

KOL NIDRAY 5774

It was at a Friday night service. I was a college student and went with my family to our temple in suburban Detroit. As it came time to recite the *kaddish*, the congregation rose and I began reading along, “*yitgadal v’yitkadash* . . . “when my Grandma Bessie elbowed me in the ribs and said “you don’t do that.”

I understood the reference. In more traditional congregations, only the mourners recite the words of the *kaddish*. Certainly, someone whose parents are living would not do so. A non-mourner saying *kaddish* is seen by some as a kind of *kenna hora*, an invitation to the evil eye. Most people don’t believe those superstitions but, especially when they involve death, they observe them . . . just in case.

The truth is that *kaddish* was not originally a prayer recited for the dead. The words were recited at a *siyyum*, the conclusion of a period of study. Eventually, the *kaddish* became identified as the mourner’s prayer with, of course, the Ashkenazic version “*yisgadal v’yiskadash*” and the Sephardic version “*yitgadal v’yitkadash*.”

There are actually various versions of the *kaddish*, including the *kaddish* which is part of tomorrow’s *Neilah* service, which includes the “*Titkabel*” paragraph, which stops most everyone in their tracks. Most of us are

familiar with the *khatzi* or partial *kaddish*, which serves to separate various sections of the service.

Grandma Bessie was correct that *kaddish* was traditionally recited only by the mourners. In fact, it was traditionally only the mourners who stood for the *kaddish*. So, what happened?

For almost a century, worship services have been held almost every day, but Sunday, at Hebrew Union College, the Reform movement's rabbinical seminary in Cincinnati. Big donors to the college were routinely remembered prior to the *kaddish* and since, in most cases, their families lived elsewhere, the rabbinic students were asked to serve as proxy for the family by standing and reciting the *kaddish* in memory of the donors.

The rabbis were ordained and went out to serve their communities around the country, spreading the practice of having the congregation stand. At this point, most of us just accept it as the way it has always been because, that is all we have known for most of our lives.

Just look at teenagers or young adults hearing hit songs like "You've Lost That Loving Feeling" or "Unchained Melody" and more without realizing that these songs were big hits decades ago. Of course, they never heard those versions of the song, just as most of my generation had never heard

Sam and Dave sing “Soul Man” before The Blues Brothers made it a big hit.

We tend to know what we know and most of us don’t delve into history, which is kind of a shame, because many parts of life used to be very different. Go on *You Tube* or elsewhere and see film of baseball players from the 1950’s and 1960’s. Most look like stringbeans next to today’s behemoths. And in an age when we moan about the commercialization of everything from ballparks to bridges, watch the TV shows of the 50’s, where the ads for the cigarette makers were so omnipresent, that they were often actually part of the set and visible in every camera shot.

Change is the only constant in life, yet it is often hard to accept.

Nonetheless, after more than three decades of using “Gates of Prayer” for our Shabbat services, we will begin using a new prayer book, *Mishkan Tefilah*, as of January, 2014.

The process took our congregation a couple of years and we honestly believe that this is the best option available for us. In saying that, I hope that the results will be better than what the New York Jets experienced last year when they said that Mark Sanchez was “the best option available for us.”

Mishkan Tefilah is the primary prayer book used in Reform congregations today. It updates the language and the content of the prayer book. It is not perfect, to be sure, and I am one of over two hundred rabbis who voted against our movement adopting it back in 2006, because of many of those problems.

Still, it is time for a change. The fact that a book has problems doesn't mean that we cannot accept it. On this Yom Kippur, we accept that we are all flawed. We are charged with accepting one another, warts and all.

Mishkan Tefilah is a beautiful prayer book which is very user friendly for those who do not read Hebrew, as all of the Hebrew is transliterated into English letters. On the other hand, it can be big and bulky and the layout is often confusing, even to rabbis who use it every week.

We think that we have minimized most of those issues by adopting the Shabbat-only version of *Mishkan Tefilah*, which excludes the festival services for Sukkot, Pesakh and Shavuot. This will give us a streamlined book which will be easier to use. Because the book offers two different options for Shabbat evening and morning services, we will also be able to offer a more straightforward service, in addition to the option which features a rich and sometimes confusing array of options.

And so, we will change. Many of you here remember when, back in the early 1970's, Reform Judaism adopted "Gates of Prayer" in place of the beloved "Union Prayer Book." GOP, as it was called, was unpopular from the start. It was considered to be an intellectual prayer book, as opposed to the UPB, which touched the soul.

However, most of us who have used "Gates of Prayer" for decades are bound to have developed an emotional attachment to it. *Mishkan Tefilah* has beautiful content and I am sure that we will all adapt to it with time, but let me tell you, it will be a challenge for me as well.

One of the perks of being a rabbi who has spent his entire rabbinic career with GOP is that I have pretty much memorized the prayer book. Just do the math. If I have heard a service just once a week over the course of thirty years, that is over 1,500 times hearing the service and that is without factoring in bar/bat mitzvah lessons. And since we do the exact same Shabbat morning service every week, I pretty much know where every comma is, let alone the page number.

So moving to a book where I don't know any of the page numbers by heart is quite unnerving. I am in a very comfortable place with GOP. As one rabbinic colleague said to me at a workshop on social media at last year's

rabbinic convention, “I am eight years away from retiring; do I really need to learn a whole new way of doing things?”

The answer is “yes.” On Rosh Hashana, the shofar called us to break out of our complacency and the comfortable routine of our lives. “Awake, arise, get out of your slumber...”

There is tremendous value to keeping things fresh and not letting them grow stale. Our tradition frowns on reciting prayers by rote. We are supposed to read, not memorize the words of the prayer book, so as to interact with them anew at every service. We are supposed to be alert, so as to respond to the words of our prayers. We are supposed to be alert, so that we can respond to the needs of people and situations around us.

A couple of weeks ago, I was reading an article in response to the wave of local accidents caused by people driving on the wrong side of the road. The article pointed out that we need all of our senses to fulfill the mission of our trip, which is getting us safely to our destination.

If we are on the phone, even with a hands-free device, our brains lose some of their focus. If we are holding the phone or, God-forbid texting, we are basically a target for anything that could go wrong. Our ability to react quickly is so reduced that we are anywhere from 8 – 23 times more

likely to get into an accident. From bad drivers to deer, from objects in the road to police cars pulling up behind us, responsible driving demands our full attention. Physiologically, our brains cannot fully commit to two or more tasks simultaneously. To be a good driver, we have to be alert.

It is very similar with prayer. To do our best, we need to be able to focus fully on our vehicle. Like a new car, *Mishkan Tefilah* will take some getting used to, but I am confident that most people will end up embracing it warmly once they become familiar with it. Not all change is good, but “Gates of Prayer,” like the beautiful tapestries which once adorned the walls of this sanctuary, is our vehicle of the past. We can connect to it nostalgically, but realistically, it is time to make the move.

Our society is changing very, very rapidly and not all of the changes are for the better. Growing up in Detroit, it was pretty much a given that one never bought a new car in its first year out. Everyone knew to wait until all of the problems that were discovered by first-year owners were corrected in the next year’s model.

And, of course, newer is not always better, as the makers of Coca Cola realized back in 1985, in what may have been one of the biggest blunders in American corporate history. Coke survived, but not New Coke.

Change is not always easy or comfortable or even necessary. There is no commandment to buy every new product that advertisers try to sell us. If an article of clothing was so attractive last year, how is it that this year, you wouldn't want to be caught wearing it?

As Reform Jews, we believe in evaluating change, along with everything else we do. It is probably impossible to evaluate everything, because there just isn't time. However, we are supposed to question as much as we can. So often, something which seems obvious at first glance, is much more complex under closer examination. It would make life a lot easier if the personal, societal and world problems we faced could be resolved with black and white answers. However, the world is usually marked by various shades of grey and the simplest solution is not necessarily the best.

On this *Kol Nidray*, we stand together as a community of flawed individuals. In five days, we celebrate the festival of *Sukkot*. Two of the symbols of the festival, the *lulav* and *etrog*, remind us that some of us perform *mitzvot* and others possess wisdom. Some possess both, some have one or the other and some have neither. However, just as we hold the *lulav* and *etrog* together on *Sukkot*, so we celebrate the new year together and participate in our Jewish community together.

We recognize our diversity as a community and understand that sometimes, like Archie Bunker of a generation past, we have to get up out of that nice comfortable chair and make some changes.

And so, we focus today on changing ourselves, changing our society, but not changing blindly. As Reform Jews, we are constantly evaluating and reevaluating, until we bring ourselves and our society to their optimal level. Clearly, we're not quite there yet.

This year of 5774 in the Jewish calendar, we will have a new prayer book. We will tweak some of our service rituals, including those related to standing for the *kaddish*. We have added beautiful lighting to our Sanctuary and will soon have beautiful new doors for the Ark which houses our Torah scrolls. We have welcomed many new families to our congregation.

However, most of the changes we are called to make will take place outside of these walls. They will require us to ask if we are as committed as we should be to our children's Jewish education. Are we as committed as we should be to giving of ourselves to better our community, as opposed to simply paying dues and taking what we want for ourselves? What will we do, will we do anything, to benefit anyone with whom we don't have a close relationship? And if not, why not?

All of us are called to ask the hard questions; we all have the capacity and the need to change. None of us are exempt; none of us have fulfilled all of the potential God has put within us; none of us have all of the answers.

However, we can start by asking the questions about where we are, where we hope to go and how we plan on getting there. May our answers to those questions bring blessing to our communities, to those in need, to those we love and to ourselves. AMEN