

Book Reviews

The Koren Siddur

with Introduction, Translation and Commentary

by Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks.

Koren Publishers, Jerusalem: 2009.

Reviewed by Rabbi Jeff Hoffman

The original all-Hebrew *Koren Siddur* (1981) is a respected edition of the *Siddur* that pays great attention to graphics in general and the appearance and readability of the Hebrew alphabet specifically. The appearance of an edition of this *Siddur* with a new translation and commentary by the Chief Rabbi of the British Empire, Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks, is a publishing event of some moment and deserves attention.

I have been paying close attention to translations of the *Siddur* for many years. Jewish tradition has long recognized that every translation performs veers from the meaning of the original language. Nevertheless, in an effort to make the worship experience more meaningful for those who do not understand Hebrew, it is understandable that the *Siddur* has been rendered into the vernacular many times.

Some translations (notably, the Conservative *Siddur Sim Shalom* – both the 1985 original and the 1998 “Slim” *Shalom* versions) attempt to provide a “prayable” translation. In this view, an accurate but stark translation may be more loyal to the meaning of the original language, but if it does not lend itself to prayerful expression through graceful and poetic wording, it is not fulfilling an important role of a prayer-book translation. The major weakness of this approach is that the English often takes great liberties with the original Hebrew. This has led to frustration among those users of *Siddur Sim Shalom* who know some Hebrew because they are often unable to find precise renderings of specific words and phrases in the translation: the Hebrew has been rephrased into an elegant English that bears little resemblance to the original passage. This approach to translation also often uses the translation to consciously edit the original Hebrew when the original wording contains notions that are not politically correct.

So, for example, *Siddur Sim Shalom* (1998) translates the opening words of *Birkat Kedushat HaYom* of the *Amidah* for the Three Festivals as: “You have chosen us from among all nations for Your service by loving and cherishing us as bearers of Your Torah. You have loved and favored us, and distinguished us by instilling in us the holiness of Your mitzvot and drawing us near to Your service, our Sovereign, so that we became known by Your great and holy name.”

The knowledgeable Hebrew reader will notice that toward the beginning of this passage, the words “for Your service” and “as bearers

of Your Torah” are added by the translation; they simply don’t exist in the Hebrew original. Similarly, “and distinguished us by instilling in us the holiness of Your mitzvot” combines two separate translations for the word *vekidashtanu*: “and distinguished us,” and “by instilling in us the holiness of.” Including both translations is going beyond the act of felicitous translation and entering into interpretation.

The reason for all of these additions is obvious: they are meant to soften the very boldly expressed notion of the chosenness of Israel. My own view is that since all translations, by definition, change the meaning of the original, the translator should be as mindful as possible not to consciously add additional changes. The translator is not an editor. If a something in the original Hebrew is so offensive that the translator cannot bear it, then either an interpretive note ought to be added, or the translator (or the translator’s sponsoring organization) ought to have the courage to edit the original Hebrew. Leaving the original Hebrew intact while consciously editing out difficulties is tantamount to perpetrating fraud on the worshiper who is not literate in Hebrew.

In contrast to the style of *Siddur Sim Shalom*, there are *Siddurim* that do provide starkly accurate translations. One good example of this style is *The Artscroll Siddur* (1984). The following is Artscroll’s rendering of that same passage from the Festival *Amidah*:

“You have chosen us from all the peoples; You loved us and found favor in us; You exalted us above all the tongues and You sanctified us with Your commandments. You drew us close, our King, to Your service and proclaimed Your great and Holy Name upon us.”

No interpolations to soften the boldness of Israel’s chosenness here. No bowing to political correctness. Furthermore, at first read, these lines do not seem stilted or awkward.

Now, let us compare both *Sim Shalom* and Artscroll to *The Koren Siddur*.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks’ translation in *The Koren Siddur* reads as follows:

“You have chosen us from among all peoples.
You have loved and favored us.
You have raised us above all tongues.
You have made us holy through Your commandments.
You have brought us near, our King, to Your service,
And have called us by your great and holy name.”

I would submit that the Sacks translation combines what is best in *Sim Shalom* and Artscroll while avoiding the pitfalls of both. It preserves the straightforward, felicitous style of Artscroll. It certainly does not add verbiage to soften the chosenness idea expressed in this part of the Festival *Amidah*. At

the same time, the grace and poetry of the English clearly surpass that of the Artscroll. In copying Sacks' translation, I have maintained his line spacing. The spacing helps the eye to see how each phrase begins exactly the same way, "You have...us," which beautifully reflects the fact that six of the seven Hebrew verbs in this passage are formed with the suffix *-tanu* of the Hebrew. The Artscroll rather arbitrarily renders two of the verbs as "You have...us," and the rest simply as "You...us."

This one passage exemplifies the careful attention of Sacks' translation to both accurate translation – as opposed to interpolation and interpretation – as well as to the lyricism of the Hebrew poetry. The thoughtful line-spacing – which is found throughout the volume – immediately tells the worshiper that s/he is confronting poetry on every page of the *Siddur*. This feature alone is very valuable in that it may help the worshiper not to interpret the *Siddur's* images and expressions literally: the fact that the *Siddur* is written in poetry is graphically apparent.

Simply put, the translation is most impressive.

The commentary, on the other hand, is another story. The commentary, along with the substantial introduction (28 pages) entitled "Understanding Jewish Prayer" is a disappointment, at least to me, as a student and teacher of Jewish liturgy. They almost completely ignore advances in the study of Jewish liturgy of the last hundred years. In fact, they often ignore widely acknowledged facts of Jewish liturgical history altogether. While Rabbi Sacks is certainly an Orthodox rabbi, he is not a member of the *haredi* community, but rather a member of modern society. And therefore, while I wouldn't expect a modern Orthodox rabbi to accept every conclusion from the secular world of Jewish studies, I also wouldn't expect the wholesale discounting of such scholarship evidenced in his interpretations.

Both the introduction and the commentary also abound in generalizations that often sound inspiring, but upon closer examination, turn out to simply not hold true. In general, they read as if they were composed by Sacks without his doing any serious research at all. The impression I have is of someone who, over a number of years, developed a number of theories about the history and structure of the *Siddur*, but did not take the time to investigate what others have written about those theories. The beautiful translation deserves better.

A few examples of my disappointment are in order.

In his introduction (page xxiv, bottom), he repeats the oft-quoted construct based upon a number of traditional sources (Sacks cites *Mishneh Torah Hilkhos Tefillah* 1:2) that the weekday *Amidah* is based upon a structure of praise, requests, and thanks or acknowledgments. These concepts, says Sacks, are found expressed in the following way: The first three blessings express praise, the middle thirteen express requests, and the final three are

acknowledgments. He ignores the fact that of the last three, only the second is truly an expression of thanks; the other two are requests. The first of these (*Retseh*) is a request for the return of the sacrificial service of the Temple and the third (*Sim shalom*) is a request for peace. This critique of the traditional schematic of the *Amidah* was noted by Reuven Kimelman over twenty years ago.¹

Another example of ignoring modern scholarship: It is well known that one form of the *Kedushah* (the version in the *Amidah*) requires a *minyan* and is recited while standing, while two other forms – *Kedushah DeYotser* and *Kedushah DeSidra* – do not require a *minyan* and may be recited while seated. In explaining the difference, Sacks merely rehearses the Geonic explanation of this inconsistency which holds that the *Amidah* version has stricter requirements because in it, we “enact” the mystical vision of the *Kedushah*, whereas in the other two forms, we only “describe” it (page xxvi). This does not take into consideration modern studies which show that all three of those versions of the *Kedushah* (among the six forms it takes within just the *Ashkenazi* rite) were alternate forms of the same prayer with variant customs attached to them, already in the Geonic period, with no real differences of “enacting” or “describing” between them.² It is possible, and maybe even likely, that in an early period, a *Shaharit* service contained just one of these forms of the *Kedushah*. One community may have had the version that we now say in the *Amidah*. Another may have had the version that we now know as *Kedushah DeSidra*, and so on. The tendency of the Geonim in many arenas, including that of liturgy, was to assert their authority by legitimizing just one, unified, rite. They often did that by consolidating several customs which were originally part of distinct rites from separate communities. Thus, we may have three *Kedushot* in the *Shaharit* service because the Geonim found three separate entrenched versions, from three separate communities. Since each version, even by then, was already hallowed by several generations of observance, they preserved all three, uniting them in one rite. The fact that we stand for the version in the *Amidah* is likely due to the fact that we stand for the *Amidah* itself. The reason for the requirement of a *minyan* for this form of the *Kedushah* is not clear; by the time of the Geonim, for some reason, now lost to us, the custom was that this *Kedushah* required a *minyan*.

An example of ignoring widely acknowledged facts of Jewish liturgical history as well as of an observation of Sacks’ that sounds inspiring but upon closer inspection is found not to hold true is found on page xxix: “Many prayers such as *El Adon* (page 461) and *Aleinu*[sic]³ are constructed in a pattern of fours: four-line verses, each of four words. Often these reflect Jewish

1 Reuven Kimelman, “The Daily Amidah and the Rhetoric of Redemption,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 79, nos. 2-3 (1988-89), 165-197.

2 See Meir Bar-Ilan, “*Kavvei Yesod LeHit’havutah shel HaKedushah VeGibushah*,” (“Major Trends in the Formation and Crystallization of the *Kedushah*”), *Daat*, 25, 1990, 5-20 and Ruth Langer, *To Worship God Properly: Tensions Between Liturgical Custom and Halakhah in Judaism*, (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1998), chapter 4, “Individual Recitation of the *Kedushah*: The Impact of Mysticism on *Minhag* and *Halakhah*,” 188-244.

3 Sic – probably as a result of a simple typing error, “*Aleinu*” is not italicized

mysticism with its four 'worlds': *Asiyya* (Action), *Yetzirah* (Formation), *Beri'a* (Creation) and *Atzilut* (Emanation). *Merkava* mysticism, based on Ezekiel's vision of the Divine chariot, is an important strand of early rabbinic prayer."

Neither *El Adon* nor *Aleinu* is constructed in a pattern of four-line verses, each of four words. Even checking his own versions of these two prayers (pages 181 and 461), one finds many lines with three words, or five words. Beyond that, his graphic of *El Adon* into four-line stanzas is not persuasive. He does not explain on what basis each "verse" consists of four lines, and I see no basis for such a literary division.

But even had his inspiring-sounding observation of four-line verses, each with four words, been borne out through close-reading of the prayer-texts themselves, his history is also wrong. Both of these prayers derive from *Merqavah* mysticism (corresponding approximately to the time of the *Amora'im*, circa 4th-6th centuries) as Sacks correctly hints on page xxix. However, Gershom Scholem decisively showed that Four World Theology dates from the time of the *Tiqqunei Zohar*, about 800 years after the time of *Amor'aim*. It is very difficult to assert that these two prayers reflect a theology that didn't exist in Jewish tradition until about 800 years after these prayers were written.

In sum, the English translation is a worthy companion to the venerable *Koren Siddur*. The introduction and commentary, unfortunately, do not live up to the level of excellence reached by that translation.

Rabbi Jeff Hoffman, Rabbi-In-Residence at The Academy for Jewish Religion, holds a doctorate in liturgy from The Jewish Theological Seminary.