
Rav Tzair, A Misguided Siddur

IT IS fortunate for Professor Mordecai M. Kaplan that a ban was put on his new prayer-book. This has given him and his defenders an opportunity to flay the fanaticism of his opponents. It has also shifted the discussion from a consideration of the merits or demerits of the Siddur itself.

It is difficult to contribute anything to this controversy without being accused of taking sides. Prof. Kaplan attaches far-reaching importance to the controversy and asserts that it shows that we are not prepared for self-government. I should like to reassure him on this score and to remind him that we had many religious struggles in ancient Palestine which did not impair our power to govern ourselves, just as there have been constant religious conflicts practically in every self-governing state throughout history.

What concerns us most is that Prof. Kaplan views the whole matter as a question of "class struggle" rather than of religious differences. He explains away the opposition of various Yiddish writers by stating that the Yiddish press is in the control of the Orthodox Rabbinate. He quotes Maimonides to show that we are addicted to following authority blindly. This, however, is far from the truth.

There is no doubt that the instrument of the ban as such was unjustified but one cannot question the religious motives of the Rabbis who sponsored it. The main issue at hand is the Siddur itself and its contents. Though strongly opposed

to the ban, I feel moved to express my views on the Siddur itself. I do so not out of any partisan bias for I am not a member of any of the Rabbinical groups.

I consider it scandalous that a group of younger men in the Rabbinate who, except for Dr. Kaplan are not known for their contribution to Jewish learning, should have dared to make such radical changes in our prayer-book. The Siddur is more than a religious volume; it has deep national roots and to change it is to harm the character of our whole people. If only additional prayers were inserted it would be another matter but here we have a number of fundamental changes.

To mutilate such beautiful and time-honored passages as *Kriath Shema* is both illogical and irreverent. The removal of the prayers referring to immortality is a complete departure from our religious practice. Maimonides who interpreted this belief in a spiritual sense found no fault with these prayers. Yet, the compilers failed to remove consistently all traces of the belief and we find it retained in various places, and even added elsewhere.

Generally speaking, the entire Siddur gives one the impression of a job hastily gotten together. The Mussaf, for example, gives a distorted view of sacrifice. The style of the prayers is difficult even for those well-versed in Hebrew. Some smack of Christian influence and others are borrowed from non-Jewish sources. Among the glaring contradictions are the retention of

references to miracles and the omission of references to Zion at many points.

The introduction is a dogmatic statement presenting a misconstruction of the Jewish God idea, the chosen people concept, and the belief in national redemption. This viewpoint completely contradicts the religious faith of our people. Instead of the 13 principles of faith, the Siddur present 13 Wants, implying that Judaism has no fixed principles. Upon analysis we find these inadequate and out of place in a book of prayer. Some of the Wants are very general in nature, dealing with such points as learning how best to make use of our leisure. Such a Want could just as well serve as a motto for a business establishment. Taken as a whole, they show little depth of thought and express no attachment to the hallowed principles of Jewish belief, such as the Sabbath, the Festivals, and the study of the Torah.

One of the ideas which has suffered at the hands of the compilers is the chosen people concept. Claiming that it no longer applies in our time, they have removed it from our prayers, although inconsistently this time as well. It must be remembered that this concept runs through our Bible and that it is based not merely on the strength of the recognition of one God but also on the Covenant which God made with his people. It is thus an integral part of our belief in one God and cannot be dissociated from it.

The chosen people concept was retained even by the early exponents of Reform, though in modified form. What reason can we provide for our

existence in the *galut* if we deprive ourselves of any moral purpose or aim? If there really is nothing that separates us from the non-Jews why does the new Siddur substitute the words *asher kervanu la-avodato* for *babar banu*? There is really no difference in the context. We have a right to retain the chosen people idea if only for having introduced monotheism. There is certainly nothing in this idea that smacks of racial superiority.

The same sense of inferiority that led the compilers to tamper with the chosen people idea probably led them to omit the *av ha-rahamim*, the prayer for the martyrs in Israel which contains references to the hope for revenge. They have failed to understand that in the Bible revenge or *nekamah* is equated with *din* or justice. This is the same type of thinking which led to the omission of the *shfokh hamatkha* in the Haggadah.

Another cardinal belief which has no place in the new Siddur is the principle of national redemption. There is not to be found here any belief in a Messiah or redemption from the *galut* but rather a belief in individual, personal redemption corresponding to the Christian concept of salvation. We fail to see why as national Jews the editors could not subscribe at least to a belief in a national redemption of the Jewish people. For this even the most modern Jew could pray without hesitation. This is especially surprising since the editors regard themselves as Zionists.

The new Siddur can only be considered an attempt full of inconsistencies and errors, misguided and misleading.