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Time for a new Israeli prayer book

Lisa J. Hack

The Israeli Progressive Movement is set to publish a brand-new prayer book. Titled *T'filat HaAdam*. The name is based on Chana Senesh's poem, *A Walk to Caesarea (Eli Eli)* and translates as *The Prayer of the human* (or *Adam's Prayer*), a fitting title for the new prayer book.

We spoke with Rabbi Prof. Dalia Marx, a professor of Liturgy and Midrash at Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem, who was the co-editor of *T'filat HaAdam* with Rabbi Dr. Alona Lisitsa. We are happy to share what we've learnt.



Lisa Hack

Time for a New Prayer Book

When does one know it's a time for a new Prayer Book? In earlier days, the Progressive movement defined itself through prayer books. Back then, several new prayer books had been published within each generation. After all, research shows that when there is a new platform for a movement, a new arrangement is born, too, and that arrangement must meet the demands of the time.

When we look at it like this, it's incredible to realise that *Siddur HaAvoda Shebalev (The Worship of the Heart)*, which *T'filat HaAdam* replaces, has completed 40 years of service; an entire generation's

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worth. *HaAvoda Shebalev* is a much-loved prayer book, and it's been an important building block within the Israeli Progressive movement.

Rabbi Marx vividly recalls that when she was younger and attending youth activities, parts of the *HaAvoda Shebalev* were introduced, before the book was published. She fondly remembers the creativity involved in the publication process, and the opportunity to highlight a piece of the liturgy in context quickly captured her imagination.

The IMPJ was formally established in 1971, the first Israeli Progressive rabbi was ordained in 1980 and the final version of *HaAvoda Shebalev* was published in 1982. This was a very important phase in the history of the movement. However, much has changed since these early days. In a long process of consultation, the IMPJ realised the need to not only publish a revised siddur but to create a new comprehensive liturgical compendium that reflects the spiritual needs of the community.

The Beginning of the Process

The initiative to compile a new siddur was launched seven years ago when both the Israeli Council of Progressive Rabbis and the Israeli Movement for Progressive Judaism appointed Rabbi Marx, who was later joined by her friend and colleague, Rabbi Dr. Alona Lisitsa to head up the project.

During the foundation phase, decisions had to be made as to whether they continued with the branding of the current prayer books or come up with something different. With love and respect to the previous prayer book, the decision was made to create a new format, a new brand and a new language of design.

The project was made possible by the generosity of the Chinn Foundation, for whom the prayer book is a living memorial to Danny Chinn's father, Geoffrey z"l.

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Rabbi Dalia Marx ... one of the most radical prayer books in terms of inclusivity

Working Towards New Beginnings

So, how did the movement devise guidelines for the editorial task ahead of them?

Rabbi Marx says there were two different and simultaneous orientations. The first was to return to more traditional texts. For a multitude of reasons, a variety of traditional prayers were discontinued in the earlier Progressive prayer books, some of which this generation finds meaningful. This prayer book is more traditional, but also more creative.

Kiddush Levanah, says Rabbi Marx, is a perfect example. The Sanctification of the Moon is an ancient ritual, performed outdoors at night. Classic Reform Jews considered the ritual irrational, even pagan. Today, more and more Progressive Jews feel a need for this section, which connects the individual and the community, the cosmic and the national, the transcendent and the immanent.

The second orientation, explains Rabbi Marx, is that this is one of

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Left - Siddur Tfilat HaAdam, Jerusalem, 2020. Right - Siddur Bayit Chadash congregation, Hamburg, 1819.

the most radical prayer books in terms of inclusivity and equality.

Over the decades, there's been tremendous progress in our awareness of the values of equality and inclusivity, and it's reflected in the language of our prayers. Rabbi Marx says that they felt it their duty to include prayers for all groups of people, all genders, and all needs.

While there was already acknowledgment of the Four Mothers in the later editions of *HaAvoda Shebalev* from the 90's, the editorial team felt it was time to widen and deepen the repertoire of religious language offered to better and inclusively express the feminine aspects of Judaism.

The principles of the faith teach us that the Eternal has no gender, "no shape, nor is he a body," according to Maimonides. Yet, Hebrew is very much a gender-oriented language, and we know that Judaism developed within a predominantly patriarchal society. When it comes to editing the new prayer book, the task was to sensitively merge the different voices into a cohesive prayer book.

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It was along these lines that the editors found themselves in an interesting position between generations. One the one hand, there's the new generation of women Rabbis who wish to see God addressed in both feminine and masculine terms. On the other, older generations are used to a certain way of doing things, many of them did not want to include gender related issues in the siddur.

This is just one example, says Rabbi Marx, but there were myriad suggestions that were presented to the communities to choose. She says it was important for the editorial team to be versatile and able to accommodate the communities who will use the book.

Rabbi Marx goes on to explain that sometimes there's a theological reason to include a prayer, and sometimes there's simply a desire to bring in more voices. A non-Orthodox prayer book, for example, developed within the Ashkenazi tradition in central Europe, later moving to the British Empire and North America, yet keeping its Ashkenazi orientation. However, currently there are many within the Israeli Reform movement who have Sephardic roots and orientation. Thus, it is part of a wider opening toward this liturgy within the Israeli society.

IMPJ saw it as a duty toward "Klal Yisrael," the shared heritage, to include more of these traditions. One of their goals was to ensure the representation of many voices of Jews who left testimonies to their faith.

As a result, *T'filat HaAdam* features prayers chosen carefully from the different layers of Jewish history: The literature of the Second Temple, the Cairo Geniza and medieval siddurim along with contemporary Israeli poems and reasons, which Rabbi Marx dubs "pre-Canonize."

She explains that there is a graphic distinction between the two genres within the new siddur. The versions sanctified in tradition are printed in bold black font, while the additional versions are printed in blue font.

When it came to deciding what to include in the new prayer book,

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Rabbi Marx is widely published ... a selection of her articles

Rabbi Marx outlines three criteria. Firstly, high-level literature. Secondly a genuine representation of religious or theological notion, in other words, those who talk from within the religious experience as opposed to writing about it. Finally, the selected piece of writing should be meaningful for the Israeli culture and public life. She also mentions that, at times, adjustments were made according to one criterion, particularly if a piece had more gravitas in other pieces.

Besides *Kiddush Levana*, Rabbi Marx mentions other examples of prayers that demanded more attention than others.

One is the question of the state of Israel and its place in the liturgy. *HaAvoda Shebalev* laid out its Zionist identity in a very explicit manner (and much more overtly than traditional siddurim), but during the editing process of the new Siddur, a need was identified to evaluate to what extent these expressions of prayer still represent us.

Another is the daily psalm, *Shir Shel Yom*, which is based on tradition in the Mishna, Tamid 7:4, which teaches that every day a special psalm was sung by the choir of Levites in the Jerusalem Temple. While

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the traditional Reform prayer book refrains from mentioning the Temple, the IMPJ team decided to re-introduce it, minus the opening statement, “the song which the Levites used to sing in the Temple,” highlighting the need to express different voices.

Everybody Has a Voice

Rabbi Marx reckons that creating the prayer book was a long process. It's a celebration of activities around liturgy and it took several years. Unlike the prayer book that was created for the Youth movement some 20 years ago, which took a matter of weeks, the goal of the new siddur was to include as many voices as possible and to benefit from the crowd's wisdom.

The editorial team began by meeting at the congregations and putting together an advisory committee. Study days were set up and matters were introduced and discussed in two Biennial conferences. Also, a digital feedback system was installed. Today, during the corona pandemic, we have a weekly program “Dabru T'fila”, when Rabbis and lay readers pray from the prayer book and then have a conversation with the editors.

Further, valuable time was allocated during meetings of MARAM, the Israeli Progressive Rabbinic Council for feedback and discussion.

Some communities were quick to adopt the draft as their regular form of prayer, including the Israeli rabbinic programme and Noar Telem, from which valuable feedback was received.

Rabbi Marx says that they were aware of the different needs of different congregations. There are those communities who come from English-speaking traditions, German-speaking backgrounds, an Israeli secular perspective, and a Mizrahi perspective, to name a few. Each group should be comfortable using the new prayer book.

It is their hope, says Rabbi Marx, that as *T'filat HaAdam* is introduced as the central Israeli Reform prayer book, that the extensive fieldwork will speak for itself, and that the communities are united in the process.

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Rabbi Dalia Marx .at her inauguration as Professor of Liturgy and Midrash at HUC-JIR/Jerusalem on July 13, 2019.

Bridging the Gap Between Israeli and Diaspora

While the focus was on Israeli communities when editing the siddur, Rabbi Marx hopes that the prayer book will bridge the gap between Israel and the diaspora. Rabbi Marx mentions that she doesn't see the relationship as one side instructing the other, but rather a collaboration. She hopes that *T'filat HaAdam* will serve as a resource from those wanting to learn more about Israeli literature and culture.

With this in mind, the siddur can serve a group of learners, Youth leaders preparing *Ma'amad*, (short and creative prayer sessions, usually lead by peers), Rabbis looking for sermon materials, Hebrew classes and conversion classes equally.

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The Link Between T'filat HaAdam and BaZman

Rabbi Marx has also published a book titled *BaZman*, which means “within/about the time/on time.” The book reviews the traditions of the Jewish Year Cycle and was well-received for its friendly and inclusive manner. While it's not yet been published in English, We've asked Rabbi Marx if there is a connection between *BaZman* and *T'filat HaAdam*?

She says that she worked on the books concurrently, so they did take form together. While she reviewed as many traditions as she could in *BaZman* to offer as many possibilities to readers, the process was the opposite for the prayer book, where she had to take from endless options only that which was appropriate to create a cohesive and inclusive version – decisions that will influence how the movement prays. *BaZman* is not a Reform book, but a collection of various traditions from all the communities and diasporas. *T'filat HaAdam* prayer book includes various traditions but is mainly designed to meet the needs of the Progressive community. Naturally, we hope that other crowds will find it relevant, too.

While Rabbi Marx took very different approaches to the books, they do complement each other in that *BaZman* reviews the Jewish Year Cycle month by month, while *T'filat HaAdam* offers the ongoing pace of daily and weekly prayer for the Progressive movement.

About Rabbi Dalia Marx, Ph.D.

Rabbi Marx serves as the Rabbi Aaron D. Panken Professor of Liturgy and Midrash at HUC-JIR and teaches at several institutions both in Israel and Europe. A tenth-generation Israeli, Marx earned her doctorate at the Hebrew University. She was ordained at HUC-JIR in Jerusalem and Cincinnati in 2002. She lives in Jerusalem with her husband and three children.