

The Limits of a Siddur with Photographs: Cautionary Guide to the User

by Michael Haruni

What role can there be for photographs in a prayer book?

Pirkei Avot, citing Rabbi Shimon (2:13), exhorts:

Be thorough in reciting *Shema* and the *Amidah* prayer; and when you pray, do not make your prayer a fixed rote, rather it should be compassionate and imploring in the presence of God...¹

The Rambam even states that reciting a prayer text without the mental state of *kavanat halev*, the “focusing of the heart,” simply does not count as prayer.²

Yet we are all aware of the difficulty of focusing on what our prayer is about. All too often we become lulled into reflexively uttering word sequences, without thought of their meanings. The problem is that however fully we identify with the words of our prayer *generally*, it is only seldom that this felt identification is what *immediately prompts us to say it*. In interpersonal conversation — often our model for conversing with God — it is easier for us to mean what we say, because our saying it is prompted by our immediate, prior need to say it. But when we pray, it is usually our reaching the particular prayer in the fixed script of the siddur that prompts us to say it, not our immediate feeling for its meaning.

The juxtaposing of photographs that portray the meanings of the texts can help us deal with this problem. For such is the nature of visual images: as we pray, the photos can impress these meanings into our flow of thoughts with particular force. A sequence of images showing, for instance, the movement from day into night and into day again (pages 64-65), can make our awareness of the

1 הוֹי זְהִיר בְּקִרְיַאת שְׁמַע וּבִתְפִלָּה. וּבְשִׁאֲתָהּ מִתְפַּלֵּל, אַל תַּעַשׂ תְּפִלָּתְךָ קָבַע, אֱלֹהֵי רַחֲמִים וְתַחֲנוּנִים לִפְנֵי הַמָּקוֹם בְּרוּךְ הוּא...

2 *Mishneh Torah, Abavah, Tefilah* 4:15. Do not pray, he further says there, when anxieties distract you, and after a journey wait three days until you are calm again before praying.

Creator's involvement in this process more vivid, less abstract, more filled with substance. It helps us make this thought our own.

The user is, however, urged to beware certain misapprehensions and dangers.

1. *It is plainly unthinkable that God could be represented visually.*

It should be clear and obvious — but must be stressed here as a special caution — that in no way should any image presented here be taken, in any remotest sense, as representing God. We may of course see the images — of a mountain range, a sunrise or an act of salvation — as representing God's productions and activities. Indeed one happy spinoff of a siddur with photos is that our fuller awareness of the magnificence of God's creations and active presence in history may inspire our awe for God Himself.³ But in no sense are they, or might they be understood as, aspects of God.

2. *Praying with this siddur, no less than with any other, demands our lively mental and spiritual effort.*

We should not imagine that a siddur with photos entitles us to become passive "spectators." It does not absolve us of our responsibility to exert ourselves; on the contrary, it demands our even greater active involvement. On reaching an emphasized line, we must pause a moment, think how the photo aligned with it might show us something about what this line means, and try also seeing how the meaning of this line relates to that of the passage as a whole. The usefulness of the photo could otherwise pass us by.

3. *A siddur with photos should not be a book focussing on the photos.*

We use a siddur as an instrument for performing an action — for speaking a message to our Maker. This gives imagery a different role from what it has in other kinds of illustrated books.

3 Cf. *Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Mada, Hilchot Yesodey HaTorah 2:2*. This is an outcome which, according to the *Shulchan Aruch*, justifies our producing even otherwise-forbidden images, such as of the sun; cf. *Yoreh De'ah*, 141:3.

Looking at, say, a travel book with illustrations, we read the text and then expand on the idea we've acquired by looking at the images. Or looking in a book about the artwork of a painter or photographer, we'd read the text as merely an introduction to our separately taking in the pictures. But the pictures in this siddur are not primarily here to inform us about their own contents, nor are they here to become objects of our attention in their own right. Their purpose is to assist us in verbally expressing to God something about their contents; and for this, our attention cannot be separately directed at the image. Awareness of the contents of the photo should be, rather, part of a whole thought directed at God. We will nevertheless in some way be aware of the image, but this awareness is *tacit* — an integral part of the overall mental act, part of a single flow.

We should therefore not regard this siddur as a picture book (at any rate not while using it to pray). Our seeing the photos, and our attending to and speaking the text, should be, ideally, not distinct processes, but the single undifferentiated act of speaking to God.

4. *We should not rely only on the photos, but should press our imagination beyond them.*

A photo juxtaposed with a particular line of a text may go beyond alerting us to the meaning of this one line. It may also prompt us into a more general alertness to meanings.

A picture presented here is like a window looking out to the world. It is as if we are seated in a closed room, repeatedly reciting a text describing the world outside, eventually losing any real sense of what it is we are describing — when suddenly, just as we describe a certain tree, a window opens, and we see this tree before us. Now, if we remain seated, the tree is all we see. But by standing, coming closer, straining to look beyond the tree itself, we may discover its foliage in closer detail, and how it is emblazoned in sunshine, and even that larger segment of the world surrounding it — the sun shining, the river feeding the tree, birds flying to and from it — which this one tree came merely to signal.

From an awareness of the meaning of the one depicted line,

we might similarly move, by exercising our imagination, to a livelier, more encompassing appreciation of the prayer — as if the dimension of meanings, once opened up, suddenly becomes more openly accessible to us.

5. *In some places, we must rely only on our imagination.*

In a discussion of how prayer can be heartfelt and not just fixed rote even though we pray primarily from fixed texts, the Talmud suggests that much depends on how we understand this term קבע (*fixedness*), and quotes the definition given by Rav Yosef:

Anyone's [prayer is fixed] who cannot find newness in it.⁴

Rav Yosef is suggesting that, though we recite a fixed text, we must nevertheless discover our own personal meaning within it — the fresh way in which it relates to our own time and our own lives.

Each of us is required to find meanings, in the fixed texts of the Siddur, that are pertinent to our individual lives. As our family situations, the landscapes we inhabit, our occupations, life goals, states of health, economic security or lack of it turn this way or that, they fill our prayers with their diverse meanings, reconstituting our prayers like colors in a kaleidoscope. All the more so as the world changes from one generation to the next: our prayer texts act as vessels, constant in themselves, yet ever able to accommodate the novel yearnings we load into them.

Thus for instance the security we plea for as we read לְדָוִד⁵ may be our response to the threat of war and displacement, or to anxiety for the safety of our sons defending our borders, or to the dangers that have entered the fabric of ordinary lives everywhere whether from terrorism or from road travel. Better therefore not to regard any photo presented as if this exhausts the text's meaning. We can look further, and see the photo as showing merely one token of some larger range of meanings embedded there.

Indeed, the meanings of certain prayers are too intensely individual to be matched at all with photographs. Much of the

4 Berachot 29b. כל שאינו יכול לחדש בה דבר.

5 Psalm 27, on pages 100, 402 & 592

weekday *Amidah* is a case in point. While ברכת השנים, the blessing for the thriving of our resources, asks literally for a healthy agricultural yield, a person whose job security depends more perceptibly on, say, the global situation of information technology can see this as a prayer for its stability — and the thriving that would be enabled by a good rainfall as a paradigm for other varying concerns. The blessing for רפואה, asking for healing, might for some express a concern for the physical health of a loved one, while others might plea through it for the repair of some widespread social malaise. (These contrast with other texts, such as *Kabbalat Shabbat*, which lend themselves better to shared responses.)

A dense series of photos imposing their possibly alien subject matter on the robustly private mental state inspired by the *Amidah* may therefore have been overly intrusive and restrictive. Better there that we are left enclosed in our own personal way of discovering meanings, and of enjoying a freedom to address God, each of us with our own pressing concerns.

6. *Kavanah* is more than just thinking of what the prayer describes: it is an awareness of addressing God.

We may not assume that by merely reflecting on what the prayer itself is referring to — on what a photograph may direct our thoughts to — we are fulfilling the requirement of *kavanah*, of directing our thoughts in prayer.

It is of course true that some kind of consciousness of the meaning of the text is a crucial part of praying with *kavanah*,⁶ but this is not sufficient. For there is also another highly important aspect of *kavanah*, namely, the awareness that we stand in the presence of our Creator.

The Talmud quotes Rabbi Eliezer as citing this as a central principal enabling one's continuing to the next world:

When you pray, know before Whom you stand.⁷

The Rambam regards the attaining of this sense, after freeing

6 *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 98:1

7 *Berachot*, 28b. כשאתם מתפללים דעו לפני מי אתם עומדים.

oneself of other distractions, as the defining feature of *kavanah*:

What does *kavanah* consist of? One must empty one's heart of all [regular] thoughts and see oneself as if standing before the Presence of God.⁸

Or as Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik states this:

Prayer is basically an awareness of man finding himself in the presence of and addressing himself to his Maker, and to pray has one connotation only: to stand before God.⁹

It is not enough, then, to be aware of what we are speaking about: we must also be aware of to Whom we are speaking.¹⁰ Prayer requires our sense of entering a direct dialogue with God, of encountering His presence in an immediate way, of being in a direct I-You relation with Him.

This says something not only about the state of mind we should enter as we pray, but also about how we then use language. When saying to God, "You are blessed," or "How brilliantly You produced all of this," we do more than just describe a state of affairs: we are performing actions directed at God. This distinction has been widely made about different kinds or aspects of interpersonal speech. Saying to someone "I love you," or "Marry me," is not just to describe the world — it is fundamentally different from telling someone, "This sunrise is magnificent," or "So-and-so is lovely." Saying "I love you," is in itself an action intended to have a certain effect, to have an impact on our relationship with the person we address, and is akin in this way to actions such as presenting a gift, or placing a ring.

Likewise, being aware that we are standing in the presence of God, we can use the language of prayer not just to describe the world, but also to try to have some real impact on His regard for us. We may even hope, in asking for compassion, or for health, or

8 כיצד היא הכוונה? שיפנה את לבו מכל המחשבות ויראה עצמו כאלו עומד לפני השכינה. *Mishneh Torah, Tefilah* 4:16.

9 *Lonely Man of Faith*, Image, 2006, pp.53-54

10 *The Shulchan Aruch* op. cit., additionally describes a higher state that can be attained — a kind of spiritual disembodiment that approaches the level of prophecy — but also clarifies that this is just the extraordinary achievement of outstandingly pious individuals, and is not expected of most of us.

for His return to Tziyon, that our statement will prompt a change in the divine plan of action.¹¹

Thus, being conscious of referring to the Creator as raising bread from the earth is *part* of what is involved in making the blessing with *kavanah*; but this *kavanah* also involves our intending to directly tell Him of our awe and love of Him for His procuring this process. Or to declare with *kavanah* that He “has made His redemption known and His justice visible to the nations” (Psalm 98, p. 38) requires not only our being aware of describing His redemption of our nation, but also that we are describing this *by way of expressing directly to Him* our loving and thankful celebration.

The word אַתָּה (*You*), where it appears in a siddur — most importantly as the grammatical subject of the blessing template אַתָּה בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה (*You are blessed...*) — has a special role in this respect. More than any other word, it is a vehicle for directing ourselves actively and lovingly towards God Who is present to us.

We therefore cannot assume that by merely allowing the photos to awaken our awareness of what the prayer refers to, our *kavanah* is complete. The photos will at best prompt us into knowing that we are referring to the beauty of some part of His creation, such as this butterfly or that galaxy; or that we are speaking of His redemptions, such as bringing about the establishing of the Jewish State. But we must also direct ourselves further into referring to these by way of standing and acting before God.

7. A siddur with photos does not resolve contemporary issues.

Thinking orthodox Jews are confronted today with difficult questions — above all in the wake of the Holocaust. And while our liturgy remains startlingly pertinent, certain expressions still at this time resist our understanding. A siddur relating texts to images from recent history does not pretend to offer answers; on the contrary, it brings some of these questions into sharper relief.

11 It is thus useful to understand praying as the performing of a “speech act,” in other words to look at prayer for what philosophers of language have called “illocutionary force.” Cf. especially J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, Harvard University Press, 1962, and J. Searle, *Speech Acts*, Cambridge University Press, 1969.

Nor would it be any resolution to adapt the text. This siddur is radically innovative in its devices, but it resorts to these wholly out of dedication to its core content, namely, the inherited script for our conversation with God, from which it does not depart by one iota.

Much the same applies to conflicts posed at a time when gender inequalities have become conspicuously untenable. Some of the typography in *Nehalel* may make it a shade more egalitarian, and some of the instructions and photos acknowledge a fuller inclusion of women. But there is no claim here to offer any real new clarity, and the inherited text itself has not been refashioned.

8. *The harshness of reality: one especially difficult photo.*

The inclusion of the photo on page 484 follows prolonged deliberation. The picture shows the humiliation by German officials of Rabbi Moshe Ben-Yitzchak Hagerman, in Olkusz, Poland, on “Black Wednesday,” July 31, 1940, 25th *Tamuz* 5700.¹²

On that day, in what began as a “reprisal” mission, German police began at 5 a.m. to force all males of the town of 14 years or older (from 17 according to another account), out of their homes, and to lie face down in the square. Those of them identified as Jews were then detained there further, and the Germans began variously abusing them, beating them with rifle-butts, treading on them, firing shots in the air to terrify them into thinking they were being slaughtered. They were kept that way in the intense heat until around 7 p.m., when they were allowed, wretchedly injured, to return to their homes (except for at least one Jew who had been shot dead). Rabbi Hagerman, a *dayan* of the community and *cheder* teacher, had been dressed for morning prayer when he was taken from his home, and became the subject of special humiliation.

Most of those 4097 residents of the town listed as Jews by the Germans were deported in 1942 to Auschwitz, where most of them perished. Rabbi Hagerman himself was murdered in 1942, probably in Majdenek.

12 http://www1.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/our_collections/olkusz/index.asp
See also, in Hebrew: <http://www.hidabroot.org/ARDetail.asp?BlogID=7955>

Several people have thought this photo should not be included, for reasons that are certainly very weighty. One reason is that many users of the siddur will find it overly distressing; although fulfilling the imperative of keeping alive and disseminating awareness of the Holocaust — possibly an overriding reason in itself to include the photo — will frequently, by its nature, be deeply distressing. Another reason is that those diabolical faces in the background (indeed there cannot be many images more alarming of the human potential for evil), disgraces the Jewish prayer book; although often, where we pray for redemption, this follows a depiction by the text itself of the human bestiality that perpetrated our desolation.

The reason the photo has stayed in, despite continuing uncertainty, is that its juxtaposition with Psalm 123 is particularly instructive about the nature of our prayer. This passage, like many other texts of the siddur, served as a heartfelt expression to God by Jews responding to their dire situation some two and a half millennia ago; and it is shown here to be just as powerful a response to events in living memory.

This may point to a certain transcendent quality of our prayer. Its match with reality enables us, as we pray, to sense that God's involvement in our history is not an anachronism: it does not belong only to our Biblical memory. Rather, our prayer presupposes that God is vividly present to us — here, today — in much the same way as during periods of revelation; that He is routing us through a destiny at times too dreadful to comprehend, at other times so marvelous that to have envisaged it would have been as if dreaming. And this, I believe, suggests a compelling reason to include the photo despite the doubts: that its inclusion here, in sequence with images of redemption, helps us see that we are praying to a God Who is not distant or indifferent to our contemporary history, but Who is, on the contrary, intensely involved in our lives.

The siddur is the Jewish book of wishes. More than any other document, the siddur has, throughout its evolution, acted as a

repository for the collective yearnings of the Jewish people. It is in this way the text by which we align ourselves with the living spirit of the nation.

Thus we find in it the wish to thank and express love of God, the wish for national redemption, and especially the wish — which throughout two millennia has been more emblematic of our collective longings than any other — for our return to Jerusalem. We find in it our wishes for personal fulfillment and well-being, for the well-being of our community, and for universal peace and welfare.

These concerns, all thoroughly Jewish, arise as we discover ourselves within an ever-changing and multi-layered reality: within our own personal life experiences and within our communities, within the situation of our nation and within the ongoing history of which our lives are a part, within the situation of humanity as a whole, and within the planet and the cosmos which God has created.

The Rambam writes:

Which is the way to love Him and be in awe of Him? When a person observes His marvelous and tremendous works and creatures, and witnesses in them His immeasurable and unceasing wisdom, he immediately loves and praises and glorifies, and feels a tremendous desire for, the great Name.¹³

It should be His manifest intention that this volume assists us, as we pray, in holding on to our awareness of our constant, active Partner, the living God behind those multiple layers surrounding us, so that we truthfully address Him with our love.

ירושלים תשע"ג
Jerusalem 2013

13 והיאך היא הדרך לאהבתו ויראתו. בשעה שיתבונן האדם במעשיו וברואיו הנפלאים הגדולים ויראה מהן חכמתו שאין לה ערך ולא קץ מיד הוא אוהב ומשבח ומפאר ומתאוה תאוה גדולה לידע השם הגדול.

Mishneh Torah, Mada, Hilchot Yesodey HaTorah 2:2