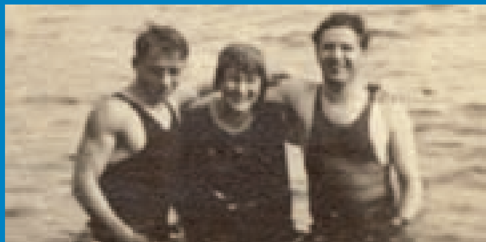

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Praying in color

Michael Haruni illuminates the liturgy with new siddur

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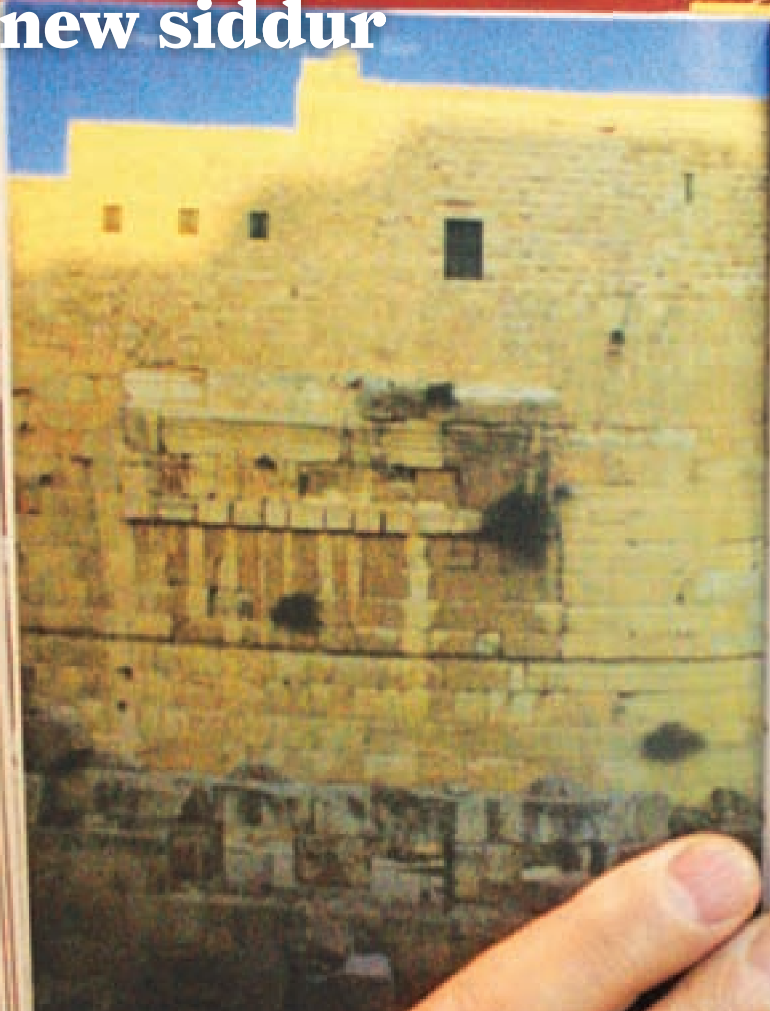

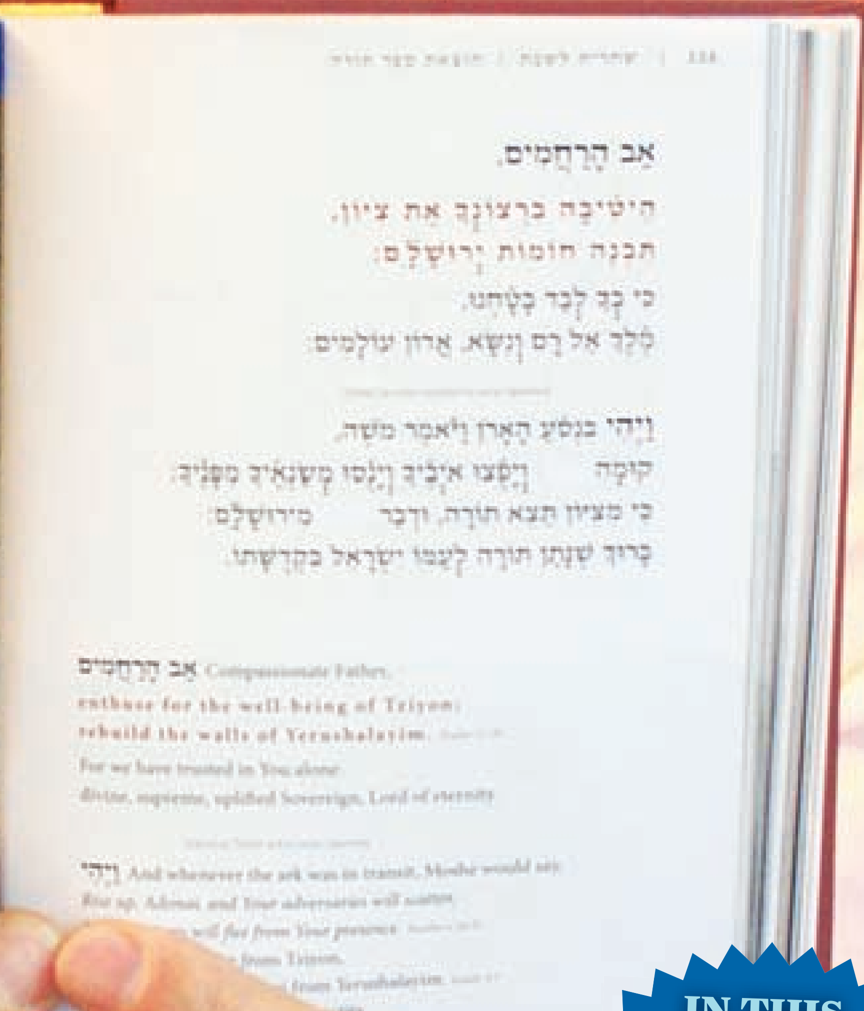

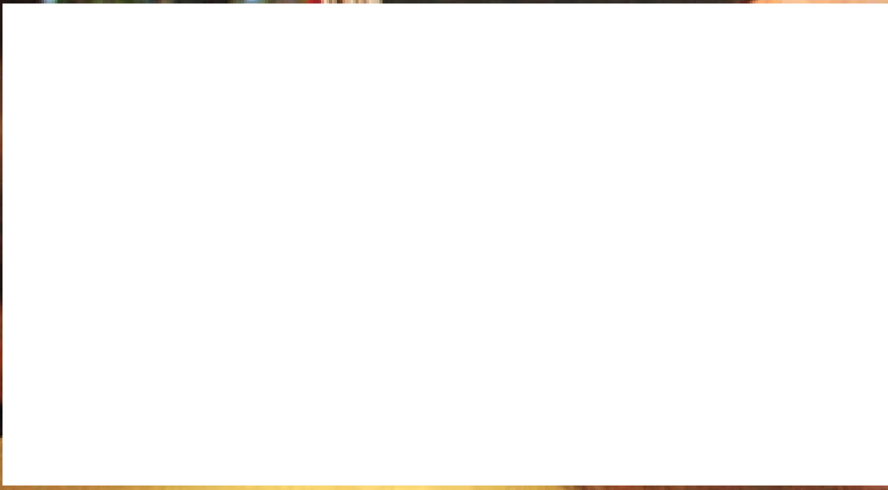

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Cover Story

A siddur to send spirits soaring

A picture, worth a thousand words, adds new meaning to prayer

JOANNE PALMER

It's funny, the way the human desire for novelty often is at war with the desire for the comfortingly familiar.

When it comes to the Shabbat siddur – the Sabbath prayer book – usually the need for familiarity wins.

Liturgy, of course, does not change as much as it gradually grows, as if it were a luminescent pearl, in many parts of the Jewish world. How, why, if, and how much it should or does change is a question for theologians, philosophers, linguists, and historians.

But the way the book looks – that's a different matter.

Typefaces and layouts change as technology changes; at the very least, they become larger, clearer, and more easily readable. Translations change as language changes.

Nehalel be Shabbat, a new Hebrew-English Israeli production, is something else again. It's an illustrated Shabbat siddur; it combines the absolutely familiar – the liturgy – with photography that illuminates those words, highlighting phrases as surely as if with a spotlight.

The liturgy is straightforward Ashkenazi Orthodox, meaning the text is not the one used by chasidim, Sefardim, the Mizrachi, or the more liberal streams.

Each page of Nehalel includes text in Hebrew and English; most pages have photographs, as well. On each page that has a photo, the text the art illustrates directly is printed in a color – most of the rest of the text is black or white – that makes it jump. Most of the photos are in color; some of the historic ones are stark in black and white.

The idea admittedly could be cheesy, or at best juvenile; instead, the photos have been chosen and matched with text in ways that are smart, insightful, deeply moving, and at times profound. One of the early morning blessings, the one translated here as thanks to the God "who engineers the stride of man," is alone on a two-page spread. One of those pages shares the text with a silhouetted picture of a diaper-clad toddler, arms bent and taut, taking an early, shaky step; the facing page is of an astronaut leaving footprints on the moon, its surface at his feet and reflected on the glass of his helmet.

Much of the liturgy calls for photographs of created glories – of the earth from afar, of canyons and forests and planted fields and mountains and sunsets. Those photos are lovely, at times surprising in their beauty. Some are of people – mostly people dressed in ways that identify them as Jewish or in Israel, but at other times, in the more universalistic prayers, people who might be Jewish, but just as likely are not.

Other photos are wrenching.

And I shall fill your meadow with vegetation even for your herd:
and you shall eat, and you shall be satisfied. Keep guard over yourselves
— lest your heart succumbs to temptation and you stray
and devote yourselves to other gods and bow worshipfully to them.
For A[illegible] would then rage against you with His wrath,
and He would arrest heaven so that there would be no rain
and the land would not yield its produce; and you would quickly become
alienated from the wonderful country which A[illegible] is giving you.
Hence you shall affix these precepts of Mine onto your heart and onto
your soul, and you shall bind them as a signature around your arm and
they shall act as bearings between your eyes. And you shall teach them
to your children, to talk them through, whether you are sitting down
at home or going on your way, whether you are lying down or getting up.
And you shall register them upon the doorposts of your home
and upon your gates. So that you, and your children, enjoy longevity
upon this land which A[illegible] promised your ancestors to give them
— like days of heaven on earth

Nehalel is openly Zionist in orientation. The prayer Nishmat kol chai – "the soul of every living being" – takes four pages. The first two, illustrating lines about the ocean and its tides, show a vast blue-green sea. The third page is all text. The fourth, partly text, also illustrates "You emancipated us from a regime of slavery." The photo is of Mathausen as it was liberated in 1945; you cannot see faces, but many of the survivors wear stripes and they wave at the tank and the soldiers who are driving it through the gate.

The blessing right after the Shema, the one that begins "You have eternally been the support of our patriarchs," also takes four pages. They show groups of immigrants – from Europe in 1943, from Yemen in 1950, to Haifa in 1945 and 1947, from Ethiopia in 1991. The children's black-and-white faces stare out at us with what? Grief? Fear? Longing? Others glance to the side. Somehow they look more hopeful. They illustrate the concept of God as a being who "brings the incarcerated out into the open, and emancipates the meek, and supports the emaciated."

It would be hard to look at these faces and remain unmoved.

Nehalel is published by Nevarech (the name means "Let us bless"), which also publishes a bentscher – a smaller, soft-covered book that holds the words for the Birchat Hamazon, the grace after meals – that is familiar to many Jews of all streams.

The inspiration for both the bentscher and the siddur is that "we people who pray on any kind of regular basis find that it's very difficult to keep your mind focused on what you're saying," Michael Haruni said. Haruni, who lives in Jerusalem, is the creator, translator, co-designer, and guiding force behind Nehalel.

"On the other hand, the consensus of opinion among the sages is that there has to be a significant amount of kavanah" – of intention. "So we have a problem. We say the same texts over and over again, and often it's very difficult to maintain the kavanah.

Michael Haruni

"From the feedback I got from the bentscher, it seems that people who have bentsched" – who have said grace after meals – "every day of their lives, as far back as they can remember, were saying the same texts, but when they used the bentscher, suddenly they became aware of what they were saying.

"It broke the force of their habit."

Given the bentscher's success, a siddur was the obvious next step. (In fact, Haruni considered a full siddur, that could be used on every day of the year, during the week and on holidays, as well as on Shabbatot, "but then it became clear that it would be so heavy that you'd need a wheelie to take it to shul. So I decided to break it into three volumes." The other two are not yet ready for publication.)

Nehalel began with the liturgy, Haruni said. "First, I translated the whole siddur, including weekdays and chagim" – holidays – "and then I went through each passage and thought about it. I looked for the central theme in each section, which ideally but not always should be the central idea or image of the passage as a whole, the theme that encapsulates the meaning – the pinnacle of the meaning.

"I tried whenever possible to find such an expression which lent itself to some visual image.

"Often I came up with a variety of options for visual images. The next stage was searching for those images.

"With the internet, this is the right time in the history of the human race to do this."

Fifteen years ago, when he compiled the art for the bentscher, Haruni went to archives, where he paged through shelves and piles of physical images. He did not have to do that with the siddur. He found many free photos; the Israeli government had many online, and so did the American government. Keren Kayemet L'Yisrael (the Jewish National Fund) was another reliable source for nature photography, Haruni learned. "There were image banks that were not too expensive," he added; that was important "because all of this was done on a shoestring budget."

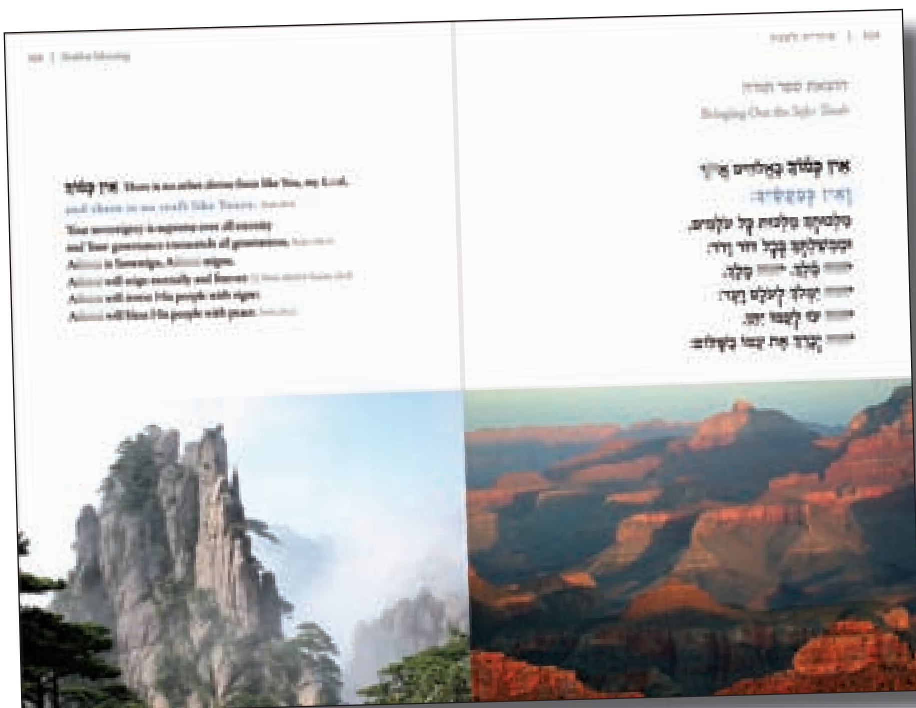
Still, he needed more photos. "At a certain point I realized that I wasn't going to find ready images for everything I wanted, so I had to revive my old love – photography." He bought a new camera, and has found much satisfaction in the art. About the third of photos in siddur are Haruni's. "This is a very personal book," he said.

He did work closely with other artists, including a professional graphic designer; still, given Haruni's freely admitted difficulty delegating work, particularly work as close to the heart as this one, work that seemingly would have to be pried from his heart with surgical instruments; the overall look is his.

"It's also personal in that my father died just under 10 months ago," Haruni said recently. "My mother had died 17 years ago, and I wanted to dedicate it to the memory of my mother, and to my father. I didn't show it to him before – he would have forbidden it – but just a few months later, when it went to press, he had died. Almost all I had to change in the dedication to him was the suffix, to zichrono livrachah" – may his memory be for a blessing.

Although the siddur does not diverge at all from the modern Orthodox worldview

SEE SIDDUR PAGE 23



Siddur

FROM PAGE 21

that forms his lens on the world – "the starting point is that philosophically and theologically it is absolutely committed to the traditional Orthodox text as we received it, and I did not have license to change the text by even one iota," Haruni said – "there is a spirit in a lot of the communities I tend to find myself in here of working strictly within Orthodoxy but pushing the limits of egalitarianism as far as possible within it.

"I am sympathetic to very gently and sensitively pushing the boundaries within accepted halachah. What that means is that within the siddur, there is scope to acknowledge that fact that there will be women using it, that there are women in the world, and that God created them.

"We can acknowledge that more than existing siddurim have managed to do."

He does that, he says, "through the typography giving equal measure in terms of size to what men and women say when they say different things. Also, the instructions don't have to be limited to one gender or another."

Also, he said, he includes photographs of women. He has been criticized for using a photograph that shows a woman wearing a sleeveless shirt. She is among the clandestine immigrants to Haifa in 1947. "My thought was that a miracle happened here," he said. "An immense miracle.

"An immense miracle occurred within living memory. Our tefillah, our prayers, relate to that. They don't relate only to biblical or mishnaic or Talmudic times. They relate to our own reality as well.

"The reality is that this miracle occurred, and that men and women were brought here from Europe, redeemed by God, and brought to Eretz Yisrael. Like it or not, the women were not left behind.

"That picture is what it really looked like. We should be prepared to bring it close to our hearts, to see what it actually looked like, to be prepared to look at it."

Haruni's background is exotic. As his accent makes clear, he is British – he was born in London in the early 1950s – but his family came from Meshed, in northeastern Iran. "The Jews there were born into a situation similar to the Marranos in Spain," Haruni said. "More than 100 years ago" – in fact, in 1939 – "the community in Meshed had been forced to convert to Islam. They did it – but they maintained Jewish life, using extreme measures to keep their Jewishness secret.

"For example, until he changed it my father's official name was Abdul Rachman, although he always was known as Eliezer."

Although his mother, Hannah, was born in England, his father, who was born in 1925, did not get there until 1951. Eliezer Cohen-Haruni's grandmother had made her way to Jerusalem, where there was a small Jewish community, and she stayed there. "When he was 9, my father decided that he wanted to live with his grandmother in Jerusalem," Michael Haruni said. "They all agreed, and he came here to live."

When he was 15, though, the adults in his life worried that "my father was becoming active in the Jewish underground. The British sent even very young kids they captured to very far away places," so instead his grandmother sent Eliezer back to his parents, who by that time had escaped to Bombay.

That was in the late 1920; "the shah instituted religious tolerance, so they were legally able to practice Judaism," Haruni said. "Meshed is one of the five important centers of Islam, though, so the local authorities were stricter than they should have been." They did allow Jews to get out; "there was a big migration to Italy, New York, England, and Jerusalem."

"Poverty and misery were the physical situation of my father's life," his son said. "From 15 to 20, in Bombay, there literally were times when he slept in the street. There was not enough space at home.

"When he was 19 he started putting his pennies together, and when he was 20 he sailed to America to seek his fortune."

That was just after the war. "He made a bit of money there, and sent everything he made back to his family. He was alone; a couple of years later, he went to London and met my mother there.

"They were going to go back to America when they learned that his father had died in Bombay. He was the eldest of six kids – his mother was very young when he was born – and he became the patriarch of the family. They went back to India to look after them – my oldest sister was born there – and then they went to England to set up a home there."

Because India was part of the British Commonwealth, it was not hard for people who had obtained Indian citizenship to be allowed into the United Kingdom.

Michael Haruni made aliyah when he was 13. "Yeshivat Keren b'Yavneh was my first stop," he said. "Then I studied math and philosophy at the Hebrew University; I got a master's in philosophy. My subject was the philosophical analysis of physical pain.

"I have written a number of plays; some of them have been produced," he continued. "I've also done some quite different work – in the diamond business – and about 20 years ago I came into this publishing enterprise."

This wide-ranging background, yoking together as it does disparate continents, languages, disciplines, and ways of seeing, has left him uniquely situated to create Nehalel. He's now at work on the weekday siddur.

"I hope any Jew will feel at home in this siddur," Haruni said.

PHOTO CREDITS

COVER: Michael Haruni holds Nehalel; he took the photo showing on that page.

All photographs except of Michael Haruni are from Nehalel be Shabbat.

PAGE 20, LANDSCAPE: Tiberias and the Sea of Galilee; A. Ohayon/GPO

PAGE 20, BABIES: From right, Nathan Samuels, Ori Vanhotsker, Noam Greenaway, Amit Goshen.

PAGE 22, BOTTOM LEFT: Sunrise, North Point, Wisconsin; Dori, CC BY-SA 3.0

PAGE 22 TOP: Eliezer Cohen-Haruni and grandson/Michael Haruni

PAGE 22 BOTTOM RIGHT: Classroom in Lodz Ghetto; Yad Vashem; Temple Mount under snow/M. Milner/GPO.