

# THE UNITED JEWISH CONGREGATION OF HONG KONG SHABBAT SHALOM

21- 22 November, 2008

24 Cheshvan 5769

Parashat Chayel Sarah  
(Genesis 23:1–25:18)

Rabbi Stan Zamek  
Song Leader Shani Ben Or

## From the Rabbi's desk

“Of all the books that line the shelves of a Jewish library, it is the Siddur, not the Talmud and not even the Bible, that Jews know best. The prayer book is our Jewish diary of the centuries, a collection of prayers composed by generations of those who came before us, as they endeavored to express the meaning of their lives. To know the prayer book is to know our history from within.”

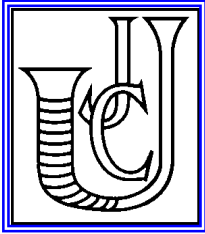
This passage is from the first volume of Prof. Larry Hoffman's brilliant commentary on the Siddur, My People's Prayer Book. Like many truths, Hoffman's teaching on the importance of the Siddur ought to be apparent, but it is obscured by familiarity. Even the most marginally involved Jew has handled, read, and recited words from a Siddur. The prayer book is our constant companion. Of all Jewish sacred texts, it is the most likely to be used until it wears out. But because the Siddur is so pervasive, it is easy to become numb to its beauty and richness, even for those of us for whom the Siddur is a tool of the trade.

We are very fortunate to be living in a time when a great re-discovery of the prayer book is possible. For the first time in more than 30 years, the Reform Movement has recast its Siddur. All over the progressive Jewish world the Gates of Prayer is being replaced by a new prayer book, Mishkan T'filah. This change-over alone would be sufficient to rekindle our awareness of the importance of the Siddur, but Mishkan T'filah is not merely new. It is in fact a significant advance in progressive Jewish life. The Movement's new Siddur is a better custodian and transmitter of Jewish thought and Jewish history than its predecessor. In Larry Hoffman's words it is a better way “to know our history from within.”

In the same introduction to his prayer book commentary, Larry Hoffman notes the power of the Siddur to create *minhag*, the norms and customs of prayer. If a Siddur includes a particular text or ritual instruction, these traditions will remain part of the community's collective knowledge and repertoire of prayer. Anything that a Siddur chooses to omit from the traditional corpus of Jewish prayer will quickly fade from the community's consciousness. An individual Rabbi, Cantor, or Ritual Committee could choose to reintroduce some of this excluded material, but this would require struggling against what is considered “normal” -- that is the prayers and instructions printed in the book.

The old Union Prayer Book, the Siddur I used in shul until I was 15 years old, radically narrowed the scope of what was considered appropriate liturgy for Reform Jews. As a consequence, it caused quite a stir when Gates of Prayer was introduced in 1975. My congregation adopted the “GOP” early, as I recall, but not without some controversy. Some were disturbed by the much greater amount of Hebrew. And then there was all the “new” stuff. A blessing for the new moon? A service for Tisha B'Av? Where is all this coming from? In a short time we got over the shock of the new (or the vast majority of us did--there are still a handful of congregations using the venerable UPB) and the “Gates of Blue” became normative Reform Jewish liturgy.

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While it had its flaws, as all prayer books do, Gates of Prayer was revolutionary. It set the Movement on the path of broadening Reform liturgy. Mishkan T'filah is a fuller realization of this impulse to make more of the centuries of Jewish liturgical creativity available to Reform Jews. A congregation or an individual worshipper may not choose to adopt all of the options Mishkan T'filah provides, but much more of the tradition will be available to us and much less will fade from our knowledge because it no longer appears before our eyes. Mishkan T'filah is solidly within the Reform tradition; its instructions are couched in the language of choice, but the significant difference is the amount and quality of raw material we are given to work with.

The UJC cannot be left behind as the progressive Jewish world embraces this new vision of synagogue life. The UJC leadership is making preparations to join our sister congregations around the world in adopting Mishkan T'filah as the foundation of our *minhag*. I hope that you will become part of this exciting moment in our Movement's history and in the life of the UJC by joining us this Sunday for a special Bagels & Bina dedicated to a discussion of the structure and significance of Mishkan T'filah. Come and see sample copies of the new Siddur, ask your questions, and be part of the continuing evolution of Reform Jewish life.

All Blessings  
Rabbi Z

20<sup>th</sup> November, 2008