Sat 24 July 1999
Va'etchanan
Congregation Adat Reyim
Robert Berkowitz

Vaetchanan

"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One" (Sim Shalom, page 347). "Love the Lord your God with all your heart ..." (Sim Shalom, page 347). "You who cling to the Lord your God have been sustained to this day" (Sim Shalom, page 401). "This is the Torah that Moses set before Israel;" (Sim Shalom, page 411). "Know this day and take it to heart that the Lord is God in heaven above and on earth below; there is no other" (Sim Shalom, page 511).

All these verses have two things in common. First, we recited or will shortly recite them; second, these verses are each found in today's Torah portion, Va'etchanan, which begins at Deuteronomy 3:23 and goes through Deuteronomy 7:11. Many ancient texts were woven into the liturgy. Phrases from or references to the Talmud, the Zohar, and especially the Tanakh, are used as the foundation for many, if not for most, of our prayers.

Today I will talk about how the rabbis used these ancient texts, starting with the texts found in Va'etchanan. These and other extracts will lead us to a discussion of reciting parts of the service that could be offensive. I will conclude my D'var Torah by presenting a modest proposal to the congregation.

The service belongs to the layman, not the experts.[1] Our liturgy excerpts older texts in a skillful manner, but sometimes in a way that is untrue to the original meaning. The rabbis were willing to tamper with the original message in order to make their points.

Usually the rabbis were able to use the ancient verses and be faithful to the original message. The quotation in the Alenu on page 511 of Sim Shalom is taken from Deut 4:39 and is used in a way totally consistent with the verse in its original context. The fact that the line is a quotation is noted in the Alenu, an attribute that puts this verse among a liturgical minority. The quotation in the Torah service on page 401 of Sim Shalom, while complete and unchanged from Deut 4:4, doesn't inform us that we are quoting Torah. The practice of using verses from the Tanakh without citing the source is the more usual practice.

With the verse from Deut 4:44 found on page 411 of Sim Shalom, we start to get a feel for the playfulness the rabbis had when putting the service together. Deut 4:44 supplies only the first part of the what is recited (the part before the semicolon). The hagbaha recitation concludes with a passage from Numbers. This passage occurs twice in Numbers1[2] and in the original contexts its meaning is different from the meaning the text attains when appended to the verse from Deuteronomy.[3] However, the phrase from Deuteronomy and the phrase from Numbers go so well together that I doubt anyone feels deceived when they learn that two separate Torah verses are combined.

With the Shema, the rabbis edited in yet a different way. A long statement from Moses is interrupted by a verse that is not even from the Tanakh! The interrupting verse is very old; it is found in the Talmud. But the fact that the rabbis were willing to interrupt a discourse of Moses is to my mind surprising. We do not have the time to discuss in further detail Baruch Shem Koved Malkuto, but this example demonstrates that the rabbis were willing to split Torah verses as well as combine Torah verses.

Besides interrupting or combining passages of Tanakh, the rabbis took statements out of context, even when it reversed the meaning of the passage. For example, the Alenu concludes with a quotation from Zechariah.[4] As used in the service, the quotation refers to that glorious future when men will live together in peace. When read in context, however, one sees that the reason God is one and His name one is that Israel's God has gone to war against Israel's enemies. There is no one left among Israel's pagan neighbors to deny that HaShem is God. The quotation is complete and unchanged, but its meaning is totally different in the service

than it is when read in the Book of Zechariah. By the way, this quotation is another rare instance of an introduced phrase.

During the weekday, Torah service verses from the Book of Exodus[15] (Sim Shalom, bottom of page 395) are recited which are not recited during Shabbat. What we chant is incomplete; the last few words of the verse are excluded. The liturgy describes a compassionate, forgiving God. Exodus' God, on the other hand, is no pushover; the part that is ignored makes clear that God does not cleanse completely, recalling the iniquity of parents upon the children.

My last example of how the rabbis were willing to use ancient verses for their own purposes is from the Yotzer Or prayer, the prayer immediately following the morning Barechu (page 341 in Sim Shalom). The first line of this prayer is almost a quotation from Isaiah,[6] but instead it is a gloss because the last word was changed. The change of this single word alters the impact of the verse. The liturgy doesn't indicate the words are from Isaiah, so in a strict sense we as congregants are not misled. Still, it seems the rabbis did handle Isaiah's words rather cavalierly.

Given that there is historical precedence for changing verses, what stops us from changing or dropping prayers people find offensive? Should passages that give offense be changed, and if so, how?

The morning blessings (on page 10 of Sim Shalom) bless God for giving sight to the blind. These words are lifted from Psalms.[7] Do these words give false hope to Jews that are blind? Does the line about teaching ones children diligently cause embarrassment to childless Jewish couples? The rabbis were sensitive to this problem. During the 16th century Rabbi Joseph Caro discussing this topic proposed:[8]

> ...anyone for whom these blessings are inappropriate, ... should still recite the blessing, but with the omission of the divine name.

As Rabbi Jeffrey Cohen observes, this is a subtle fusion of praise and protest.

Rabbi Caro's younger contemporary, the Polish Rabbi Moses Isserles, disagreed. Isserles responded:

> If the blessings are inappropriate they should still be recited (with the inclusion of the divine name), for a blessing is not related exclusively to one's own circumstances. We bless God for fulfilling the needs of the whole world.[9]

Today many of the attacks on Jewish prayers come from a feminist perspective. Consider the morning blessings again. Originally God is praised for:

> not making me a gentile
> not making me a slave
> men: not making me a woman
> women: making me according to His will[10]

Additionally, many people object to referring to God as He or to references to the patriarchs when there are no reference to the matriarchs.[11] Thus, changes to the English and even to the Hebrew of the service are being implemented. Some changes are in the newer "gender sensitive" editions of the Siddur, and some changes are made by the prayer leader who changes a word or phrase from what is printed the Siddur.

I propose for consideration some guidelines with regard to changing the words of our liturgy. I make no claim that my proposed tenets are comprehensive or that they are worded in the best manner. I hope members of Adat Reyim will start to think about how we as a congregation within the larger Jewish community will respond to the complaints that women are left out of the service.

My first proposed rule is that when a prayer states it is quoting a source, then the quotation should not be tampered with. If the quotation is changed, then remove the claim that the prayer contains a quotation from an older source. The Siddur we use Friday evenings, Likrat Shabbat, fails to follow this rule. In particular, the Alenu still contains the sentence, "The prophet too proclaimed this promise:" although the words "His name One" have been changed to "God's name One." Additionally, the quotation marks around this verse are still there.

My second proposed rule is that the meaning of the prayer as a whole, as well as the meaning of each statement comprising the prayer, should not be altered. Thus, third-person references should be replaced by third-person references and not by second-person references. For example, at the end of the Yotzer Or prayer (page 345 in Sim Shalom) is the phrase, "For He is unique." Rabbi Aft and others often instead say, "For You are unique." This transformation changes the focus of the statement, and thus its meaning. As originally articulated, the congregation is not addressing God. When the word He is changed to You, the congregation converses with God. A better rephrasing, in my opinion, would be, "For God is unique," keeping the third-person reference and thus not changing the statement's meaning.

My last proposed guideline is that when changes are made, they should be made with style. The words should sound right, flow smoothly, and keep as many of the emotional, historical, Biblical, and poetic ties of the original as possible. The morning blessing on page 10 of Sim Shalom replaces the three statements about not being a gentile, a slave, or a woman with one line: "who made me a Jew." This alternative phrasing goes back to the Talmud, and respected Orthodox leaders such as the Goan of Vilna and Abraham Berliner urged the re-introduction of this wording.[12] Likewise, Debbie Friedman's version of Mi Sheberach, which refers to both mothers and fathers, keeps the sense of the original on which it is based.

The siddur has changed over the centuries. We learn in today's Torah reading that each of us was at Mt. Sinai and that we each received a wonderful tradition. If that tradition is not to die, it must adapt to new circumstances. The prayer service must remain meaningful to us. Rabbi Henry Slonimsky wrote:" [The] Siddur [is] the most important single Jewish book ... the Jewish soul is mirrored there as nowhere else...". Our prayers have changed with time. The changes, however, should not be arbitrary or done without knowledge as to their cumulative effect. I don't see that we in Adat Reyim are discussing the issues of changes to the service. We should be having those discussions. Shabbat Shalom.

---

[1] Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, "The Liturgical Message," an essay in the book Gates of Understanding, CCAR, 1977, wrote: "... the prayerbook, unlike most other forms of rabbinic literature, is intended not for scholars but for the general community."

[2] Numbers 4:37 and Numbers 9:23.

[3] Numbers 4:37 deals with the counting of the Kohathite clan (of the tribe of Levi) by the command of God. Numbers 9:23 describes how Israel made or broke camp with a sign from God.

[4] Zechariah 14:9.

[5] Exodus 34:6-7.

[6] Isaiah 45:7.

[7] Psalms 146:8.

[8] Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chayyim 46:8. Referenced in the book Blessed are You - A Comprehensive Guide to Jewish Prayer, by Rabbi Jeffrey Cohen, published by Jason Aronson, 1993, page 136.

[9] Quoted by Rabbi Jeffrey Cohen in the book Blessed are You, page 136.

[10] This is still the form of the morning blessings in The Complete Metsudah Siddur, Metsudah Publications, 1990.

[11] It is not absolutely true that every prayer ignores women, but the exceptions have a tendency to prove the rule. The Birkas Hamazon may under some conditions mention women (Esther when said on Purim, mother if one has eaten at one's parents'). The Friday night's blessing of daughters asks that God make them like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. The Modim begins with "We thank you." The Hebrew word translated "you" is in the second person singular feminine, a grammatical subtlety that cannot be expressed in English since English is an uninflected language and the same word is used for masculine and feminine second person singular.

[12] See The Authorized Daily Prayer Book, revised edition, by Dr. Joseph H, Hertz (The Hertz Siddur), Bloch Publishing Company, 1959, notes on pages 19 through 21. Rabbi Elijah (1720-1797) was known as the Goan of Vilna. Abraham Berliner (circa 1833 - 1915) was a leader of the Orthodox movement and a fierce opponent of the nascent Reform movement.