

Truth in Liturgy: When Prayer Doesn't Quite Capture Our Intent

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At the end of the recitation of the Shema, the core declaration of Jewish faith, the prayer leader announces: ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֶמֶת (The Eternal, your God is **true/truthful**).² The following blessing, which, in traditional Ashkenazi worship, concludes the Shema liturgy in the morning, repeats the word “truth” six more times,³ adding up in a staccato-like manner

1. I would like to thank Joshua Garroway and Wendy Zierler, the organizers of the HUC-JIR symposium, “These Truths We Hold: Judaism in an Age of Truthiness” (November 2018). Also, shortly before the submission of the final essay, I found the recently published essay by our teacher, Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, “How Liturgy Tells the Truth” (*CCAR Journal*, [Spring 2019]: 150–63), a revised version of which appears in the next chapter of this book. Rabbi Hoffman’s paper is not discussed here, but I was happy to find out that some of my conclusions are similar to his.

2. These words were added to the public recitation of the Shema liturgy by the medieval German pietists (*Hasidei Ashkenaz*), who paid great attention to the number of the words in each prayer. This addition brings the number of words to 248, and this number corresponds with the number of the positive commandments (b. Makkot 23b) as well as, according to tradition (m. Ohalot 1:8), the number of limbs in the (male) human body. The words אֱל מֶלֶךְ נֶאֱמָן (God is a faithful king) were also added, immediately before the recitation of “Shema Yisrae’l,” in order to reach that number. The word *ne’eman* (faithful) shares the same etymology as *emet* (truth); see more on this below.

3. In traditional Sephardic prayer books, the word *emet* is repeated eight times. In Liberal prayer books, the text is often trimmed to avoid what seem to be verbal repetitions.

and serving as affirmation of the covenant between the Eternal and Israel⁴:

אֱמֶת וְיָצִיב [...] הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה עָלֵינוּ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד.
 אֱמֶת אֱלֹהֵי עוֹלָם מִלְּנֻנוּ [...] .
 אֱמֶת וְאִמּוּנָה, חֶק וְלֹא יַעֲבֹר.
 אֱמֶת שְׂאֵתָהּ הוּא ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ [...] .
 אֱמֶת אֵתָהּ הוּא אֲדוֹן לְעַמּוֹךָ [...] .
 אֱמֶת אֵתָהּ הוּא רִאשׁוֹן וְאֵתָהּ הוּא אַחֲרוֹן [...] .

True and steadfast [...] is this matter for us for all eternities.

True it is the eternal God is our Ruler [...]

True and trustworthy it is, a matter that cannot be transgressed.

True that You are the Eternal our God and God of our Ancestors
 [...]

True it is that You are a sovereign to Your people [...]

True, You are the first and You are the last [...]⁵

This repetition of the word “true” again and again serves as a covenantal affirmation of what was just said, namely, the Shema unit, comprised of three biblical passages (Deut 6:4–9, 11:13–21 and Num 15:36–41) and encased by liturgical blessings. It stresses the importance of the concept of truth in the Jewish faith as well as the importance of its expression in worship.

The parallel blessing in the evening recitation of the Shema also invokes truth, but in a different tone: **אֱמֶת וְאִמּוּנָה כֹּל זֹאת וְקִיָּם עָלֵינוּ כִּי** (True and faithful [lit. truth and faithfulness] is all this, and accepted by us, for He is our God and there is none else, and we are Israel His people).⁶ Like the blessing recited in

4. Reuven Kimelman, “The Shema Liturgy: From Covenant Ceremony to Coronation,” in *Kenishta*, ed. Joseph Tabory (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2001), 9–105

5. Since Reform liturgy is based on the Ashkenazic rite, the texts cited here are taken from the Ashkenazic prayer book, unless otherwise stated.

6. Perhaps the evening liturgy stresses faithfulness (*emunah*) because people are more likely to experience existential anxiety in the dark, when the created world is less visible.

the morning, it serves as a covenantal pledge at the end of the Shema liturgy. According to Rashi:

The blessing “True and steadfast” is all about the loving-kindness [*hesed*] that (God) had for our ancestors, for He delivered them out of Egypt and opened the sea for them and caused them to pass, while the blessing “True and faithful” is referring also to the future events, for we are hoping that He shall fulfill his promise and faithfulness for us to redeem us. (Rashi on b. Berakhot 12a)

These two references to truth in the liturgy, Rashi says, acknowledge the divine acts of lovingkindness that happened in the past and express confidence in the bestowal of future gifts, respectively. Even that which is yet to come can be *emet*.

WHAT IS EMET?

I will treat the term “truth” as it is popularly understood, namely as describing a proposition in accordance with a reality of some kind. The reader will most likely note that the term “truth” refers on occasion also to authenticity, integrity, and sincerity, which are not perfectly synonymous but belong to the same semantic field and for our purposes are often inseparable. Truth in itself is a multifaceted concept and is especially complex when it intersects with issues of worship and faith. Should we relate to truth in prayer in the same way in which we relate to truth in other types of speech? When searching for truth, in what ways is prayer unique? Can one lie when praying and still consider this prayer? In other words, is sincerity a necessary condition for prayer? Is there an essential difference between the search for truth and integrity in Jewish prayer in traditional as opposed to in liberal Judaism? Are there different kinds of truths – for example, historical, theological, and social truths – that are manifested in prayer? And, if this is the case, is there a truth that governs all others, a truth that encompasses and transcends all these fragmentary “truth” statements? I will tentatively address these questions below.

Before we further delve into the concept of אמת (truth) in Jewish

liturgy, let us consider its etymology. The root of the word is א.מ.נ.⁷ the word אמונה (faith) is also derived from it, as is the response to hearing a blessing, אָמֵן (amen), by which one expresses affirmation of the content of the blessing and allegiance to the praying community.⁸ The fundamental connection between faith and truth is expressed in Rabbi Joseph Karo's *Shulḥan Arukh*: “And they should respond ‘amen’ after every blessing [. . .], with the intention to direct [the following] in their hearts: ‘the blessing that was recited is truth, and I believe in it’” (*Orah Hayyim* 124:6).

While the question “what is truth?” occupies an essential place in every sphere of human experience and knowledge, it is especially crucial when discussing religious worship. When we read biblical or rabbinic texts, we may appreciate their poetic, cultural or intellectual value, even if we don't necessarily believe that they represent “truth” for us. But when one prays, when one lifts the eyes in concentration and *kavvanah* – in deep intentionality – and recites words of a prayer, these words must bear truth of some sort, or else the prayer becomes empty and void. Yet, despite this (or, perhaps, because of this), the definition of truth in the context of liturgy remains especially difficult and elusive.

I shall treat *emet* as a central concept in Jewish liturgy later in this essay. Before doing so, however, I must first address whether speaking the truth is a necessary characteristic of prayer. Is it really a prayer if it is not true? Can a prayer that does not embody and reflect the truth still be referred to as prayer?

CAN ONE PRAY A LIE?

The Talmud specifies the three main liturgical genres: praise, petition, and thanksgiving (b. Berakhot 34a). Only utterances of praise can easily

7. That is why conjugations of the word *emet* have a dagesh in the letter א, replacing the א that was omitted due to assimilation of the two consonants א and א, for example in the word אֱמֶתִי (truthful, real).

8. See Numbers 5:22; Deuteronomy 22:16–26; 1 Kings 1:36; Isaiah 65:16; Jeremiah 11:5, 28:6. In an explicitly liturgical, biblical, context one finds אָמֵן in the conclusion of the Book of Psalms 41:11, 72:19, 89:53, 106:48, as well as in Nehemiah 5:13, 8:6; and 1 Chronicles 16:36.

be deemed true or false, as they describe either an existing or hoped-for reality. Petitions and thanksgiving, on the other hand, fall into the category of performative speech.⁹ They cannot easily be examined in terms of their truthfulness or falsehood; rather, it is their felicity – to use John L. Austin’s terminology – which is of relevance.¹⁰

The sages of the Talmud asked how our prayer should reflect the truth in the most refined and exact manner. The following talmudic discussion raises this fundamental issue, relating to a single phrase in Avot, the first blessing of the *‘Amidah*. The phrase refers to the Eternal as “הַאֵל הַגָּדֹל הַגִּבּוֹר וְהַנּוֹרָא” (The great, the mighty, and the Awesome God), citing Moses’s speech (Deut 10:17). It appears again in the Hebrew Bible twice with minor yet meaningful changes, first in the words of the prophet Jeremiah (Jer 32:18) and then again in Daniel (Dan 9:4). Each of these subsequent texts lacks a word from Moses’s threefold description: Jeremiah lacks the epithet “awesome” and Daniel lacks “mighty.” Although these utterances were not initially meant to be used in the liturgy, Rabbi Yehoshua understands the change from Moses’s “original” phrase as reflecting changing historical realities and a theology revised accordingly:

TALMUD BAVLI, YOMA 69B¹¹

For Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said: “Why were they called ‘men of the Great Assembly’?” Because they restored the crown to its original splendor.

בבבלי, יומא סט ע”ב

דאמר רבי יהושע בן לוי:
למה נקרא שמן “אנשי כנסת
הגדולה?” שהחזירו עטרה
ליושנה.

9. One may argue that the truthfulness of liturgical requests and utterances of thanksgiving may also be judged; however, our discussion will concentrate mainly on those indicative liturgical expressions dealing with the divine and with experienced reality.

10. John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words. The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, ed. J.O. Urmson & Marina Sbisa (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 14. In fact, praise is also a speech act, but it is an indicative expression, describing (or constating) a reality.

11. Another version of this tradition can be found in y. Berakhot 7:3 (55b).

Moses had come and said: “The great, the mighty, and the Awesome God” [Deut 10:17].

Jeremiah came and said: “Aliens are destroying His Temple. Where are, then, His awesome deeds?” Hence, he omitted [the word] “Awesome.”¹²

Daniel came and said: “Aliens are enslaving his sons. Where are His mighty deeds?” Hence, he omitted the word “mighty”.

They [the Men of the Great Assembly] came and said: “On the contrary!” Therein lie His mighty deeds that He suppresses His wrath, that He extends His long-suffering to the wicked.¹³ Therein lie His awesome powers: For but for the fear of Him, how could one single nation persist among the [many] nations?!

But how could our Rabbis [Jeremiah and Daniel] abolish an ordinance established by Moses?!

Rabbi Eleazar said: Since they knew that the Holy One, blessed be He, is true, they would not ascribe false [things] to / lie about Him.

Rabbi Eleazar praises Jeremiah and Daniel for their determination to speak truth about God: “Since they knew that the Holy One, blessed

אתא משה, אמר: “הַאֵל הַגָּדֹל הַגִּבּוֹר וְהַנּוֹרָא” (דברים י, ז).

אתא ירמיה ואמר: נכרים מקרקרין בהיכלו, איה נוראותיו? לא אמר “נוֹרָא”.

אתא דניאל, אמר: נכרים משתעבדים בבניו, איה גבורותיו? לא אמר “גִּבּוֹר”.

אתו אינהו ואמרו: אדרבה, זו היא גבורת גבורתו שכובש את יצרו, שנותן ארך אפים לרשעים; ואלו הן נוראותיו – שאלמלא מוראו של הקדוש ברוך הוא היאך אומה אחת יכולה להתקיים בין האומות?!

ורבנן היכי עבדי הכי ועקרי תקנתא דתקין משה?!

אמר רבי אלעזר: מתוך שיודעין בהקדוש ברוך הוא שאמתי הוא, לפיכך לא כיזבו בו.

12. The midrash refers to Jeremiah 32:18: “The great, the mighty God, the God of hosts is His name.”

13. The midrash refers here to Daniel 9:4: “The great and awesome God who keeps His covenant and mercy with them that love Him and keep His commandments.”

be He, is true, they would not ascribe false [things] to / lie about Him.” Rabbi Yehoshua, on the other hand, applauds the ancient authorities (Men of the Great Assembly) for restoring the “original” phrase in the liturgy, even though it did not reflect historical reality and the diminished circumstances of the Jews.

This short text reveals two approaches to truth in the liturgy. According to Rabbi Eleazar, prayer should reflect reality, at least as we experience it. If a liturgical epithet for God no longer applies, it needs to be revised. Thus, Daniel and Jeremiah are willing to revise the “original” text to make prayer more accurate or suitable for their contemporary situation. The second approach is that of the Men of the Great Assembly, who retained Moses’s phrase even in the face of a differing historical reality. The midrash praises them as those who “restored the crown to its original splendor,” having found a way to read the praises in a metaphorical way and ascribe contemporary and relevant meaning to old words. However, the midrash also praises Jeremiah and Daniel, who lived in a time of disaster, namely that of the destruction of the First Temple, and knew that God was true, so “they would not ascribe false [things] to Him.” As is often the case in the Talmud, the argument is left without clear resolution, leaving it to future readers to decide which truth they choose to accept, the truth of historical circumstances or the philosophical truth as first expressed in the text.

TALKING TRUTH IN LITURGY

While it is generally agreed upon that prayer ought to be truthful and that it lacks meaning if it is not, it is not always clear what we mean by “truthful.” Indeed, several measures of truthfulness can be adduced in relation to prayer: historical, theological, ideological, philosophical, and aesthetic. One may also reflect on liturgical truthfulness by contemplating the tension between the personal, communal, and more general truths embedded in the liturgy. One can attempt to evaluate the integrity of the liturgical text and the sincerity of what is expressed in it.

Unsurprisingly, these different truths are often in tension, even in contradiction with each other. We will thus consider here two cases

revealing tensions between different manifestations of truth and sincerity in Jewish liturgy. The first has to do with the evaluation of historical events and the second with the integrity of the text itself.

*Time of Perfect Love or Disloyalty:
The Israelites' Sojourn in the Wilderness*

The siddur is often referred to as the “life journal” of the Jewish people, as that which holds all its joys and sorrows, fears and hopes.¹⁴ It is thus worthwhile to examine which historical events found their way into this liturgical life journal and which did not merit inclusion.¹⁵ But even those events that are often mentioned in the siddur receive varying treatments. An example of this phenomenon is the different liturgical evaluations of the forty years of the Israelites’ sojourn in the wilderness. In some instances, the wilderness sojourn is presented as time of special nearness and grace, as in the citation from Jeremiah in the additional service (*Mussaf*) of Rosh HaShanah: “Thus said the Eternal: I remember the devotion of your [Israel’s] youth, the love of a bride; how you followed Me in the wilderness, land unsown” (Jer 2:2). Quite a different depiction of the same period appears in the opening psalm in *Kabbalat Shabbat*, the ceremony welcoming Shabbat, which reads “For forty years was I wearied with that generation, saying: It is a people that do err in their heart, and they have not known my ways” (Ps 95:10).

The different estimations of the Israelites’ forty years of sojourn on their way to the promised land may not be a matter of truth and falsehood – yet how does one reconcile these differences? What actually happened in the wilderness? Even if we set aside questions relating to the historicity of these events as they are depicted in the Bible, we have a confusing literary depiction of that period. The ramifications of these

14. Jakob J. Petuchowski, *Prayerbook Reform in Europe: The Liturgy of the European Liberal and Reform Judaism* (New York, NY: World Union for Progressive Judaism, 1968), 22–23.

15. A salient example concerns the mentioning of the two major events that shaped Jewish history in the twentieth century: the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel. See on this Dalia Marx, “Memorializing the Shoah,” ed. Lawrence Hoffman, in *May God Remember: Memory and Memorializing in Judaism* (Woodstock, NY: Jewish Lights, 2013), 39–62.

different versions are vital to our understanding of this nascent era in the history of the Israelites and of the nature of their relationship with God.¹⁶ And yet, identifying historical accuracy in the liturgy remains a complex task.

*Textual Integrity or Selective Truth:
The Thirteen Attributes of the Divine*

Jewish prayers often cite other texts: the books of the Bible, rabbinic literature, even other prayers.¹⁷ One may ask, if citation represents the cutting and pasting of a portion of text – be it a phrase, a verse, a paragraph, or an entire psalm – whether the cited text maintains the integrity of the original. In other words, when a text is taken out of its original context, does it (and can it) preserve its contextual meaning, its integral truth, or does it become a new creation altogether? An example of the tension between the integrity of the cited text and the new context that cites it concerns the thirteen attributes of the Divine, recited in the liturgy for the High Holidays:

וַיַּעֲבֹר ה' עַל-פְּנֵי וַיִּקְרָא ה' ה' אֵל רַחוּם וְחַנּוּן אַרְבָּע אַפִּים וְרַב-חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת: נִצָּר
חֶסֶד לְאֱלֹפִים נִשָּׂא עֵוֹן וּפְשָׁע וְחַטָּאָה וְנִקְיָה

And the Eternal passed by before him, and proclaimed: “The Eternal, the Eternal, God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy unto the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin . . .” (Exod 34:6–7)¹⁸

16. While American Reform liturgy incorporated Jeremiah's positive description of the Israelites in the wilderness as included in the Rosh Hashanah liturgy (*Mishkan Hanefesh for Rosh HaShanah*, 265), the editors chose to omit the second part of the psalm, thus avoiding the harsher parts. Most likely, this omission was made not in response to questions of historical accuracy but because of the unpleasant sentiments in that text. The current American Reform Siddur, *Mishkan T'filah* (2007), continues the path of the previous Siddur, *Gates of Prayer* (1975), including only the first, pleasant part of the text. Other Reform siddurim, such as the Israeli Reform siddurim *Ha'avodah Shebalev* (1982) and *Tfillat HaAdam* (2020), cite the text in its entirety.

17. Michael Marmor, “Why Jews Quote,” *Oral Tradition*, 29/1 (2014): 5–46.

18. While the Talmud refers to this list as the “Thirteen Attributes,” there are

In many synagogues, the recitation of the thirteen attributes is considered to be an especially moving moment in the service, and most worshippers seem unbothered by or unaware of the fact that the liturgical text cites only the loving and merciful aspects of the divine, omitting the harsh words of the final part of verse 7: “לֹא יִנְקָה פְּקֹד עֵוֹן אָבוֹת” (and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the ancestors upon the children, and upon the children’s children, unto the third and unto the fourth generation”).

It appears that the rabbis creatively carved out from the Torah text only what was relevant for them – the portion portraying the compassionate aspects of the divine – pasted it in the liturgy, and omitted the rest. This practice reflects a significant sense of ownership over Scripture, but is it *true* to the original text? By modern scholarly standards, the rabbinic selection of some verses and omission of others would be viewed as dishonest, as it reflects (and in this sense is “true to”) a particular rabbinic agenda: that of presenting God as forgiving and merciful at times when Jews needed forgiveness and mercy. The theological “truth” the rabbis sought to convey, however, stands in tension with textual sincerity and integrity.

These two examples, the first dealing with different depictions of historical events and the second with sincerity in the use of scriptural passages in the liturgy, attest to the complexity of liturgy’s attempt to express theological truth while simultaneously maintaining a commitment to textual integrity.

TRUTHFULNESS AND INTEGRITY IN TRADITIONAL LITURGY

Reciting the fixed prayers was considered by the rabbis a fulfillment of a religious duty (and is still deemed as such by many contemporary Jews). However, this does not mean that these prayers were merely texts to be mechanically intoned daily (or weekly) and at designated times. The

several ways to count them. Several biblical passages provide variations of the attributes of the Divine (among them: Num 14:18; Jonah 4:2; Micah 7:18–20).

words of the prayers were meant to embody and convey meaning – to embody and convey truth. Jews were and remain concerned about their duty to say the truth when pouring out their heart to the divine. We saw this in the abovementioned talmudic discussion regarding the proper and accurate manner to address the divine. The complexity of considerations regarding the truthfulness of liturgical utterances is an issue often discussed in classical Jewish sources. A famous example is a question asked of Maimonides (1138–1204) by “Ovadia the convert,” who wanted to know if he was allowed to join the congregation in saying, “Our God, and God of our ancestors” at the beginning of the *Amidah*, knowing that his ancestors were not Jewish. Maimonides concluded that a convert can use the same liturgical language as everyone else, even when the utterance seems to contradict their personal biography.

Rabbi Joseph Qafih (1917–2000), who researched Maimonides’ work and restored the early version of his unprecedentedly comprehensive legal work, *Mishneh Torah*, maintains, based on early manuscripts of his commentary on the Mishnah (Bikkurim 1:4), that Maimonides initially did not approve of converts reciting this statement about Jewish ancestry. However, when asked about the matter by a specific convert – Ovadia – he came to recognize the sensitive position of this individual who had decided to join the Jewish people and did not want to add to the difficulties he faced. Therefore, he ruled that converts should recite the same text as ethnic Jews.¹⁹ In other words, even in such cases where an utterance contradicts simple, biographical truth, Maimonides acknowledged that truth is a complex matter and that one needs to take a plethora of matters into consideration when searching for it.

However, other authorities were reluctant to allow converts to use a phrase that contradicted the simple truth.²⁰ Still others tried to retrofit the truth reflected in the phrase “Our God, and God of our ancestors,” to the reality of the convert. Rabbi Reuvein Margolies (1889–1971), for example, maintained, based on a midrash (b. Shabbat 146a; Num.

19. Ari Isaac Shvat, “Can a Convert Say, ‘Who Did Not Create Me A Gentile?’” *Thumin* 15 (1995): 434–45 [Hebrew].

20. For the various opinions on this matter in the halakhah, see Shvat, “Can a Convert” [Hebrew]; Dalia Marx, “Converts and Prayers” (forthcoming).

Rabbah 13:16), that the souls of all converts were present at Sinai; thus, and when a person decides to convert, it only retroactively reveals their original Jewish soul. Therefore, converts should be treated (and should pray) as though they were Jews by birth.²¹ Recently, it has been suggested that some Jews by choice may want actively to acknowledge their choice to become Jews through the liturgy, in which case a special framing of the prayer would not be an act of exclusion but one of self-assertion.²² Either way, the case of Ovadia the convert shows that Jewish legal authorities have long been attentive to questions relating to the need for truthful expression in prayer and have acknowledged that truth can mean more than one thing.

TRUTHFULNESS AND INTEGRITY IN REFORM PRAYER

The search for truthfulness in prayer emerges with particular intensity in the context of the Reform movement, or, more broadly, in liberal Judaism. Emerging in response to modernity and the Enlightenment, Reform Judaism has placed truthful expression at the center of its ideological and theological agenda.²³ This commitment is attested to first

21. Margolis arrives at this from the talmudic phrase “a convert who converted” (גר שנתגייר, b. Yevamot 22a), instead of “a gentile who converted.” See Shvat, “Can a Convert,” 440.

22. Marx, “Converts and Prayers.”

23. See, for example, the statement in the first declaration of principles of the Reform movement, (Pittsburgh, 1885): “We recognize, in the modern era of universal culture of heart and intellect, the approaching of the realization of Israel’s great Messianic hope for the establishment of the kingdom of truth, justice, and peace among all men.” The CCAR commentary from October 27, 2004, on the newest Reform platform (Pittsburgh, 1999) reads:

Truths: The plural suggests the Reform view that within Torah can be found a plethora of truths, but because Torah reflects God’s word mediated through human transcribers (Moses or anonymous scribes), not all of Torah may register as true in every age. The revelation of all that is true in Torah awaits the coming of the messianic age.

<https://www.ccarnet.org/rabbinic-voice/platforms/article-commentary-principles-reform-judaism/>.

and foremost by the liturgy Reform Judaism has created. Indeed, at the heart of Reform innovation was an effort to make the liturgy relevant and truthful.²⁴ That said, Reform thinkers often were bolder and more direct in their theological writings than in their liturgical creativity;²⁵ they understood that traditional expressions might be important to the praying community and thus were often cautious about applying thoroughly radical changes to the liturgy. In some instances, it seems, however, that the classical reformers treated the prayer book as if it were a legal document that held worshippers accountable with each liturgical utterance.²⁶

Classical reformers insisted that the liturgy authentically reflect not only their understanding of reality (as communicated in the statements we referred to above as “praise”) but also their contemporary desires and wishes. This latter commitment has persisted over the years in Reform communities, a classic example being the ever-changing liturgies regarding Zion and Zionism. Classical reformers omitted supplications for the ingathering of the exiles, the return to Zion, and the rebuilding of Jerusalem, and de-emphasized references to Zion as the birthplace of the Jewish people.²⁷ Rabbi Abraham Geiger (1810–1874), the most influential Reform rabbi in Europe,²⁸ explained the changes he had made in the Siddur he edited in 1854 regarding the supplications for a return to Zion as follows:

Jerusalem and Zion are places from which instruction went forth, and memories are attached. But as a whole, they are to be celebrated more as a spiritual idea – as the nursery of the Kingdom of God – than

24. Dalia Marx, “Reform Liturgy: Then and Now,” in *A Life of Meaning: Embracing Reform Judaism’s Sacred Path*, ed. Dana Evan Kaplan (New York, NY: CCAR Press, 2018), 349–68.

25. See David Ellenson, *After Emancipation: Jewish Religious Responses to Modernity* (Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College Press, 2004), 203–13.

26. For examples, see Marx, “Reform Liturgy: Then and Now.”

27. Jacob J. Petuchowski, *Guide to the Prayerbook* (Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College Press, 1967), 44–45; *idem*, *Prayerbook Reform in Europe* (New York, NY: World Union for Progressive Judaism, 1968), 277–97.

28. Michael Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1995), 88–99.

as a certain geographical locale connected with a special divine providence for all times.²⁹

Geiger's statement reflects the unbridled optimism and positivist approach of many early reformers, who believed that humanity was on the verge of reaching a messianic brave new world of universal enlightenment and justice. Over the course of the first half of twentieth century, however, with the First World War, the rise of Nazism, the Second World War, and the Holocaust, this view gradually receded. The acknowledgment of Zion as the birthplace of the Jewish people as well as a valid site of Jewish longing began to feel more and more authentic, and Reform liturgy changed accordingly.³⁰ Thus, contemporary Reform prayer books reincorporate many liturgical phrases pertaining to Zion that were omitted from earlier Reform liturgies.

Other changes made in Reform prayer books were intended to remove statements that seemed to contradict scientific or empirical truth.³¹ The second paragraph of the *Shema* (Deut 11:6–22), for example, is omitted from many Reform siddurim for several reasons,³² one of them being a rejection on the basis of scientific understanding of the Deuteronomic notion that a lack of rain and thus famine (Deut 11:17) could be attributed to Israelite disobedience. Today, however, as awareness of the ecological ramifications of our deeds and the need for communal responsibility continues to evolve, some Reform rabbis and leaders have begun to re-

29. Abraham Geiger, *Israelitisches Gebetbuch* (Breslau, 1854), vi (cited from Petuchowski, *Prayerbook*, 278–79).

30. Regarding the evolution of the approach to Zion and Israel in Reform liturgy, see Dalia Marx, "Zion and Zionism in Reform Prayerbooks," in *The Fragile Dialogue: New Voices of Liberal Zionism*, ed. S.M. Davis and L.A. Englander (New York, NY: CCAR Press, 2017), 155–74.

31. In the second platform of the Reform movement (Columbus, 1937), we find the following: "Judaism welcomes all truth [. . .] The new discoveries of science, while replacing the older scientific views underlying our sacred literature, do not conflict with the essential spirit of religion" (CCAR website, <https://www.ccarnet.org/rabbinic-voice/platforms/article-declaration-principles/>).

32. See Eric Caplan, *From Ideology to Theology: Reconstructionist Worship and American Liberal Judaism* (Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College Press), 2002, 62–63, 114–15, 190–91.

incorporate the second portion of the Shema, reading this passage more metaphorically as relating to communal accountability and the consequences of our actions.³³ Israeli Reform siddurim tend to choose a different approach, keeping the traditional text from Deuteronomy 11 but juxtaposing it with an alternative reading from Deuteronomy 30:15–20, a passage stating that the punishment for idolatry would be exile rather than famine (Deut. 30:18), which seemed a more rational response to Israel’s disobediences.³⁴ However, in the light of the environmental crisis, more and more people find the original second portion of the Shema apt and meaningful.

The example of the Shema illustrates newly found willingness to relate to liturgical language as metaphorical in nature, to understand the truth it holds symbolically, and to seek out the core truths embedded within it which are among the most central features of contemporary liberal Judaism.³⁵

* * *

When reflecting upon Jewish liturgy, some passages may seem outdated, meaningless, or even outrageous. Some, many contemporary Jews (myself included) find, can no longer be recited with integrity – for instance, those which promote gender inequality or those which refer to people of other faiths and races as inferior. I believe that we should denounce such utterances as abominations.³⁶ However, other statements

33. The newest major American Liberal prayer book, *Mishkan Hanefesh: The Machzor for Yom Kippur* (2015) incorporates the second portion of the *Shema* in Hebrew and English (34–35) as well as in English alone (190), explaining in the commentary that it is possible to “interpret the passage more naturalistically, as a dire prediction of the consequences of human arrogance.”

34. *Ha'avodah Shebalev* (1982) and *Tfillat HaAdam* (2020).

35. Lawrence Hoffman, “Re-imagining Jewish Worship,” *CCAR Journal* 49/1 (2002): 77.

36. For example, *Tfillat HaAdam: An Israeli Reform Siddur* (2020), which I was privileged to co-edit with Rabbi Alona Lisitsa, does not contain the exclusionary phrases at the beginning of *'Aleinu LeShabeah*. Instead of praising God for “not [making] us as the nations of the lands nor [placing] us as the families of the earth,” *Tfillat HaAdam* reads, based on some previous liberal versions, that we praise God “who gave us a Torah of truth [or, truthful Torah] and implanted eternal life within us.” We also included alternative versions of *'Aleinu LeShabeah*

can be revisited, reread, and newly understood in metaphorical-midrashic ways, allowing for a richer reading of the liturgy than in the past. The tension between these two options is a healthy and creative one; we should not shy away from it, but, rather, actively engage with it.

I believe that we should advocate for Jews of the more traditional streams to follow the leads of Jeremiah and Daniel, who insisted on speaking truth when addressing the divine and therefore dared to revise, replace, or even omit passages or phrases in the liturgy – because, just like Jeremiah and Daniel, we know that “the Holy One, blessed be He, is true,” and we want to address God sincerely and truthfully. At the same time, we should recommend worshippers of the liberal streams of Judaism to look toward the example provided to us by the “Men of the Great Assembly,” who acknowledged the importance of the prayer text and thereby allowed themselves to read seemingly challenging liturgical passages in a metaphorical or symbolic way.

May we merit to fulfill this supplication:

וְטַהַר לִבֵּנוּ לְעִבְדָּךָ בְּאֵמֶת!

(Purify our hearts to worship You truthfully!)

by Marcia Falk and Dan Pratt, which celebrate the beauty of the world and our responsibility to maintain it.