THOSE WHO SOW IN TEARS: LITURGICAL RESPONSES TO PERSONAL SUFFERING

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"You're writing about 'suffering'?" my father asked. "Why didn't you choose something funny, like 'humor in the Torah'?" I laughed and acknowledged that I had chosen a heavy topic. But it is very "RVT-like."

I often write as a way to process life experiences. Most frequently it shows up as creative non-fiction prose. But when I went through a period of struggle and depression, my words came out in poems and re-interpreted liturgical prayers. I am grateful, therefore, to have had an extended opportunity in rabbinical school to explore liturgy in a much more in-depth way.

This thesis is dedicated to all who struggle and experience pain. I want you to know that *I see you*—you are not invisible, and you are not alone, though at times it may feel that way. I also dedicate this to my Bubbi Sylvia, who passed away towards the beginning of my thesis work. I miss you deeply, and I know you were proud of all that I have accomplished, and for my decision to pursue the rabbinate.

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INTRODUCTION: PERSONAL SUFFERING AND LITURGY

> God, please lift me from this infinite depth./ The light of life and love is so far above it seems like a wisp of a dream from long ago./ The sadness spreads around me reaching to every horizon./ If I just lie here, eventually the lifeless air will leave me a desiccated husk of bone and skin who somehow still has the capacity for endless tears./ How did I get here God? Sometimes I ask for your merciful help and implore you to fill me with your healing grace./ But today I can't even seem to do that.
>
> -*Hopeless*, an original prayer by Shoshana Hadassah[1]

In late October 2012, Hurricane Sandy, the largest Atlantic hurricane on record devastated parts of the Caribbean and Mid-Atlantic states in the US before moving onto the Northeast. It ripped through homes and buildings, flooding the streets, with high winds blowing trees about as if they were feathers. Over 250 people were killed spanning seven countries.[2]

In New York City, the preparations and feelings about the impending storm varied. Hurricane Irene had come through the previous year, leaving the city relatively unscathed but rocking parts of the surrounding states and cities. So while some expected this to be a repeat performance—a lot of fuss for a bad rainstorm—others hurried to batten down the hatches and gather supplies. On 14th street in Manhattan, shelves were cleared of perishable foods, and bodegas sold out of batteries and beans. News reports seemed conflicting. The city called for an evacuation of Zone A—the low-lying areas of the city and surrounding towns. Some left their homes and some stayed, including those who either could not physically leave or who decided it was not worth the trouble.

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[1] Elliot Kukla, "The Torah of Despair," *CCAR Journal* (Summer 2012): 97.
[2] "Hurricane Sandy," n.p. Online: http://en wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurricane_Sandy .htm.

My apartment building was situated on the border of the evacuation zone, and since my roommate was stuck out of town, I decided to head for higher ground and company. Not knowing how long I might be out of the apartment, I gathered together a few family photos, my immigration papers, school books, a couple of sweaters, and trekked my way uptown and further inland, to stay with a friend until this blew over. No one knew exactly what was about to happen.

In a way, it felt like a modern version of Noah's Ark during the Flood. Rains and wind pelted against the windows, and my friend and I huddled in her apartment, trying to distract ourselves with movies and snacks, flashlights at the ready in case we lost power. There are a million stories from that first night, some only now being told.

In the morning the rain drizzled, the day outside gray and gloomy. We watched the news, trying to assess the damage in other parts of the state. Some areas remained relatively intact, while others—some places not very far from where we sat—had been devastated by high winds and rain. Cars were flooded and floated away. Millions lost power. Trees fell on houses, even killing one man asleep in his bed in the middle of the night. Falling debris and trees killed many others, including two young people, members of two separate liberal synagogues in Brooklyn, NY.[3] West End Synagogue in Neponsit, NY, was gutted, destroying the insides of the building and everything within it—*siddurim*, and other religious articles. Much like death—the human equalizer—Hurricane Sandy paid no attention to race, class, creed, or religion. It was not selective in its destruction.

[3] Adam Shergold and Louise Boyle, "Hurricane Sandy Aftermath: Young Couple Killed by a Falling Tree Among 22 New York Victims," *Daily Mail* (October 2012). Online: http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2225653/Hurricane-Sandy-aftermath-Young-couple-killed-falling-tree-22-New-York-victims.htm.

Over the course of the following week, while my apartment downtown remained without power, heat, or hot water, I engaged in fascinating conversations with people both inside and outside of the Jewish community. Everyone had a different experience to share, and their own perspectives over why and how things had occurred. A few days later at a diner on the Upper East Side, an area practically untouched by the storm, I sat with a fellow classmate and dear friend. When the subject of the losses specifically in the Jewish community came up, she confided: "It's strange to say, but somehow I thought that this kind of thing couldn't happen to *us*."

Later in the week, as Shabbat approached, I had a hunch (as did many others) that synagogue attendance would be extremely high. As we know, after a tragic event or loss people tend towards religion for comfort—whether for God or for community with others—and to collectively share their grief and sadness. Knowing instinctively that I, at least, wanted to go to synagogue that Friday night, I headed to the synagogue where I serve as Rabbinic Intern. The clergy did not ask me to be on the *bimah*, so I was able to be a part of the *kahal*, and pay attention to my own spiritual needs.

The Friday night service was solemn but not sad. It focused on hope, and the importance of being together in community. It also had the typical hallmarks of New York: "We are strong. We are New Yorkers. We will make it through." That was a dominant message.

I wasn't so sure. For many in the area, their lives had essentially gone back to normal, though perhaps with a few interruptions. But I did not yet know when I could go home again, and the sensation was disorienting. I looked to the words in the prayer book for comfort, but did not find any. Where in the liturgy was the acknowledgement of my

reality? Recognition of the pain and sadness that gripped me and so many others in much worse shape than I was? There was only praise and more praise, words of reward and punishment. It was a strange feeling—the pastoral response from the clergy was so clear, but the liturgy was distancing.

The scene was similar in other surrounding synagogues. The congregation in Neponsit, NY held services in part of their building, using flashlights and borrowed prayer books. "It was just amazing", Rabbi Slome said. "My congregants were few in number because they are dealing with what happened, but there is a lot of love."[4]

In the Park Slope Armory in Brooklyn, NY, clergy and future clergy led services for hundreds of displaced people, specifically for those who had to evacuate assisted living facilities and nursing homes in Rockaway and other neighborhoods. Their experiences were moving and emotional. A classmate reflected:

> And so we gathered a little closer together. We sang and we blessed. We laughed and we cried. We prayed for healing. And on Shabbat morning, we shared not the traditional *nissim b'chol yom* (miracles of every day), but our own blessings of thanks: 'I am thankful that I was able to hear my mother's voice over my cell phone, and to know that she and my sister are alive, and safe.' 'I am thankful that I got these new sweatpants, because I lost all my clothing in the storm.' 'I am thankful that the Jewish people is alive and celebrating, after all that has befallen us, up to even this storm.'[5]

Looking back on these moving worship experiences I sensed a pattern. People were responding to and feeling healed by the rituals that were created or used during worship, but *not* through the liturgy in our *siddurim*. People needed a true and caring pastoral response, and though they received it through being in community with others

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[4] Sharon Otterman, "Regional Places of Worship Seek to Rebuild," *New York Times* (November 2012). Online: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/13/nyregion/ regional-places-of-worship-seek-to-rebuild.htm.

[5] Nicole DeBlosi, "An Ark of Sanctuary," n.p. [cited 6 November 2012]. Online: http://rabbialready.blogspot.ca.

and from the leaders in the community, it did not come from the words Jews have been praying for thousands of years. People—all people—need a response to the moments in which they suffer. But this response is not coming from the one place you might expect it to.

It seems that Jewish liturgy responds to certain needs but not to others. It encapsulates a theology of reward and punishment that leaves little room for those who are individually and personally struggling. While it may respond to communal needs, the solitary person experiencing hardship finds the words of our prayer book lacking. So we have had to create new rituals and reinterpretations of our liturgy to provide this individualized solace and comfort. It is my assertion that aside from these new creations and adaptations, the liturgical responses to personal suffering are few and far between, and that is extremely problematic.

The question then becomes, Why don't we have this type of liturgy in our *siddurim*? Why is our liturgy geared towards praise, and framed by reward and punishment? We need to go back and understand how and why it developed as it did. Only then can we decide which pieces need to be reinterpreted to suit our individualistic needs and sensibilities.

My personal interest in this topic did not have to wait for Hurricane Sandy. During the course of my time as a rabbinical student I experienced a period of deep depression and sadness, which I kept fairly hidden from most in my community. I sought help in various places, including the pages of our numerous *siddurim*, which ought, I thought, to have words of comfort for – or, at least, acknowledgement of – my despair. I would anxiously flip through page after page of prayer, looking for something that called

out to me. I knew there was plenty of material to pull from the *Tanakh*—stories of Job, Ruth, Moses, and Psalms, to name just a few. But why couldn't I find the same thing in the liturgy? I lift up my eyes to the mountains; from where will my help come?

This experience and difficult period of time in my life led me towards a burst of creative energy. I wrote about some of my frustrations and wonderings in sermons, and others I turned into interpretive prayers. The sermons I delivered were exceedingly well received, leading me to see that others had similar questions: what is the difference between struggling and suffering? Where is God? What does it mean when we feel distant from the Divine? When I am praying in my community, does anyone really see my pain?

Slowly and painfully, I made it through the dark period. When I emerged, a new curiosity arrived with it. This is what led me to this project and exploration of our liturgy.

Over the next several chapters we will survey various *siddurim* and the liturgy we have inherited. We will also explore Judaism's penitential theology, attempting to trace and understand how our liturgy developed as it did. Later, we will hear from the brilliant and powerful person who realized this lack in our liturgy and responded in her own way: Debbie Friedman, *zichronam livracha*. We will explore the healing services and movement that she ignited in liberal Judaism. Lastly, we will take a look at more recent attempts in liturgical responses, including new rituals and prayers that have been created to respond to these urgent and persistent needs.

CHAPTER 1: THE KOREN SIDDUR

> *Rebono shel ha'olam*, source of compassion and mystery, may it be Your will that out of the darkness of despair we kindle hope and healing that enable us to recognize that we are bearers of light, vessels of Your presence. Amen.
>
> -Rabbi Elie Kaplan Spitz[6]

To test the theory that our prayer book liturgy doesn't sufficiently respond to those experiencing personal suffering, we must first decide what version of the prayer book to use. I propose starting with the traditional text from the Koren *siddur* edited by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. This *siddur* was originally published in 1981, but a translation only appeared in 2009. The Sacks *siddur* has been widely hailed as superior and is well underway to replacing even the Artscroll *siddur*, which had taken the place of such customary favorites as the Birnbaum *siddur* here in the United States, and even the venerable *Singer Prayer Book* that had been the British favorite since its composition in 1890. Singer had been compiled by England's first chief rabbi, Marcus Adler, based on the scientific study of Seligman Baer's *Seder Avodat Yisrael* (1868). This Adler *siddur* was provided with English translation by Rabbi Simeon Singer, whose name then became associated with the project. To some extent, the Sacks *siddur* is a return to the Singer tradition of modern Orthodoxy. Its attention to tradition along with concern for modernity makes it an ideal choice for our purposes. We can examine it to see how and when our liturgy responds to struggle.

The introduction to the *siddur* posits two ways of Jewish religious worship: spontaneous prayer and sacrifice. Sacks counts approximately 140 places in the *Tanakh*

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[6] Elie Kaplan Spitz, *Healing from Despair: Choosing Wholeness in a Broken World* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing), 17.

where people pray (not including the Book of Psalms). He suggests that these prayers are, "direct, simple, and spontaneous" (p.xviii). "There are no general rules: these prayers have no fixed time, place, or liturgy. They are improvised as circumstance demands" (p.xix).

This individualized prayer tradition is juxtaposed with communal sacrifices, which we no longer perform. Sacrifices are rigid and fixed, specific and carefully worded. When synagogue worship replaced temple sacrifice, our people created a fixed set of texts to be offered—some of which were based on the spontaneous prayers of our ancestors, and some not. In this way, the liturgy offers words to say and stage directions on how and when to say them. As we will see, there is not a great deal of room for spontaneity.

Sacks goes on to talk about the patterns found in our fixed liturgy: words of love, praise, revelation, awe—but nothing specifically about suffering. Our *siddurim* are filled with beautiful words of praise and long responses on reward and punishment, our sins and our shortcomings. But perhaps when we explore the individual liturgical pieces we will find more of the response we are looking for.

Beginning in our morning *shacharit* service, we find a multitude of prayers for our bodies and souls. The issue is that they are all based on the premise that one who is saying them is well—sound in body, mind, and soul.

Take for example the blessing of *Modeh Ani*. This prayer praised God for returning one's soul in the morning. But if my soul is sad, perhaps its return is painful? Perhaps I wake up and find that things have not changed, and the heaviness still sits upon

my chest. And for those in deep despair, those who maybe don't even want their soul to be returned to them—how can one praise God for an act that may cause deep distress?

Next we find *Asher Yatzar*. This blessing praised God for creating a finely balanced network, for bodies with vessels and orifices in good working order. But what about those whose bodies are broken, or perhaps do not work in this way? What about those where illness attacks the body? Or maybe even a person whose body was formed in such a way as to make statements of balance and good working order simply not true? (We shall return to this question of working bodies momentarily.)

Elohai Neshama runs into the same difficulties. This prayer requires us to thank God for creating a pure soul and for breathing it into our bodies. "Blessed are You, Lord, who restores souls to lifeless bodies" (p.6). But this assumes the pray-er has a "well" soul, a happy or content soul (or at least with some kind of wholeness/*shlemut* in mind). This may simply not be true of the person praying.

By then we reach the blessing for putting on a *tallit*, which at first glance seems innocuous. But Sacks suggests an extra blessing can be recited here. This blessing speaks about finding refuge under God's wings, and how " . . . in Your light, we see light" (p.12). These words are not satisfying to someone in despair.

Mah Tovu, whose words originate from the Book of Numbers and from different psalms in the *Tanakh*, is also wholly focused on praise. It is a spirited blessing, but again one wonders how this reads to someone who cannot utter words of praise. By this point in the service I cannot imagine a person who is struggling still managing to feel engaged in the project.

The prayer *Adon Olam* is possibly the first piece of liturgy in the service that speaks to something other than praise. While the majority of it is focused on God's eternal reign, God's oneness, and on thanking God, there is also what I read as a hope for protection. These words offer a glimmer of a response: "God is with me, I shall not fear; body and soul from harm will He keep" (p.22). It assumes confidence in God's presence, but it also illustrates God as a protector, not simply as a divine being worthy of praise. However, it does not specifically articulate language of hope. We will continue to see this pattern—a line or two sprinkled throughout that seems hopeful or seems like it might reference a person who suffers—but ultimately these moments are fleeting and dissatisfying.

We move to *Yigdal*, where the prominent pattern of reward and punishment is stated. "He rewards people with loving-kindness according to their deeds; He punishes the wickedness according to his wickedness" (p.24). This leaves little solace for one who struggles, but, as we will see, it is an oft repeated theme in our liturgy.

With the words of *Birchot Hashachar*, we find ourselves back in the problematic situation of offering praise for things that for some may simply not be real. Here is a series of blessings meant as a way to "make us conscious of what we would otherwise take for granted" (p.27). But how can we praise God for things that may be in opposition to our direct, true experience? For example, one of the blessings thanks God for giving sight to the blind. What does that mean to someone who is blind or is losing his or her eyesight? What does it mean to chant words of praise for "giving strength to the weary" when unrelieved weariness may be the only reality a person knows? This prayer is further complicated by the addition of *Yehi Ratzon*, words that are focused on reward for good

behavior. But a suffering person may well conclude that she is being punished for something she has done, further alienating her from the liturgy.

The Koren *siddur* then includes readings retelling the story of the Binding of Isaac. The passage read after the narrative focuses on reward and punishment, and asking for God's compassion.

The Binding of Isaac is followed by readings about the daily sacrifices that were made at the time of the Temple. Sacks explains that according to the Sages, reading the texts about the sacrifices is equivalent to actually performing them. After these descriptive readings, a blessing asking for atonement for our sins and the rebuilding of the Temple is recited. Also specific lines from Psalms are said, such as, "Lord of Hosts, happy is the one who trusts in You" (Psalm 84) and "You are my hiding place; You will protect me from distress and surround me with songs of salvation, Selah" (Psalm 32). These words offer little comfort to those whose faith may be faltering because of their struggles. What can it mean for the person who suffers yet believes he must recite these words every day, nonetheless? Lastly, the sacrifices that are offered are for peace, relieving one's guilt, and thanksgiving. They are not for healing.

So far, we have seen that though sometimes we might find an errant line or two or a verse in a prayer that responds to suffering, there is very little in our liturgy that "sees" or acknowledges those who are suffering. On the other hand, some of the psalms that made it into the liturgy at least reference (even if in past tense) and recognize sadness.

Take for example, Psalm 30, which is read before verses of praise (*P'sukei D'Zimrah*). Psalm 30, which is about being spared "from going into the Pit", shows the possibility for God's response to suffering. "I cried to You for help and You healed me . .

. At night there may be weeping, but in the morning there is joy . . . Turned my sorrow into dancing." These words were later picked up by Debbie Friedman, who as we will see later, did groundbreaking work in response to the need for healing liturgy and for a response to people's pain. Though again, I wish to point out that these words (as well as Friedman's) often take the form of past tense, and are not necessarily helpful to someone who is currently struggling.

I recall, in fact, at the dedication of the Debbie Friedman School of Sacred Music ceremony, that her beautiful music was played and sung. As the faculty and students sang all around me, "You turned my mourning into dancing", I wept. I was still in my own Pit, and I could find no solace or comfort in these words. When would God do that for me, I wondered. When would I dance too?

We then turn in our liturgy to the section of *Psukei D'Zimrah*—verses of praise, mostly taking the form of Psalms. Here too, we find recognition of hardship, but only a ritual and blessings to be said after the fact. I am referring to *Birkat Hagomel*, which is said by someone who has come safely out of impending danger or survived illness. In other words, there is no mention of those who may still be suffering—this is a ritual and a prayer focused on praising God for survival.

The theme of praise for God continues to grow in emphasis as we move through the service. *Emet v'yatziv*, the *Amidah*, and the *Kedushah* are all filled with great words of praise for the divine being. One of the intermediary blessings in the *Amidah* is a blessing that asks for healing, but it takes up only a single line amidst pages and pages of praise for God.

Similarly, the prayer *Sh'ma koleinu*, which forms part of the intermediary blessings, asks for God to have compassion on us. Despite this encouraging language, the rest of the blessing is more about God accepting our prayers rather than having compassion in response to those who suffer.

It is at this point that we reach an interesting and strange mix of words. *Tachanun*, a prayer understood as "pleading with God" is a main section of the service done individually and silently. What is complicated about this prayer is that one could understand it as the only structured liturgical piece that responds to suffering (other than what might be said spontaneously during a moment of silent prayer). As it happens, Reform Jews took *Tachanun* out of their worship service altogether, in no small part because of its theology of human sinfulness and attendant system of reward and punishment. But it remains in the traditional *siddur*, and is worth looking at a little more closely. "He is compassionate", it begins: "He forgives iniquity and does not destroy. Repeatedly He suppresses His anger, not rousing His full wrath. Lord, do not withhold Your compassion from us" (p.144).

The themes of compassion and care are repeatedly underscored by requests that God not punish us for our sins: "If You, Lord, were to keep account of sins, Lord, who could stand? . . . Though our iniquities testify against us, Lord, act for Your name's sake," are followed quickly by, "Remember, Lord, Your compassion and loving-kindness, for they are everlasting . . . May the Lord answer us when we are in distress; may the name of Jacob's God protect us" (p.144). We also find words like, "We know we have sinned and that there is no one to stand up for us. Let Your great name stand up for us in time of trouble" (p.146).

There *are* also some useful words as a response to personal suffering:

> Do not abandon us, Lord our God, do not be distant from us, for we are worn out by the sword and captivity, pestilence and plague, and by every trouble and sorrow . . . See our troubles and heed the voice of our prayer, for You heed the prayer of every mouth . . . Do not desert us.[7]

But we find these words interwoven against a backdrop of our great sins:

> Our Father, our King, our Refuge, do not act with us according to our evil deeds . . . Please, we beg You, forgive our sins, our Father, our King, our Rock, our Redeemer, living and eternal God, mighty in strength, loving and good to all Your works, for You are the Lord our God . . . Save us in Your great compassion; rescue us from storm and turmoil . . . Turn from Your fierce anger, and relent from the evil meant for Your people . . . Please Lord, answer us when we call. For You, Lord, we wait. For You, Lord, we hope. For You, Lord, we long. Do not be silent while we suffer . . . You who hold out an open hand of repentance to receive transgressors and sinners—our soul is overwhelmed by our great sorrow . . . Look on our affliction, for many are our sufferings and heartaches . . . Let not our hardships seem small to You. Swiftly may Your compassion reach us in the day of our distress.[8]

Again, one leaves the prayer with the overwhelming sense that one's tragedies are deserved.

Towards the end of the prayer the language shifts to pleading for God's redemption and speaks with distraught about our people's suffering. These strong, moving words reference the persecution we faced in the Middle Ages:

> Look down from heaven and see how we have become an object of scorn and derision among the nations. We are regarded as sheep led to the slaughter, to be killed, destroyed, beaten, and humiliated. Yet, despite all this, we have not forgotten Your name. Please do not forget us.[9]

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[7] *The Koren Siddur* (ed. Raphael Freeman; trans. Jonathan Sacks; Jerusalem: Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd, 2009), 148.
[8] Ibid., 148-150.
[9] Ibid., 152.

The version we see here adds a line that refers to words of hope written on a wall in a Concentration Camp during the Holocaust. We also see evidence of words from the Book of Psalms.

Tachanun's insistent references to human sin as the cause for disaster is part of the reason that the Reform Movement decided to remove it from its liturgy altogether. But, as we saw, *Tachanun* also contains the most striking verses we have seen so far as a proper response to personal suffering. The cries are real, in present tense, and describe despair not from a place of hope, but from the deepest, darkest part of the Pit. I believe this part—when one can not yet see hope—is something deeply lacking in our liturgy.

We move from *Tachanun* onto *Seder Kriat HaTorah*. "The synagogue thus became not only a house of prayer but also a house of study", Sacks tells us (p.158). This anticipated shift towards Torah as study determines the very atmosphere and nature of our worship. Particularly if the service is seen as leading up to the high point of reading Torah, does it follow that the blessings prior be geared towards praise? I wonder if there is any possibility to reframe the service so that worshipers in need become the focus. Our modern liturgy and worship services have attempted to combine the two, by inserting a *Mi Sheberakh* prayer while in the presence of the Torah. We will explore this addition later when we explore contemporary liturgical changes and innovations. I simply point out here that if synagogues are primarily places of study, then it is no wonder that there is little attention given to those who are despondent. There seems to be no room for them in the service.

What we get instead is more praise and hope. Psalms scattered throughout the liturgy may be artfully crafted, but they do not on that account necessarily speak to those

who are suffering. For example, the recitation of Psalm 20 is hopeful in its tone, but excludes those who are calling out to God but have received no answer. “May God answer us on the day we call”, it proclaims (p.172). But what if the worshipper has been crying out for a long time?

To round out this *siddur* survey, I also explored services prayed during other parts of the day or week, to see what responses or words they had for those who suffer. In the *Minchah* service I did find a reference to suffering and anguish, but the words are reserved for *Tisha B’Av*, and linked only to those particular deaths that occurred during the destruction of the Temple.

I also found the words of *Hoda’ah* troubling. A prayer of thanksgiving, these verses would be difficult to say sincerely if in deep despair: “You are good—for Your compassion never fails. You are compassionate—for Your loving-kindnesses never cease. We have always placed our hope in You” (p.224).

Similarly, when we explore the *Ma’ariv* service, we find evidence of a liturgy blind to personal suffering. A potential exception is *Hashkivenu*, a prayer asking for our protection and shelter (specifically from the dangers in the night). On the one hand, it must be quite challenging to recite if someone has already been hurt and is struggling, especially if suffering is particularly associated with the night. On the other hand, however, perhaps it is an opportunity for one who is suffering to ask for God’s help to make it through the dark hours of night—which is frequently the time when suffering is most acute.

I also explored the liturgy recited on Shabbat, although as a day devoted to praise of God and of rest, it was not likely to contain prayers that challenge my initial

hypothesis. Not surprisingly, Shabbat liturgy is filled with Psalms of praise. “He is my Rock, in whom there is no wrong” (Psalm 92) . . . “I sought the Lord, and He answered me; He saved me from all my fears” (Psalm 34). What a painful experience Shabbat worship can be to someone in the midst of deep struggle!

Surprisingly, there is opportunity to *bench Birkat Hagomel* on Shabbat. It clearly focuses on praising God for having helped someone escape grave danger, but I was surprised to see an acknowledgement of past suffering in a service oriented solely towards joy and celebration. Quoting the Talmud (Ber 54b), Sacks specifies four occasions when this blessing is to be offered: release from captivity, recovery from a potentially life-threatening illness, a dangerous journey, and a sea-crossing (though some recite it after an air flight) (p.506). Interestingly, a few congregations made a point of having worshipers recite these words in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy. Though it thereby acknowledged those who had come safely through the storm, I find it more striking that it excluded those still recovering.

Another fascinating insertion in the liturgy was a blessing specified “for a sick man or woman.” This prayer is focused almost entirely on healing for the body, not the soul. It is also assumed that it will be recited when that particular person is absent from the synagogue. This was particularly troubling to find, as it further isolates those who are “sick” but present, as if the sick must be outside and everyone inside is well in mind, body, and spirit. Also of note is that the prayer contains words indicating that the person reciting the prayer is making a donation to charity:

> As a reward for this, may the Holy One, blessed be He, be filled with compassion for her, to restore her health, cure her, strengthen and revive her, sending her a swift and full recovery from heaven to all her organs and sinews, amongst the other sick ones in Israel, a healing of the spirit and a healing of the body—though

> on Shabbat it is forbidden to cry out, may healing be quick to come—now, swiftly and soon, and let us say: Amen.[10]

This draws a direct connection between giving *tzedekah* and healing, as if healing is again reward for merit. The obvious conclusion is that suffering is punishment for sin and that people who are sick cannot deserve healing on their own account.

There is also the two-fold prayer entitled *Y'kum purkan*, translated here as "May deliverance arise." These are medieval additions, the first coming from the geonic era and praying for the well-being of the geonic academies; and the second, a prayer for the assembled congregation, but patterned linguistically after the older geonic prayer. Within these prayers, only a single line could be found that spoke to those in anguish: "May you be redeemed and delivered from all distress and illness" (p.518). This was part of a prayer for deliverance for those who work in the congregation.

As expected, the rest of the Shabbat liturgy continues with overflowing praise. Every once in a while we find a brief reference to someone who once was previously struggling, such as, "Through a pavement of sapphire He showed them the strength of His love, He revealed Himself, lifting them from the depths of the pit. For with God is loving-kindness; He abounds in redemption" (Psalm 130; p.582). But these glimpses are few and far between, and as we have noted previously, the majority speak of suffering only in the past tense, rather than the present.

So too with the *Minchah* service for Shabbat, the few phrases that speak to suffering are couched in and connected to sins or forgiveness. For example, a set of psalms to be recited to God contain words like, "From the depths (Psalm 130 and 69) . . . I have called to You, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice; let Your ears be attentive to my plea"

[10] Ibid., 508.

(Psalm 130). And yet they are followed immediately by, “If You, Lord, should keep account of sins, who could stand? But with You there is forgiveness, that You may be held in awe . . . It is He who will redeem Israel from all their sins” (p.636). It should also be noted that Psalm 130 is known as a penitential psalm, to be recited during the Ten Days of Repentance. Only one other psalm, Psalm 69, uses the phrase, “Out of the depths/from the depths,” which the editor says, “signal[s] closeness to despair or death” (p.637).

As we will continue to see, even in other types of services the liturgy contains mostly praise or references to reward and punishment. The Koren *siddur* includes a *havdalah* service to be said at home. It contains a brief line from Proverbs 7 asking God to heed prayer but it is immediately followed by words from Job 35: “Cleanse the defilement of my deed” (p.726).

We likewise continue to see references to suffering that occurred in the past tense but not in the present. For a prayer of thanksgiving after childbirth, Psalm 116 declares, “You rescued me from death, my eyes from weeping” (p.1030). These words might have been fitting to someone in deep despair, but are clearly oriented towards one who has come out of a dark place, rather than someone who is still in it.

To be sure, the *siddur* also includes explicit prayers for recovery from illness, and these too rely heavily on the Psalms. Though they recognize that people are ill, they still reference sin as well, “The Lord is compassionate and gracious . . . He has not treated us as our sins deserve” (Psalm 103; p.1044).

As we have seen, the liturgy presents a complex picture. But despite the complexity, certain obvious perspectives on human suffering are present throughout.

Wherever we look, we find the ever-present theme of reward and punishment. The *Tanakh* is filled with stories of ancestors who struggled, and many psalms reference despair, but these aspects of understanding pain have not been included in our liturgy.

What references we have to suffering allow little to no room for one who enters worship in deep despair. We hear only of successful cases where God did in fact intervene to end pain; leaving those still in pain to wonder why they have not felt God's similar healing hand. As sufferers in silence, apparently being punished for their own sins, they remain in isolation.

There are those who may wish to argue that the liturgical pieces we have surveyed do, in fact, offer a potential outlet of hope for those who are suffering. While this may be possible for someone who is already far along a trajectory towards healing, they do nothing for one who is still in the depths. In fact, sometimes they may even make a person feel worse. Rabbi Elliot Kukla asserts:

> I have come to the conclusion that hope is not always the best response to chronic despair. Some people need to be held in their pain until it passes and be reminded that things will change; but in some situations of intractable suffering there is no expectation of amelioration in the future and pushing hope rings empty. Releasing hope allows us to connect deeply to the reality of another person's suffering in the present and offer our companionship and comfort. And in the end, what else do we have in the face of mortality and loss but the here and now and our ability to connect to one another? When we connect to one another with whole hearts that are open to both triumph and deep despair, we bring true shalom (wholeness and peace) into the world.[11]

So it seems that as long as our liturgy remains as it is, it will continue to disconnect those who are suffering from the worship service, which simply alienates them. How can one who is in deep sorrow authentically pray words to God about his sins,

[11] Elliot Kukla, "The Torah of Despair," *CCAR Journal* (Summer 2012): 95-101.

when he has done nothing wrong to cause his suffering? Our modern minds generally do not accept this leap.

This leads to a bigger question in our search: why is so much of our liturgy based in a penitential system of reward and punishment? We turn next, therefore, to exploring the penitential theology behind the liturgy as we have observed it.

CHAPTER 2: PENITENTIAL THEOLOGY

> There is nothing as whole as a broken heart.
>
> -Chasidic saying[12]

As we learned from our survey of the Koren *siddur*, modern day liturgy contains a mixture of themes. There are many words of praise to God, messages of hope, and songs of glory. There is also a significant amount of liturgy couched in the frame of reward and punishment.

In order to understand why there is a range in the modern day *siddur*, we need to go back in time and trace how this came about. In particular, we need to figure out why Judaism became focused around a penitential system. The concepts of reward and punishment are very challenging to accept for someone with a liberal Jewish theology, but are additionally difficult to understand from a position of suffering. If someone in despair opens a prayer book and receives messages of reward and punishment, it will affect their own understandings of what is happening in their life. It may make them feel invisible, or even worse, as though they are being punished for their suffering, or that they have in some way caused what is happening to them.

We know that even with the first known prayer book, *Seder Rav Amram*, that sin was on the minds of our ancestors. Rav Amram, who compiled this first liturgical document around 860 CE, drew from the lessons of the Talmud and incorporated the possibility for a daily confession. According to his words, "If a person wants to say a

[12] Elliot Kukla, "The Torah of Despair," *CCAR Journal* (Summer 2012): 101.

confession after completing the daily *Amidah*, it is permissible to do so."[13] As Lawrence Hoffman explains, " . . . [B]iblical Jews did not think so little of themselves; but Rabbinic Jews did, and this low sense of self, this assumption of inveterate human sinfulness, became part of the Rabbinic tradition that was passed down through history . . . "[14]

But before we get there, we need to go back to our ancestor, Adam. How different religions understood Adam and his actions dictates the future trajectories of both Judaism and Christianity.

According to the apostle Paul, sin came about through Adam. Adam sinned, and this marked humans from that point forward. The "original sin" therefore, comes from Adam: all humans inherit sinfulness from Adam. For Christianity, we are born with sin already built inside of ourselves.

The Rabbinic belief system differed to some extent. To the Rabbis, sin wasn't something like "original sin" inherited from Adam. By contrast, they understood sin as the inherent capacity that all human beings have. But along with this inherent "evil" is the basic belief that all humans are also inherently good, created in the image of God. They understood that humans have the potential to move in both directions.

The Rabbis took their position on sin partly from the Bible, where it is described as a burden that "weighs . . . [people] down with guilt."[15] The sacrifices that we offer are the opportunity to remove the sin with which we are burdened. On Yom Kippur, for example, sin is transferred by a *kohen gadol* (high priest) onto an animal, who is then

[13] Lawrence A. Hoffman, ed., *We Have Sinned: Sin and Confession in Judaism—Ashamnu and Al Chet* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2012), 4.
[14] Ibid., 4.
[15] Ibid., 16.

either released into the wilderness or offered up through a fire meant to be pleasing to God.

However, by the time of the Rabbinic era sin had taken on a different metaphoric meaning. Sin was now like a debt that could be repaid. The more sins one committed, the deeper in debt a person found herself. The good acts and *mitzvot* that she performs get stored up and balance out the sins. One hopes that upon reaching God for judgment after death, one will have enough good deeds to outweigh the bad ones. The act of accounting for our sins and practicing passing before God happens every New Year through the ritual of Yom Kippur. We learn that through *teshuvah*, our act of returning, that we can wipe the slate clean for the coming year and strive towards doing good and being righteous people. Though the emphasis on Yom Kippur is that we have given in to our *yetzer hara* ("evil inclination"), we also know that it is balanced by our *yetzer tov* – our inclination towards good. The Rabbis taught that we constantly struggle with both of these urges.

Hoffman points out that there is a significant gap in the writing that we have in our tradition. Common belief is that the Torah was completed around fifth century BCE. Then the Pharisees, the group that is commonly understood to be the predecessors to the Rabbis, appear around 167 BCE. But the group that is known as the Rabbis only seems to appear after 70 CE, with no rabbinic writing until the end of the second century.[16] Therefore there is a solid half millennium of time between the compilation of the Torah and when the Rabbis of Rabbinic Judaism become known to us from their own body of work. Looking at our liturgy as well as early Rabbinic writing for clues, we find that the

[16] Ibid., 17.

beliefs around sin, reward, and punishment, change from the period before the Rabbis to the Rabbinic period—but that a mix of things have ended up in our liturgy today.

In pre-rabbinic liturgical practice, the biblical notion of covenant appears quite prominently. Even in our current (and, therefore, rabbinic) *siddur*, "covenant" between Jews and God remains an underlying principle. The second paragraph of the *Shema* (Deut. 11) is a great example, in that it provides not just biblical but the Deuteronomic "tit for tat" theology: "If I do X then Y will happen" (the notion is extended in Deuteronomy 27 and 28). In other words, if we keep God's laws then all is well, and if we don't obey the laws we will be punished. We have a covenantal relationship with God and we have the capacity to choose good or evil. But we do have the capacity for good, after all. Deuteronomy is filled with warning but also promise.

The Rabbis accept this basic covenantal idea but make the system much more penitential in nature. One of the most important places we find this evolution is in the *Mishnah*, an extensive work of Rabbinic law that was compiled around 200 CE. In it, we discover a significant amount of text devoted to the High Holy Days. Though technically according to the Torah the New Year begins in the spring with the month of Nisan (see Exodus 12), the Rabbis also wanted to highlight Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur which fall exactly six months later. Leviticus tells us that Rosh Hashanah was simply an important time to commemorate, but in the *Mishnah* the Rabbis suggest it has an equally high importance next to the New Year in Nisan. This separate New Year of Rosh Hashanah gets linked to the idea of judgment and the confessional essence of Yom Kippur. Therefore, Passover is the time we remember our freedom from slavery and the birth of our people, and Rosh Hashanah is a more universalistic time for all people to

assess their deeds and see if they merit another year. (Note also that the universal nature of all people is picked up by parts of the *Aleinu*, which was originally composed to announce the blowing of the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah.)

To emphasize the importance of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the entire month of Elul (the month leading up to Rosh Hashanah) was designated as a time to focus on our deeds, both good and bad. People were instructed to read "poems of pardon" (known as *s'lichot*). Today some Jews will use the month prior to Rosh Hashanah for deep reflection and personal accounting, though most Reform synagogues don't emphasize this period perhaps as much as they could.

What is important to note is that the *Mishnah* is also partly based on biblical texts from the Torah and therefore shapes the teachings found within it. Things are not necessarily one way in the Torah and another in the *Mishnah*—rather, one affects the other and is reinterpreted. A good example is Deuteronomy 26, which describes the ritual a farmer must take when he produces a tithe for the Temple. The words the farmer is to recite when handing over the tithe are commented on in the *Mishnah*. Deuteronomy 26 gives a set of words to recite describing what the farmer did and why. However when describing this farmer's ritual, the *Mishnah* employs the use of the Hebrew verb *l'hitvadot*, "to confess." But the words the farmer says are not words of admitting sin, rather, they describe his success at tithing properly. From our perspective, it would seem odd to describe it as a *vidui* ("confession"), when it is more like stating the things the farmer has done correctly. The *Mishnah* understands this ritual then not as a confession of sins, but what Hoffman calls a "profession" of good deeds, which would then merit a reward. As an early stratum in the *Mishnah* harking back to Temple times, the farmer's

ritual and the early mishnaic commentary on it illustrate the older view of a covenantal relationship. By the end of the mishnaic era, however, the Rabbis have transformed the simple notion of open-ended covenant into an anthropology that emphasizes the sinfulness of human beings and the suggestion that the evil inclination regularly wins out no matter what we do. The capacity to sin and concern that we will regularly and inevitably do so is reflected in other literature found at the same time, in both Jewish and non-Jewish texts.

The belief that we have sinned to the extent that we ourselves no longer even merit forgiveness is emphasized the most during the High Holy Days. Most worshipers today find the High Holidays difficult precisely because the rest of the year has not prepared them for this stark exercise in rabbinic theological logic – synagogue services on the average Shabbat, for instance hardly preach the intense sinful nature of humankind; and *Tachanun*, the daily liturgy that best illustrates the High Holiday approach is either omitted or passed over too rapidly for its message to be assimilated. The High Holiday liturgy, by contrast, is sin laden. For example, the prayer *Avinu Malkeinu* describes our many, many sins and shortcomings, and includes our request for forgiveness even though we don't deserve it (*ki ein banu ma'asim*). Though the rest of the year we focus on our covenantal relationship with God, this period focuses on our sins, and the hope that we will live to see another year.

It is not that rabbinic Judaism strays far from the idea of a covenantal relationship with God; it just restates the covenant with negative anthropology. The High Holy Days especially emphasize the Rabbinic belief that humans are ultimately likely to sin—rather than being people with equal potential for good deeds such as we find in the Torah (recall

the farmer ritual). This negativity in approach, says Hoffman, explains the rabbinic choice of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur as the most prominent of holidays, rather than Sukkot, which biblically was understood to be primary. In addition, Sukkot is recalled as a time for unfettered joy, whereas the Rabbis focus on the sadness that is due following the destruction of the Temple. This sadness is itself tinged with guilt, since the Temple fell because of our sins – the very best example of the anthropology that dominates rabbinic thought. So sin, sadness, and punishment triumph over pride in good deeds, joy, and the potential for well deserved reward. The liturgy of the High Holy Days, with its accent on our sinfulness and our need for God's forgiveness remained paramount for hundreds of years.

What changed it was modernity, the Enlightenment and emancipation.[17] Even today, when post-modernism has become the dominant mode of thought, we have retained the anthropological mindset of modernity, with its prevailing message of human capacity for good. Freedom and the liberty for all was the watchword of the French Revolution. For Jews, that hope came through the messages heralded by Napoleon, including the idea that they might finally be free. Ultimately Napoleon failed in his pursuits, but modernity gained momentum and even in the post-Napoleonic years – despite attempts to the contrary – villages, towns, and societies that took on the mantle of modernity had to consider the Jews. In the long run, Jews gained freedom and citizenship despite Napoleon's loss.

With emancipation came the concept behind it: the intellectual movement now known as the Enlightenment. Many people, but especially Jews, loved the ideas bolstered

[17] Ibid., 23-4.

by the Enlightenment. It heralded reason as paramount, and the belief that the ability to reason is what made all human beings equal to one another (therefore Jews were no less than their fellow non-Jewish counterparts). To be sure, the 19th century replaced the age of reason with romanticism, in which different peoples are ranked once again on an inevitable hierarchical scale. But overall, Napoleonic rationality remained: Jews did receive rights as citizens; they did enter the body politic; and more than others, they held onto the Enlightenment mindset that had gotten them to their new position.

The Enlightenment is also known for its scientific advances, and science remained supreme even in the romantic era, bringing with it expectation of infinite possibility. It is in this era that we saw exponential growth and inventiveness of new products and ideas. Everything seemed possible! As Jews started migrating from Europe to North America, they brought their hopes for a new and better world with them. They arrived on the scene to find booming progress without the hampering romanticism of old-guard superiority to stand in their way of joining everyone else in celebrating modernity's promise.

As we might expect, Jews already living in North America brought their newfound ideas and ideology into the synagogue. Here then was a confluence of incompatible beliefs: a liturgy filled with threats of punishment for human sinfulness; but mixed with sermons and other messages of the capacities for change, progress, and hope. After a while the Enlightenment won out: High Holy Day liturgies remained focused on repentance but with sinfulness toned down, and now synagogue-goers received far more messages that focused on the power to do good and calls to make the world a better place. That, at least, is what happened where Jews felt free to change their age-old liturgy and to translate it into English, with new prayers of promise, composed to balance the negative

ones of tradition. Orthodoxy (and Conservative Jews as well) retained the old, but in Hebrew, without troubling translations. Reform emphasized translations and liturgical content, however, giving us the prophetic hope for universal progress based on human decency and goodness—a message reflected aesthetically in the use of choirs and organ music, all expressing a grandeur of the human spirit at its finest. This grand feeling is the context out of which the *siddur* the *Union Prayerbook* emerges in the Reform Movement, reflecting the period we refer to as Classical Reform. We will explore the *Union Prayerbook* in our next chapter, but note here that its messages of prophetic calls to make the world a better and compassionate place, is emphasized greatly in its pages.

This positive mind-set remained alive and well throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s, as liberal values prompted the next generation to undertake fights for civil rights and against the Vietnam Conflict. By the late 1970s and 1980s, however, more conservative values were taking hold. Jews were not immune from these tendencies. In addition, Reform Judaism had paired optimism with boundless universalism, which came under attack after the Shoah and the need to reassert responsibility for Jews worldwide. Reform liturgy changed dramatically, therefore, especially with the Six Day War, which turned Jewish attention inward rather than allowing it to focus endlessly on universal issues of worldwide progress and change. Classical Reform Judaism's all-out focus on universal goodness had not left much room for Jewish particularism. Revived particularism did not automatically entail the surrender of ideas concerning human goodness. It did, however, present an alternative avenue for Jewish aspirations, an opportunity to be Jewish-ly active without having to worry about prophetic aspirations. As we have seen, the rest of the world too was discovering that the promise of endless

progress was not always realizable. The same brilliant minds that used science to invent machines for good were also harnessed to create machines that destroy and damage. Looking back on the terrifying world wars and devastating economic depression, especially in the post Vietnam era when even the American government seemed bent on evil, had led everyone to question the assumption of inevitable human goodness. Are people really that good after all? Or does our sinfulness win out, as the Rabbis believed?

This led the post-war generation, the Baby Boomers, to ask even more complicated questions: What can we really believe in anymore? Can we believe in God? Can we trust in the goodness of others?

Baby Boomers and their children are left in a quandary. On the one hand, they have never really given up the belief in their own goodness, even if they sometimes wonder about the goodness of the governments and institutions they inhabit. Despite post-modern doubts regarding the liberal version of endless progress, individuals still see themselves as worthy and deserving of reward. Our culture of capitalist enterprise holds out endless promises of the good life; and the parallel culture of therapeutic benefit convinces us that we are worthy of whatever the good life offers. We may have fewer and fewer expectations of organized human enterprise – of governments and collectives, that is. But we retain the notion that we ourselves are basically good and deserving of goodness in return. The result is a culture of personalism and personal authenticity: "Living an authentic life for one's own sake became the goal."[18]

For the mainstream, the focus on authenticity has had no moral valence connected to it. It has been more a kind of romantic time period revolving around self-expression—

[18] Ibid., 29.

and the importance of freedom of speech and self-expression. This self-expression was extended into notions of self-care and therapeutic ideas. In other words, we should not only express ourselves, but we must take care of ourselves because the authentic self is the most important thing that exists in society.

How can that generation understand itself in the context of sin? The greatest sin, therefore, comes about when you limit your own (or someone else's) freedom of expression, or when we don't take care of ourselves. This is pretty far from the sin represented in our liturgy. I suppose one could draw a parallel between the covenant humans have with God and the covenant humans have with themselves. But by and large the system of reward and punishment and our previous liturgy don't match the mindset of the Boomers and their "next-gen" progeny.

Moving forward, we now find ourselves in a time of focusing on meaning. What is meaningful is understood to be the most important. For liberal Jews then, what matters is what we personally find enriching and meaningful in the tradition. It is not about "dos and don'ts." Reform Judaism in particular has focused on wrestling with our texts and traditions in order to understand them and so that we may make informed, meaningful choices. We are tasked with choosing to perform *mitzvot* because they have some kind of inherent meaning to us, not simply because we are required to do them.

The current liturgy in the Reform Movement attempts to bridge covenantal relationship and the mindset we are in now. As we shall see later, *siddurim* like *Mishkan T'filah* incorporates new readings and ideas that reflect not sin, but hope, possibilities for renewal, and meaning. In this way, our newest *siddurim* appear as a mix of a number of themes—our traditional inherited liturgy as well as newer interpretations. Ironically

however, despite its determination to address communal ideas and needs in promising terms that speak to current understandings, it fails to do so when it comes to supporting individuals who are personally suffering. That is the subject to which we now turn. Later on we will explore rituals and music, both newer and developing, that work to address the needs still not yet found in the pages of our *siddurim*. But our next stop is those *siddurim* and their liberal predecessors to see what message they contain for people in pain.

CHAPTER 3: THE UNION PRAYERBOOK AND GATES OF PRAYER

> We are to partner with God in the work of repairing the world.
> The healing of the world begins with the work of healing ourselves.
> -Rabbi Elie Kaplan Spitz[19]

Now that we are armed with historical context for why much of our liturgy is framed by certain themes, we are ready to continue in our *siddur* survey. We turn next to the *Union Prayerbook*, which as we discussed in Chapter 2, reflects the period of the Enlightenment as it entered America at the end of the 19th century. It also reflects the Social Gospel Movement, a development within Protestantism in the 1890s that emphasized social action to deal with issues of dislocation resulting from the Great Migration of 1881 and beyond. Politically speaking, it represented the formative statement of Classical Reform and a reaction to the influx of eastern European Jewish immigrants who were arriving daily. It is aimed at spreading messages of making the world more compassionate and just, so it will be interesting to explore how its words resonate to those in deep despair.

The *Union Prayerbook* was revised twice after its original publication. First published in 1895, it was revised once in 1918, and a second time in 1940. We will explore a version from around each of these eras to compare and note any differences.

We turn first to the original version of the prayer book. I have selected a version published in 1914, a version of the original work in 1895. Let us see what response this *siddur* offers to individuals who are suffering.

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[19] Elie Kaplan Spitz, *Healing from Despair: Choosing Wholeness in a Broken World* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2008), 91.

Along with a few scriptural passages, this version begins with pages designated for silent prayer. Each prayer is labeled as "Thanksgiving" but vary by specific themes. However, the last prayer is called "Prayer in Times of Affliction", and it fits into the category of comforting words that we are searching for:

> All-wise Ruler of our destinies, with a heavy heart I come before Thee in this hour of worship; with great sadness do I seek Thy face. Thou hast visited me with tribulation and tried me with sorrow. Mine are days of anguish and nights of weeping. Humbly I bow beneath Thy chastisement and try to accept Thy will. For what am I, a child of dust, that I should murmur against the wisdom of Thy ways? I know that Thy decrees, though hard to bear, are meant for good and not for evil. In the gloom around me, I look to Thee for light. Let me not perish in my misery; let me not seek in vain for Thy sustaining arm. Comfort me, as Thou alone canst, and sustain me until Thou changest the sack-cloth of mourning for the garments of joy. Let me not repine at Thy chastening, O Lord, neither be weary of Thy correction, but may my present trial cleanse me from sins, redeem me from my faults, and give me new strength to do Thy will with a perfect heart. Amen.[20]

The prayer reflects the kind of theology that we should expect—the reader is being punished by God, who has caused the suffering for an unnamed reason. Though we would say this is decidedly not comforting to a seeker in deep despair, I was pleased to see at least some small acknowledgement of suffering within the first few pages.

Not surprisingly, the worship service for Shabbat evening is entirely filled with praise. Every blessing and responsive reading is dedicated to rejoicing in and thanking God for all that we have received. Even the reading offered before the Mourner's *Kaddish*, while meant to be comforting to the reader, also states that one should turn towards God for that is where our help resides. For those who are suffering and whose relationship with God is challenged or perhaps even non-existent, this type of language provides little solace.

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[20] The Central Conference of American Rabbis, eds., *The Union Prayer-book for Jewish Worship. Part 1 – Prayers for the Sabbath, the Three Festivals, and the Week Days* (New York: Bloch Publishing Co., 1914), 12.

As we turn to the liturgy for Shabbat morning, we should also not be surprised to find words of reward and punishment. There are also many English readings expressing the hope for a just world, where freedom of all people is paramount. This aligns with what we learned in our last chapter about the inherited liturgy mixed with the period of the Enlightenment. During the service for Shabbat morning I noted a prayer intended for the whole community, based on the traditional *Mi Sheberakh*, a composition from the Middle Ages. This novel English version has some words of comfort included:

> May He who is the source of all good gifts, bless this congregation and be with all its members, their families and their households; may He prosper them in their various callings and occupations, help them in their needs and guide them in their difficulties. May He hear the prayers of all who worship here this morning, comfort the sorrowing and cheer the silent sufferers. May He bless those who guide and who serve this congregation, and those who contribute willingly to its support; may He reward with the joy of goodness the charitable and the merciful who succor the poor, care for the sick, teach the ignorant and stretch forth their helping hand to those who have lost their way in this world . . .[21]

Though it is certainly couched in a frame of reward and punishment and is dependent on God's power, I liked that it reflected the idea that some people suffer silently or without notice.

Also interesting to note is that along with the typical liturgy we are accustomed to, this version of the *Union Prayerbook* has included a short section of sayings from the Rabbis of the Talmud. They espouse various teachings about life. However, none of them particularly address suffering.

As expected, the liturgy is overflowing with predictable themes: mercy, truth, righteousness, praise, and thanksgiving. A heavy portion of the liturgy appears in English which is consistent with the time period, but it all mirrors the liturgy that exists in

[21] Ibid., 99.

Hebrew. In their Shabbat services there is also the inclusion of many Psalms found in the *Tanakh*, though they are mostly focused on God's strength, compassion, salvation, and response in time of need. However, there is practically nothing in these worship services that would be comforting to one who is in deep despair.

This version of the *Union Prayerbook* includes a short service meant to be said in a house of mourning. Such a service provides a nice opportunity to come together in support of someone who is suffering. But that suffering is visible and obvious. While I was grateful to see it included, it doesn't offer a response to other people in the community who may be in despair for other reasons.

Prior to the communal liturgy for the weekday service there again is a short section of silent prayers. It is at least a chance for someone in pain to reach out to God, but unfortunately still renders their suffering invisible. Also, none of the readings offered really speak to an individual who is suffering; most are focused on praise, or echo the themes of reward and punishment that we are familiar with at this stage.

The second-to-last section of this *siddur* is labeled "Various Prayers." These readings, all written in English, focus on many themes, but the needs of those who suffer is woefully lacking. This section also includes a couple of prayers designated for individual prayer at home, mostly versions of the *Shema* to be recited in the morning and in the evening.

The entire last quarter of the *siddur* is an extensive selection of readings from the Torah and Haftarah. Something to note is that our Torah contains many narratives of characters who struggle with a wide variety of issues. It can be instructive to read these stories, especially when a person is immersed in a deep struggle.

Now that we have surveyed the original version of the *Union Prayerbook*, we will turn to its first revision. The revision was completed in 1918, and the version we will explore here is from 1922. By comparing the two, we can see if any progress has been made in the presentation of suffering. Let us recall that although World War I did not end until 1918, this revision emerged in a time when society was directly affected by it.

In contrast to the original version, this revised version simply begins with the evening service for Shabbat, rather than beginning with a set of prayers for individual contemplation. More specifically, the prayer book opens with a meditation at the beginning of the service focused on God, the sacredness of the Sabbath, and its importance in the hustle and bustle of our daily lives.

Amidst the general language expressing the joy of Shabbat, I want to lift up a single line that could provide comfort to those in pain: "O may this Sabbath bring rest to every disquieted heart and be a healing balm to every bruised soul."[22] It may not be a whole prayer, but at least we have located something that could bring comfort.

Unfortunately, for every small line we might find that provides comfort, we find many more that can isolate. From the opening meditation for a morning service for Shabbat, we find these statements:

> And should adversity come, may it not embitter us nor cause us to despair, but may we accept it as a mark of Thy chastening love which purifies and strengthens. Let every obstacle become an incentive to greater effort, and let every defeat teach us anew the lesson of patience and perseverance. Gird us with strength to bear our trials with courage. Let not the loss of anything, however dear to our hearts or precious in our sight, rob us of our faith in Thee. In light as in darkness, in joy as in sorrow, help us to put our trust in Thy providence, that even through our tears we may discern Thy divine blessing. Amen.[23]

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[22] The Central Conference of American Rabbis, eds., *The Union Prayer-book for Jewish Worship. Part 1* (2d ed.; Cincinnati: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1922), 21.
[23] Ibid., 64.

This mirrors what we know about the system of reward and punishment in place, but is off-putting to one who suffers. Though there may be "blessings" that come out of adversity, sometimes there are not, and this meditation pushes away those who do not adhere to the belief that suffering is justified by what we may learn from it.

During the Shabbat service prior to the holiday of Purim, I found these words in a meditation:

> . . . Israel has not struggled and suffered in vain. And though many a bitter experience may await us before the prejudice and hate that divide brother from brother shall have vanished, still do we trust, as did our fathers, that in the end all barriers to brotherhood shall be broken down . . .[24]

I wonder if these words were added to reflect the realities of World War I. In any event, even though it speaks to communal suffering, it does not directly address individual suffering. It may provide comfort, but I'm not convinced that it would.

During the afternoon service for Shabbat there is a short section of readings taken from *Pirkei Avot*, the "Wisdom of the Fathers." They are all teachings devoted to the pursuit of being a righteous and a good person, and how to live a proper life. It would have been a strategic place to insert a few prayers or teachings directed towards those who are downtrodden or in pain. However, that is clearly not the intention behind these readings. The minds of the editors were focused on other things.

I found essentially nothing else in the services for the festivals that would be helpful. Also the same service meant for a house of mourning is still included in this revised version.

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[24] Ibid., 109.

The most intriguing change in this version of the *Union Prayerbook* is the last section, called "Miscellaneous Prayers". The editors of the prayer book generated a variety of situations in which one would offer a prayer. For example, there is a "prayer of a bride", a "prayer on the consecration of a home", as well as a number of prayers to recite at different gravesides, depending on the relationship.

What is pertinent to our discussion is that not only did the editors offer a prayer to recite after passing through danger, they list several psalms to recite while "in time of trouble." Along with the psalm is this reading:

> Out of the depths of my sorrow I cry unto Thee, all-wise Ruler of the destinies of man. Thou hast laid upon me a heavy burden and tried me with sorrow. Days of anguish and nights of weeping hast Thou meted out to me. Humbly I bow beneath Thy decree and try to accept Thy will. For what am I, but dust and ashes, that I should murmur against the wisdom of Thy ways? I feel that Thy decrees, though hard to bear, are meant for good and not for evil.
>
> In the gloom around me, I look to Thee for light. Let me not seek in vain for Thy sustaining arm. Let me not rebel at Thy chastening, O Lord. Redeem me from faults, and grant me strength to do Thy will with a perfect heart. Amen.[25]

On the one hand, I was pleased to see this topic even receive attention. However, the prayers still align with the belief that sorrow is caused by God for a higher purpose, which can be disheartening if read by someone in pain.

Also in this section there are a number of prayers and psalms surrounding illness. What I appreciated is the separation of several categories: prayers to be said by the sick during illness, prayers said by the sick upon recovery, and separate prayers said for someone else who is ill. It is important that the person who is ill feel agency in their situation, and, generally speaking, I could envision someone who was ill of spirit stumbling upon this section and perhaps finding comfort. However, the prayer itself is

[25] Ibid., 361-2.

less helpful, as it yet again offers the idea that their sickness and "bitter trial" has fallen upon the person for their own good.

Ultimately, though I am pleased to see the addition of a new section that highlights various stages in life, it is still designated for private prayer. In other words, the person who is sick or suffering remains isolated from the rest of the community in their pain.

So we find again the same general themes in this version of the *Union Prayerbook*: praise, joy, God's power and our obedience, reward and punishment (and our disposition towards sin). It is generally disappointing as very little has changed structurally, and it contains few words of comfort to those suffering.

Let us turn our attention to the second revision of the *Union Prayerbook*. I selected a version published in 1956. The topic of the Shoah will not be explored here specifically; since the original came out in 1940, it was too early to reflect either World War II or the Shoah.

This version begins simply with a few pages called "Thoughts on Prayer." There is nothing in there that would speak to someone who is suffering; rather, it simply quotes different thoughts and ideas on the importance of prayer and its possibilities.

Several different layouts for a Shabbat evening service are offered, though the liturgy is generally standard. One thing that marks each of the services off as unique in its own right is the English responsive readings. Though they are focused on praising God, or the hope of creating a just world, and don't fit what we're looking for, the language itself is quite beautiful. It may be a little stilted to pray aloud with such formal English, but there is reason to believe that it was appreciated in its own time for the powerful

imagery it conveyed. I don't believe we have the same appreciation for this prayer book today.

Another thing that changes between versions of their Friday night service is the selection for silent prayer. I was struck by a few sentences in one of these versions,

> . . . We pray for all people who at this hour are in tribulation, in sickness, in want, in danger of body or soul. We name in our hearts those who are near to us and in whose afflictions we are afflicted. Let them see Thy help and grant them a blessed release from their trials.[26]

While this still renders the sufferer invisible, I appreciated both the recognition of a variety of types of struggle, and the creative language that hopes others will be set free from their pain.

As expected, the liturgy itself remains intact and the focus is on praising God, thanksgiving, and some words describing God's power. What I find less of are explicit references to reward and punishment. God reigns supreme and everything that happens is because of God's will, but at least in the evening service there are far fewer references to our being punished for misdeeds or rewarded for keeping God's word.

Another exciting thing to note is that in this version there are a number of English readings and poems presented prior to the Mourner's *Kaddish*. This is something we will find in later prayer books, such as *Mishkan T'filah* (see Chapter 6), but not something we have seen previously. The words are meant to bring comfort to the community or to one who is in mourning, but would not necessarily bring comfort to someone who is struggling for a different reason. They also direct the person who is suffering towards

[26] The Central Conference of American Rabbis, eds., *The Union Prayerbook for Jewish Worship*. *Part 1* (3d ed.; New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1956), 49.

God for healing, which as we discussed previously, may simply not work for someone who is feeling distanced from God.

The liturgy for the Shabbat morning service is all standard, and there are few surprises or differences from other *siddurim*. In this particular version I was intrigued to find more language devoted to the hope that we will not be ungrateful for what God has given to us, as well as the request that we do not get so caught up in things like material wealth that we lose sight of what is important. For example, in one prayer we find the words, ". . . May we never be tempted to profit by impoverishing and degrading the lives of others. Make us realize the wrong of letting others hunger while we are surfeited with the bounties of nature . . ." (p.133). This prayer mirrors the time period in which it was written in that it reflects a society that has experienced war and strife and loss. But it is different and new language compared to what we have seen before.

One small insertion I noted in the morning service for festivals is a short blessing. Its meaning is simple: "For the blessing of all and the hurt of none. For the joy of all and the woe of none. For the life of all and the death of none." (p.265). The set of three wishes is the Reform version of the common insertion for the holidays, *Livrakhah v'lo liklalah.* While it wouldn't necessarily bring comfort to one who is in deep despair, this is at least heading in that general direction. Importantly, the Hebrew *Klalah* (curse) has been changed to "pain" at least reflecting the notion that pain is not a tribulation offered by God to provide some benefit. I include it here because amidst all of the words of praise towards God and conversations about righteousness, it struck me as a place where someone struggling could find hope. There is little there is in this *siddur* that addresses deep pain, but here we find some recognition of pain as the meaningless thing it is.

There is also some language that would likely isolate someone who is suffering. For example, during the morning service for a weekday, the prayer named *Ahavah Rabbah* contained these words:

> Let us now proclaim the supreme truth of our faith. It is heard round the world. In every crisis of his life, even in the presence of death, has the Jew affirmed his faith in the one and only God. By this he has endured the fury and suffering of the centuries and risen to a sublime ministry of service . . .[27]

Again, someone who is struggling in their relationship with God would find this language isolating. Imagine someone near death from cancer. All he learns is that he ought to affirm his faith better.

We find the same type of language within the same service. A reading that follows shortly after the one above states:

> O Thou who givest meaning to the strivings of men, attune our hearts for communion with Thee. How often, when everything fails us, do we yearn for Thee. In the stillness of the night, in the press of the crowd, in the agony of our inner conflict, we bow our heads, and lo, Thou art in our hearts and we are at peace. We know not, O Lord, whether the gifts for which we ask are for our good, whether our trials and tribulations may not be blessings in disguise, whether even the fragment of our shattered hopes and love may not minister to the upbuilding of other lives and the fulfillment of Thine unfathomable plan. So we do not pray unto Thee to make our lives easy to give us happiness without alloy. Rather do we pray Thee to aid us to be uncomplaining and unafraid . . .[28]

I don't know if this translation is an attempt to reference the trials of World War I and the Depression, and to hold up hope opposite those events. However, it sends the message that perhaps there is a reason for our suffering, and that if we just reach out to God we will feel better. In any event, this could be extremely frustrating to someone who is in pain.

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[27] Ibid., 328.
[28] Ibid., 335.

After surveying this second revision of the *Union Prayerbook*, we can gather some conclusions: We find many of the same general themes such as God's power, praise, the request for salvation and help in following a righteous path to God, and the pursuit of a just world, to name a few. Though some of the language has changed and mirrors different ideas, I didn't find a great deal that differed from the traditional notions found in the Hebrew *siddur*. It may also be that the editors felt to make such vast changes would involve re-writing the entire prayer book, but nonetheless, had they known what we do about suffering, they surely would have changed more of the standard theological responses that we have found this far. That knowledge was just around the corner, arriving with the advent of popular attention to psychology, and available in the 1946 best seller by Joshua Loth Liebman, *Peace of Mind.* In 1940, the editors could not have predicted the therapeutic approach to religion that Liebman had not yet introduced. In the end, therefore, there is very little here for the individual who suffers.

We turn our attention now to the next *siddur* that emerged in the Reform Movement, called *Gates of Prayer*. Published in 1975, it remained the prayer book used in most Reform congregations until the arrival of *Mishkan T'filah* (which we will survey in Chapter 6). Let us see how the liturgy has changed in the decades following the *Union Prayerbook* and explore what may be of comfort to those who suffer. By the time it came out, therapeutic religion was becoming the rage, not just because of Liebman and rabbis of his stature, but because of feminism, which brought healing to popular attention. We should also be mindful that *Gates of Prayer* is situated in the mid-1970s, several decades after World War I and II, but in a society not unaccustomed to war or strife. At the same time, life in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s was quite different from prior decades, and that

will likely shape the liturgy that we find within the prayer book. The introduction to the prayer book offers us more clarity:

> . . . [I]n this prayerbook we have followed the principle that there are many paths to heaven's gates, that this prayer and that one, this service and that one, may both have the power to lead us to the living God. Faithful to this view, we have tried to provide room for many ways of worship. We have included many old songs to God, and we have attempted new ones that seem appropriate to our time and condition. So it is that while our themes are the ageless ones of our tradition, the manner of their expression reflects our own day. The result is a variety of mood and thought and style. We offer these songs, old and new, with reverence.
>
> Ours has been a time of almost perpetual strife. By reason of our technological prowess in the art of warfare, the very continuance of human life on this planet is by no means assured. Our civilization is unstable; information has grown exponentially, without an equivalent growth in wisdom; we have experienced tremendous changes, material and intellectual. Some have been harmful, others beneficial, but all of them have had their impact upon us. And we Jews have also experienced the Holocaust and the rebirth of Israel—events that loom large in our consciousness. To these, in particular, have we attempted a response . . .[29]

What makes this lengthy citation important is that it acknowledges major societal changes and explains how the editors have attempted to respond by making additions to the inherited body of liturgy.

Consistent with the *Union Prayerbook*, *Gates of Prayer* begins with a selection of readings about prayer which is a bit disappointing, as the editors had the opportunity to try something new. Though none of them specifically address personal suffering, some speak to the nature of religion and the importance of prayer. This section is followed by selections from *Pirkei Avot*, as we have seen previously as well.

Gates of Prayer offers several versions of weekday services for both morning and evening. They look quite different from what we saw in the *Union Prayerbook* partly because each prayer is now listed in both Hebrew and English, but partly because the

[29] Chaim Stern, ed., *Gates of Prayer: The New Union Prayerbook* (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1975), xii.

English used reflects a more modern time. More significantly, each service proposes a different theology or approach to Judaism in our time. Chaim Stern, the editor of the prayer book, offers this note of explanation:

> *Gates of Prayer* is an intensely Jewish prayerbook with endless possibilities of worship inherent in it. Every rabbi and cantor has his or her own path of prayer and sense of responsibility, just as each congregation has its own inherited customs and traditions. All, we hope, are open to novelty and an earnest search for truth; and all will find opportunity here to deepen discoveries, to heighten one's sense of commitment, and to rejoice and sing of the creation and its Creator.[30]

While I deeply appreciate the sentiment, there were not really any extra readings or prayers inserted into these services. It is a fairly straightforward service, with little to no opportunity for one who is personally suffering.

The liturgy and layouts for Shabbat evening services are also standard and what we would expect. I did, however, find this meditation:

> Prayer invites God to let His presence suffuse our spirits, to let His will prevail in our lives. Prayer cannot bring water to parched fields, nor mend a broken bridge, nor rebuild a ruined city; but prayer can water an arid soul, mend a broken heart, and rebuild a weakened will.[31]

It is not necessarily directed to one who is suffering, but it fits the general theme.

In the same service, we find this meditation which reflects the tumultuous time in which this *siddur* was birthed:

> The universe whispers that all things are intertwined. Yet at times we hear the loud cry of discord. To which voice shall we listen? Although we long for harmony, we cannot close our ears to the noise of war, the rasp of hate. How dare we speak of concord, when the fact and symbol of our age is Auschwitz?

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[30] Lawrence Hoffman, ed., *Gates of Understanding: A companion volume to Shaarei Tefillah: Gates of Prayer, Volume I* (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis by the Union of American Hebrew Congregation, 1977), 176.
[31] Chaim Stern, ed., *Gates of Prayer: The New Union Prayerbook* (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1975), 152.

> The intelligent heart does not deny reality. We must not forget the grief of yesterday, nor ignore the pain of today. But yesterday is past, I cannot tell us what tomorrow will bring. If there is goodness at the heart of life, then its power, like the power of evil, is real. Which shall prevail? Moment by moment we choose between them. If we choose rightly, and often enough, the broken fragments of our world will be restored to wholeness.
>
> For this we need strength and help. We turn in hope, therefore, to a power beyond us. He has many names, but He is One. He creates; He sustains; He loves; He inspires us with the hope that we can make ourselves one as He is One.[32]

Although it doesn't quite speak to the individual sufferer, it certainly acknowledges the pain and brokenness of our world, and offers a different theme from the standard ones of joy, happiness, or praise. It speaks of the experience of hate and war, and recognizes the grief and doubt that many feel.

Unfortunately the meditation also suggests that the reader turn to God, which as we discussed previously, may not work for someone who is struggling. Someone who is in pain may simply not want to connect with the Divine or feel that they are able to do so. However we must be careful here: I don't want us to assume unequivocally that connecting to God is out of the question for someone in pain. But it has been my personal experience that praying to God can be difficult while trapped in deep despair.

As in the second revised version of the *Union Prayerbook*, multiple versions of a service are offered. In another layout of a *Shabbat* evening service I discovered a lovely reinterpretation of the *Gevurot* prayer found in the *Amidah*:

> . . . We pray for winds to disperse the choking air of sadness, for cleansing rains to make parched hopes flower, and to give all of us the strength to rise up toward the sun.
>
> We pray for love to encompass us for no other reason save that we are human, for love through which we may all blossom into persons who have gained power over our own lives.

[32] Ibid., 221-2.

> We pray to stand upright, we fallen; to be healed, we sufferers; we pray to break the bonds that keep us from the world of beauty; we pray for opened eyes, we who are blind to our own authentic selves.
>
> We pray that we may walk in the garden of a purposeful life, our own powers in touch with the power of the world.
>
> Praised be the God whose gift is life, whose cleansing rains let parched men and women flower toward the sun.[33]

I have never encountered this composition before, and was moved. A person who suffers might find these words comforting. Perhaps some would feel recognized in their pain and be pleased to have this recited communally. It is a beautiful interpretive prayer, and I wish it was found in more *siddurim*.

In a Shabbat morning service, we find a meditation that could fit well into the category of readings that might respond to a person in need:

> Each of us enters this sanctuary with a different need.
>
> Some hearts are full of gratitude and joy:
> They are overflowing with the happiness of love and the joy of life; they are eager to confront the day, to make the world more fair; they are recovering from illness or escaped misfortune.
> And we rejoice with them.
>
> Some hearts ache with sorrow:
> Disappointments weigh heavily upon them, and they have tasted despair; families have been broken; loved ones lie on a bed of pain; death has taken those whom they cherished.
> May our presence and sympathy bring them comfort.
>
> Some hearts are embittered:
> They have sought answers in vain; ideals are mocked and betrayed; life has lost its meaning and value.
> May the knowledge that we too are searching, restore their hope and give them courage to believe that not all is emptiness.

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[33] Ibid., 255-6. See also: *Gates of Understanding: A companion volume to Shaarei Tefillah: Gates of Prayer, Volume I* (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis by the Union of American Hebrew Congregation, 1977), 217-8.

> Some spirits hunger:
> They long for friendship; they crave understanding; they yearn for warmth.
> May we in our common need and striving gain strength from one another, as we share our joys, lighten each other's burdens, and pray for the welfare of our community.[34]

This novel prayer by Rabbi Robert I. Kahn is striking because it recognizes the range of emotions that people may feel when entering a worship service. It does not assume that all worshippers are present merely to praise God, but rather, the author reminds us that some are experiencing other emotions, such as sadness or grief. It helps the suffering become visible to others.

In a section designated as "Prayers and Readings for Special Occasions", there are a few pages devoted in remembrance of Jewish suffering. This is a set of blessings and readings likely geared towards a *yizkor* service in remembrance of the Shoah. Though it is not intended for personal suffering, it is encouraging to see the new section in the *siddur*. It is perhaps a sign of the times that for the first time, an entire section is being devoted to suffering. It is also important to note that later on in the *siddur* there is a specific service for Tisha B'Av and Yom HaShoah, as it indicates that one might use different prayers or liturgy depending on the particular reason for the service.

Like the *Union Prayerbook*, *Gates of Prayer* also has a section of prayers and blessings designated as "Special Prayers." However, this section is greatly truncated from the previous version.

Gates of Prayer also includes a service meant for a house of mourning, like we saw in the first two versions of the *Union Prayerbook*. Again, a service like this presents the chance for community to gather to care for someone who is suffering. However, just

[34] Ibid., 333.

as we saw in the *Union Prayerbook*, the person who is "suffering" is understood in narrow terms: it is only the person or people who have experienced the death of someone close to them. None of the readings or meditations reflect the idea that people might be in anguish for another reason. I suppose that one could argue though that speaking to all who suffer is not the purpose or goal of this service.

Something new that we find in this prayer book is a section of prayers and readings devoted to special themes, such as nature, omnipresence, quest, and humanity. There is actually a section on loneliness, though most of the readings are positioned around hope. However, there is one reading that might speak to the sufferer:

> There are times when each of us feels lost or alone, adrift and forsaken, unable to reach those next to us, or to be reached by them. And there are days and nights when existence seems to lack all purpose, and our lives seem brief sparks in an indifferent cosmos.
>
> Fear and loneliness enter into the soul. None of us is immune from doubt and fear; none escapes times when all seems dark and senseless. Then, at the ebb-tide of the spirit, the soul cries out and reaches for companionship.[35]

This meditation is unique, for it points out that sometimes it is not possible for a person in deep anguish to reach out to others, which is a recognition that we have not found in previous prayers.

Lastly, in this section of special themes there are prayers devoted to the topic of doubt. Mostly the readings are geared towards general doubt or are passages from the *Tanakh*. There was however, one reading that could bring comfort to someone in pain:

> I do not know how to ask You, Lord of the world, and even if I did know, I could not bear to do it. How could I venture to ask You why everything happens as it does, why we are driven from one exile into another, why our foes are allowed to torment us so. But in the Hagadah, the father of him 'who does not know how to ask' is told: "It is for you to disclose it to him." And, Lord of the world, am I not

[35] Ibid., 671.

> your son? I do not ask you to reveal to me the secret of Your ways--I could not bear it! But show me one thing: show me what this very moment means to me, what it demands of me, what You, Lord, are telling me through my life at this moment. O I do not ask You to tell me why I suffer, but only whether I suffer for Your sake?[36]

This prayer speaks honestly to God. Its raw emotion reflects deep sadness and pain, and might be comforting to someone who has similar questions.

In conclusion, we find several general themes in *Gates of Prayer* that are not so different from the *Union Prayerbook*: God's greatness, praise, truth, hope for peace and justice, covenantal relationship with God, *mitzvot*, reward and punishment. We also find the theme of uniqueness, which echoes the introduction that suggests many paths to God.

In all of these prayer books, we find a handful of readings that could bring comfort to an individual who is suffering (and some that may have the opposite effect). But there are not many, and the ones that do exist are often meant for individual worship, which (as we have discussed) keeps the sufferer invisible.

For contrast, in our next chapter we will explore two *siddurim* that come out of the Reform and Liberal Movements in England.

[36] Ibid., 713-4.

I pray to You O Lord
from all my heart,
O Lord! I pray to You
with fervour and zeal,
for the sufferings of the humiliated,
for the uncertainty of those who wait;
for the non-return of the dead;
for the helplessness of the dying;
for the sadness of the misunderstood;
for those who request in vain;
for all those abused, scorned and disdained;
for the silly, the wicked, the miserable;
for those who hurry in pain
to the nearest physician;
those who return from work
with trembling and anguished hearts to their homes;
for those who are roughly treated and pushed aside,
for those who are hissed on the stage;
for all who are clumsy, ugly, tiresome and dull,
for the weak, the beaten, the oppressed,
for those who cannot find rest
during long sleepless nights;
for those who are afraid of Death;
for those who wait in pharmacies;
for those who have missed the train;
- for all the inhabitants of our earth
and all their pains and troubles,
their worries, sufferings, disappointments,
all their griefs, afflictions, sorrows,
longings, failures, defeats;
for everything which is not joy,
comfort, happiness, bliss …
Let these shine for ever upon them
with tender love and brightness,
I pray to You O Lord most fervently -
I pray to You O Lord from the depths of my heart.

-Juljan Tuwim[37]

For contrast, we are going to explore two *siddurim* that come out of Britain's

[37] Jonathan Magonet, ed., *Forms of Prayer* (London: Movement for Reform Judaism, 2008), 17.

liberal Jewish movements. The first is a prayer book from the Liberal Movement, called *Siddur Lev Chadash*. The name is based on a quote from Ezekiel 36:26: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you." Here we will see what responses this *siddur* offers to one who is suffering.

Similar to what we saw in our prayer books from Chapter 3, this *siddur* begins with a variety of meditations on prayer. They deal with prayer and its meaning, however —not with suffering.

The liturgy and readings for weekday evening, morning, and afternoon services are all exactly as we have seen in other *siddurim*. The prayer book offers different versions of services for both Shabbat evening and Shabbat morning, all with standard liturgy, but with different psalms included in each one. As expected, the psalms are geared towards praise. The liturgy for Shabbat and festival afternoon services is all typical and standard. Essentially nothing in it would speak to one who is suffering.

However, this *siddur* did have something new: a section entitled, "Prayers and Readings on Various Themes." Though we have seen this kind of section before, here it is quite extensive. The introduction to the *siddur* speaks to the intention behind adding in this new section:

> While some of the innovative material to which we have referred has been accommodated here and there, most of it will be found in the section entitled *Prayers and Readings on Various Themes*, which is perhaps the most novel feature of this Siddur. The idea goes back to the *Liberal Jewish Prayer Book*, which occasionally focused on a particular subject, such as the Sabbath or Prayer or Social Justice, and *Service of the Heart*, which offered twelve such sequences. Now, however, we have gone much further and provided a different one for every week of the year. This has enabled us to cover a much larger range of topics and to accommodate a much greater quantity of innovative passages.
>
> Our suggestion is that these sequences should be used in every Sabbath Eve and Sabbath Morning Service, each in the week for which it is appointed according to

> the Jewish calendar, but with freedom to choose a different one when the nature of the occasion makes it more appropriate. Our hope is that the regular inclusion of these sequences will add a new dimension of interest to our services and that, since they will generally be used only once a year, they will not quickly grow stale. We think that they will also have considerable educational value, since in them we have assembled many of the most characteristic teachings from the whole gamut of Jewish literature on over fifty key topics; and we suggest that they might be used as a source of meditations for daily private devotion . . .[38]

The idea is that each week a set of readings is designated to match the Torah portion. Each section contains passages from the *Tanakh*; some have psalms, music, or writings from different textual sources, and some have alternate readings.

There are a few sub-sections here that could speak to someone in pain. For example, in a section on Theodicy, we find the following text:

> *. . . Job cried out: I will not restrain my mouth; I will speak in the anguish of my spirit; I will complain in the bitterness of my soul.*
>
> Job teaches us that suffering is not punishment for sins; he will not pretend to guilt in order to save God's 'reputation'.
>
> *As long as my breath is within me, and the spirit of God in my nostrils, my lips will not speak falsehood, and my tongue will not utter deceit.*
>
> Perhaps the sufferings of the righteous are 'chastisements of love', which God visits on them for their own good? Perhaps the righteous will be rewarded, and the wicked punished, in 'the world to come'? Perhaps the pain we inflict on one another is the price we have to pay for being free to choose? Perhaps God looks on in sorrow as we misuse our freedom, yet cannot, or will not, revoke it?
>
> *Perhaps, but the discrepancies seem too vast, and the agony too deep . . .*[39]

I am pleased to see the inclusion of a passage from Job. As we have discussed, our biblical characters offer us teachings and stories that can help us make sense of our own experiences. I am also glad that the lesson imparted about Job is that we are not punished

[38] John D. Rayner et al., eds., *Siddur Lev Chadash* (London: Union of Liberal and Progressive Synagogues, 1995), xix.
[39] Ibid., 174-5.

for our sins. This new theology breaks with our traditional liturgy focused around reward and punishment.

In another sub-section on Consolation, we find a remarkable passage:

> In every life there are times of failure and frustration, disappointment and sorrow. Sometimes we can take them in our stride. But there are times when our woes seem too many or too grievous, so that they threaten to overwhelm us, and our own resources are insufficient to sustain us. Then we need consolation. We turn to family, to neighbours, to friends; or they perceive our need, and turn to us.
>
> *To offer consolation to those who need it is one of our highest obligations. To accept it, though more difficult, is also right. For it is a privilege of our common humanity that we are able to support, and lean on, one another.*
>
> But there are times when human help is insufficient.
>
> There are sorrows whose roots the sympathy of best friends cannot reach. There are burdens so heavy that no human being can help to lift or bear them. There are some whose wounds are too raw even for a friendly touch. What must it mean to such people to know and to feel that One greater than any human being is there with a sympathy silent, but how tender. With a balm unseen, but how healing. One to whom a heart can pour out its torrents of bitterness without words. A Friend with the tenderness of a mother, and with an understanding that is infinite.
>
> *Eternal God, help me to feel Your presence even when dark shadows fall upon me. When my own weakness and the storms of life hide You from my sight, help me to know that You have not deserted me. Uphold me with the comfort of Your love!* [40]

The language of this passage is quite beautiful, and recognizes that there are times when our deep sorrow is too great to bear. However, what I find problematic is the assumption that a person in despair would feel connected to God or think that God could understand their pain. But the inclusion of this reading is still significant, as it provides a different perspective on the human experience.

Another sub-section on the theme of Light provides this helpful reading that fits

[40] Ibid., 177.

what we're looking for:

> In times of darkness when my heart is grieved,
> When despair besieges my mind
> And my days are a weariness of living—
> Then is my life like the flower that struggles to grow
> Where no ray of sun ever penetrates;
> Then is my spirit pent up within me
> And my soul is shut in like a night of darkness.
>
> When such darkness overtakes me, O God,
> Fortify my mind with trust in life.[41]

This reading articulates and describes one possible way in which suffering is experienced, thereby expanding our knowledge and understanding of it.

Thankfully, we also find an entire sub-section devoted to the topic of "Suffering", in which the contents are varied. It begins with suffering in the context of the Holocaust. But there are also some readings that could bring comfort to an individual in despair. For example:

> *Suffering is part of life; and even among us there may be some who carry heavy burdens of past or present sorrows, and struggle to fend off despair.*[42]
>
> All who are sick at heart and cry in bitterness,
> Let not your soul complain in grief.
> Enter the garden of my songs, and find balm
> For your sorrow, and sing there with open mouth.
> Honey compared with them is bitter to the taste,
> And before their scent, flowing myrrh is rank.
> Through them the deaf hear, the stutterers speak,
> The blind see, and the halting run.
> The troubled and grief-stricken rejoice in them,
> So do the sick at heart, who cry in bitterness.[43]

While the second reading here is perhaps not the most comforting, it is at least moving in the right direction. However, the rest of the section leaves much to be desired. For

[41] Ibid., 237.
[42] Ibid., 265.
[43] Ibid., 267-8.

example, some readings in this section will be isolating to those suffering, including this one:

> Each day must contain the service of God even if it is also a day of suffering. Like everything that is sent into our life, suffering comes to us independently of our volition; but we must mould and shape it . . . Our task is to make that part of our life into which suffering has entered a portion of God's dominion. We must reshape it, surmount it ethically, and therefore raise ourselves above mere causality. Thus to suffering too the command applies: 'You shall love the Eternal One your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might.'[44]

But at least this *siddur* has a section devoted to suffering in the first place! It has the potential to bring the topic into communal worship, rather than relegating it to private prayer.

In a section on Prosperity, I found the following passage:

> We tend to forget, to shut our minds to the suffering of fellow human beings far away—or not so far away, because we have our own problems, or we are too busy, or because there is so little we can do. And sometimes we commit an even graver sin, and allow ourselves to think that all receive what they deserve.[45]

While it may not speak directly to one who is in pain, it at least reminds people that suffering happens all around us--both near and far away; and it reminds people not to be apathetic to those who are struggling. The inclusion of such passages may be only a small step, but it is something.

I was also pleased to find a section on the theme of Loneliness. Within those pages, I found two readings that could prove comforting:

> There are times when we all feel lost or alone, adrift and forsaken, unable to reach those next to us, or to be reached by them. And there are days and nights when existence seems to lack all purpose, and our lives seem brief sparks in an indifferent cosmos. Fear and loneliness enter the soul. None of us is immune from anxiety and doubt, none escapes time when all seems dark and senseless.[46]

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[44] Ibid., 268.
[45] Ibid., 285.
[46] Ibid., 288.

And:

> I have been one acquainted with the night.
> I have walked out in rain—and back in rain.
> I have outwalked the farthest city light.
>
> I have looked down the saddest city lane.
> I have passed by the watchman on his beat
> And dropped by eyes, unwilling to explain.
>
> I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
> When far away an interrupted cry
> Came over houses from another street,
>
> But not to call me back or say goodbye;
> And further still at an unearthly height,
> One luminary clock against the sky
>
> Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
> I have been one acquainted with the night.[47]

These pieces normalize the idea that struggle or despair exists in all of us, and is not an experience isolated to a few people.

There is also a poem in this section that may provide comfort, but if nothing else, speaks to some of the emotions a person who is suffering might feel. I thought it worthwhile to include here:

> I am! yet what I am who cares or knows?
> My friends forsake me like a memory lost.
> I am the self-consumer of my woes;
> They rise and vanish, an oblivious host.
> And yet I am--I live--though I am toss'd
> Into the nothingness of scorn and noise,
> Into the living sea of waking dream.
> Where there is neither sense of life, nor joys,
> And all that's dear. Even those I loved the best
> Are strange--nay, they are stranger than the rest.
> I long for scenes where man has never trod—
> For scenes where woman never smiled nor wept—

[47] Ibid., 288.

> There to abide with my Creator, God,
> And sleep as I in childhood sweetly slept—
> Full of high thought unborn. So let me lie,—
> The grass below; above the vaulted sky.[48]

I appreciate the meditation's honesty and poetic language.

There is a section on Doubt, but it is all geared towards general doubt or faith in God, rather than personal doubt and struggle.

So far, of all the liturgies we have looked at, this *siddur* provides the largest number of readings that could provide comfort to one in pain. But by and large, however, the impact of these passages must be slight because the situations in which they might be used are limited. Aside from a chance encounter as part of private prayer, they would come up in communal settings only once a year – when they match the Torah portion.

I found nothing pertinent to our discussion in the sections on Services for Various Occasions: *Tefilah* for special Sabbaths, that is, or festival services. I also found nothing in the sections for the reading of the Torah for Sabbath morning or afternoon, and weekdays or festivals, or concluding prayers and songs.

In a section designated for the Torah reading and a memorial service for the festivals, however, I found a line in a prayer for the community that I want to emphasize:

> Eternal God, as You blessed our ancestors in generations past, bless now this congregation: its leaders and its members, and all who enter this synagogue to meet, to study and to pray. <u>Comfort the sorrowing hearts among us and heal those in anxiety or pain.</u> May we all find here community and friendship, renewal of purpose and hope, a deeper understanding of our heritage, and a sense of Your abiding presence. Bless all congregations of the House of Israel throughout the world; let those who live under oppressive rule soon be freed; and may we all unite to witness to Your truth and do Your will.[49]

While it is just one line in a prayer, what I appreciated is that this reading is intended to

[48] Ibid., 290-1.
[49] Ibid., 484-5; my emphasis.

be read aloud in the community. While it doesn't ask any person to identify as a sufferer, it draws attention to the fact that even in that congregation or group of people that some may be suffering.

In a section designated as prayers for various occasions, we find a page devoted to the *Mi Sheberakh*. A short prayer is offered. However, it is important to note that it is not a *Mi Sheberakh* prayer for healing; it is instead a positive, general blessing designated for a man or a woman. It feels like a missed opportunity to offer a blessing for healing alongside this first prayer. It is a chance to remind our communities that even in moments of happiness there are moments of struggle too. We cannot keep suffering invisible.

This *siddur* has a section on life cycle events and services. We do find some material that is useful in addressing suffering, but once again, the theology is alienating. Here, as before, the readings about suffering are connected to reaching out to God for the help that "You alone can give (p.606)." The problem with suffering is that one quickly discovers how little God gives such relief.

Another potential issue is that what readings there are seem to limit the topic to physical illness. There is a whole section devoted to illness and recovery, for example, but someone suffering mental illness or even just plain mental exhaustion might have trouble feeling included in it, though it depends on how they understand their pain. Of course, it is possible that someone feeling mentally exhausted could certainly relate to a meditation on physical illness. However, I think the greater issue lies in the fact that when we think about "illness and suffering" we generally think of physical difficulties, when in reality, pain can take many forms. The range of "suffering experiences" is not

represented in the liturgy as much as I would like it to be. One exception to my findings is this single reading that relates to personal suffering of any form:

> Eternal God, we thank You for the gift of life and for the healing powers that You have implanted within Your creatures. Sustain, we pray, . . . , our loved one through this time of illness. Grant him/her courage and strength to endure pain and weakness. Teach us how best to help him/her by our love and care for him/her and by our own composure. May s/he and all who are ill know that You are with them, comforting them and reinforcing their will to get well. May their afflictions soon be ended, and may they return in health to family and friends.[50]

The only issue I take with this prayer is the assumption that the person has the desire to get well again. For those in deep pain (of any kind), they may simply not have the wish to get better, or to see that as an option.

In conclusion, by and large this *siddur* has the most liturgy or language in it that could bring comfort to someone in need. But I am not convinced that there are enough opportunities built into the worship services laid out here that draw attention to the individual who suffers among their community and family.

We will turn now to the most recent *siddur*, *Forms of Pra*yer, put out by the Reform Movement in Britain in 2008.

In the opening section of meditations offered before prayer, is the lovely poem which is shared at the beginning of this chapter. Though it is a prayer for others who suffer as opposed to coming from a person in pain, I thought it offered recognition that all around us people struggle for internal peace, and they are not invisible.

I found nothing geared towards suffering in the liturgy for daily morning or evening services, weekday Torah services, or in the Shabbat evening service. However, in the Shabbat morning service there was one reading that at least acknowledged

[50] Ibid., 607.

suffering:

> *The Gift of Women*
>
> May God who remembered Sarah, remember us with blessing.
> May God who prophesied to Rebecca, give us vision in our time.
> May God who answered Leah, sustain the family of Israel.
> May God who heard Rachel, help us in our need.
> May God who honoured Shiphra and Puah, support all who resist oppression.
> May God who healed Miriam, bring healing to those in pain.
> May God who restored Naomi, bring comfort to those who mourn.
> May God who guided Abigail, bring wisdom to those in conflict.
> May God who responded to Hannah, bring redemption to our world.[51]

The prayer is actually modeled after a passage in *Mishnah Taanit*. On fast days, we are told, people met in the town square and petitioned God by recalling, "May the one who answered Abraham", or "May the One who answered Jacob", answer us. The people "answered" there are all men. Here they have been changed to women. In keeping with feminist concerns, the new prayer emphasizes suffering. I don't necessarily believe this is the most comforting prayer for one who is in need. But it does at least acknowledge suffering.

What I like about it also is that it connects suffering to biblical characters. This helps us see ourselves reflected in our ancestors' stories, rather than making our experiences separate from those we read about in our holy texts. As we have discussed, the *Tanakh* is full of rich narratives of people who struggled, though most of it has not ended up in our prayer books. This is a small way to bridge the gap between the two, reminding us of their stories in our worship moments and not just relegating these narratives to Torah study or private reflection.

In the Torah service for Shabbat morning, there is a section of prayers devoted to

[51] Jonathan Magonet, ed., *Forms of Prayer* (London: Movement for Reform Judaism, 2008), 158.

the community in general. One of these prayers is for healing:

> God, may it please You to send healing to those who are in pain or in anxiety. Be their refuge through their time of trial. Make them secure in the knowledge that they will never be forgotten by You, for You are the shield of all who trust in You. Amen.[52]

I appreciate the opportunity to offer a prayer for the entire community, making note of the fact that some people are in pain or are struggling. It does not invite people to identify individually though, so it keeps those who are suffering invisible.

I found nothing pertaining to our topic in the additional service for Shabbat, the Shabbat afternoon service, or concluding prayers and songs. However, something new that we have not seen previously is a section in this *siddur* which contains reflections on the Shabbat services and the daily *Amidah*. The editor included a footnote to explain how these might be used; it is instructive for our survey:

> The modern world has had a profound impact on all who live within it. While our Jewish prayers speak to the personal experiences of our lives, from birth to death, through love and loss, in suffering and in joy, as individuals and as part of the Jewish people, much of the language and many of the assumptions belong to a very different understanding of the world, the universe and God. The following materials are intended to raise some of the questions we bring to the prayers we recite or offer another way of expressing the ideas and hopes they contain. The passages may be used alone or together, for private or public reading, as alternative 'reflections' on the traditional prayers. Further reflections on the themes of the service can be found in the Study Anthology.[53]

How happy I was to discover this note! Here is an explicit reference to the issue we have been grappling with, namely, that the liturgy we have inherited does not necessarily match modern Western needs. What I also like is that it suggests that these could be used for private or public gatherings. This opens the possibility for something like suffering to

[52] Ibid., 247.
[53] Ibid., 325.

be brought into the public sphere in a more obvious way. Now we shall see if they have any reflections that speak to the issue of personal suffering directly.

The issue, of course, is that reflections and interpretations based on the liturgy can only get us so far, since the liturgy itself is already geared towards praise and thanksgiving. There were two interpretive readings based on blessings in the *Amidah* that speak about suffering, and because they are the only readings I found in this section that pertain to our discussion, I chose to include them here:

> *R'ei v'onyeinu* – Look upon our affliction
>
> We cannot live in this world without encountering suffering and hurt, from failures within, from violence without. This we share with all humanity, but we are also bound up with the fate of our people Israel, we who are vulnerable in our weakness and in our power. We hope for strength for the struggle, for release for all that limits, brutalises or diminishes us as a people, we who bless and are blessed.[54]

And:

> *Refa'einu adonai v'neirafei* – Heal us, God, and we shall be healed
>
> We ask for '*refuah*', for 'healing', for we are aware that our bodies, minds and spirit are frail. We ask for '*yeshua*', for 'rescue', for we know that we carry wounds and scars as a people. All this affects how we see ourselves and the world around us. So the healing we seek is both private and shared, for ourselves, for those we care for and love, for the Jewish people, and for a world that is torn, wounded and scarred, we who bless and are blessed.[55]

They offer nice opportunities for public recognition, but again they take place in the context of the *Amidah*, so people who are struggling are still individually rendered invisible. However, I appreciate the innovation of the section.

Another welcome addition in this *siddur* is a section named Community Prayers and Passages. The title itself indicates that these are prayers to be recited aloud in a

[54] Ibid., 341.
[55] Ibid., 341.

communal setting. This section does include a chance for a *Mi Sheberakh* prayer for healing, but does not really give a person the opportunity to indicate that they themselves are in need. Otherwise the prayers included here are for happier events. However, the editor does try to add in innovative readings and prayers for things such as interfaith understanding, combating poverty and injustice, or a prayer in time of a natural disaster—all of which I have not found in previous prayer books.

This *siddur* also includes a lengthy section devoted to life cycle events. Here we find a great deal of innovation and new ideas about what might be included in a life cycle moment. For example, there are prayers here to be said after a miscarriage or on the death of an infant, a prayer about animal companions, and a prayer for parents when a child leaves home.

In terms of suffering, this section has a prayer I have never encountered before: a prayer to be offered during depression:

> Out of the depths I call to You,
> my Living God.
> God, listen to my voice.
> Let Your ears hear the sound of my pleading.
>
> -Psalm 130: 1-2

> Source of Mercy, help me at this time of need. My soul is full of anguish and my spirit full of disquiet and terror. I see the world as though through a darkened glass. I cannot connect with anyone, not even those I am close to. Even the tender reaching out of friendship or love fills me with a sense of loss and sadness. Why does everything appear so distant from me? What is the path that lies ahead? Why am I so afraid of what will become of me? Show me Your tenderness, forgiving God. Help me to open myself to Your presence; pour Your spirit into my soul that I may gain the patience for this journey to continue. May I put my trust in You, and understand soon that I, too, am Your creation, formed in Your image and worthy to receive Your love and goodness. Amen.[56]

[56] Ibid., 417.

I'm impressed that the editor would include this kind of blessing, even if it might only be read silently. It at least raises awareness to the fact that individuals in our communities suffer.

> This section also has a prayer to be said during illness. It certainly applies to our search for helpful and comforting words:
>
> In my illness God, I turn to You, for I am Your creation. Your strength and courage are in my spirit, and Your powers of healing are within my body. May it be Your will to restore me to health.
>
> In my illness I have learnt what is great and what is small. I know how dependent I am upon You. My own pain and anxiety have been my teachers. May I never forget this precious knowledge when I am well again. Comfort me, God, and shelter me in Your love. Heal me and I shall be healed, save me and I shall be saved.[57]

I like the connection the author makes between pain and anxiety and teaching. I think suffering teaches us about finding compassion for ourselves and others. I also appreciate the reminder that we always remain created in the image of God.

This *siddur* had a section of services to be said in the home, though nothing in there applies to the theme of personal suffering. But, something else that is different in this *siddur* is a study anthology—a collected set of passages and readings on the liturgy and a variety of themes. I suppose these teachings could be used in a communal worship setting, such as when there is a time set out for *chevruta* study in the middle of a service. But by and large I believe these are meant as pieces of interest for personal study. It did include some passages and texts that respond to personal suffering. Unfortunately, not all of the readings in the study anthology on the theme of suffering were comforting. One was a piece of Talmud text that suggests suffering is related to sin, or that they are

[57] Ibid., 419.

"afflictions of love" from God. Another reading says that we should turn to God when we suffer, which is a message that may not be helpful to someone in deep pain or who feels distant from God. But at least there is a section devoted to the topic of suffering.

Another section in the study anthology offers a reading about prayer and healing. For someone who is in the darkest place of their despair, I don't think it would be particularly comforting, but it acknowledges that sometimes there is no opportunity for complete healing:

> Healing does not always mean that the illness is cured, however much we might want that to be the case. The reality is that we may not get well, or even better. When we say prayers for healing, we must at the same time acknowledge that complete health might not come. Healing can mean that illness is removed, but it can also mean that deeper self-understanding is gained . . .
>
> A sixteenth-century Japanese potter would never allow his apprentices to discard a cracked pot. He would say, 'Honour the workings of chance in your creation.' He would often instruct them to outline the cracks with tracings of gold. So too illness, or other 'cracks' in our souls or bodies, although unwanted and sources of pain, can be honoured as teachers for us. It is not God that can teach us these lessons. In order to gain greater understanding of ourselves in relation to our illness or suffering, it is we who must do the work to open our hearts or minds.[58]

Again, these words remind us to have compassion for ourselves and for the burdens we carry. The prayer also offers a more nuanced understanding of what healing can mean.

Interestingly enough, there is also an anthology of Psalms included in the prayer book. However, none of the psalms that were included seem to speak to an individual in crisis.

In conclusion, this *siddur* has more innovative readings and ideas than any of the other prayer books that we have explored. And by and large, compared to their North American counterparts, these British *siddurim* also contain more readings that could be comforting to one in pain. However, I still have questions about where a person who is

[58] Ibid., 585.

struggling could find recognition in a communal worship service. I do not think these prayer books or the Reform Movement have quite figured out how to do that in our time.

In our next chapter, we turn to the topic of healing services. A few decades ago, visionaries such as Debbie Friedman and others recognized a lack of space for people who were in need. The innovative readings and prayers that we have now would not be what they are today without those that came before us. These leaders helped draw attention to the fact that people in our communities suffer and are in pain, and started a new set of services in order to respond to the needs that they saw. While healing services have become less prevalent in the Reform Movement (see Chapter 6), it is important for us to look at earlier attempts to respond to personal suffering.

CHAPTER 5: HEALING SERVICES

Supermarket Prayer

Last week in the supermarket
at an unlikely hour
I saw a woman I know.
She tried to avoid me
pretended not to remember me
but I had unwittingly trapped her
blocked escape in the tuna fish aisle.

I just wanted to say hello
my cruelty was inadvertent
but up close I saw
her hair was in disarray
and dirty, her face
without its careful mask
of lipstick, blusher, shadow.
She was wearing a ratty old jacket
the discard of her husband
or perhaps her teenaged son.

Nine thirty, on a Tuesday morning,
dressed like that –
suddenly I knew she was out of work
and ashamed. And coming undone
there in the tuna fish aisle.

I tried as best I could
to help her cover her nakedness
but all that day and the next
she haunted me.
How strange, I thought,
how strange and how sad
that she should feel threatened, judged,
shamed by me.

The rabbis say
when you bring colour to someone's face
it's as if you shed their blood.
Forgive me.
May you be restored to your full self
soon, speedily, in our day.

And let us say amen.

-Merle Feld[59]

We have spent the last few chapters exploring early 20th century *siddurim* from both North America and Britain, in order to see what our liturgy has said to those who were in personal crisis.

Naturally, we are not the first ones to question whether or not the liturgy that we have inherited is helpful to someone who is suffering, or how it responds to people in deep despair. Many people have asked, and many continue to ask this question. Innovations have regularly been incorporated over time – some will be explored in Chapter 6. But first we should know what preceded us more immediately – how leaders in the Reform Movement specifically have responded to personal crisis in the last few decades.

Gates of Prayer was published in 1975. The most recent prayer book put out by the Reform Movement was published a few years ago, in 2007. (We will survey that prayer book in Chapter 6 as well.) But what has happened in the decades between these two *siddurim*?

We should first look to history and what was happening in North America during that time. In the 1970s the United States was engaged in the Vietnam War, and in the 1980s both Canada and the United States were involved in the Cold War. Although World War II was several decades prior that experience was still in the back of people's minds.

[59] Jonathan Magonet, ed., *Forms of Prayer* (London: Movement for Reform Judaism, 2008), 582-3.

In the 1980s and 1990s other large-scale societal changes were impacting people. For example, HIV/AIDS was first detected in the late 1970s. This impacted everyone, including the Jewish community:

> When the AIDS epidemic appeared in 1978, the government and the population at large were mainly silent. As a blood-born disease that was transmitted by sexual contact, it was almost impossible to separate AIDS from sexuality. That it centered on gay sexuality in particular, a topic that made many people uncomfortable, seemed the reason for the silence. The disease was first known as the gay cancer, the gay plague, and GRID (gay-related immune deficiency). Gay people, hemophiliacs, and intravenous drug users were on the margins of society, and it would take until 1987 for President Ronald Reagan to address the issue publicly. AIDS Project Los Angeles (APLA) and the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) in New York, both opened in 1982 by gay people, were founded in reaction to the low level of governmental response to the epidemic.
>
> Jewish communal response was also slow, even though many Jewish men, and some women, were infected and dying. With homosexuals not accepted in the Jewish community, AIDS was not considered an issue for Jewish communal organizations. Their sexuality a stigma in and of itself, gay men and lesbians were often alienated from their tradition, so they did not turn naturally to Jewish organizations for help. The first synagogues with specifically gay outreach were organized in 1972 and 1973 and were not officially recognized by most of the mainstream Jewish religious movements. AIDS affected these congregations in high numbers, so it feel to Beth Chayim Chadashim in Los Angeles, Congregation Beth Simchat Torah in New York, and Congregation Sh'ar Zehav in San Francisco to provide social services to those who wanted a Jewish component to their care.[60]

During this time period the feminist movement too was making great strides in North America. First wave feminism in the 19th and early 20th centuries was focused on property rights for women, marriage, parenting, and women's suffrage. Some were campaigning for women's sexual and reproductive rights as well. By the 1960s the second wave had begun. It centered on issues of discrimination, and gender inequality in law and culture. The personal was political.

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[60] William Cutter, *Healing and the Jewish Imagination: Spiritual and Practical Perspectives on Judaism and Health* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2007), 162-3.

Throughout these large-scale shifts and changes people continued to experience difficulties and pain. They wanted their places of worship to respond to the harsh realities happening in every corner of the world. It is out of this place of anguish that healing could begin.

It emerged through the pioneers of what became known as the Healing Movement in Reform Judaism. Some of these were scholars, some were clergy; but all were creative and passionate people. They understood that as good as our worship services were, they weren't addressing the needs of people in our communities who were suffering on an individual level. So they sought to change this in two ways.

The first was the creation of the genre known as Healing Services. These are services explicitly geared towards those in need of healing, and those who are struggling. Sometimes they are based on a common theme: like grieving the loss of a loved one; or combating a battle with cancer. In any case, the idea was to come together to pray, to support one another, and to recognize the validity of pain and difficulty—so as no longer to make the people carrying them feel invisible.

The liturgy or structure of a healing service can vary greatly, depending on the participants or the worship leaders, what their ultimate goals are, the emotions they wish to explore, and the prayers they want to offer. We also learn:

> Classic Judaism rejected a fixed liturgy for healing in order to offer the worshipper some flexibility in worship between fixed and spontaneous prayer. Even the *Amidah* . . . was really only intended to provide themes as guidelines for worship, but the selected prayers of individual rabbis were recorded and repeated over time until they became commonplace and eventually fixed, often at the expense of personal prayers. A healing service can provide the individual with a structured time and place for focused prayer that draws on a mixture of traditional Jewish liturgy and nontraditional texts and activity. This mixture reflects the service that connects us to classic Jewish tradition and modern modes of worship.

> . . . [T]he service of healing is more reflective of the theology of the worshipper than of the worship itself. Some worshippers will come to a service (or pray individually) expecting that God can fulfill all prayers; others will seek God as a source of comfort. Still others may see God as part of the great life force of creation that can aid healing. There will be those who will find comfort and healing in the gathering of a group rather than its focus on the Almighty. We can gain strength in facing adversity with the support of others. Few of us come to healing services for any one of these reasons alone. Instead, they all serve the purpose of bringing us to the path toward healing. As Rabbi Nancy Flam suggests, "Almost all services have one thing in common: the desire to create out of a gathering of discrete individuals in pain a community of comfort."[61]

The drawing together in community is key. Judaism is a religion which requires the presence of others—that's why there are even certain prayers that we traditionally won't recite without a *minyan*. We need the love and support of a group:

> This type of prayer elevates and inspires a community to action; it helps people bond and feel comforted in the face of suffering. We confront our own fears and awareness of mortality, appreciating the very tenuous and fragile nature of our human bodies.[62]

The Movement also sought out to insert moments for healing into our existing services. This was an opportunity so that those who were struggling could receive recognition, blessing, and support in a public way in front of the community (and as part of the community). Rather than being isolated, the idea was to integrate and weave these moments into the larger context of the community praying.

Debbie Friedman, who wrote music for a *Mi Sheberakh* for healing, wrote about that experience and why she felt it necessary:

> In October of 1987, four designated individuals took their places on the *bimah* and opened a huge *tallit*. All those who were in need of healing were invited to come forward to gather under the *tallit*. A mass exodus ensued and there was no one left sitting in the congregation. One hundred fifty people were huddled

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[61] Kerry M. Olitzky, *Jewish Paths toward Healing and Wholeness*: *A Personal Guide to Dealing with Suffering* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2000), 49.
[62] Julie Pelc Adler, "Prayer and the Courage to Heal," *Sh'ma Journal* (June 2011). Online: http://www.shma.com/2011/06/prayer-and-the-courage-to-heal/.

beneath the *tallit*. This would be the very first time I was to sing the *Mi Shebeirach* publicly.

We climbed inside each word and in between each line looking to be enveloped and comforted; acknowledging our fragility and our brokenness. We knew that we were alone and yet not alone; that we were in a community and however isolated we might have felt before this experience, we were now a part of something much greater. There were tears, there was hope and a long silence when we finished singing the *Mi Shebeirach*.

I wrote this setting of the *Mi Shebeirach* for a friend who was celebrating her 60th birthday. She was struggling with the recent death of her husband as well as other significant difficulties in her life. I wanted and needed to write something that would speak to both the pain and the joy of this occasion. Those of us in her circle of friends were also met with various personal challenges. At that time there was no liturgical vocabulary nor were there any set rituals to help us manage such challenging times as these.

I wrote this piece when I was hearty and healthy. I wrote it for my friends. It was written from a part of me that felt great love and great compassion. At the first singing I recognized the power of these words. In the same way that reciting "*al cheit*" on Yom Kippur helps us to acknowledge the ways in which we have missed the mark, the *Mi Shebeirach* gave us the words we needed to address our pain.

The *Mi Shebeirach* is a prayer for the individual and the community. It can be uttered amidst havoc or in calmness. It can be uttered aloud or in silence . . . in moments of joy and relief or in times of anguish and despair. There is room to be angry and still utter these words, affirming life and maintaining a connection to our ancestors who also felt anger.

In these moments of reflection, we are forced to face whatever obstacles are in the way of our living fully. While we know full well that healing of the body may not be a possibility, we know that healing of the soul has infinite possibilities. There are times when we feel like we are in the midst of a living nightmare. We cannot imagine that anything will ever look "right" again. At some point we must be willing to confront the pain, the enemy and befriend it; that it become not only our teacher, but a teacher to all of those who are in our circle of life, our community. Jewish life was not meant for us to experience alone; not the joy and not the sorrow.

For those in need of healing, for those afraid to ask, and for the many for whom there is no one to ask, this is for you. May the source of strength who blessed the ones before us, help us find the courage to make our lives a blessing, and let us say Amen.[63]

This moment of saying the *Mi Sheberakh* for those who are in need of healing is still found frequently in Reform worship services today. What is crucial to note from

[63] Merri Lovinger Arian, ed., *R'fuah Sh'leimah: Songs of Jewish Healing* (New York: Synagogue 2000, 2002), 53-4.

Debbie's beautiful words is that the idea was to create a space for those in the room who needed healing for themselves. While this still happens in some services, by and large this *Mi Sheberakh* moment seems to occur on behalf of people who are not currently in the room. This isolates those in the community who wish for healing, keeps them silent and reinforces their feeling of being alone in their struggle. While this is certainly not intentional, I have seen it happen with more frequency. We do not seem to have a culture of being able to say the name of someone else in the room or even say our own names when in need of healing. Again, I am not the first to draw this conclusion:

> Jewish healing must teach that those who sicken and die also reflect the image of God. Re-membering the stranger includes she whom the Jewish community has estranged, whom the community wants to forget, and who embodies the community's fear of death and unmaking. A Jew is not just made of the earth. She also consists of holy breath. Healing must bring the sick and the dying back into the holy place, the *makom kadosh*, which is the place of the communal *b'rit* relationship with God. This is the place where all Jews are re-membered.
>
> Defining self and community by what is not, by what is spoiled, may be universal, but it is not immutable. Jewish healing must transform the primitive impulse to isolate the sick and the suffering from the congregational mainstream so that the congregation can pretend its identity is unspoiled . . .
>
> . . . Jewish healing must resist the convenience of caring community *committees*, and instead insist that the praxis of the congregation be more caring. It must resist the impulse to allow congregations to distance themselves from the reality of the sick and the suffering by "sponsoring" special healing services instead of praying in a manner that is healing . . .
>
> . . . Jewish healing requires prayers and psalms and words of hope and comfort that address not just those who are sick and suffering, but the *entire* community. Jewish healing needs rituals and liturgy and places of study that allow all Jews—lay people and rabbis, doctors and nurses alike—to strengthen the *b'rit* of the Jewish people with God. For *that* Jewish healing, however, Jews must unmake the unconscious communal behaviors that place outside the camp those who demonstrate that all humans are always near death.[64]

[64] William Cutter, *Healing and the Jewish Imagination: Spiritual and Practical Perspectives on Judaism and Health* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2007), 140-1.

Whether we are speaking of the dying or those suffering in some other way, I think the point is clear. Just as importantly, we also forget that those in our communities who do not "look sick" are often in pain and despair. We have to start retraining ourselves to recognize that suffering can take many forms, and people who otherwise seem fine might be quite the opposite. We must find ways to respond.

Related to this is the question of the act and ritual of prayer. Is it the act of gathering together in prayer that is the response to suffering? Or is it something else? In the end, does it matter what the liturgy says if people still come together in community to stand beside one another? I have to say that while the ritual piece—the act of gathering together in community—is vital, the words that we say matter deeply. The fact that there are absences in our prayer books is a very real issue that needs addressing now and for the future.

Modern Jews still recognize this general lack of language dealing with those in pain. Others see the absence of liturgy as an opportunity for creative expression:

> The prayer book might be considered a history book of the Jewish soul. While there is a specific liturgy for nearly all of Jewish life and there are specific prayers for healing that are inserted in various contexts, there is no fixed, independent liturgy for healing services. Perhaps it is just too new of a phenomenon. However, since the motivation and desire to seek healing from God is not new, it seems more likely that Jewish liturgists have stayed away from fixing a liturgy for healing. They recognized people's desire to allow their prayers to flow directly from their hearts without any of the restrictions that a prepared liturgy places on them. Thus, it gives those who are interested in developing a *matbeah tefillah* (a structure or rhythm for prayer) a great deal of freedom and flexibility to develop a liturgy without measuring it against any standard.[65]

[65] Kerry M. Olitzky, *Jewish Paths toward Healing and Wholeness*: *A Personal Guide to Dealing with Suffering* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2000), 48-9.

Today we still use music and ritual (from Debbie and many others) as attempts to respond to personal suffering in the midst of a worship service. We will explore these innovations in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 6: MISHKAN T'FILAH AND MODERN INTERPRETATIONS

When we are wounded,
When we are angry,
When we are in deep despair—
it seems an insurmountable exercise to ask for our mouths to be opened for praise.

How can we talk to God, how can we sing of God's praises when we cannot see God's gloriousness, or feel God's presence in our lives?

I am told that in that space, the dark place where we cannot move forward, or backward, when all we have in our hands is dust and ashes—that is the time we are to push ourselves the most—to call out to God, and to sing praise through our tears.

So I stand, meek and small before You, God. I wait for You to say, "Hineini"—I am here. I strain my ears listening for You.

All of your creatures, O God, no matter their faith background, their shape or size, the colour of their skin—they cry out to You--
Just as all of us here stand before You now, stand before You every day, and ask for You to meet us—
To help us find strength to offer praise that is sincere, and worthy of You.

But if I am silent today,
If I cannot sing every word as it is written, O God,
If I do not utter every note in praise of You,
Do not take it to mean that I am sinful, full of hatred, or that I do not love You.
Sometimes, sometimes,
Our standing here before You, simply and vulnerably, is what we can do in this moment.
I pray that today that is enough.

-Rachel Van Thyn[66]

With all of our surveying in mind, it is time now to turn to modern liturgies, new rituals, and reinterpretations. How do more recent writings and rituals respond to personal suffering? If the established liturgy doesn't help address suffering, how otherwise can we respond liturgically to those in need?

[66] Rachel Van Thyn, "Iyyun", 2010.

I am not discussing what people do privately during services – while, that is, the service is going on around them. Modern interpretations have indeed provided us with new liturgy and readings that can help people on an *individual* basis – giving them something to read from the *siddur* on their own time, that is. But this is hardly sufficient. With or without such readings, my original hypothesis still stands: despite a great deal of work done in the realm of healing, music, and reinterpreted prayers, we have not yet fully figured out how to move more pastoral moments into our *communal* worship services. Though as we saw in our last chapter, brilliant visionaries like Debbie Friedman have helped us include new rituals and prayers in our lives, we have yet to bridge the gap between these separatist services, so to speak, and statutory worship *per se.* This point becomes evident if we examine even our most recent liturgies and *siddurim* being used in many Reform synagogues today.

We begin with *Mishkan T'filah* – the new Reform *siddur* that was published in 2007. Many (though not all) Reform synagogues have moved from using older *siddurim* such as the *Union Prayerbook* and *Gates of Prayer* (see Chapter 3) to this one. It represents a new, dynamic way of thinking about worship. In it, there are traditional blessings and liturgies on the right-hand side of the page, and on the left, several interpretive options or poems based on the liturgy or on ideas from the liturgy. Since we have already done a thorough survey of the liturgy that exists in most standard *siddurim* (see Chapters 1, 3, and 4) I will only point out new pieces or prayers found here that attempt to respond to personal suffering.

Unfortunately, I find a slightly disappointing note in the introduction at the beginning of the *siddur*:

> While prayer invites us to beseech God, we must also be open to what God wants from us. Samuel Karff wrote, "Each generation must struggle to hear the call, 'Where art thou?' Each must choose to answer, 'Here I am, send me.'" *Each generation* – not merely each individual. A *siddur* must challenge narcissism; that challenge begins by saying to a worshipper: your voice is here amidst others. *To hear the call:* to realize that prayer is not merely an outpouring of self; it is the opening of our senses to what is beyond our selves. *Send me:* prayer must motivate us to give selflessly.
>
> In any worship setting, people have diverse beliefs. The challenge of a single liturgy is to be not only multi-vocal, but poly-vocal – to invite full participation at once, without conflicting with the *keva* text . . . Jewish prayer invites interpretation; the left hand material was selected both for metaphor and theological diversity. The choices were informed by the themes of Reform Judaism and Life: social justice, feminism, Zionism, distinctiveness, human challenges . . .
>
> An integrated theology communicates that the community is greater than the sum of its parts. While individuals matter deeply, particularly in the sense of or emotional and spiritual needs and in the certainty that we are not invisible, that security should be a stepping stone to the higher value of community, privilege and obligation. We join together in prayer because together, we are stronger and more apt to commit to the values of our heritage. Abraham knew that just ten people made a difference. In worship, all should be reminded of the social imperatives of community.
>
> Prayer must move us beyond ourselves. Prayer should not reflect "me"; prayer should reflect *our* values and ideals. God is not in our image; we are in God's . . .[67]

I feel a little conflicted about these introductory statements. Clearly these words were crafted with extreme care over time and through much discussion. And it is true that in any communal act of worship, one must balance the needs of the community with the needs of an individual. But this accent on the community reinforces my point—how can *individuals* feel seen and acknowledged during a *communal* worship service? What is in the pages of the *siddur* that can help them with their struggles, at the same time as their desire to be engaged in worship with a community? While the editors aren't suggesting

[67] Elyse D. Frishman, ed., *Mishkan T'filah: A Reform Siddur* (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2007), ix.

those individuals have no place during the service, I read these introductory remarks with some concern. No, we do not need services to become opportunities for navel-gazing and narcissism. But I still feel strongly that we need to find and create more chances for those who are struggling and suffering to be recognized by the community. But let us see what the *siddur* text offers to us, and draw more conclusions after our survey.

There were a few readings found within the *siddur* that might provide some comfort to someone who is suffering, and I was happy to see those insertions. However, by and large there is very little solace found within the pages of the prayer book. And there are one or two missed opportunities in which moments of recognition could have been built.

A good portion of the standard liturgy mirrors what we found in the Koren *siddur* (see Chapter 1) – none of which needs revisiting. Instead, we can direct our attention immediately to a few readings or snippets that might be considered comforting to a person in despair.

The first reading occurs right near the beginning of the *siddur*, as an opening reading to a service for weekday evenings:

> Tell them I'm struggling to sing with angels
> who hint at it in black words printed on old paper gold-edged by time.
> Tell them I wrestle the mirror every morning.
> Tell them I sit here invisible in space;
> nose running, coffee cold & bitter.
> Tell them I tell them everything
> & everything is never enough.
>
> Tell them I'm davening & voices rise up from within to startle children.
> Tell them I walk off into the woods to sing.
> Tell them I sing loudest next to waterfalls.
> Tell them the books get fewer, words go deeper
> some take months to get thru.
> Tell them there are moments when it's all perfect;

above & below, it's perfect,
even in moments in between where sparks in space
(terrible, beautiful sparks in space)
are merely metaphors for the void between
one pore & another.[68]

The above-cited prayer represents the sort of liturgy for which I have been arguing, and *Mishkan T'filah* does have a few other such paragraphs. For example, as part of the liturgy for Shabbat, we find the following. It falls under a section designated for silent/personal prayer (a topic we will return to shortly as a topic of exploration in its own right). But for now:

Help me, O God,
to find still moments,
quiet spaces within to refresh my soul;
cease my questions, my inner debates,
and let me meditate on Your goodness.

Help me, O God,
to nurture my courage,
recalling moments of strength.
Let me remember days of fortitude
and the certainty of your regard.

Help me, O God,
to turn to the light,
to feel the warmth of Your touch,
my own face and fingers outstretched,
alive, alive in Your sight.[69]

Mishkan T'filah does, therefore, have a few meaningful interpretive prayers and readings but not enough.

Along with prayers, blessings, or readings that occur as part of the service itself, *Mishkan T'filah* also features a small section on the bottom of each page filled with

[68] Ibid., 3.
[69] Ibid., 284.

quotes and lessons for further thought. These too can be helpful. Two particular such readings found in this designated section of the *siddur* caught my eye:

> When people come to you for help, do not turn them off with pious words, saying: "Have faith and take your troubles to God!" Act instead as if there were no God, as though there were only one person in all the world who could help – only yourself.[70]
>
> -Martin Buber

And: "It is not enough to be concerned for the life to come. Our immediate concern must be with justice and compassion in life here and now, with human dignity, welfare, and security" (p.73).

A third area of concern now deserves attention: the moment to recite *Mi Sheberakh*. As mentioned in Chapter 5, we know that in recent decades many synagogues and worship services have included a chance for the community to recite names aloud of those who are in need of healing (of all kinds). While this ritual offers deep meaning and the opportunity to recognize those who are ill and suffering, there still is no tradition of sharing one's own name aloud during this time. So though worshipers are invited to share aloud the names of others, they may be in need of deep healing themselves. I also feel that this ritual provides a space for people to turn their thoughts towards those in pain, but because it is now such a familiar moment in our service, sometimes we can perform this section by rote without intending to. If we are not personally suffering, it is easy to empathize for a moment and then immediately turn to the next part of the liturgy. Instead, I wonder if there is a chance to take a longer moment here for recognition or silent prayer. Regardless, again credit must be paid to brilliant thinkers such as Debbie

[70] Ibid., 13.

Friedman, who composed music to this blessing, and whose melody many synagogues (Reform or otherwise) still use today.

In one of the layouts for a Shabbat evening service, *Mishkan T'filah* offers a reading in place of the *G'vurot* blessing that might provide comfort—but I think it may still be a stretch:

> We pray that we might know before whom we stand:
> the Power whose gift is life,
> who quickens those who have forgotten how to live.
>
> We pray for the winds to disperse the choking air of sadness,
> for cleansing rains to make parched hopes flower,
> and to give all of us the strength to rise up toward the sun.
>
> We pray for love to encompass us
> for no other reason save that we are human,
> for love through which we may all blossom into persons
> who have gained power over our own lives.
>
> We pray to stand upright, we fallen;
> to be healed, we sufferers;
> we pray to break the bonds that keep us from the world of beauty;
> we pray for opened eyes,
> we who are blind to our own authentic selves.
>
> We pray that we may walk in the garden of a purposeful life,
> our own powers in touch with the power of the world.
>
> Praise be the God whose gift is life,
> whose cleansing rains let parched men and women
> flower toward the sun.
>
> *Baruch atah, Adonai, m'chayeih hakol (hameitim).*
> (Blessed are you, Adonai, who gives life to all and who revives the dead.)[71]

It is intriguing to see the above reading as an interpretation of the intermediate prayers of the *Amidah* for Shabbat, since traditionally, one is not to make requests of God during Shabbat. However as a modern movement we don't necessarily follow this idea (and

[71] Ibid., 169.

many places offer moments for *Mi Sheberakh* on Friday night Shabbat services—possibly because that is when their synagogue attendance is highest during the week).

So far, we have surveyed three issues: prayers dealing with suffering, interpretive items at the bottom of the page, and the manner in which the *Mi sheberakh* is recited. Before leaving *Mishkan T'filah*, I would also like to suggest a missed opportunity where a more significant response to suffering could have appeared. During some of the service layouts in the *siddur*, there is a section labeled "Prayers of our Community" (as we saw in Chapters 3 and 4). Here we find prayers for the congregation as a whole, for our country, for the State of Israel, and for the new month. Along with this there are also blessings for a *bar* or *bat mitzvah*, and a prayer for those soon to be married. If we make the space for joyous events, why don't we do the same with experiences of pain and suffering? It would not encourage navel-gazing; rather, it would better represent the spectrum of human experience. It is a very simple change that would help recognize those in need.

Now that we have done our survey of *Mishkan T'filah*, I'd like to turn towards other rituals in general – some modern and some traditional – that have been inserted into worship services to respond to personal suffering.

The first example is the *Mi Sheberakh* moment found in the midst of modern worship services. We have already dealt with it in the survey of *Mishkan T'filah*. Here, I want to expand those observations somewhat. Rabbi and scholar Dr. William Cutter suggested that healing services have fallen out of use in some areas. Instead, many synagogues are finding ways to reintegrate the possibility for healing into services in general. He notes that this was something Debbie Friedman felt strongly about—

recognizing the fact that there are always people in our communities who are struggling, and that we should make all of our endeavors with this in mind.[72] In this way, we can incorporate opportunities for healing and compassion consistently in our language, our worship, and our everyday interactions, as opposed to relegating the sufferers to bereavement groups or isolated events.

One place I have witnessed this kind of opportunity was in a worship service performed by the United Church of Christ. Similar to a *Mi Sheberakh* moment in a Jewish service, worshippers are encouraged to request healing for loved ones. However, it is done in an anonymous way. At each seat there is a "prayer request form", where worshippers are invited to request prayer for a need (and space is given for a person to write in that specific request). Later in the service there is time devoted to the communal acknowledgement of pains and suffering of those present. Requests are read aloud by the pastor and afterwards a blessing is offered. While this still potentially renders a person invisible, it opens the possibility for someone to request healing for themselves without having to say their own name out loud.

Another opportunity that is currently in place in Jewish worship services, which has existed for millennia, is the chance for silent or personal prayer. While the general basis for gathering is to worship in community, there is also the recognition of the need for personal and individual prayer within that setting. Coincidentally, *Mishkan T'filah* includes a paragraph explaining the history of this:

> . . . The Rabbis in the Talmud considered the need for personal prayer amidst the communal prayer of the *T'filah (Avodah Zarah 7b-8a*). *B'rachot 16b-17a* cites a number of examples of private prayers that various Rabbis recited; this prayer (Elohai N'tzor) of Mar bar Rabina has appeared in all prayerbooks since the ninth

[72] Paraphrasing from personal conversations exchanged during February 2013.

> century. Private prayer concludes with Psalm 19:15, *Yih'yu l'ratzon* ("May the words of my mouth") and *Oseh shalom* (from the *Kaddish*), another prayer for peace.[73]

Worshippers are encouraged to take a few moments of silent prayer at some point during the service. There are some meditative readings provided to give people inspiration as well. While this is not necessarily meant specifically for those in pain to communicate with God, it certainly can lend itself to that. However, I would note that this is a private moment, done in silence, and therefore the suffering individual could continue to go unnoticed in their struggles even while in the midst of a full community.

Moving beyond the prayer book for a minute, I want to note that there is another opportunity for a worship service in a community that is not necessarily performed in a synagogue. In particular, I am thinking about life-cycle events or other worship events created where a clergy or a lay person is leading a group in prayer. While exploring this type of worship is beyond the scope of our topic, I bring it up here to point to some different ways the Reform Movement is trying to respond to the needs of its members. One example is that the newest Reform Rabbi's Manual, which has not yet been published, has a new, extended section on healing. The readings and blessings in it demonstrate a substantial range: prayers for an ongoing illness, pregnancy loss, on entering rehab for substance abuse, before a transplant, and for accepting infertility. It gives me hope that while movement is slow, it will happen.

Another example of the Movement's response is a number of other books of prayers and readings published by the Central Conference of American Rabbis for a variety of occasions. A recent publication, *Mishkan R'fuah: Where Healing Resides*, is

[73] Elyse D. Frishman, ed., *Mishkan T'filah: A Reform Siddur* (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2007), 283.

essentially a book that aims to respond to personal suffering. It is aimed at the individual sufferer. Though it is not intended for a communal worship experience, it represents a growing area of readings and liturgy.

Before we reach our final conclusions, let's explore other interpretive responses, as well as new liturgy/prayers being created today to respond to suffering.

One interpretive response to personal suffering is the act of spontaneous prayer. While it is not a new method, it is not widely used in Reform worship services or moments. I encountered this tradition to be more prevalent in the Christian world, but through chaplaincy work I was exposed to and encouraged to explore the powerful possibilities spontaneous prayer can offer. Simply put, it is an opportunity to state aloud hopes or wishes for healing or recognition. (We must always remember that a full "healing" may not be possible in every situation, but we can still ask for the temporary removal of pain.) These moments are unscripted and verbal, and are very potent.

My first summer doing chaplaincy work found me serving in a hospital specifically devoted to those with joint diseases. Many of the patients were recovering (or suffering) from surgeries, joint replacements, or long-term health challenges.

One day I entered a patient's room I had never been in before. The patient was a middle-aged woman who was lying flat on her back. We'll call this patient Susan. On either side of Susan were a man and a woman, whom I later learned were her parents. I stood a few feet from the edge of the bed, and introduced myself to all three of them, who were all facing the open doorway. I immediately picked up on a feeling of anger, but could not determine if it was directed towards me or not.

As we talked, I learned that Susan had undergone a dozen spinal surgeries and was experiencing deep, continual pain. She was in despair. Her parents were extremely angry not only for their daughter's unrelenting pain, but also for what they felt was mismanagement by Susan's doctors. They did not feel that their concerns were being heard, and they felt helpless to see their daughter writhe in pain while not being able to do much about it.

I decided to take a risk and ask permission to offer the three of them a prayer. Dubiously, Susan agreed. I took a moment to contemplate, and then offered a spontaneous prayer which reflected back each of their feelings. I asked for Susan to feel a moment or moments of relief. I acknowledged her parent's feelings of anger and helplessness. Though I didn't know if they were Jewish or not, I began the prayer by calling upon Jewish ancestors, in a formula that I used in every spontaneous prayer (similar to how most Jewish prayers begin with a formulaic set of words).

When I finished offering the prayer, Susan was crying. As I was preparing to leave, Susan asked me to come back and see her the next day. Over the following two weeks she and I came to build a meaningful relationship. She told me that she had been doubtful of me when I had first asked to offer a spontaneous prayer, but that it opened something inside of her and she felt relief even for that moment. I also learned that Susan was a Reform Jew, who belonged to a nearby congregation in New Jersey. We had long conversations about God, religion, and the world.

I visited Susan several times during her hospitalization, though I was not around during her discharge from the hospital. When I stopped on her floor the day after she left, one of the nurses handed me a note Susan had left for me. It spoke of her gratitude for my

time and wisdom, and noted that it is strange to create a strong connection to someone, but for it to only be temporary—and that perhaps it was meant to be that way. I continue to reflect on my experiences with Susan, and think of her often.

However, this exchange and usage of spontaneous prayer occurred inside the walls of a hospital. As I learned over the summer, there is a big divide between the Land of the Sick and the Land of the Healthy, divided sharply by the walls of the hospital and the outside world. Yet each of us has been or has known a Susan, or has known her parents. How powerful could it be to create a moment like this in the midst of our worship services, where often the community members know one another? How much impact could we make on our own lives or our neighbor's simply by including public acknowledgment of our own crises? While some may not wish to draw attention to themselves, especially in moments when they feel low, some silently cry out for this exact opportunity.

Along with the possibilities of spontaneous prayer, there have been a multitude of recent reinterpretations, prayers, and insights that people have written in order to respond to the needs of those in pain. These have come from either people's personal experiences or from their healing work in the world. While they are too numerous to mention here, I wanted to draw our attention to at least a few of these beautiful creations to point to the burgeoning trend of new interpretive prayers being created every year. I also humbly wish to add a few of my own interpretive prayers that have come out of my own periods of despair and struggling.

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God,
Do you have time for me in this moment?

For my little desires and confusions?
For the aching of my heart and the pain of my body?

Where are You?
Who are You?
I want to touch You.
I want You to touch me.[74]
-Paulette Rochelle-Levy

***

Open my heart to the stillness of being
Let me become an empty vessel
Receiving the nourishment of grace.[75]
-Paulette Rochelle-Levy

***

God, this is a new breath, a new day, a new moment,
You open me up to the possibility of holy renewal
Let wholeness be now.[76]
-Paulette Rochelle-Levy

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For my father, the war years spent in Hungarian forced labor camps were pushed deep within his memory. For my mother, memories of her youth scarred by the horrors of the Auschwitz concentration camp and forced labor were woven into my bedtime stories. I was aware as a child that suffering is as much a part of life as the warmth and calm of my family home.[77]
-Rabbi Elie Kaplan Spitz

***

A friend of mine who has trouble with balance due to a brain injury once told me that when she falls down everyone rushes to help her get up, but in those first moments she needs to gather her thoughts and dignity and she does not want to be pulled to her feet. "I think people rush to help me up," she says, "because they are

[74] Paulette Rochelle-Levy, "Poetry Section", *CCAR Journal* (Summer 2012): 254.
[75] Ibid., 254.
[76] Ibid., 255.
[77] Elie Kaplan Spitz, *Healing from Despair: Choosing Wholeness in a Broken World* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2008), 3.

so uncomfortable with seeing an adult lying on the floor. But what I really need is for someone to get down on the ground with me."[78]

-Rabbi Elliot Kukla

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A Yizkor Meditation in Memory of a Parent Who Was Hurtful

Dear God,
You know my heart.
Indeed, You know me better than I know myself, so I turn to You before I rise for Kaddish.

My emotions swirl as I say this prayer. The parent I remember was not kind to me. His/her death left me with a legacy of unhealed wounds, of anger and of dismay that a parent could hurt a child as I was hurt.

I do not want to pretend to love, or to grief that I do not feel, but I do want to do what is right as a Jew and as a child.

Help me, O God, to subdue my bitter emotions that do me no good, and to find that place in myself where happier memories may lie hidden, and where grief for all that could have been, all that should have been, may be calmed by forgiveness, or at least soothed by the passage of time.

I pray that You, who raise up slaves to freedom, will liberate me from the oppression of my hurt and anger, and that You will lead me from this desert to Your holy place.[79]

-Robert Saks

***

Nachshon

I am swimming in uncharted waters
I am choking on the sea
I am scrambling
Trying to turn back
From the way I came.

But I cannot find the way.

[78] Elliot Kukla, "The Torah of Despair", *CCAR Journal* (Summer 2012): 100.
[79] Edward Feld, ed., *Mahzor Lev Shalem: Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur* (New York: The Rabbinical Assembly, 2010), 292.

I do not know how to swim forward
Paralyzed
And alone.

I look for you in the rays of sun reflecting off the waves
I look for you deep below in murky black depths

When I call out for you, why do you not answer?
When I look for you, why can I not find you?

I look to the heavens and cry out in pain.
Water does not fill my lungs, but in my mind I have already drowned.

I beg for you to show me the way.[80]

-Rachel Van Thyn

***

Iyyun in place of Ahavah Rabbah

I do not know how to speak of God's great love for us when so often I do not see it reflected in the world.

I admit that sometimes I rush through the words in our siddur, reading quickly in Hebrew until we arrive at the parts that we have put to music, so that I don't have to deal with the cognitive dissonance.

The woman across from me on the train looked as though she had not slept for weeks. Sullen and defiant, tears slid down her cheeks and she made no move to wipe them away. This is God gracing us with surpassing compassion?

The woman next to her was overloaded with bags, and she could not even find energy to move the hair that had fallen in her face, almost blocking her face entirely. She stared blankly ahead, her mouth gaping open from exhaustion. Having trusted in Your great and awesome holiness, we shall celebrate Your salvation with joy?

Prove me wrong, God. Show me the awesome and the good and the joyful.

I desperately wish to feel the words we have established—to be enlightened by Your mitzvot, and to fulfill all that is in the Torah. But sometimes I do feel ashamed, I do deserve rebuke, and I do stumble. Help me—help all of us—to see Your wonders and miracles and to know that You have chosen Israel in love.

[80] Rachel Van Thyn, "Nachshon", 2010.

> Gather Your people from the corners of the earth and draw us near to You, so we may feel your closeness, and declare Your love truthfully, with whole hearts.[81]
>
> -Rachel Van Thyn

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Conclusions

It is extremely difficult to know when and where to draw boundaries on a project such as the one we have engaged in here. There are many related subjects that are very important, but that simply go beyond the scope of this project. For example, while we talked briefly (back in Chapter 3) about the Shoah and how it might have affected liturgy, the question of suffering in a post-Shoah world is a huge area that I have chosen to leave to others. As the granddaughter of two survivors, I have come to believe that people who experienced the Shoah, either firsthand or through the lives of their children and grandchildren, have a unique perspective on suffering. That pain and anguish needs its own response.

Also beyond the scope of this project are larger questions about suffering, such as the idea of some modern thinkers that suffering can be "transformational" in some way.[82] This is a topic that can be (and has been) explored both through the lens of Judaism and other religions such as Christianity. However, the ultimate question of whether we can (or even should) translate pain into blessing is more than we can give proper attention to here.

Some of my research also took me into questions about the stages of suffering. For example, are we better able to hear messages of hope at one part of a struggle than

[81] Rachel Van Thyn, "Iyyun in Place of Ahavah Rabbah", 2011.
[82] Elie Kaplan Spitz, *Healing from Despair: Choosing Wholeness in a Broken World* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2008), 15.

another? Would some readings that I suggest as being “unhelpful” actually be completely suitable for a person in a specific stage of suffering? Is there liturgy that could move us from one supposed stage to another? I chose to focus on the place of deepest, darkest pain—the scariest part of being in The Pit. When I was surveying our liturgy, it was to hold these words up against the backdrop of someone in extreme pain. There is of course a huge difference between someone who is “struggling” and someone who is “suffering.” But gradations or stages of suffering are something that could have taken us on an entirely different tangent.

Along this same path I also encountered the question of choice in my research. How much choice does a person have when in deep despair? What is their ability to see slivers of light in a dark place? Can someone simply “choose” to change how they understand their situation, or does this happen gradually over time? What does it mean for those whose suffering causes them to take their own lives? These complicated questions are uncomfortable and definitely deserve much more space and time than we can commit to in these pages.

Lastly, though we explored healing services, we didn’t have a chance to delve too deeply into the role of music in healing. Sometimes healing words are set to melodies. Does this help in the process of healing? Is this a helpful way for us to respond to suffering even when the words we seek are not found in our prayer books? This is another question I hope to explore in the future.

With all of that being said, we are ready for some final conclusions.

While there have been some pieces of liturgy through our survey that respond to personal suffering, my original thesis still stands strongly. We simply do not have enough

of the kind of liturgy that can speak to an individual praying in a community (or even searching through a *siddur* on their own time) who is in despair. We (especially in the Reform Movement) have created new rituals, incorporated music, and tried to designate specific moments to those in our communities who are suffering. However, I still feel that many of these individuals suffer silently and alone. They may be the most active people in our congregations, but they may feel invisible in their pain.

Our tradition is so painfully rich and full of useful stories and texts that speak to struggle and suffering. Our narrative as a people who were freed from slavery speaks to the notion that we have come from struggle and pain, and we made it to another place. Our patriarchs and matriarchs are just some of the examples we use to talk about deep and personal difficulties. So why hasn't more of that entered into our liturgy and found its way into our prayer books? This is a nagging question for me that at the moment remains unanswered.

My hope is for new liturgy to be created to add alongside the bountiful amount that we have inherited—liturgy that will say to those who suffer—*I see you*. And more than just being seen and recognized, people in deep pain will see themselves, their feelings, and their doubts reflected back to them from the pages of a *siddur*.

I desire more pastoral moments in the context of a worship service. We have the *Mi Sheberakh* for others—but where is the appropriate place to ask for healing for ourselves? While again, there are some who do not want that kind of attention, by and large I hear those in deep pain calling out to us to do better. We must answer them. We must not ignore them any longer.

May it be that in the future those that suffer find more comfort within the walls of a worship service, and more solace and recognition from within a *siddur*. May they feel supported, cherished, and held as they continue on their individual journeys. And may they know—may we all know, as my liturgy professor taught—that even if there is not an answer to our suffering, there is always a response to give.

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