



On Prayer: Preserving Tradition While Progressing Spiritually

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By Rabbi Dana Kaplan

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Our congregation — Shaare Shalom Synagogue in Kingston, Jamaica — is trying to preserve more than 350 years of tradition. It is a weighty responsibility, and we are often asking ourselves how we can preserve tradition while progressing spiritually. In truth, there is no simple answer, and Jamaican Jews have been grappling with this question for years as the history of our prayer book clearly illustrates.

The Jamaican synagogue has its own prayer book, which predates the arrival of the last rabbi of memory, Rabbi Henry Philips Silverman, who arrived in Kingston in 1935 and retired back to England in 1965. We are currently on the seventh edition, but the differences between the editions are slight, at least from my perspective.

Over the last century, congregational leaders remained determined to preserve Spanish Portuguese liturgy but were increasingly unable to read basic prayer book Hebrew. They introduced translations from the Spanish Portuguese prayer book but began to regard those translations as sacrosanct, just as unalterable as the Hebrew text itself.

Going back to the beginning of the 20th century, the congregation adopted Haham Moses Gaster's British Sephardic prayer book, *The Book of Prayer and Order of Service according to the custom of the Spanish and Portuguese Jews* (6 volumes, 1901-1907). The Gaster prayer book, as it was known, included the Hebrew text and translations but not transliterations.

The prayer book was originally edited by Rabbi David Aaron De Sola from Amsterdam, who came to England as cantor of the London Sephardi community in 1818. He was the assistant to Haham Raphael Meldola, whose daughter he married in 1819. After Meldola's death in 1828, De Sola became the spiritual leader of the country's Spanish Portuguese community. The famous Jewish leader and philanthropist Moses Montefiore encouraged De Sola to create a new prayer book, which was published as *Forms of Prayer According to the Custom of the Spanish and Portuguese Jews*. This prayer book series was later revised by Haham Moses Gaster, who was born in Bucharest and studied at the University of Breslau and the Jewish Theological Seminary of Breslau. In 1885, allegedly because of his protests against the biased treatment of the Jews, he was expelled from Romania. He settled in England where he taught Slavonic literature at Oxford University in 1886 and became the leader of the English Sephardi community in 1887.

In Jamaica, there was a need for a supplement because the Gaster prayer book had Hebrew on the right side and

English on the left side. Since much (if not most) of the congregation had great difficulty reading the Hebrew and the service was conducted almost entirely in that language, they could not follow without transliterations.

As early as 1913, Mortimer C.H. de Souza, founder of Mortimer C. de Souza & Co., Printers and Publishers, and the grandfather of Ernest de Souza (who served the congregation in multiple roles for decades until his untimely death in 2000), compiled a supplementary book that was published with Hebrew hymns transliterated for the many members who even then could not read Hebrew letters.

As Rabbi A.E. Dobrin, who led the congregation in the early years of the 20th century, explained in the preface: "It was a happy idea that moved Mr. Mortimer C.H. de Souza to get up this booklet, and in pious tribute, present it as a freewill offering to the Synagogue of the Amalgamated Congregation of Israelites in Kingston, Jamaica." The want has been felt for quite some time, "... ever since our form of service has been modernized in a manner to retain the vital parts of the Orthodox and Portuguese Prayer Book and yet contain a considerable amount of English. We can say as a result that our service is essentially Orthodox, all opinions to the contrary notwithstanding." It is clear from this comment that some had declared that the liturgical reforms meant the synagogue was no longer traditional.

The second edition of the Jamaican supplementary book, published in 1931, took out all of the prayers that had been in the original version leaving only the Hebrew and English hymns. Apparently, the idea was to revert to the supplement as a hymn book, while using the prayer book for the actual services.

Rabbi Henry Philips Silverman came to Kingston in December 1935 and immediately saw the need for an enlarged edition of the Jamaican supplementary prayer book. Early in 1936, he edited a third edition of this work including a condensed Shabbat evening service as well as other prayers in addition to the hymns. Part of the reason for this was that the Gaster prayer book had supposedly gone out of print and was no longer available.

In addition, the congregation had a mixed ritual practice that included Ashkenazi practices and prayers. Finally, there was a desire to reform certain aspects of the service and shorten some sections of the prayers. He revised this work in 1944, 1955 and 1963, each time increasing the amount of material as the congregation relied on the "little blue book" more and more.

The justification was that there were no longer enough Gaster prayer books for all of the worshippers. Since the Gaster prayer book was reprinted as recently as 1974, this was not due originally to the work going out of print but to the internal dynamics within the congregation. There was apparently a reluctance to order copies of the newest edition and this provided the excuse necessary to rely on their own version of the prayer book. Eventually, the Gaster prayer book did go out of print so the justification eventually acquired a factual basis.

Rabbi Bernard Hooker, a dynamic Liberal rabbi also from England, published a revised seventh edition in 1969 dramatically reducing the percentage of Hebrew in the text. Since new technology made the lithographic process more economical to publish actual Hebrew text in addition to transliterations, the prayer book began to become the primary prayer book, including everything that the worshiper might need. Ernest de Souza then published the eighth edition in 1984 which was then reprinted in 1992 and again in 2000 - 2001, immediately after his death.

Ernest Henriques de Souza edited a new edition of the prayer book in 1984 restoring a little bit of the Hebrew and adding an extensive history of the congregation including photographs. The prayer book now constituted not only a Shabbat Siddur (Sabbath services prayer book), but also a High Holy Day Machzor (prayer book), a Rabbi's manual covering every ceremony from cradle to grave, a home ritual guide with instructions for Shabbat dinner, the Passover Seder and other such ceremonies, and a pictorial history of the synagogue. De Souza was a professional photographer and believed that including many historical photographs helped the congregation appreciate their roots.

There were certainly changes made. Both Rabbi Hooker in the 1960s and spiritual leader de Souza in the 1970s made their own "edits." Both efforts were significant, indeed radical. But I am not sure if most of the

congregation saw it that way. The perception of continuity became what was important, rather than continuity itself.

The current edition of the prayer book which was edited by de Souza in 1984 and then reprinted in 1992 and then in 2000, cuts out entire prayers. The clearest example of this appears in the Friday night service where the Amidah, the most important prayer in the entire service (if one regards the Shema as a declaration rather than a prayer), consists entirely of an opening meditation from the Union prayer book and a closing meditation from the Gaster prayer book. The series of prayers which constitute the Amidah itself are entirely absent.

This brings us to the present day. We hope to revise the prayer book once again but some equate the exact text — particularly the English — with our congregational tradition. Therefore, any change, no matter how minor, is seen as breach of our historic tradition and an insult to the ancestors.

We will have to proceed slowly and cautiously.