

Obstacles to Prayer ... and how Siddur Eit Ratzon addresses them

Joseph G. Rosenstein

When I teach courses on prayer, I generally ask participants to describe the obstacles that they experience to meaningful prayer. In preparing Siddur Eit Ratzon, I kept their responses very much in mind.

In this note, I describe and categorize the responses I have heard to this question over the years and describe how this Siddur addresses the concerns that they raised.

One common response is that of **feeling lost in a prayer service**. Imagine the predicament of a person who joins an activity conducted in an unfamiliar language with few, if any, cues about what is happening. Siddur Eit Ratzon attempts to ease this predicament in several ways:

- The transliteration enables the reader to follow along as prayers are being chanted or sung in Hebrew.
- The guideposts explain to the reader what this part of the service is all about.
- The translation provides the reader with an intelligible indication of what is being said.
- The page guides (available at this website) enable the reader to translate page announcements from the Siddur used by the congregation to the appropriate pages in Siddur Eit Ratzon.

The sense of feeling lost is often exacerbated by the **speed with which services are conducted** at many synagogues. Your using this Siddur will not automatically result in the services being slowed down. However, ...

- The structure of the Siddur gives you permission to focus on a single prayer – to recite it, to read about it, and to reflect on it – allowing you to proceed at your own pace and have a meaningful and instructional experience while the service continues apace.

If, moreover, Siddur Eit Ratzon is the primary Siddur of your congregation, then ...

- The layout of the page, with one phrase per line, and the style of the translation facilitates and encourages the congregation to chant prayers aloud, in Hebrew or English, so that everyone can follow along as the service itself proceeds at a slower pace.

The feeling of being lost and the rapid flow of the service often generate **feelings of inadequacy**, further undermining the possibility of meaningful prayer. That is indeed very unfortunate.

- The translation is davennable, that is, it can be chanted in English as well as in Hebrew, so that readers who can't recite the Hebrew text can feel that they too are participating in the service.
- Siddur Eit Ratzon provides the information that enables readers to know what is happening in the service, and the resulting confidence that their participation in the service is worthwhile, that they are not just contributing seat-time.
- If you focus on one or two prayers each Shabbat – reciting them attentively, reviewing the commentaries, and reflecting on their content – you will in a relatively short time become familiar with the prayers and become able to participate fully and confidently in the services at your own comfortable pace.

A second set of obstacles to prayer involves the translations found in most prayerbooks. People complain that **the language is boring and repetitive**, that most prayers seem to **focus on praising God**, that the translations are expressed in **language to which they cannot relate**, and that, ultimately, even though they don't express it in these terms, the prayers **increase the separation between themselves and God**.

In translating the prayers, I started with two assumptions, that the prayers were written as reports of their authors' intense spiritual experiences and insights and that my task in part was to try and recapture these "Wow!" experiences. My conviction is that, to a large extent, the obstacles discussed above are a consequence of the translation. The authors of the prayers and psalms were not trying to bore us, but were trying to transmit their insights to us. Language is of course inadequate to relate such messages even to those who are on the same wave-length; all the more so when it comes to conveying insights across the many linguistic, cultural, literary, temporal, and geographical divides that separate us from the authors of the prayers. Repetition, for example, was evidently an asset in prayers in the age and culture of their authors, although it is hardly considered an asset by the modern reader. The prayers beg for interpretive translations, not for translations that seek to convey the literal meaning of the prayers but are inattentive to their underlying messages.

- In translating the prayers, my priority was to try to capture the insights of the authors, using the words of the prayers whenever possible and diverging from their literal meaning whenever necessary.
- In order to reduce the separation between ourselves and God, the translation consistently refers to God in the second person, even when the Hebrew text is in the third person. (The Hebrew text often switches back and forth, seamlessly, between these two.)
- The translation is intended to be readable, meaningful, and interesting. It focuses on capturing the meaning and spiritual excitement of the Hebrew text rather than necessarily following the idiomatic expressions of the authors.

A third set of obstacles involves **troubling philosophical and theological assumptions made in the Siddur**. Many people respond that prayer is difficult because it seems to them that acceptance of these assumptions is a prerequisite to prayer.

These assumptions not only evoke questions and disagreement, they also often serve as deal-breakers for prayer. That is, some people have emotional reactions to these assumptions that are so strong that they move them in directions that are incompatible with prayer. Advising people to set aside their reservations temporarily may be helpful to some, but not to all.

Among the assumptions that some find problematic are that the dead will be resurrected, that Israel is the chosen people, that we are better than other nations, that God responds to prayer, that God punishes transgressors and rewards the righteous, and that, based on the Siddur's references to God, God must be male. Others of course may be quite comfortable with some of these assumptions.

- The translations and commentaries of Siddur Eit Ratzon discuss each of these philosophical issues, and, in many cases, alternative language that addresses the concerns that are raised.

- By addressing these philosophical issues, Siddur Eit Ratzon encourages and validates people's concerns and questions about prayer and grants them permission to become engaged in prayer despite the fact that their concerns have not all been addressed and that their questions have not all been answered.
- Siddur Eit Ratzon avoids all male God-language. This is achieved, in part, by referring to God exclusively in the second person.

Once all of these obstacles – of distance, of language, and of theology – are cleared away, it should be easy to davven, to pray with one's whole being. But, unfortunately, that is often not the case. Our achieving a meaningful prayer experience also depends on overcoming **internal obstacles**. We need to let go of all of the **distractions** that clutter our minds and the **reservations** that restrain our souls. We need to **reposition ourselves** so that we leave everyday space and move into holy prayer-space. We need t'shuva, **turning** from a place of darkness into a place of light, where God's presence is evident.

- Siddur Eit Ratzon presents the morning prayers as a spiritual journey and serves as a guide through that journey.
- Its kavvanot, meditations, and commentaries help us focus on the spiritual content of the prayers; over time we can move ourselves into God's house.

May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts bring us closer to You, so that You can be a source of strength and a source of hope to us all.