

Rabbi Mark Cohn
Rosh HaShanah Evening 5777/2016
“Machzor Review and now HHD sermon: How things (re)Cycle”

It is really quite amazing how things cycle. And of course, as you know my deep love for Hebrew, it is really quite amazing that the Hebrew word for this prayerbook of ours, used exclusively for the High Holy Days, and the word for recycling share the same root.

Machzor. (hold up the prayerbook)
Michzur. (hold up diagram)



All that changed were the vowels. The root is the same.

Chazar. To return.

What's old is new again.

This prayerbook, in which our congregation and I had a hand, is all about recycling. It recycles and returns to that which is old and making it new, making it ours. This machzor is born out of 21st century Reform Judaism. Unlike the last 100 years of Reform Prayerbooks that more often sought to cut out, remove, excise, revise and hand-pick so as to not engage in questionable texts, practices, or theologies, these new machzorim embrace complexities and uncertainties and antiquities in order to increase understanding alongside the chance to struggle, grow, imagine, create, and connect. My friend and colleague, Rabbi Leon Morris, penned a fabulous essay describing some of the philosophy behind creating and editing Mishkan HaNefesh. He wrote about the concept called “Ressourcement,” which has to do with recycling and returning to old sources, “...mining the classic words of our sources to see how they might be used or transformed for our own context.”

We must always remember that no one element of Judaism belongs exclusively to one group of Jews or type of Judaism. The Western Wall doesn't belong to the Orthodox any more than fighting for Social Justice belongs to the Reform. Tefillin may be a common practice in Conservative minyanim but we have tefillin in one of our sanctuary windows and some of us even put them on as part of our daily practice. Being shomer shabbes (halachically observant of Shabbat) may sound like something for the frum (religious) but being zocher shabbes (mindful of Shabbat) is just as important and ought to be a part of every Jew's practice. We may run somewhere between being hyper observant and scarcely observant, overly serious and less serious, intensely committed and hardly committed. But labels of Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, Renewal, Orthodox, Neo-Hasidic ... hardly tell us as much today as some of them once did.

I once saw a t-shirt for sale that said: I'm an Ashkefardic Reconstructodox Jew. I'm still sorry I didn't get it.

And while this prayerbook is designed mainly for a Reform Jewish community and was edited by Reform rabbis and published by the Reform movement – the contents are drawn from Jewish and non-Jewish sources – universally spiritual, engaging, traditional, modern, and some simply timeless.

And you helped to make this possible.

You may or may not recall that in October of 2008, I was invited to join a two-day think tank in NYC held by the Central Conference of American Rabbis (the Reform movement's rabbinical union) to begin dreaming of what a new Reform machzor would look like and include. But before I could go to the meeting I needed to create a mini-think tank in my synagogue (as did the roughly thirty colleagues from across the country who we are a part of that opening group). And I polled many of you – and sent emails and culled your responses. I carried them up to NYC and your words meshed beautifully and consistently with those of Reform Jews from across North America.

You said you wanted traditional passages but with corresponding English selections that could illuminate or elaborate on difficult or foreign concepts.

You said: “Don't change anything too much – for those of us who had to go through losing the old Union Prayer Book to Gates of Prayer/Repentance – once in a lifetime should be enough!”

You asked that we not eliminate concepts or prayers just because we are uncomfortable with them. And that we carefully consider our history and how it is presented.

I loved one respondent who said to our group of rabbis and cantors: “Make a machzor that is both modern and timeless. Current but not trendy. A book in which nearly every Jew will feel at home (good luck).”

You wanted inclusive language; the incorporation of Kabbalistic themes and prayers; meditations, poems and prayers written from a feminine perspective; and a prayerbook that would allow for a more participatory, engaging experience. You wanted language that respected the ancient Hebrew but reflected the 21st century.

And you wanted a new Yom Kippur Yizkor service that honors our beloved and comforts our hearts when we remember those who came before us. And a request was even filed for a better presentation or a reconstituted or redrafted or reconsidered section of the ten martyrs on Yom Kippur Afternoon.

Our commenters here wanted transliteration. You wanted sidebar or bottom of the page commentary like we find with the Plaut Chumash.

Well, it would seem that the editorial staff heard every one of your comments because a) others from elsewhere in North America asked for the same and/or b) they were fabulous ideas. After I read these suggestions in 2008, starting in 2009 I begin instituting some of them, drafting a new Yizkor service and a shofar service, including new readings and teaching outside Gates of Repentance regularly. If you take even this much of the service we have had until now to realize – this machzor hit all of our dreams and requests – and more – even the part about the 10 martyrs!

The Jewish prayerbook is a tool. It is a physical device that we, as Jews, have created over the centuries to find the words to access prayer and God – as well as reflect our theology, our philosophy, our humanity, our morals, our aspirations. While the words are critical, the intentions of our hearts are equally important. The words are the vehicle upon which we allow our hearts' and souls' intentions to ride into a celestial realm, in which we reside simultaneously with this very earthly world. This machzor you hold, the prayerbook we use all year, they are the means by which we connect with ages past, present and future. To design a new machzor is a pretty momentous and monumental task and it includes a solid quotient of chutzpadik. To make something new is both impossible and entirely necessary sometimes. This new machzor is fashioned with you, the worshipper, and us, as a community, in mind at every turn.

One of my Jewish spirituality teachers many years ago taught me that we are together.alone. For the first time. again. How is it possible to be together alone? Because we are each very much alone. We are on our own even in this massive room with people we know and people we don't know. We are alone with our thoughts, our stories, our ambitions, our frustrations, our fears and our prayers. But we are together with shared intimacies and celebrations, sorrows and delights, hopes and past experiences. We are alone in our search and we are together in our seeking. This whole experience is new and yet we have been here before. I know – complete conundrums and paradoxes but clear and understandable if we allow them to be.

The new machzor is completely different from Gates of Repentance and you are allowed to miss that machzor that held us through nearly forty years of prayer, searching, wandering, crying, imagining, hoping. 40 years of wandering in the desert and searching for God and the Promised Land – allowing us to struggle and grow from her pages. I am not suggesting that Mishkan HaNefesh is the Promised Land. Quite the contrary – this new machzor is simply another map – another roadmap. It is the old AAA roadmap converted into Waze. I suspect this prayerbook will last another forty years. They say prayerbooks do have a lifespan. Many of these readings are already timeless – many of them are 500, 1000, 1500, 2000 years old. And some will not make it into the next machzor. Some of the readings do not belong to Jewish tradition but have been included

for their ability to lift our souls. Other readings are simply reflective of this era and will have lived rich lives, and that is all that matters.

The point of the new machzor is to provide us with opportunities for connection and soul expansion: within and without, together and alone, for the first time, again. My gratitude for having been a part of this process with you all and my colleagues is only heightened by the generosity of Mike and Wendy Brenner, The Marcia & Lou Gottlieb Family (Justin and Barbara Gottlieb, Dana and Jeff Dittesheim, Richard and Jennifer Gottlieb), and Barry Klaus and Jacob Klaus.

When I came back from my trip to NYC in December of 2008, I wrote a sermon to update everyone on how things went. Here is what I said: “While I went to NYC to try and contribute something of meaning to a deeply challenging process, what happened to me was completely unexpected: the challenging process contributed something to me! As a ‘good Jew’, I feel guilty for having walked away with something for myself, when I genuinely went to contribute something of worth. And I hope, somewhere in those discussions, I did. I most certainly tried to present what our congregants here wrote so lovingly and what I sense are the biggest issues facing a new machzor.”

“I have walked away from these meetings and the answers written by our local think tank with a renewed sense of appreciation for my colleagues and congregants, for this daunting and intense road ahead of whatever committee ultimately designs the new machzor (we were just an initial dreaming committee), and a sense of appreciation that we – myself as a rabbi and we as a congregation – were invited to participate. I really don’t know how we were chosen but it was very moving to have been asked. Reading what our local think tank wrote was inspiring and a reminder that we – as rabbis, service leaders, participants – do not engage in the process of prayer in a vacuum but very much in a living, breathing congregation of searchers.”

“Some think this process could be done in a few years. Others expect that the Messiah may deliver the finished product.”

And here was my favorite section of what I wrote, which has added poignancy given my father’s death this past year:

“On a personal note: When my father was in the schmata/garment business for nearly 30 years, he traveled to NYC regularly. I used to love when he came home with gifts from NY: something from Macy’s, something if I was really lucky from FAO Schwartz, and as I got older and could appreciate it: something from Zabar’s. I used to imagine my father walking the streets of Manhattan, busy at work, buying the raw materials of clothing. That was his job as head of purchasing for a sportswear manufacturer in San Francisco. He used to do the same thing right here in North Carolina, when he visited the mills that dotted the landscape: from Burlington to Statesville, and all along the I-85 corridor. And

for a while, in the 1970s and 1980s, he served on the regional and national boards of the Reform Jewish movement as a lay leader. It's amazing how things cycle, sometimes, even within a family. I have wound up sewing something different in the same places where he traveled and worked, which is personally very special. And while I came back with gifts as well – rugelach included – I am excited at the prospect of sharing these lessons of a new machzor with our congregation as a whole.”

“And so my trip this week was in many ways a very real dream: a dreaming opportunity to help a process along its way toward a new machzor maybe, a personal connection with my friends and colleagues – and even my father. It was a step for our congregation to walk with the very movement of which we have been a member for over 75 years, and with which we agree and disagree, quarrel and question and ultimately embrace: as family. And we have a voice there: sometimes with greater or lesser influence – after all, it is family.”

And that was December 2008.

And now it is October 2016. And here we are.

My prayer in 2008, with which I closed my sermon, is the absolute same today. I wouldn't change a word. Some things are really good to return to, to recycle, and to renew. Here is what I said then: “It is my sincere prayer that this process of designing a new machzor be one of health and strength for all who are involved. May it lead to an engaged, serious, and committed group of Jews and their loved ones who want to take the Days of Awe and create awe-filled moments to help them in their journey of repentance, renewal, and reawakening for their souls.”

The task, my friends, is ours. May we do so in good health and in peace always.