siddur seems identical to the one found in the Orthodox (or the Conservative, or the Reform) congregation?

Dan writes further, “Rabbi David Teutsch explicitly makes this point [about metaphorical power] in his “Commentary” on “V’zot ha-Torah” on p. 406 of Kol Haneshamah: Shabbat Vehagim, but he does not acknowledge its broad applicability to other liturgical formulas.“

Perhaps the applicability is not quite so broad. There is a place for mythic imagery in our siddur; not necessarily because we are “quoting” rather
than “affirming,” but because the drama of such myth has emotional truth. The crossing of the Sea of Reeds, the Revelation at Sinai — these are a part of our “mythic past.” Wishing for a king messiah from the line of David, praying for the restoration of the Temple cult — these are expressed as wishes for the future. I hope for a “messianic age” someday; reading about a king and a ritual abattoir does not nourish my thoughts about this utopian dream.

Dan then asks what appears to be the key question of his piece:

Taken together, these two generational changes give rise to a fundamental paradox of Hebrew liturgy for the Reconstructionist movement today: If most Reconstructionists do not know the differences between the Reconstructionist and traditional versions of almost any of the modified prayer texts, and if those Reconstructionists who understand exactly what changes have been made to the traditional liturgy, and the reasons for those changes, are precisely the ones who are most comfortable preserving the traditional versions for the reasons outlined above, then for whom, and for what purpose, is the liturgy being reconstructed?

From my perspective, this question makes two incorrect assumptions. First, regarding those with Hebrew and liturgical knowledge: It is my experience that Reconstructionists (and other liberal Jews) with the most functional Hebrew are the most uncomfortable with the traditional liturgy, not because we can’t understand it, but because we can. Those of us who really understand and care about liturgy want to daven with words that work for us. For many of us, the more “traditional” words don’t work.

I daven every once in a while at a local Conservative congregation; when I do, I bring Kol Haneshamah so that I can pray the Amidah and other parts of the services as I want to pray them. I sing the Aleynu as we sing it at Keddem Congregation, my Reconstructionist synagogue in Palo Alto, California. I certainly know the traditional liturgy, and I understand the Hebrew. I am simply not “comfortable preserving the traditional versions” any more than I am comfortable at a service in a room with a mekhitzah (partition; another “tradition” that I understand quite well).

Second, regarding those who “don’t know the difference”: At Keddem, we spend time at our junior congregation teaching our children about differences between our liturgy and “traditional” liturgy. We teach this in our adult education classes, too. Those who want to learn will learn. They get it. If you teach people, they may or may not care, but they will understand. To say, “They don’t understand it anyway, so what difference does it make?” is both patronizing and an abrogation of our responsibilities as serious Reconstructionists who care about our “religious civilization.”

Dan then raises another “paradoxical aspect” of reconstructing a traditional prayer text — that doing so may deprive the text of historical resonances that should appeal to us as rationalists. In light of the previous discussion about the low state of Hebrew and liturgical awareness among modern Reconstructionists, I find this a curious argument. How are those congregants who don’t know either Hebrew or liturgical history to recognize this, even with the more “traditional” text restored? In the midst of worship is probably not the time most people would choose for historical analysis of prayer, any more than most concertgoers do Schenkerian analyses of Brahms concerti during performances. The historical analysis of liturgy is a fascinating study, and belongs in our adult education programs. This allows both our liturgy and more “traditional” liturgy to be put into the proper context, helping to remedy the lack of liturgical literacy discussed earlier.

Dan goes on to specifically suggest that references to the restoration of the Davidic dynasty (i.e., a personal messiah, rather than just a messianic age) and to the resurrection of the dead, be restored to Reconstructionist prayer. I’ve addressed the former item above. Regarding the latter, Dan says,

Because most Reconstructionists today, unlike their
predecessors, can relatively easily reinterpret references to the resurrection of the dead in a metaphorical manner, and because they can say words like “mehayey hameytim” (“who revives the dead”) without choking on them, reinstatement of the traditional language in Reconstructionist Hebrew liturgy should be considered.

I can certainly say these words without “choking” on them, but I’d rather not. Again, if our ideas are not made clear in our liturgy, how will people recognize them?

Eric Mendelssohn, a former member of the siddur commission that produced Kol Haneshamah, wrote in an e-mail communication:

There is a wonderful rabbinic tale used to talk about “Song of Songs” — in which a boy is sent to market and asked to buy a pail. He returns and his father is very upset because the pail has a hole in it. He gives him a severe lecture about why a pail should not have holes. The next week he is sent to buy a sieve — he returns empty-handed. His father asks him why, and he responds, “They all were full of holes.” The father then says “A pail is supposed to have no holes; a sieve is supposed to have many holes.”

The rabbinic moral of this story is “the Torah is literally true and Song of Songs is metaphor.” It seems this simple story points out to us that we should NOT assume that everyone can tell the difference between what is proclaimed from the bimah that should be understood as literal and what is proclaimed from the bimah that should be understood as metaphor.

Eric’s right; not everybody can tell. As a final argument, Dan writes:

If I am correct that, for the reasons suggested above, we cannot expect Reconstructionists today to be familiar or comfortable with more than one Hebrew liturgy, then that is another important reason to make as few changes to traditional prayer texts as reasonably possible.

But which “traditional” prayer text should be the “standard?” Chabad siddurim, which use “nusah Ari,” are different from “standard” Ashkenazi Orthodox siddurim. Sephardi siddurim are different from Ashkenazi. Over the last 1,000-plus years, the siddur has constantly changed from place to place and from time to time. I doubt that it has ever been the case that “all Jews” used the same siddur. There are even stories in the Talmud that show us how far back variations in liturgical practice may be found:

When the beth din sanctified the New Moon in Usha, R. Johanan b. Beroka went down [before the ark] in the presence of Rabban Simeon b. Gamaliel, and read as prescribed by R. Johanan b. Nuri. Rabban Simeon said to him: That was not the way they used to do in Jabneh. On the second day, R. Hanina the son of R. Jose the Galilean went down and read as prescribed by R. Akiba. Rabban Simeon b. Gamaliel said: So they used to do in Jabneh. (Rosh Hashana 32a, Soncino tr.)

So, the idea that we should “go back” in the name of Jewish unity is not even “wishful thinking”; it’s an attempt to return to something that never was. If you accept the premise that it’s only possible to learn “one liturgy” (which I don’t, actually) then let’s make sure that the one liturgy Reconstructionists are familiar and comfortable with is an evolving liturgy. (I’ve heard more than a few Reconstructionists suggest that our liturgy ought to be in a loose-leaf binder, so we can keep adapting it as need be. I don’t see any problem with that, except that sometimes the pages fall out!)

My nine-year-old son is capable of dealing with differences in liturgy between what he does at Keddem and what he does at tefillah at his unaffiliated (liturgically more-or-less Conservative, and certainly conservative) day school. It doesn’t confuse him in the least; he just knows some Jews do it one way and others do it a different way, and mostly he knows why. Again, education is the obvious answer to the worry about the “depressing experience” of the Reconstructionist child at an unfamiliar Jewish service.

As a final argument, Dan writes:
With regard to liturgy, I have an important ally: My position is similar to the one advanced toward the end of his life by no less a figure than Rabbi Ira Eisenstein, z”l, Kaplan’s son-in-law and in many ways the father of the institutional Reconstructionist movement.

Rabbi Eisenstein, z”l, was entitled to change his mind. All of us who believe in liturgical evolution, as conceived of by Mordecai Kaplan and continued today, are equivalently entitled not to change ours.

**In conclusion, Dan notes that “the next series** of Reconstructionist prayerbooks not only could, but should, look very different from either of its predecessors.”

I agree with this statement completely, but I suspect that my hopes for 21st-century Reconstructionist liturgy probably don’t match up with Dan’s. As we are the “evolving religious civilization of the Jewish people,” so our liturgy must continuously evolve. Evolution of liturgy may have many forms, and at least one valid form of liturgical change is to remove and/or change those words that no longer speak to us.

To some extent, even change as change is valuable. As Syd Nestel of Congregation Darchei Noam in Toronto wrote, in an e-mail communication:

> I would oppose reversing our liturgical changes, because I think it sends the wrong message. Reconstructionism starts from the premise that the Jewish world is broken and in need of Reconstruction. It starts from the premise that change is inevitable and a good thing. So to reverse the changes in order to create a false consensus of practice in order to promote a mythical Klal Yisrael is wrong IMO. And to reverse the changes simply in order to preserve older forms of prayer as intrinsically valuable, is to reject any possibility of change.

Finally, I quote from Mel Scult, Mordecai Kaplan’s biographer, who wrote in an e-mail:

> I don’t think we have yet solved the problem of making prayer meaningful... Nonetheless, I strongly support Kaplan’s approach to liturgy. Kaplan was deeply revolutionary in ways I am only beginning to grasp. It was in the liturgy where his radicalism was most clearly expressed. Therefore, I would advocate keeping the changes, if only to remind us that we must face up to the challenge of a meaningful Judaism with courage and creativity. The key to awakening us from our religious torpor is creativity and change, and Kaplan intuitively understood this. I am not sure what the answer is regarding prayer, but I know it does not lie in doing things as they have been done.

Amen.

Daniel Cedarbaum replies:

**FIRST AND FOREMOST**, I want to thank Elaine Moise for expressing her views on Reconstructionist liturgy so eloquently. My primary purpose in writing on this subject was to provoke the kind of thoughtful response that Elaine has produced and, hopefully, to stimulate a series of ongoing conversations about how we pray, or daven (synonyms for some but not for others). As I have written in these pages before, I believe that we Reconstructionists discuss serious ideological issues in a serious manner too infrequently, and on that point I take Elaine and myself to be in complete agreement.

As to the substance of her arguments, forceful though they are, Elaine has not convinced me to change my position. At the risk of oversimplifying the matter, she comes down strongly in the “If you don’t believe it, don’t say it” camp, and I come down strongly in the “quotation rather than affirmation” camp. I don’t believe that I can prove Elaine wrong, but neither do I believe that she can prove me wrong. She offers Mel Scult as a witness for her side, and I offer Rabbi Ira Eisenstein, z”l, as a witness for my side. In the end, when we talk about what sort of liturgy is both intellectually honest and emotionally satisfying, I am convinced that, within broad bounds, we are discussing highly subjective matters. In other words, Elaine and I are just going to have to agree to disagree.

Having said that, as with halakhic matters as to which strong arguments can be marshaled for more than one result, we will ultimately need to make decisions about what the Reconstructionist
liturgy of the future will look like. And here I believe that we will need, in some way, to count votes, and I guess that is appropriate for a movement so committed to democracy. We will have to go out and see what the people want. (By the way, I am certainly not suggesting that we take a simple poll; rather, I believe that we should create alternative versions of various pieces of our liturgy to be tried out in actual services in some of our congregations and see how the participants respond.)

In the absence of such testing, I cannot be sure that my views represent those of more than a handful of Reconstructionists, but Elaine cannot be sure that hers do, either.

Just to be clear: I believe that Elaine misunderstands what I claimed in my article to be the “fundamental paradox of Hebrew liturgy for the Reconstructionist movement today: If most Reconstructionists do not know the differences between the Reconstructionist and traditional versions of almost any of the modified prayer texts, and if those Reconstructionists who understand exactly what changes have been made to the traditional liturgy, and the reasons for those changes, are precisely the ones who are most comfortable preserving the traditional versions for the reasons outlined above, then for whom, and for what purpose, is the liturgy being reconstructed?” I meant this question to serve as a sort of hypothesis and to be subject to empirical testing.

A couple of quibbles: I never meant to suggest that we could identify a sort of “Platonic” traditional siddur that all Jews would accept as normative. But neither do I see much of a problem in choosing which ‘traditional’ prayer text should be the ‘standard’ for us. The history of Reconstructionist liturgy establishes that we have already made this decision: With a few exceptions, we have classified ourselves liturgically as non-Hasidic Ashkenazi Jews. Our ideological ancestors are the mitnagdim of Lithuania, and I would guess that a relatively small minority of us have actual familial roots in Sephardi or Chabad Jewry. Today, what is understood to be traditional, non-Hasidic, Ashkenazi liturgy is remarkably uniform. I see no reason to change our approach in this regard.

Finally, with regard to my serious concern about expecting our children to be familiar with more than one liturgy: Although I am pleased that Elaine’s son is apparently receiving an excellent Jewish education at his “more-or-less Conservative” day school and can move from a traditional service to a Reconstructionist service and back again, without confusion, the percentage of Reconstructionist kids enrolled in Jewish day schools (of any kind) is very small. Moreover, for reasons both practical and philosophical, I would not want to base any decisions about Reconstructionist liturgy on the assumption of a significant increase in the percentage of our children who will receive traditional day-school educations in the future.

On a positive note, I strongly agree with Elaine that, for pedagogical reasons, we should “make sure that the Hebrew and the English in our siddurim say the same thing.”

With gratitude to Elaine, I look forward to continuing the conversation.

Elaine Moise is a founder and past president of Keddem Congregation, the JRF affiliate in Palo Alto, California. She is also a member of the Steering Committee for Harmoniyah: The Reconstructionist Music Network.

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