

These Are a Few of My Favorite... Columns



One of my themes for this year will be "A Few of My Favorite...". Many congregants are studying with me as I review some of my favorite teachings and lessons. In each issue of the Newsletter, I am reprising some of my favorite Perspective columns from the last thirty-five years.

This issue's column is from 1996 and is titled "Restoring the Alaynu Text — The Dialectic of Tradition and Change." Of all the liturgical changes made during my tenure as rabbi, none elicited as much emotion, on both sides, as the change in

Alaynu, restoring the traditional text in place of the Seder Avodah text established by Rabbi Max D. Klein.

This article talks about this process. I think it models the way change was made during my time as rabbi, as well as the principled changes that are part of the Seder Avodah tradition. In the latest editions of Seder Avodah, the Klein version of Alaynu is maintained as an option for individual worship, and it is used by some weekday leaders at daily services.

Restoring the Alaynu Text — The Dialectic of Tradition and Change

At its February meeting, the Board of Directors of our congregation overwhelmingly voted to initiate a change in our liturgy by restoring the traditional text of the prayer Alaynu, which concludes every religious service, evening, morning, and afternoon.

In this article, I want to review with you why this change was adopted and how it will be implemented.

In some congregations, a liturgical change like this would be made unilaterally by the rabbi in his capacity as the mara d'atra, the authoritative halachic decisor. And, indeed, I have made a number of liturgical changes on my own over the 18 years of my tenure at AJ.

However, some issues are of such symbolic importance that they require congregational consensus and support in order to have an effective implementation. I can recall other issues about which I have asked the congregation to make such a religious decision—most notable, permission for women to lead religious services, the wearing of tallitot by women, and the use of videography at Shabbat services.

The Alaynu is an issue of unusual symbolic importance. The text that is in our *Seder Avodah* was developed by Rabbi Max. D. Klein for inclusion in this prayer book which he presented to the congregation in 1951. "Rabbi" was concerned that the traditional text of Alaynu made "invidious distinctions between the House of Israel and other nations of peoples." While he did not go as far as other religious leaders in the 1940s and entirely omit references to the "chosen people," he used translation to modify the doctrine, and, in the case of Alaynu, replaced the traditional reading with a more universalistic tone by adapting a verse from the Book of Isaiah.

Our deliberations on restoring the traditional Alaynu text began more than two years ago with a public forum that I held. I followed that up some months later with a second review of the reasons for which I wanted to change the text. Discussions have continued, ongoing, publicly and privately. In January, there was a lengthy Board meeting at which all opinions were articulated. Finally, after a hiatus for reflection and further private discussion, a vote was taken in February. It was a thorough process that allowed for the input of every member of the congregation who wanted to make a contribution, and it elicited some of the most thoughtful and probing discussion on all

sides of this issue that I have ever seen. I am proud of the process, and proud of the way in which we handled this sensitive issue. I would have been proud whichever way the decision was made.

Why did I recommend that we change the AJ Alaynu? First, and foremost, I believe that it is important for AJ to come closer to K'lal Yisrael, the community of Israel, in its liturgical practice. The Alaynu that we use at AJ is unique. Many in the congregation, even after years with us, still are uncomfortable with the AJ text, even though they know it. Guests to the congregation are often stymied by the change in the prayer and wonder what kind of synagogue they are in. Others who might want to join the congregation are put off by this reformulation of a prayer that is one of the most widely known in words and music in the liturgy. Moreover, I believe that Rabbi Klein interpreted the prayer in a needlessly harsh way. I do not believe that it makes "invidious comparisons" between Jews and non-Jews. It merely asserts our separate identities, unique practices, and different destinies.

How will the change be made, and when? On the first day of Passover, at our Annual Passover Gathering, I will address some of these issues in my sermon. It will be entitled "How I Interpret the Chosenness of Israel." On the first day of Passover, we will continue to use the Klein Alaynu. However, beginning the second day, I have developed a seven-week program, corresponding to the Omer, during which the restored text will be introduced in a gradual way. The Omer will be a transition. And the new text will be fully in use for Shavuot.

Reverence for transition is an important value in Judaism. I do not want to see Rabbi Klein's text discarded or lost. His memory is part and parcel of the identity of this congregation, and the *Seder Avodah* which we use is his spiritual legacy. An insert which we will print for each prayer book will contain both the traditional text and the Klein text, side-by-side, with the notation, "In private devotion, the worshiper may choose either alternative."

The translation of the traditional text posed a delicate issue. Should it be done literally or interpretatively? Recognizing that all translation is interpretation, and that Rabbi Klein used translation in that manner, I have followed in that direction, using Rabbi Klein's own words from other parts of the *Siddur*. The restored text will be translated this way: "Let us now praise the Lord of the universe and acclaim the greatness of the Author of creation, *who distinguished us from among all the peoples by giving us the Torah, which established for us our unique, national destiny.*"

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A Rabbinic Perspective *By Rabbi Seymour Rosenbloom*

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These Are a Few of My Favorite... Columns (continued)

This has not been an easy process. I know that there are many for whom this change is not just one of the few words in a prayer, but also elicits concern about the future direction of the congregation. Some are concerned that we are becoming too traditional, too Conservative. Others fear that it is the first step in abandoning the *Seder Avodah*.

With respect to the first concern, it is important to note that the history of our congregation since Rabbi Klein came in 1910 has been one of moving towards greater traditionalism in our liturgy and service. Rabbi Klein's *Seder Avodah* is revolutionary in the way it returned the congregation to tradition from the prayer book that was used until then, the *Abodath Israel* of Marcus Jastrow and Benjamin Szold. There were further moves toward traditionalism in the High Holy Day *Machzor* which was published ten years later. During Rabbi Rosenberg's tenure and mine, we have seen many subtle, and not so subtle moves towards more traditional liturgical practice.

How far will we go towards restoring traditional practice is unclear. Services evolve. I am committed to evolutionary, and not revolutionary, change. The strategic planning process in which we are now engaged should give us further guidance as to how the congregation would like to move.

With respect to the second concern, I am committed to continuing the use of both the regular and High Holy Day versions of the *Seder Avodah*. I believe that the changes

that I can foresee in the future can be accommodated with the use of these volumes, and with revisions in them as we print them. Some of the unique special and beautiful aspects of our service that are precious to all of us could not be found in any other prayer book. These prayer books can continue to be used even in the midst of liturgical change and I am committed to doing so.

We have had an exhaustive debate on the issue of Alaynu. I am sure that the unity of our congregation will overcome any temporary discord which may arise because of the variant opinions that we hold. I am sure that we will unify ourselves to implement this change, recognizing that the common goals that we share are more fundamental than any temporary disagreements. The greatness of our congregation is, in one way, expressed by our ability to argue passionately for our various points of view, without allowing lingering disagreements to create any permanent divisions.

As we move forward in the implementation of this historic change, I want to solicit your continuing comments and suggestions. As always, I value the input of our members so that we can continue to preserve the greatness of our congregation in the midst of the evolutionary process of change.

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