

## **Mishkan HaNefesh: The Soul's Sanctuary**

Sermon by Rabbi Esther Adler, Mount Zion Temple, Saint Paul, MN

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On the east coast of Japan, not far from the sacred city of Kyoto, stands an ancient Shinto shrine. It is a beautiful simple structure: a fine thatched roof borne on cypress timbers and beams. It is believed to have been on this site for over 2000 years, and is one of the most sacred Shinto sites. Three years ago local villagers awoke early one morning, made their way to the revered shrine, and proceeded to tear it down. The thatched roof was thrown to the ground, the pillars felled and the inner sanctum was dismantled and carted away. The destruction of this uniquely sacred place would be tragic, if it weren't for the fact that the local people actually tear it down and rebuild it every twenty years. They have done so without interruption, 63 times now, over the past 1300 years. If it weren't for the 20-year rebuild, the cypress pillars, which must be set directly on the ground, would rot. The thatched roof, exposed to the harsh seasons, would decay and begin to leak. But it is more than simple maintenance. The underlying concept is that repeated rebuilding renders the sanctuary eternal.<sup>1</sup>

Of course Jews are different from the Japanese, and Judaism differs from Shinto. What we hold sacred are not shrines, but texts, built not of cedar and thatch but of words and ideas. And yet, like the people of Japan, we Jews have perpetuated what we hold sacred by periodically dismantling and rebuilding our sacred institutions and practices. The Mishkan - the portable wilderness sanctuary was replaced by the Temple in Jerusalem. The Temple was destroyed in 586 BCE by the Babylonians, and then rebuilt. Destroyed again in 70 CE by the Romans, it was reimagined by the rabbis, and instead of rebuilding the Jerusalem Temple, they built local synagogues and houses of study. We offered up the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts instead of rams and doves. The prayer book replaced the tabernacle, becoming a Sanctuary of prayer. - a Mishkan Tefilah - which is the name of our Shabbat Prayerbook.

For 2,000 years, Jewish worship has evolved and been renewed to reflect our changing experiences in history. As early as the second century, after the destruction of the Temple, And the shift from sacrifice to prayer, our sages understood the need for innovation in worship. There is a discussion in the Talmud about whether prayer should be fixed or spontaneous. In the Mishna, Rabbi Eliezer says that fixed prayer is not true supplication...In the next generation, in the Talmud, Rabbi Abahu adds that "one should not recite prayers as if one were reading a letter, and Rabbi Aha says one must add something new each day."<sup>2</sup> Explicating this ancient passage, Rabbi Janet Marder, one of the editors of our new High Holy Day prayer book Mishkan HaNefesh writes: "Prayers with fixed times, structure, format and content make communal worship possible, link Jews across time and space; and imbue prayer with a specific set of shared concepts and values. Perhaps the most important is the sense of comfort and belonging

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/this-japanese-shrine-has-been-torn-down-and-rebuilt-every-20-years-for-the-past-millennium-575558/?no-ist>. With thanks to Rabbi David B. Thomas, [http://www.ccarpress.org/admin/manage\\_assetlibrary/file.asp?id=04358](http://www.ccarpress.org/admin/manage_assetlibrary/file.asp?id=04358)

<sup>2</sup> Jerusalem Talmud Berachot 4:4

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evoked by words and melodies ingrained in our memory. Yet reciting the same prayers three times a day may soon devolve into mechanical, mindless mumbling. Hence the sages dual desires for the fixed and the fluid: the received texts enlivened by elements of novelty added each time we pray.”<sup>3</sup>

A traveling peddler comes into the local shul one Shabbat morning, to find that the worshippers are moving so quickly through the prayer book that he can barely keep up, and he wonders how they could possibly be getting anything out of the experience. He comes back a month later, and to the astonishment of the worshippers, he brings his horse into the shul with him. “You can’t bring that beast in here,” hollers the shammash. “But my horse can daven<sup>4</sup>!” He leads his horse to the bima, opens his prayerbook on the table, and lo and behold...the horse begins to pray. She looks at the book, nods, and then with her muzzle she turns the page, scans the text, and turns the page once again. The congregants gasp in astonishment. “How on earth did you teach your horse to daven?” asks the rabbi. “In fact, I did not,” says the visitor. “I put oats between all the pages of the prayer book, and my horse learned how to turn them looking for more food. After a couple of weeks I removed the oats, but she still turns the pages looking for the nourishment she seeks. That’s what I saw when I was here last month, he says. The words in your prayer books...I’m sure that at one point you all found fulfillment in them. Yet, it seems to me that now you are just turning the pages, finding no nourishment in them, just like my poor horse.”<sup>5</sup>

We want our prayers to be nourishing, so every so often we have to shake things up, dismantle the shrine and reassemble it.

On the other hand, nobody likes change. According to research, “human beings tend to resist change, even when change represents growth and development.”<sup>6</sup> For the first 25 years of my rabbinate, I led services from the Gates of Prayer. We used to use it here, as well. Honestly, I still expect the Aleinu to be on page 615, and the Kaddish on 629. Maybe some of you can do the same for our current Shabbat prayerbook Mishkan Tefilah. Lecha Dodi? Page 20. Kaddish? 287.

It is comforting to know our prayerbook that well. Like a favorite sweater, a familiar walking path, or an old friend. But eventually the sweater wears out, the path gets overgrown, or the

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<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Janet Marder, *Praying in Captivity: Liturgical Innovation in Mishkan HaNefesh*, Divrei Mishkan HaNefesh, (NY:CCAR, 2016) page 66

<sup>4</sup> A yiddish term for “pray”

<sup>5</sup> Story told by Rabbi Todd A. Markley.

[https://www.tbsneedham.org/sites/default/files/uploaded\\_documents/tam\\_rh\\_5776\\_sermon\\_-\\_mishkan\\_haNefesh\\_a\\_sanctuary\\_for\\_our\\_souls.pdf](https://www.tbsneedham.org/sites/default/files/uploaded_documents/tam_rh_5776_sermon_-_mishkan_haNefesh_a_sanctuary_for_our_souls.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/bitstream/handle/2142/7649/librarytrendsv38i1h\\_opt.pdf?sequence=1](https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/bitstream/handle/2142/7649/librarytrendsv38i1h_opt.pdf?sequence=1)

friend moves on. George Carlin said, "Just when I discovered the meaning of life, they changed it."<sup>7</sup>

But, as Charles Darwin observed, it is not the strongest species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change.<sup>8</sup> The tenacity of Judaism seems to have borne that out. Judaism has survived the millennia because it has learned to adapt to changing circumstances. Yes, change is hard, but really, change what Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are all about. In fact, the Hebrew word for change - Shinui is from the same root as Shanah- the Hebrew word for year.

Rosh Hashanah: the beginning of change. Change is not a simple thing. Usually a change is initiated by something external like say, getting a new prayerbook. Often the change is beyond our control. What matters more than the external change, according to the experts, is how we adapt to the change. Adapting is the internal transition that enables us to accept and embrace the change.<sup>9</sup>

I have always found that knowing more about a change makes the transition easier. So I want to take the next few minutes to share a little bit about our new prayer book Mishkan HaNefesh: what some of the innovations are, and the thinking behind them.

The effort began in back in 2008. The editors' first step was to articulate their goals. They envisioned "a twenty-first century machzor that provides meaningful liturgy to those who pray regularly, and welcomes those who are new," that "inspires a multifaceted experience...from feelings of awe to moments of solace, from the solitude of contemplation to the solidarity of song and worship," that "embraces the rich liturgical voices of the Jewish past and the aspirations of our people today. A [prayer book] whose words, tone, and theological range are uplifting, inviting, and challenging, and which achieves an integration of tradition and innovation, prayer and music, speech and silence, the struggle with God and the struggle with being human."<sup>10</sup>

Sure thing.

How'd they do? Each one of us will determine in our own hearts the extent to which these goals are met, and it will probably take many years till we know. Steve Martin handed in a script

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<sup>7</sup> Also attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr

<sup>8</sup> While the principle is Darwin's, the quote appears to have originated with a Darwin Scholar named Leon C. Megginson. <http://quoteinvestigator.com/2014/05/04/adapt/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://teressagriffin.com/2014/08/26/difference-between-change-and-transition/>

<sup>10</sup> Rabbi Sheldon Marder, in Divrei Mishkan HaNefesh page 58-59

to the studio, and when he got it back he said, “they didn’t change one word. The word they didn't change was on page 87.”<sup>11</sup>

Don't worry. The editors of Mishkan haNefesh haven't gone that far; our precious liturgy is still in tact, but let's take a look at some of the things that did change. Some of the innovations in the book are obvious, but worth mentioning:

There are now two volumes, instead of one, so that more material could be included without making the book too physically cumbersome. The gold and silver covers are evocative of the richness and majesty of the texts within. Moving inside the book, one might notice right away that there are pictures! The editors “made a bold choice to include abstract art in the new machzor.”<sup>12</sup> You can find one opposite the title page, and on the page before each service.

These visual prayers are likened to the white spaces between the words in Torah, which according to the mystics contain hidden levels of meaning. The art in Mishkan HaNefesh “is an invitation to experience the High Holy Days using a different kind of language, a different kind of metaphor, perhaps even a different part of our soul.”<sup>13</sup>

There are 11 original woodblock prints by internationally recognized artist Joel Shapiro, who created them after many months studying the themes of the High Holy Days, and drafts of Mishkan HaNefesh. We are invited to experience them rather than try to understand the images. Rabbi Hara Person, Executive Editor of the machzor writes: “Art doesn’t have to be understood to be felt. Let yourself experience the art in Mishkan HaNefesh. Move beyond the discomfort of not knowing what to do with it and just look at it.”<sup>14</sup>

Next, flipping through the pages, one can see that there are pages tinted blue and others tinted grey. The blue pages, marked “for study and reflection,” are intended to let you pause and delve deeper into something that catches your eye or heart, even while the rest of the congregation moves on. The grey pages offer interpretative or poetic translations, and go a step further, with what the editors call “counter-texts,” boldly alternative theologies and perspectives. These counter-texts are indicative of a subtler change in perspective regarding traditional texts we might find problematic or troubling. Historically, the Reform movement has tended to filter these out. For example, the Union Prayer Book, Gates of Prayer, and Gates of Repentance all left out the second paragraph of the Shema which deals with divine reward and

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<sup>11</sup> [https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Steve\\_Martin](https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Steve_Martin)

<sup>12</sup> Rabbi Hara E. Person, *How Do We Read This? The artwork in Mishkan HaNefesh*, Divrei Mishkan HaNefesh

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

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punishment. According to Rabbi Janet Marder, "Mishkan HaNefesh aims [instead, for] a deep encounter with difficult concepts, and a more complex...understanding of Judaism's great ideas."<sup>15</sup> In Mishkan HaNefesh, reflections on the challenging second paragraph of the Shema Fill 6 grey pages.

Next, those of you who attend Torah study Have heard me say "Translation translation translation...." It is so important to the way we understand our Hebrew texts. In Mishkan HaNefesh the English translations of the Hebrew prayers are what the editors call "faithful translations" rather than literal translations. "A faithful translation presents idea for idea, feeling for feeling, and value for value - not word for word..."<sup>16</sup>

In translating, the editors' main goal was to reveal a prayer's essential ideas, and to capture the pervasive spiritual and poetic rhythm of the prayers.<sup>17</sup> One of the more subtle innovations in Mishkan HaNefesh is what the editors call "Integrated Theology." Those of you who worshiped with Gates of Prayer - the Reform prayerbook of the '70s - may remember that it contains 10 different service choices, each with a different theological perspective.

Service 1 is "traditional" (in air quotes): God is presented as Sovereign of the Universe. In Service 4, we worship the God of Justice. Service 6 deletes God entirely from the English, praising instead the "power that makes for life, the "power that makes for light," or love, freedom, holiness and so on". Service 9 is pediatric theology - God is maker of rainbows and butterflies. Recognizing that God cannot ever be reduced to a single attribute, the editors of our Machzor sought to *integrate* these diverse theological perspectives and images *throughout* the book, with the hope that by encountering different approaches to the sacred, we would emerge with a fuller and more holistic understanding of the Divine.<sup>18</sup>

In the 2009 Vision Statement for Mishkan HaNefesh, the editors wrote: "Most important to our work are the people for whom this book is intended: the members of a dynamic, ever-changing and diverse Reform Movement who gather in community to experience awe and forgiveness and hope."<sup>19</sup> We, here, now, are that dynamic and diverse community. We've had Mishkan HaNefesh in our hands for about an hour now, and I imagine there are as many different reactions to it as there are hands holding the books. I hope that it has been a good experience

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<sup>15</sup> Rabbi Janet Marder, *Praying in Captivity: Liturgical Innovation in Mishkan HaNefesh*, in Divrei Mishkan HaNefesh, p. 69

<sup>16</sup> Sheldon Marder, *Translating Faith*, in Divrei Mishkan HaNefesh p. 87

<sup>17</sup> Sheldon Marder, *Translating Faith*, in Divrei Mishkan HaNefesh p.86

<sup>18</sup> Rabbi Elaine Zecher, "Integrated Thology" in Divrei Mishkan HaNefesh p. 114

<sup>19</sup> Rabbi Sheldon Marder, *A Vision Statement for a New Reform Machzor, 2009*. In Divrei Mishkan HaNefesh page 58

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for you so far, and that however you may be feeling about it right now, that you will keep an open mind and open heart for the remainder of these holy days.

Rabbi Chaim Stern, one of the great liturgists of Reform Judaism, said, "In the liturgy of the synagogue the Jewish people has written its spiritual autobiography. For a score of centuries, each generation has, in turn, added its own distinctive chapter to this book...Each [seeking] in its own way to express our people's soul..."<sup>20</sup>

We hold in our hands the latest chapter: Mishkan HaNefesh - The Soul's Sanctuary. But the chapter isn't finished; we've just begun writing it. Mishkan HaNefesh is only the "chapter headings." It is *our* task now to offer our own minds, hearts and souls to it, to fill in the white spaces of its pages and make it our own so that each of us will, indeed, experience awe, forgiveness, and hope. And so that a new generation of Jews will come to love this book, like a favorite sweater, a familiar walking path or an old friend, until it is time yet again for it to be disassembled and a new chapter written.

Ken Yehi Ratzon; May it be God's will.

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<sup>20</sup> Stern, Chaim, *Introduction*, Gates of Prayer: The New Union Prayer Book, NY: CCAR, 1975