

SUMMARY OF THE ARTICLE:

CHANGES IN THE TEXT OF THE PRAYERS
AND IN SYNAGOGUE ARRANGEMENTS

by

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There is no doubt that every group of worshippers has the right to do as it sees fit with regard to making changes in the text of the prayers. There are no grounds for maintaining that any particular version of the prayer service is sacrosanct. In fact, the sages of old who compiled the prayers of Israel never intended to lay down an official, uniform prayer service from which no deviation was permitted. In both the Babylonian and the Jerusalem Talmuds we find admonitions against turning the daily prayers into a routine. And Rabbi Elazar is cited for having recited a new prayer each day.

In this area, there is no merit in conservatism for its own sake. Blind adherence to a prayer formula which changed circumstances have made obsolete, simply evinces contempt for the prayer. To dwell in Zion and yet to mourn "Our God, look upon our sunken glory among the nations, and the abomination in which we are held; how long shall Thy strength remain in captivity, and Thy glory in the hand of the foe?" is to make a mockery of one's prayer. Similarly, the prayer calling on the All-merciful to "break the yoke from off our neck, and lead us upright to our land". Anyone who recites that either does not know what he is saying or, even worse, does not care what he says, so long as he does not omit a single word that is printed in the Siddur.

It is a deliberate falsehood to say, in our day, that Jerusalem is "in mourning for she is childless . . . despised in the downfall of her glory, and desolate through the loss of her inhabitants". And how are we to explain the retention, in the "Uniform Version" of the Passover Haggadah issued by the Office of the Chief Chaplain of the Armed Forces: "This year we are slaves; next year we shall be free men".

If nothing may be altered and even utter absurdities must be left as they are, then how can a "Uniform Version" be compiled, when by its very nature it must choose one version to the exclusion of others. But if changes are permissible, then this stumbling-block must be removed, particularly as it is not an obligatory prayer at all, but an invitation to the Seder guests.

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We are not impressed by the argument that every innovation is "Reform". It would be an irreparable sin if the fear of Reform, which has paralyzed our rabbis for three generations, were to keep us from introducing necessary changes and thus by our own hand intensify the fossilization of Judaism which gave rise to Reform in the first place. Just as customs were originally created in order to meet the needs of the time, so they must be changed in accordance with the needs of the time. In any case, "uniformity" should by no means be regarded as a supreme value.

Summary by Aryeh Rubinstein