

Siddur Sim Shalom and Developing Conservative Theology

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Defining the theology of Conservative Judaism has never been an easy task. The founders of the movement avoided statements of ideology and self-definition. During the past decades, slogans such as "pluralism" or antonyms like "tradition and change" have gained popularity but have not added precision. In a recent interview Chancellor Ismar Schorsch explained that:

Conservative Judaism comprises both *halakhah* and midrash, both prescribed behavior and intellectual openness and development. . . .

Do you want to know what Conservative Judaism is? It's *pshat* and *drash*. There is no elegant translation of the two terms; the best I can do is "the literal translation" and "the allegorical translation." And that is what Conservative Judaism is about."¹

The use of such antonyms emphasizes that Conservative Judaism is a centrist movement which lies somewhere between the poles of Orthodoxy and Reform rather than describing Conservative theology in a positive fashion.²

It is important to note that Conservative Judaism shares this characteristic with rabbinic Judaism, for although rabbinic Judaism provides a wealth of theological statements, it provides no systematic statement of theology. Mishnah Tractate *Avot*, often purported to be a cohesive articulation of rabbinic theology, is essentially a diverse collection of aphorisms and exhortations. Within the vast corpus of rabbinic literature is evidence that God is immanent and transcendent; that study, ethics and prayer each constitute the quintessential act of piety; that Torah develops over the centuries and that it was received *in toto* at Sinai, that suffering is good and that it is bad. Every theological claim seems to have its opposite. Consequently the ambitious projects which sought to collect all relevant sources in order to produce a "definitive rabbinic theology" have been abandoned.

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Faced with this impasse, scholars have turned increasingly to the prayer book in an effort to define rabbinic theology. Whether the rabbis composed and instituted prayers or whether they gave their approval to a liturgy which evolved gradually and derived from disparate sources, the final product undoubtedly contains their fundamental beliefs. Unorthodox statements were excised from the liturgy even if they were tolerated in other documents, such as midrashic collections. Thus the three passages of the *sh'ma* professing belief in the unity of God, the Torah, reward and punishment and redemption are a more precise and clear statement of rabbinic theology than the results of attempts to derive theological consensus from rabbinic literature.

Given the problems that Conservative Judaism has experienced in clearly articulating its theology, a logical way to gain a theological understanding of the movement is to imitate the scholars of rabbinic theology and to turn to the liturgy. A prayer book published by institutions of the Conservative movement should contain its fundamental theological beliefs. Both the Reform movement in nineteenth-century Germany and Mordecai Kaplan's Reconstructionist movement in twentieth-century America published prayer books in order to give expression to their theologies and formally reject the theology expressed by the traditional liturgy. The same is undoubtedly true for the Conservative movement. Indeed, Robert Gordis has observed that "the *Sabbath and Festival Prayer Book* probably did more than any other single undertaking to give coherence and self-definition to the growing movement of Conservative Judaism."³ The publication of a new Conservative prayer book, *Siddur Sim Shalom*,⁴ affords us an excellent opportunity to study the current liturgy of the Conservative movement in order to understand its theology. Published with the imprimatur of the Rabbinical Assembly and The United Synagogue of America and already used in many Conservative congregations, *Siddur Sim Shalom* embodies the current theology of Conservative Judaism.

In the following pages we shall analyze the theology of *Siddur Sim Shalom*. Almost every aspect of a prayer book, including its format and style, can be important theologically. Two aspects, however, are paramount in importance. These are the changes introduced into the Hebrew text and the English translations of the prayers.

Changes introduced into the Hebrew text provide the clearest expression of theology for the simple reason that the Conservative movement is indeed conservative, and tends to break with precedent only where a compelling necessity is perceived. In terms of the liturgy, unacceptable theology is most often the compelling necessity which motivates change. This is certainly true of the two prayer books which *Siddur Sim Shalom* is designed to replace, the *Sabbath and Festival Prayerbook*⁵ of 1946 (henceforth *Sabbath*), and the *Weekday Prayer Book*⁶ of 1961 (henceforth

Weekday). Both of these prayer books take the traditional Ashkenazic liturgy as their starting point⁷ and alter it only in areas of theological concern. For example, as is well known, *Sabbath* changes the text of the *musaf amidah* from *na'aseh venakriv* (we will present and sacrifice) to *asu vehikrivu* (they [our ancestors] presented and sacrificed). This minor textual change expresses the belief that the Conservative movement does not wish the sacrificial system to be restored. In order to discover the theology of *Siddur Sim Shalom*, its Hebrew text will be compared with the texts which serve as its starting point, namely, those of *Sabbath* and *Weekday*, and, where these prayer books fail us, with the traditional liturgy. We are particularly interested in tracing patterns and focuses of change from *Sabbath* to *Weekday* to *Siddur Sim Shalom* (henceforth *Sim Shalom*) in order to pinpoint the development of Conservative theology.

Translations are the second major aspect used to identify theological concerns, because translations offer a means of dealing with unacceptable theology where the decision is made to retain the Hebrew text. Now it is true that a translation cannot capture every nuance, shade of meaning or ambiguity of the original since there is rarely a one-to-one correspondence between the vocabularies and grammars of different languages, much less different modes of thought, concepts and cultural idioms. Consequently, a certain dissonance between a translation and the original is inevitable. This is especially true of a sensitive subject such as liturgy, in which the goal of the translation is not merely to translate but simultaneously to provide a devotional text. Yet, even when these factors are taken into account, the translation can be expected to be faithful to the original. When we carefully study the translations of *Sim Shalom*, however, we can discern certain points at which the translation diverges greatly from the original. These divergences are often too great to be explained by such factors. They are attributable to a feeling of theological discomfort with the original; that is, the beliefs expressed in the Hebrew text did not cohere—or even clashed—with the beliefs of those responsible for the text. In many of these cases the translation is not accurate but rather inserts theological convictions into the text. By isolating and studying these divergences, the theological beliefs of the translators can be seen. Since these translations represent Conservative Judaism, the theology of Conservative Judaism will emerge from our study.

Methodologically, however, a note of caution is in order. There is sometimes no clear, plain sense to the Hebrew. The objection may be made that the translation does its best to faithfully reproduce the sense of the Hebrew and hence no theological bias can be “proved” from translations. Divergence from the Hebrew may be due to error, misunderstanding, stylization and so forth. Nevertheless, the translations of *Sim Shalom* are generally exact and authentic. Divergences from the Hebrew do not occur randomly. They occur in predictable instances and persistent patterns, and are most plausibly explained by theological discomfort.⁸ Furthermore, we shall show that the translator of *Sim Shalom* rejected the translations of

Sabbath and *Weekday* in these instances while borrowing freely in other cases, both where theology was not an issue and where theological discomfort was shared. Moreover, we shall combine evidence from translation with other evidence to make our claims. Therefore a careful study of translation can inform us as to the theology of the prayer book.

In addition to changes in the Hebrew text and the translations, we shall focus on the instructions to the reader, supplementary readings and introductions to the prayers as sources for theology.

Pluralism and Revelation

Sim Shalom fully testifies to the Conservative movement's espousal of pluralism, which we shall tentatively define as the belief that a plurality of conflicting practices, rituals or interpretations is valid. In the context of the prayer book, a belief in pluralism recognizes that a plurality of liturgies is legitimate. This recognition is expressed throughout *Sim Shalom* in that multiple versions of many prayers are provided. There are three versions of the weekday *amidah* (pp. 106–123, 228–235), two versions of the Sabbath evening and Sabbath morning *amidot* (pp. 296–302, 354–365, 328–330), six (!) versions of the Sabbath *musaf amidah* (pp. 328–330, 430–455), and also several versions of the festival *amidot*. The number of available options is further increased by the addition of the directions "Some congregations add" (e.g., pp. 43–4) to certain passages of the various *amidot*. Alternatives are provided for *birkat hamazon* (pp. 754–769, 778–781), the psalm recited in a house of mourning (43–5), *magein avot* (p. 315), the meditations following the *amidah* (pp. 120–123, 302–3, 312–3), and *tahanun* (pp. 128–135). These examples recognize that both congregational and individual practices may vary.

Providing multiple (or alternative) versions of certain prayers is an expression of a belief in pluralism. Multiple versions do not simply reflect the existence of diversity without conferring approval. They are necessarily prescriptive as well as descriptive, both bearing testimony to the existence of different practices in Conservative congregations and simultaneously giving legitimacy to those differences. The theological claim is that no monolithic liturgy exists. Many variations of the prayers are acceptable. In the words of the introduction to the prayer book: "There are many paths, many ways" (p. xxix).

The question naturally arises as to the limits of permissible practices within this pluralistic theology. Can anything be substituted for the "traditional" formulation of the prayers? Or are certain alternatives legitimate while others are not? If the latter, then how do we distinguish between the legitimate and the illegitimate? Or does *Sim Shalom* espouse what has been coined "halakhic pluralism," the doctrine that practices based upon halakhic sources and reasoning are legitimate while those which lack them are not? The answer seems to be that limits do exist, but these are ill-defined and broad. Many of the alternatives provided derive

from halakhic sources. The alternative meditation following the weekday *amidah* (p. 123) is based in part on a prayer found in the Babylonian Talmud (*Berakhot* 7a).⁹ Of the passages provided for *tahanun*, one is taken from the prayer book of Rav Saadia Gaon and one from Rav Amram Gaon (pp. 130–1, 132–3). So, too, a variant phrase in the text of *magein avot* follows Rav Saadia Gaon while the traditional phrase is called an alternative (p. 315).¹⁰ The introduction states that the scriptural passages in the *musaf amidah* which mention sacrifices “are preceded by the rubric ‘Some congregations add,’ indicating that these passages are optional. This view follows the view of the twelfth-century Rabbi Moses Maimonides (Rambam)” (pp. xxiv–v). Thus the innovations introduced in these prayers are based on halakhic sources—the Talmud, the Geonim, and Maimonides. On the other hand, there is a great deal of innovation which derives from a variety of non-halakhic sources. The alternative *amidot* in English were prepared by Rabbi Andre Ungar, who serves a congregation in New Jersey. One version of the middle passage of the Sabbath *musaf amidah* is “based on the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel” (p. 449).¹¹ Alternative passages for the benedictions surrounding the *sh’ma* are authored by or adapted from Martin Buber, A. M. Klein, Abraham Joshua Heschel and Andre Ungar (pp. 279–293). Substantial portions of the liturgy clearly derive from non-halakhic sources and are nonetheless legitimate, even in cases of the most important prayers.

On the other hand, there is at least one indication that there are certain limits to the acceptable liturgy and hence that not everything is valid. This indication appears in the instructions to the Sabbath and Festival evening service (pp. 279–293). These pages are divided in two. The traditional liturgy appears above the line while English readings, together with the conclusion of each benediction in Hebrew, appear below. An introduction to the service suggests that the readings are supplemental yet recognizes that some congregations (“for purposes of instruction”) may build their service exclusively from the readings. In these cases the congregation should nonetheless conclude with the “translation above the line, or the passage at the bottom of the page which ends with the Hebrew *berakhah*” (p. 279). It is theologically acceptable to replace the traditional liturgy with thematically related English readings; it is unacceptable to stray too far from the standard arrangement of benedictions (the *matbeia*). Unfortunately, the reasons why this is the case are not detailed. With respect to the *sh’ma*, however, a parenthetical note in the instructions indicates that the supplementary readings may not be substituted for the “required passage.” Yet such readings are provided below the text! It would appear from the foregoing discussion that: (1) there is a plurality of acceptable practices, (2) not every practice is acceptable, (3) some legitimate practices do not derive from halakhic sources; *Sim Shalom* rejects the doctrine of “halakhic pluralism,” (4) it cannot be determined what criteria separate legitimate practices from illegitimate practices.

The acknowledgement of pluralism is a striking aspect of *Sim Shalom*. Yet it is not without precedent. While *Sabbath* did not reflect or acknowledge pluralism, *Weekday* did, albeit in a limited way. In *Weekday*, alternative versions of the *musaf amidah* are provided (pp. 183–191, 193–204) and are acknowledged as such in the introduction (p. 8). From this kernel there developed the plethora of alternatives offered by *Sim Shalom* and concomitantly the bold and pervasive espousal of pluralism.

Closely connected with pluralism is another significant belief, namely, the legitimacy of contemporary innovation. Although Jewish liturgy as a whole was never canonized or fixed in a static form, individual parts of the service which at one point in history were fluid tended to become fixed at a later point. Many prayers which circulated in a fluid state in the Amoraic period became fixed in the Geonic period; prayers which were fluid in the Geonic period became fixed in the subsequent centuries, and so forth. The printing press accelerated this process tremendously, since naturally the liturgical material that happened to be printed became authoritative. Liturgical innovation has all but ceased in most of the Orthodox world, both as a result of this process and as a reaction to the radical innovations introduced by the Reform movement. This attitude translates theologically into the belief that we are bound by the past. The golden age of Judaism is over, the giants of Torah are no more; consequently we have no right to create anew, much less reject or deviate from inherited tradition. In the words of the great nineteenth-century leader of Hungarian Jewry, Rabbi Moses Sofer, “anything new is forbidden by the Torah.”

Sim Shalom, in contrast, presents a stunning array of innovation and creativity. New liturgies have been created for Israel’s Independence Day and Holocaust Memorial Day. A prayer for peace has entered *birkat hamazon* and the Sabbath Torah service (pp. 416–7, 766–7). More significant than additions to the already existing liturgy, however, is the fact that multiple versions are offered for prayers heretofore considered to possess fixed wordings. That alternative forms of the *amidah* and the evening service are legitimate is a striking statement; all the more striking is the fact that the alternatives were not culled from halakhic sources but were composed by our contemporaries. Theologically this translates into a powerful affirmation of the present and a rejection of the idea that our age is inherently inferior to the great ages of the past. In addition, an emphasis on autonomy is discernible. No longer will an orthodox liturgy be dictated to the masses. One may make decisions about what liturgy is appropriate for oneself. Indeed, there is a persistent stress on the validity of an individual’s personal prayers at specific prescribed times. Thus the introduction to *tahanun* advises that: “Any words or thoughts that one cares to offer are appropriate at this point, from a brief reflection to a lengthy expression of deep feelings. Suggested texts follow. You are free to supplement or replace the texts . . .” (p. 129). The introduction includes a discussion of individual prayer which suggests:

Each person must find his or her own appropriate path. Your personal involvement is more important than your reading rate. . . . It is difficult for many individuals to appreciate the fact that their own words of prayer or reflection are as authentic at certain times as those of an ancient or medieval sage. Individuals should be encouraged to overcome the difficulties of expressing their own prayers . . . (pp. xxix-xxx).¹²

These passages are not motivated simply by a desire to improve the quality of devotion. They reflect a belief in individual autonomy. At certain points in the service, one's own words are as authentic and valid an expression of prayer as those composed in the past. Hence the contemporary creativity and innovation displayed throughout the prayer book are justified.

Behind the belief in autonomy and the affirmation of contemporary creativity stands a particular view of revelation, namely, that revelation is progressive. For *Sim Shalom*, revelation is not the disclosure of a body of doctrine which occurred at a specific time in history, but an ongoing process which continually occurs. It is for this reason that creativity and innovation are legitimate. Newly composed prayers express this generation's understanding of God's word, just as the traditional liturgy expresses the understandings of previous generations. An individual's prayers are legitimate because each individual can respond to the ongoing revelation. That this is the understanding of revelation implicit in *Sim Shalom* is seen clearly in supplementary readings for the benediction preceding the *sh'ma*. These passages claim that:

Revelation does not deal with the mystery of God, but with a person's life as it should be lived in the presence of that mystery. . . .

[Torah] is as close to us as we allow it, on our lips, in our heart, integral to our deeds. . . .

Revelation is not vicarious thinking. Its purpose is not to substitute for but to extend our understanding. We must look for ways of translating biblical commandments into programs required by our conditions . . . (p. 282).¹³

What stands out in these sentences is the conviction that revelation is not an event or series of events which happened in the past, but rather an aspect of life, "integral to our deeds" and dependent on our conditions; in short, a process. It follows that innovation and creativity are legitimate aspects of the eternal process of understanding God's ongoing revelation. And each individual has the potential to contribute to that understanding.

From Sacrifices to Ethics

An important and persistent theological motif in *Sim Shalom* is the de-emphasis of sacrifices and the emphasis upon ethics. The strength of this shift is evident from the rabbinic passages at the end of the early morning service (pp. 14-19). In the traditional liturgy, passages detailing the laws of sacrifices conclude this service, culminating with the introduction to

the *Sifra*, based on the belief that studying the laws of sacrifices could achieve atonement just as offering sacrifices had done while the Temple still stood. These passages have been replaced by passages stressing ethics. The reason for the replacement, as explained in the introduction to the prayer book, is that “deeds of lovingkindness must now atone for sin” (p. xxv). But the message of *Sim Shalom* is not only that ethics are now effective atonement. It is also that sacrifices are no longer effective. Thus the initial passage of this section reads:

Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai once was walking with his disciple Rabbi Joshua near Jerusalem after the destruction of the Temple. Rabbi Joshua looked at the Temple ruins and said: “Alas for us! The place which atoned for the sins of the people Israel through the ritual of animal sacrifice lies in ruins!” Then Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai spoke to him these words of comfort: “Be not grieved, my son. There is another way of gaining atonement even though the Temple is destroyed. We must now gain atonement through deeds of lovingkindness.” For it is written, “Lovingkindness I desire, not sacrifice” (Hosea 6:6).¹⁴

Hence the theological argument is two-sided. The stress on ethical behavior is complemented by a rejection of sacrifices.

Over and above this passage there is a great deal of evidence which reveals theological discomfort with sacrifices, the temple and the cult. The *berakhah aḥaronah* deletes the words *ve’al mizbaḥekha* which petition God for mercy upon His altar (p. 782). The first petition after the Torah reading, *lekhonein et beit ḥayeinu* is translated “to assure the holiness of Jerusalem, our city” although it traditionally has been understood to refer to the Temple (p. 147).¹⁵ So, too, the translation of *ma’oz tzur* omits reference to *ḥanukat hamizbeiaḥ*, the dedication of the altar (p. 243).

The major de-emphasis of sacrifices, however, occurs in the treatment of the *musaf amidot*. First, as was noted above, the statement “Some congregations add” which precedes the Scriptural passages detailing the appropriate sacrifices in every *musaf amidah* indicates that these passages are optional. Second, the *musaf* for Rosh Ḥodesh deletes the petition: “Thou wilt set up a new altar in Zion; upon it we will offer new moon offerings and acceptable sacrifices. All of us will rejoice in the service of the sanctuary and in the psalms of thy servant David which will be heard in thy city and recited before thy altar.”¹⁶ Third, the alternative *musaf amidot* progressively eliminate mention of sacrifices. In fact, the five alternatives for the Sabbath *musaf amidah* do not mention sacrifices at all (pp. 329, 446–449).¹⁷ The “alternative” passage for the Festival *musaf amidah* omits the petition to rebuild the Temple. In fact, this “alternative” passage is placed above the traditional version, thus creating the impression that it is primary while the traditional version is an alternative. Thus, *Sim Shalom* uses three methods to de-emphasize sacrifices and the cult: deleting such passages from the text, minimizing their importance by portraying them as optional or secondary, and providing alternatives. The theology goes beyond the belief that the resumption of sacrificial worship

should no longer be prayed for. Even the necessity of remembering the historical existence of the cult in the liturgy is questioned.

The de-emphasis of sacrifices in *Sim Shalom* continues the trend that originated in *Sabbath* and was expanded in *Weekday*. As we have seen, *Sabbath* changed the text of the *musaf amidah* from *na'ase venakriv* (we will present and sacrifice) to *asu vehikrivu* (they presented and sacrificed). The Scriptural references to sacrifices appeared in the Hebrew but were only alluded to in the translation, further minimizing their importance (pp. 141, 151–2). In addition, the petition to accept the “fire offerings of Israel” was removed from all versions of the *amidah*. In *Weekday*, two versions of the *musaf amidot* for Rosh Hodesh and Hōl Hamo’ed are printed (pp. 182–205). In the Rosh Hodesh *amidah* the version above the line omits all reference to sacrifices and the Temple, replacing them with a petition to “accept with favor and with love the prayers of Your people Israel, wherever they dwell.” The “alternate version,” printed below the line, is closer to the traditional version. It retains the mention of sacrifices (in the *asu vehikrivu* form) and their Scriptural references, but deletes the petition to rebuild the Temple (quoted above). The Hōl Hamo’ed *amidah* is treated in a similar fashion.

Seen in this light, the anti-sacrificial tone of *Sim Shalom* has deep roots in the liturgy of the Conservative movement. *Sim Shalom* goes beyond its predecessors in its efforts to minimize references to the cult, but its methods and message resemble those pioneered in both *Sabbath* and *Weekday*. Yet a development in theology can be seen. Sacrifices in *Sabbath* were a necessary element of the *musaf amidah* as a testimony to the history of Jewish worship.¹⁸ In *Weekday* and *Sim Shalom*, mention of sacrifices is dispensable.

We have shown that the de-emphasis of sacrifices is more extensive than the replacement of rabbinic passages concerning sacrifices with those emphasizing ethics. It is also true that the emphasis on ethics goes beyond this replacement. A notable addition to the early morning service is the prayer: “I hereby accept the obligation of fulfilling my Creator’s mitzvah in the Torah: Love your neighbor as yourself” (p. 11; this meditation derives from the prayerbook of Rabbi Isaac Luria). Thus *Sim Shalom* proclaims the importance of leading an ethical life from its outset. The ethical emphasis can also be perceived in the choice of prayers which comprise the *tahanun* service (pp. 126–137). Only two of the passages parallel those printed in *Weekday*, which, taken directly from the traditional liturgy, stress primarily the sinfulness, humility and unworthiness of man. (“Excessive self-abasement” are the words of the introduction [p. xxv].) The passages in *Sim Shalom*, in contrast, do not stress as much the low and humble state of man. While several passages petition God not to abandon His people and to show mercy, others petition for wisdom, understanding, modesty, humility, a good portion in life, reverence of God and peace. In this way, the virtues necessary to lead an ethical life become a major focus of *tahanun*.

A fundamental aspect of the ethical vision of *Sim Shalom*, as the title implies, is that of peace.¹⁹ A prayer for peace is added to the Sabbath Torah service (p. 417). "May the Merciful cause peace to dwell among us" enters *birkat hamazon* (p. 767). Furthermore, a strong tendency to disassociate God from war and destruction can be discerned. The translation of *al hanisim* (p. 117), following the translation of *Weekday* (p. 64) does not mention *hamilhamot she'asita la'avoteinu*, literally, "the wars You wrought for our ancestors," which *Sabbath* translates as: "Thy victories in battles our forefathers fought" (p. 100). The first benediction of the morning service describes God as *ba'al milhamot*, translated in *Sim Shalom* by "championing justice" (p. 99). This follows "champion of justice" of *Weekday* (p. 45), although *Sabbath* offered "triumphant in battle" (p. 91). In addition to the disassociation of God from war, images of God as vindictive and brutal are minimized. In the benediction before the *sh'ma*, *kol bekhoreihem haragta ubekhorkha ga'alta* becomes: "The firstborn of the Egyptians were slain; Your firstborn were saved" (p. 105). Both Hebrew verbs are in the active, hence the translation should be: "You slew the firstborn of the Egyptians; You saved Your firstborn." But it is theologically unsettling to say that God killed, hence the translation switches both verbs to the passive²⁰ (*Weekday* does the same, p. 51). In *avinu malkeinu*, the petition *nekom nikmat dam avadekha hashafukh*, "avenge the blood of Your servants that was spilled," is omitted from both the Hebrew and the English. (It appears in *Weekday* with the translation 'remember the innocent blood of Your servants' [p. 69].)

The reason why it is so crucial that God be a God of love and peace, not war and violence, is that the doctrine of *imitatio dei*, the imitation of God, lies at the heart of the theology of *Sim Shalom*. Among the rabbinic passages which focus on ethics is the classic source for this doctrine:

"To walk in all His ways" (Deuteronomy 11:22). These are the ways of the Holy One: "gracious and compassionate, patient, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, assuring love for a thousand generations, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, and granting pardon . . ." (Exodus 34:6). This means that just as God is gracious and compassionate, you too must be gracious and compassionate. "The Lord is righteous in all His ways and loving in all His deeds" (Ps. 145:17). As the Holy One is righteous, you too must be righteous. As the Holy One is loving, you too must be loving (pp. 18-9).²¹

The ethical vision of *Sim Shalom* is based on an ethical God. Therefore God is removed from war and linked with peace, love, compassion and justice.

The Status of Women

From its outset *Sim Shalom* proclaims that the status of women is equal to that of men in the theology of the prayer book. The passages preceding the morning benedictions contain both masculine and feminine forms (p. 10). The *mi shebeirakh* prayers contain forms for both male and female called to

the Torah, male and female who are ill, a *bar mitzvah* and a *bat mitzvah* (pp. 142-5, 402-9). The special invitations for the coveted *aliyot* for concluding and beginning the Torah on Simḥat Torah, *ḥatan hatorah* and *ḥatan bereishit*, now have forms for *kallat hatorah* and *kallat bereishit* (pp. 554-7). Even the meditations prior to putting on *tallit* and *tefillin* provide masculine and feminine forms (pp. 2-4). The significance of this should not be underestimated. *Sim Shalom* expresses the belief that women may wear *tallit* and *tefillin* and pronounce the benediction which asserts that God has given them those mitzvot.²²

A second means of improving the status of women is to modify or delete passages of prayers which could offend women, especially those which reflect a male-centered congregation. Borrowing the innovation of *Sabbath*, the benediction "who has not made me a woman" becomes "who made me in His image" (pp. 10-11). The Prayer for the Congregation following the Sabbath Torah service reads: "bless the entire congregation with all holy congregations; them, their sons and daughters and all that is theirs" (pp. 414-5). In *Sabbath* the reading is "them, their wives, their sons, their daughters" which draws a distinction between the congregation (men) and their wives, essentially eliminating women from the congregation (p. 128). Similarly the *yehi ratzon* following the weekday Torah Reading reads "may He safeguard them (the learned) and their families (*heim umishpehoteihem*, pp. 146-7) where *Weekday* reads "them and their wives" (*heim unesheihem*, p. 87).²³ These changes advance the belief that women are full members in the congregation.

A third tendency of *Sim Shalom* related to the status of women is the beginning of a shift to a non-gendered text or equal-gendered text. Traditional prayers appeal to male figures to a far greater extent than to female heroines. *Sim Shalom* often attempts to equalize these references. In the alternative *amidah* (pp. 232, 328, 331), the first benediction of the *amidah* which invokes the "God of Abraham, of Isaac, of Jacob" becomes "Abraham and Sarah, Rebecca and Isaac, Jacob, Rachel, and Leah stood in awe before You." In the aforementioned Prayer for the Congregation and in the *mi shebeirakh* prayers, both the Hebrew and the translation mention the matriarchs as well as the patriarchs (pp. 402-7, 414). On the other hand, where the Hebrew mentions Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in *uva'leziyon*, the translation gives the non-gendered "ancestors" (pp. 156-7). In the blessing following the *sh'ma*, *ashrei ha-ish* (happy the man) is translated "Happy the one" (p. 104-5). *Avoteinu* is regularly translated "ancestors" although *Sabbath* employs "forefathers."

Yet *Sim Shalom* is not a fully egalitarian prayer book, at least not according to rigorous feminist standards. God is still masculine. The pronouns for God are universally "He," "Him" and "His." God is "Lord," not "Sovereign," "Father," not "Parent." In any case, the improvement in the implied status of women in *Sim Shalom* is a natural continuation of the process initiated by *Sabbath* and continued in *Weekday*. And as with the shift from sacrifices to ethics, *Sim Shalom*

embodies a much more powerful and confident statement. We might well expect that the next Conservative prayer book will be fully egalitarian.

The Election of Israel

The election of Israel has been a source of embarrassment and apologetic for centuries. *Sim Shalom* too shows theological discomfort with references to Israel as chosen by God. The Hebrew root *bhr*, typically understood as “chosen,” is often translated by “loved.” For example, the benediction preceding the *sh'ma* is translated: “Praised are You, Lord who loves His people Israel” (*haboher be'amo yisra'el* (pp. 98–9). In contrast, *Sabbath* translates “who in love hast chosen Thy people Israel” (p. 91) while *Weekday* translates “who chose your people Israel in love” (p. 46). Similarly, the blessing preceding the *haftarah* is “praised are You, Lord who loves (*haboher*) the Torah, Moses His servant, Israel His people . . . (pp. 410–11) where *Sabbath* has “who hast chosen the Torah, Thy servant Moses, Thy people Israel . . . (p. 126). In the Sabbath morning *amidah*, *lezera ya'akov asher bam baharta* becomes “Your beloved descendants of Jacob” rather than “the descendants of Jacob whom you chose” or the like (p. 359). (In this example *Sim Shalom* parallels the translation of *Sabbath* [p. 98].) Now it should not be denied that “love” is one meaning of the root *bhr*. But the translators of *Sim Shalom* nevertheless reveal their theology by consistently giving preference to “loved” over “chosen” and consciously rejecting the translation of *Sabbath* and *Weekday* wherever they employ “chosen.” The translation of the first lines of *aleinu* is also illuminating. *Sabbath* translates: “He hath not made us like the pagans of the world, nor placed us like the heathen tribes of the earth; He hath not made our destiny as theirs nor cast our lot with all their multitude” (p. 158). This translation already tones down the strength of the Hebrew by translating *goyei ha'aratzot* and *mishpehot ha'adamah* as “pagans” and “heathen tribes” rather than “families of the earth” and “other nations.” *Sim Shalom* translates: “He made our lot unlike that of other people, assigning to us a unique destiny” (p. 161). Four clauses are reduced to two. Israel is no longer “made” or “placed” unlike other nations, yet Israel does retain a “unique destiny.” What this means theologically is open to interpretation. To a certain degree every people has a unique destiny since the destinies of no two peoples are identical. Understood in this sense, the translation turns the election into a relative quality. Israel has been chosen for her destiny just as other nations have been chosen for their own. This interpretation probably overstates the case although it is not impossible. A more likely interpretation is that Israel is not “chosen” in the absolute sense, that is to say, there is nothing inherently special about the Jewish people. But Israel is special, elect and chosen insofar as it fulfills its destiny, which, as we have seen, is to be a holy and ethical people. Being chosen does not inhere in the Jewish people; it is a responsibility which must be pursued actively.

There is good evidence that this is the correct interpretation of the concept of election in *Sim Shalom*. Election, when mentioned in the translations of benedictions, is always linked to mitzvot or Torah by the preposition "by." Thus the benediction for an *aliyah* is translated: ". . . who has chosen us from among all peoples *by* giving us His Torah (p. 141)." "By" is certainly a valid translation of the *vav* conjunctive of *venatan*, but so is "and," which would render the translation: "who has chosen us among all people *and* has given us His Torah." Theologically there is a subtle but significant difference. The use of "by" implies that the election is connected to the responsibility of Torah. Jews are chosen only insofar as they uphold the Torah. The use of "and" implies that the election is unconditional and absolute. Though no changes are introduced into the Hebrew text, this technique is employed in many contexts throughout the prayer book. Thus the Festival *amidah* reads: "You have chosen (*behartanu*) us of all nations for Your service *by* loving and cherishing us as bearers of Your Torah" (p. 371). (Note that the words "for Your service" do not appear in the Hebrew; they serve to reinforce the notion of the election as responsibility and service.) The *kiddush* for Festivals reads: ". . . who has chosen (*baḥar*) and distinguished us from among all others *by* adding holiness to our lives with His mitzvot (p. 319). The *kiddush* for Sabbath reads: "Thus You have chosen us, endowing us with holiness, from among all peoples *by* granting us Your holy Shabbat lovingly and gladly (p. 319). (*Sabbath* translates: "Thou didst choose us from among the peoples *and* in Thy love and favor didst sanctify us in giving us Thy holy Sabbath [p. 28].) It seems that for *Sim Shalom* the election of Israel is a task, not a gift. The Jewish people have been given the Torah, the Sabbath and the mitzvot, and must uphold them responsibly, for, if they do not, they then have no claim to being elect.

Discomfort with the idea of election is complemented by a growing universalist sensitivity. *Sabbath* expanded the benediction for peace in the morning *amidah* to include the whole world, not just Israel, by adding the word *ba'olam* ("unto the world," [p. 101]). *Sim Shalom* has done the same with the parallel petition in the afternoon and evening *amidot*. The benediction now reads: "Grant true and lasting peace to Your people Israel and to *all who dwell on earth* (pp. 184-5). This example shows that the discomfort with the election and emphasis on universalism of *Sim Shalom* is a development of the theology in *Sabbath* and *Weekday*.

Commandments and Mitzvot

Another area of theological discomfort for *Sim Shalom* seems to be the concept of commandments. The word "mitzvah" has merited a wide spectrum of English translations including commandment, statute, precept, law, folkway, tradition, custom, good deed and duty. However, it is derived from the root *zvh* whose basic meaning is "to command." Thus *Sabbath* and *Weekday* often translate mitzvah as "commandment" or

“precept” and the verb *metzaveh* as “command.” *Sim Shalom* tries to avoid such translations by transliterating. *Mitzvah* is transliterated as “mitzvah”; *tzivanu* and *metzaveh* become “gave us the mitzvah” and “gives the mitzvah.” The standard benediction changes from “blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with Thy precepts and enjoined on us . . .” (*Sabbath*) and “praised are You, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who sanctified us with Your commandments and commanded us to . . .” (*Weekday*) to “praised are You, Lord our God, King of the universe whose mitzvot add holiness to our life and who gave us the mitzvah to . . .” in *Sim Shalom*. Except for a handful of cases, this technique is used in the translation.²⁴ Printing “mitzvah” in English avoids the problem of translating and thereby imposing an interpretation on a foreign concept. But one might assume that the decision to transliterate here has a deeper motivation. Translating conceals the meaning of “mitzvah,” thereby eliminating the discomfort of understanding “mitzvah” as “commandment.” The choice of verb for *metzaveh*—gave the mitzvah—betrays the theological discomfort. If mitzvot are given, not commanded, God is not a master and we are not slaves. Theologically, this calls into question the concept of obligation. Are Jews obligated to perform mitzvot, or are mitzvot “given” as a system of ethics and rituals which lead to a hallowed life should one choose to perform them? *Sim Shalom*’s answer is ambiguous. Clearly the nature of the mitzvot is a theological issue which is as yet undecided in current Conservative theology. Perhaps the clearest indication of the direction of the trend is the supplemental reading to the second benediction after the *sh’ma*:

“Seek peace and pursue it” (Psalm 34:14). The Torah does not obligate us to pursue the mitzvot, but only to fulfill them at their proper time, at the appropriate occasion. Peace, however, must be sought at all times; at home and away from home we are obliged to seek peace and pursue it (292).²⁵

Mysticism and Hassidism

A surprising mystical and Hassidic influence appears in *Sim Shalom*, as is illustrated by the numerous additions to the prayer book which originated in these movements. The Blessing for the New Moon (*kiddush levanah*) appears at the end of the Sabbath liturgy (pp. 704–5). This service was extremely popular among Kabbalists who identified the moon with the *Shekhinah*. Certainly the attempt to provide a comprehensive prayer book may have motivated its inclusion, but considering that it is hardly the most popular service of the liturgy today, the growing influence of mysticism and Hassidism must be responsible in part. Indeed, the service begins in *Sim Shalom* with Rabbi Yoḥanan’s statement, “whoever blesses the new moon at the proper time is considered as having welcomed the presence of the *Shekhinah*,” although this statement is not a true part of the service, nor does it appear in any other prayer book as part of the

liturgy (It is taken from *Sanhedrin* 42a). Another mystical element incorporated into *Sim Shalom* is the *raza deshabat*, the "Vision of Shabbat," which precedes the Sabbath evening service (p. 278). Taken from the Zohar, this passage vividly depicts the enthronement of the *Shekhinah* which occurs every Sabbath. Several of the alternative meditations which follow the *amidot* stress joy and request freedom from *atzvut* (sorrow) in classic Hassidic fashion. In fact, a number of these meditations are based on the teachings of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav (pp. 302-3, 312-3). Most benedictions for mitzvot (e.g., counting the *Omer* and putting on *tefillin*) are preceded by *kavanot* (meditations) which were introduced into the liturgy by the Kabbalists. The emphasis on individual devotion and the importance of finding prayers that are meaningful in a personal way are also familiar Hassidic themes. This is not to deny that Hassidism and mysticism have had a tremendous influence on the traditional liturgy, but only to point out that many additions to *Sim Shalom* which do not appear in *Sabbath* or *Weekday* derive from such sources. Thus the theology of *Sim Shalom* contains aspects of Hassidism and mysticism.

Conclusion

The theology of *Sim Shalom* continues the development of a theology which began in *Sabbath* and further evolved in *Weekday*. An understanding of that theology could be presented as follows: God is good, loving, compassionate and peaceful. In accord with the doctrine of *imitatio dei*, we must lead ethical lives, striving for peace and justice. Revelation is an ongoing process which continually occurs. Therefore we are not bound by the institutions or decisions of the past, and certainly no one correct liturgy exists. Many forms of prayers are legitimate and each person should find prayers that are meaningful to him. Nor are we restricted to prayers that appear in halakhic sources. Contemporary creativity and innovation are perfectly valid. Furthermore, part of the understanding of revelation today is that women are full members of the congregation and may perform all rituals. Mitzvot are not really commanded by God; they are given to us to sanctify our lives. Israel has no absolute claim to be a chosen people. But Israel has received the Torah and mitzvot and is responsible for upholding them.

Whence comes this theology? Two main sources appear: the teachings of Abraham Joshua Heschel and those of Mordecai Kaplan.

Heschel is well known for his campaigns for social justice and is widely perceived as a model for ethical living. The importance of prayer and meaningful devotion was a subject on which Heschel wrote extensively. Heschel came from a prominent Hassidic family. The theology expressed in his writings is heavily influenced by Lurianic Kabbalah. In fact, it is often said that much of Heschel's writing was an attempt to translate Jewish mysticism into Western categories. Thus the stress on ethics and

prayer, the concept of revelation and the Hassidic and mystical influence in *Sim Shalom* derive from Heschel's teachings. It should be no surprise that Heschel's writings are quoted in more than twenty places in *Sim Shalom*.

Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionism, understood Judaism to be a religious civilization. Judaism is not an inherited, ancient religion; it is made up of the customs, rituals and practices of Jews, whatever those are. Therefore contemporary innovation is as legitimate and vital a part of Judaism as is tradition. Mitzvot are not commandments, but rather the structures of Jewish civilization. For Kaplan, Israel is not a chosen people; it is a people among all others. And the status of women in Judaism should be equal to that of men, as it is in our day and age. Thus the theological discomfort which *Sim Shalom* displays with the election and with commandments derive from Kaplan's teachings, as does the improved status of women. Kaplan, too, is quoted often in the prayer book.

If, as we suggest, the theology of *Sim Shalom* reflects the theology of Conservative Judaism, then these conclusions apply equally well to Conservative theology today. Conservative Judaism should be understood as the product of the teachings of Abraham Joshua Heschel and Mordecai Kaplan. Ethics are the foundation of life, revelation is progressive, pluralism and innovation abound, and, with respect to liturgy and ritual, men and women are equal. At the same time, the election of Israel and the definition of mitzvot are concepts undergoing serious scrutiny.

NOTES

1. Ismar Schorsch, "A Moment interview with Ismar Schorsch," *Moment Magazine*, XXXI:2 (June 1987), pp. 21, 24.

2. *Emet ve-Emunah: Statement of Principles of Conservative Judaism* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1988), published after this paper was written, only underscores this point. The wide spectrum of beliefs legitimated by the pamphlet indicates how difficult it is to make any defined claim about Conservative theology. Thus an interesting reversal has occurred: whereas the founders eschewed theological statements, Conservative leaders today affirm a wide range of theological positions. The outcome is the same.

3. Robert Gordis, "The Struggle for Self-definition in Conservative Judaism," *Conservative Judaism*, XXXIX:3 (Spring 1987), pp. 7-19.

4. Jules Harlow, editor, *Siddur Sim Shalom* (New York: The Rabbinical Assembly and The United Synagogue of America, 1985).

5. Morris Silverman, editor, *Sabbath and Festival Prayer Book* (The Rabbinical Assembly of America and the United Synagogue of America, 1946).

6. Gershon Hadas, chairman, *Weekday Prayer Book* (New York: The Rabbinical Assembly, 1961).

7. To be sure the "traditional" Ashkenazic liturgy is not monolithic and appears in many variations. Nonetheless, there are but minor differences, quantitatively speaking, between the Hebrew texts of *Sabbath* and *Weekday* and the text of a typical Orthodox prayer book.

8. In some cases inaccuracies in translation are due to obvious factors. For example, the translation of *lekha dodi* diverges widely from the Hebrew due to the effort to mimic the *aaab* rhyme scheme (pp. 262-5). Thus there is a tradeoff between accuracy in style and accuracy in meaning. Similarly the translation of *kulam ahuvim kulam berurim kulam*

giborim is “adoring, beloved, and choice are they all” (pp. 96–7). The English mimics the beginning of the acrostic found in the Hebrew at the expense of the translation, since the English adjectives do not correspond with the Hebrew. At other points inaccuracy is due to the desire to impart information to the reader. The beginning of the translation of *aleinu* is “We rise to our duty . . .” (p. 161). The Hebrew does not say “we rise” but it is important for the reader to know that this prayer is said standing. These cases are easily recognizable. It is when such considerations are absent that theological concerns are responsible.

9. The sources for prayers and readings in *Siddur Sim Shalom* are listed at the end of the prayer book, pp. 874–879.

10. See the note in the introduction, p. xxvii.

11. The reference is given on page 875.

12. See, too, the Introduction to Candle Lighting, p. 717.

13. These passages were written by Abraham Joshua Heschel.

14. *Avot D’Rabbi Natan*, 11a.

15. The identical translation appears in *Weekday*, p. 87.

16. The translation is that of Phillip Birnbaum, *Daily Prayer Book* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1949), p. 578.

17. The Temple is mentioned once in the phrase: “blessed are those who will sing in His Temple” (p. 448).

18. The foreword to *Sabbath* claims that “it is characteristic of Judaism to recall the sacrificial system which represents a legitimate stage in the evolution of Judaism and religion generally” (pp. ix-x).

19. See the end of the introduction, p. xxxi, which also concludes with a plea for peace.

20. Similarly, the phrase *vezeidim tibata vididim he’evarta* becomes “the faithful You rescued; the wicked drowned.” Does this mean “You drowned the wicked” (active) or “the wicked drowned” (passive)? Note that *adonai ish milkhamah* is translated “the Lord, the Warrior” (pp. 92–3). As a rule, translations of biblical verses are far more honest in *Sim Shalom*.

21. *Sifre* Deuteronomy, *Ekev*. See also the passage from *Sotah* 14a which appears immediately following this one.

22. The *kavanah* before counting the *Omer* does not provide the feminine form (p. 237). Is this an oversight?

23. *Weekday* translates “them and their families” although the Hebrew reads *heim unesheihem* (p. 87)!

24. I find only four places in the liturgy (excluding the readings in the back of the book) where command or commandment appears: see the first paragraph of the *sh’ma*, p. 101, the supplementary reading, p. 282, and the alternative *musaf amidot*, pp. 329, 332. Even the phrase *hukei retzonekha* in the passage added to the *amidah* and Birkat Ha-Mazon on Hanukkah, pp. 218–9, 758–9, is translated “mitzvot” rather than “commandments” as in *Weekday*, p. 63, and *Sabbath*, p. 100.

25. *Numbers Rabbah* 19:27