

# The Siddur: An Inner Understanding of the Jewish People

I have often been asked if there is one book that will help Christians understand Judaism and the Jewish people. Actually, there are a few, including:

*To Be A Jew: A Guide to Jewish Observance in Contemporary Life* by Hayim H. Donin; *Understanding Judaism: A Basic Guide to Jewish Faith, History and Practice* by Mordechi Katz; *Understanding Judaism: The Basics of Deed and Creed* and *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Understanding Judaism*, both authored by Rabbi Benjamin Blech—are all great books on understanding the Jewish religion. However, I believe the best work to date has always been the Jewish prayer book known as the *Siddur*.

*Lex orandi, lex credendi*—What we pray is what we believe. Comprised of a collection of biblical texts along with personal prayers of rabbis that have been adopted into the corporate body of Israel, the *Siddur* is a masterful tapestry of prayers that are grouped into categories of thanksgiving, praise and petition. Those prayers inform our lives from morning until night.

Upon waking from the slumbers of sleep in the morning, we immediately acknowledge God's returning of the soul back to consciousness with, "I thank You, living and eternal King for giving me back my soul in mercy. Great is Your faithfulness" (Note: The English translation of the Siddur was taken from the Koren Sacks Siddur published by Koren Publishing). Before petitioning for our daily bread, we ask God to give us a sweet tooth for His word, requesting that He continue to divulge new insights into the Torah.

Invoking Daniel 9:18, we confess our bankruptcy before God. We

admit that no deeds or righteousness have sway over Him, declaring our total reliance on His compassion and grace. As people of the Abrahamic covenant, we have a duty to praise and glorify the Lord as well as to accept His kingdom and be His witnesses to the world when reciting the Shema: "Listen, Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is One" (the last letter of first word, Shema, and the last letter of the last word, Echad, formulate the word Hebrew word for witness—Eid).

The beliefs of the Restoration of Zion, Messiah, Resurrection of the Dead, Repentance, God as Creator and Redeemer and the ultimate triumph of His will are all declared in our prayers. Even in the most tragic of events such as losing a loved one we say the following prayer for mourners: "May the Omnipresent (HaMakom) comfort you among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem."

We use the name "HaMakom" (literally, The Place) and not "HaRachaman" (the Merciful One), for often a person who has lost a loved one feels abandoned by God. We pray that the individual be blessed by a renewed awareness of His presence, even in the grief-stricken place in which the person now finds him/herself—for that place too is HaMakom, the place of God. It also asserts that God is everywhere and in everything: physical and spiritual, matter and energy. All of this makes up the oneness of God, and at the end of life, the soul returns to its Makom. It is our way to tell the mourner: If you could see The Place where the deceased now dwells, you'd be comforted.

I am quite cognizant that many Evangelical non-denominational congregations are reluctant to use prayer books or a set of prescribed liturgy. Worship services are often very "free flowing," and include the latest from contemporary Christian music artists such as Chris Tomlin, Michael W. Smith and Hillsong Church. But from Judaism's view point, we know that even the greatest of prophets were tongue-tied (Ex. 4:10, Is. 6:5, Jer. 1:6), and before petitioning God for divine help, we

recite: "O Lord, open my lips, so that my mouth may declare Your praise" (Psalm 51). The purpose of liturgy is to help people who feel speechless before God with texts that can jumpstart the emotion to commune with Him. The *Siddur* is the emotional result of 40 centuries of God's hand in Jewish history.

One of the latest prayers adopted into the *Siddur* is the Prayer for the State of Israel. In it we acknowledge that our sovereignty over the land is "the first flowering of our redemption" and we ask God to guide Israel's leaders with good counsel as well as lead diaspora Jewry back home.

We recite this prayer on Shabbat and on Israel's modern-day national holidays—Independence Day and Jerusalem Day. The conclusion of this prayer is the hope of Jewish people that the world will accept the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob: "Appear in Your glorious majesty over all the dwellers on earth, and let all who breathe declare: The Lord God of Israel is King and His kingship has dominion over all."

In the Hallel Psalms (113-118), recited during biblical feasts as well as certain rabbinic holidays, the shortest chapter in of all of Hebrew Scripture is recited—Psalm 117. The question that baffles biblical commentators is why the Gentile nations are praising God and not the Jewish people. One possible explanation is that only the nations who plotted against Israel could fully comprehend God's steadfast love and faithfulness in rescuing His people and foiling the plans of the nations. Only those Gentiles can see clearly "God's kindness to us was overwhelming" and can adequately praise Him.

The *Siddur* is not written by one particular author or from a specific period. Rather, it is the expression of the Jewish soul to our Father in heaven over the centuries of Judaism's development. No one can fully comprehend the Jewish people without a clear understanding of the religious truths

preserved in our liturgy. And for Christians who are called to support Israel, that understanding is critical.

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