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### Prayer book ignites debate

#### New edition blurs distinction between Jews, critics charge

By Manya A. Brachear

Tribune religion reporter

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The pages of the Reform Jewish prayer book offer the sacred words that mark life's milestones, bless eternal bonds and fill the devastating silence when loved ones die. So Rabbi Peter Knobel understands why many Reform Jews are reluctant to retire the old volume for a new one.

But the Evanston rabbi, head of the rabbinical group that publishes the movement's liturgy, says the time has come for congregations to embrace a newly revised edition of the beloved book. As people change, scholars say, so do the books that reflect their lives and culture.

The new prayer book, expected to be adopted by at least 300 of 900 congregations across the nation in the next several months, symbolizes the myriad definitions of what it means to be part of the nation's largest and most liberal Jewish movement in the 21st Century. It also highlights disagreements about the direction of Reform Judaism, founded in the 19th Century as a more rational approach to the faith.

Spiritual and traditional texts rejected in the early days of the Reform movement are revived in this new edition. One prayer reclaims the idea of resurrection, still spurned by some Reform Jews even as a metaphor. It also includes blessings for common Orthodox rituals, such binding oneself with tefillin, and uses far more Hebrew than previous editions.

Scholars say the editorial decisions reflect the evolution of Jewish culture, theological ideas and history. But some rabbis and congregants who champion classical Reform Judaism believe the book endangers the identity of the movement and blurs the distinction between Reform and Conservative Jews.

"I'm really sorry it's happening this way," said Rabbi Michael Sternfield of Chicago Sinai Congregation. "I give [the editors] an A for effort. They know their stuff. But I think their mind-set is to make the Reform movement as much like Conservative Judaism as we can."

Knobel said the book responds to a demand for choices from congregations, many of which have started producing their own prayer books.

"[That's] symbolic for us that people were becoming dissatisfied with what we were providing," he said. "We really feel people are hungry for something."

To understand the significance of a new prayer book, it is important to know the crucial role it plays in the spiritual lives of Reform Jews. For many, the bound volume speaks to them more than the Bible. Or at least more often.

"To some people, the most intimate contact they will have with the Jewish text is with the prayer book," said Rabbi David Sandmel of KAM Isaiah Israel. "Whether it's once a year on the anniversary of a loved one's death or weekly, they're going to be learning the prayer book."

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The Reform movement originated in 19th Century Germany as a radical and rational departure from traditional Judaism. Reform Jews bucked kosher dietary laws, replaced the term "synagogue" with "temple," rejected Zionism and translated Hebrew prayers into the vernacular. They also rejected the notion of the Jews as God's "chosen people." The Union Prayer Book, published in 1895, captured those sentiments and focused on how the movement could be a light to the world.

The fall of the Iron Curtain and the birth of Israel altered some of those positions. The second siddur, or prayer book, titled "Gates of Prayer" and released shortly after Israel's Six-Day War, echoed a rise in Jewish pride and consciousness. It included services to celebrate Israeli Independence day and memorialize Jews who lost their lives in the Holocaust.

The new edition, the third, is called "Mishkan T'filah" and reflects the movement's emerging spiritual side. It also offers an opportunity for worshipers to grapple with some of the concepts previously cast away.

One optional prayer implies once again that Jews are God's "chosen people." Another includes a reference to resurrection as a metaphor for God's life-giving power. In addition, the book reads from back to front like a traditional Hebrew text and unlike previous books proclaims its title in Hebrew, meaning "sanctuary for prayer."

Fans of the book say its beauty lies in the multitude of options. Four versions of each prayer are laid out on a two-page spread intended as one extra-wide page. On the right are the prayer in Hebrew, its pronunciation and a more literal English translation. On the left is a more poetic translation of the prayer, followed by a metaphorical or meditative passage reflecting on the prayer, or commentary about the prayer's origins. It is the first Reform prayer book to include commentary.

"The way sacred texts remain important, meaningful and relevant is through an ongoing process of commentary," Knobel said. "We're constantly looking at the sacred texts we have and looking for a meaning in them that speaks to us in our day and age in our own personal and communal teachings."

Unlike previous prayer books that have dictated when congregants sit, stand and read aloud, the new book leaves it up to the worship leader to give stage directions at their discretion. Knobel said it's also up to leaders to build in larger blocks of silence so congregants have time to absorb and reflect on supplemental texts throughout the service.

"Each worshiper, as they're going through the service, will find things that will move them and move them deeply," said Knobel, president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis.

Rabbi Karyn Kedar of B'nai Jehoshua Beth Elohim in Glenview commends the new prayer book for stretching the mind "to think in new ways and new metaphors for the divine," as she believes every prayer book should. She sees it as a presentation of Jewish liturgy through a 21st Century lens, comparing the layout to a Web page.

But some critics consider the book a giant step in the wrong direction. They say its inclusion of more traditional prayers kowtows to conservative pressure.

"I do really feel this prayer book is a mistake," said Sternfield, whose congregation wrote its own prayer book seven years ago. He said "Mishkan T'filah" reflects a shift toward the Conservative Jewish movement.

"Reform Judaism has an authenticity unto itself. The more we try to be like other movements, the less authentic we are to our own core values," Sternfield said. "I'm very much in hopes that our pendulum will swing back to a different position from where it is today. It may take the disenchantment over this book for the movement to come to its senses a little bit."

Rabbi Ellen Dreyfus of B'Nai Yehuda Beth Sholom in Homewood praises the traditional twist. She and others point out that the book stays faithful to the Reform principles that support interfaith marriages, equality of women, same-sex unions and "Jews by choice." And it includes gender-sensitive language that she's been substituting in services for years. Her congregation is one of 500 that plan to review the book before deciding whether to adopt it.

"It is proudly and unabashedly Jewish," she said. "It's not Jews trying to be American. It's Americans proudly being Jewish. I think that's an indication of where we are in history."

Knobel said the intention of the prayer book indeed was to codify the values and principles of the movement, not alter them.

"The language of the prayer book is the language of Jewish values," Knobel said. "It becomes the vocabulary of your thinking, your speech and your actions. In some sense you absorb the message of the prayer book and you absorb it into your life."

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[mbrachear@tribune.com](mailto:mbrachear@tribune.com)

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