

Picturing prayer

With 260 photographs and an original translation, 'Nehalel beShabbat,' a new siddur, was six years in the making

• ABIGAIL KLEIN LEICHMAN

On page 159 of *Nehalel*, a new Shabbat prayer book that complements the traditional text with full-color photographs, a smiling elder is shown embracing a young man to illustrate the following verse from the Grace after Meals prayer: "By the time my youth is passed and I have aged, I should never see a righteous person abandoned, his children begging bread." This photograph is deeply personal for Michael Haruni, the 60-year-old Jerusalem resident who spent six years developing the *siddur*: It depicts his father hugging Haruni's son.

"My father died five months ago, and it is a source of great frustration to me that he was not here to see this," Haruni tells *The Jerusalem Post* after the book's January release. His father was descended from a family of hidden Jews in Persia, and until his passing, he sat next to his son every day in synagogue in the Old Talpiot (Arnona) neighborhood.

"I wanted him to pose for this photograph, and he agreed, and then about four months before he died, he decided he didn't want his picture in the siddur. I told him I didn't have another that measured up to it, and through my daughter's encouragement, he finally agreed."

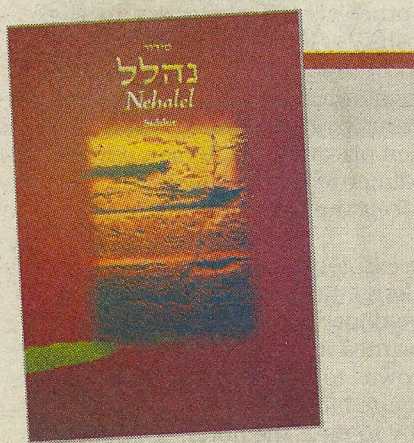
Nehalel ("Let us praise," or in this translation, "Let us celebrate") grew out of the success of Haruni's 1999 pictorial Grace after Meals booklet, or *bencher*, *Nevarech* ("Let us bless").

"The guiding idea for the *bencher* was that the photographic images would portray a central meaning of the *tefilla* [prayer]," he says. "Most of the time, we are distracted and can't get our heads around the meaning of the text. People discovered the *bencher* and said they're waking up to the meaning in a way that never happened before. So the siddur was the obvious next step."

The care and consideration that went into choosing and/or taking the 260 photographs for *Nehalel* is just one of the reasons it was six years in the mak-



MICHAEL HARUNI will be releasing a 'Nehalel' daily prayer book and holiday prayer book in the next year or so. (Courtesy)



NEHALEL BESHABBAT

Devised by
Michael Haruni

Introductions
by Rabbi Daniel Landes
and Rabbi Dr. Zvi Grumet
Graphic consultation
by Dov Abramson
Nevarech/Israel Observer
Publications
650 page; \$27

ing. The other was the text. Haruni painstakingly translated the entire Shabbat liturgy from scratch, as the novel rendering of the above difficult passage from the Grace after Meals exemplifies.

"The Hebrew text turned out, surprisingly, to be more complex a task than I ever anticipated," admits Haruni, who made aliya with his family from London at age 18, holds degrees in mathematics and philosophy, worked at the Ramat Gan Diamond Exchange and has written several plays, among other pursuits.

"I don't mean to imply any other existing translations are lesser – all are fully valid in their own way," he stresses. "However, there would have been copyright problems if I had not done my own translation, and also it was a valuable challenge to myself to turn out a text I believed would bring the tefilla to life in the same way that I want the photographs to do. They go hand in hand."

The siddur relates users to their own lives and to the contemporary world, he continues. "I want the user to be able to understand the Hebrew text, by looking at the English when necessary, as something going straight from themselves to God. It needs to be not just elegant and faithful to the Hebrew, but in a natural way of speaking. I repeatedly showed drafts to different rabbis and lay-people and people in

academia, and got repeated feedback. There were some difficult nuts to crack, so there was a lot of back and forth. I always did look at other translations as the last part of the process to check I hadn't done anything really ridiculous. Ultimately the Hebrew has to speak for itself."

He and design consultant Dov Abramson chose a new Hebrew typeface from Fontbit, working with the producers to incorporate additional diacritical symbols as pronunciation aids. He decided to transliterate, rather than translate, proper names (Avraham rather than Abraham, Moshe rather than Moses, Tziyon instead of Zion) to "contribute to a sense of speaking to God in a more distinctly Jewish voice," he explains in his foreword.

Though the text is strictly Orthodox, the work is more inclusive of female users than are most traditional prayer books.

"I knew I was producing a siddur thoroughly committed to the text in its traditional form," says Haruni, "but I did look for ways – without changing the Hebrew and without compromising the meaning – in which it would reflect the consciousness we have today."

For example, the feminine constructs of nouns and verbs in the morning blessings are offered alongside the masculine, in the same size type. To illustrate the verse "And light up our eyes with your Torah," Haruni included his

own photo of three young sisters gathered around an open Hebrew Bible. In the Grace after Meals, instead of *zera* ("seed") in the section asking for a blessing of the hosts' children, he substituted *tze'etza* ("offspring") because he fretted that "seed" would be inappropriate if the host were a single mother. That was the sole change he made to the accepted text.

"The siddur is the book which Jews have, over the centuries, held in their hands more than any other book," he says. "It's like the identity card of the Jews since the advent of printing – the Jewish book of wishes, a repository for our yearnings over the centuries for the

return to *Tziyon*. This was such an exciting book to be working on, and a huge responsibility."

As he worked, he kept in mind his mental list of likely users, from "mainstream Orthodox-from-birth who want something a bit innovative to make tefilla more spiritual," to newly religious and unaffiliated Jews who do not already have an allegiance to a particular prayer book.

"I am aware that everybody has their own siddur. If you're a person who *davens* [prays] regularly, a siddur is like a home to you, a best friend. For decades, I've been tied to *Rinat Yisrael* [a prayer book edition popular in many Israeli

synagogues]," says Haruni, who will be releasing a *Nehalel* daily prayer book and holiday prayer book in the next year or so. "It is not easy for people to switch from one to another, and I expect that to be a slow process."

Regarding the joining of text and image, his main intention was to direct the user's thoughts to the meaning of selected text. The value of visual aids is contained in the liturgy itself, in the Deuteronomy passage from the *Shema* prayer prescribing corner fringes with a thread of blue to remind the faithful of the commandments. An artful close-up image of these fringes accompanies this text in *Nehalel*.

But early feedback led to his realization that the photographs also give the ancient words present-day resonance. For instance, the phrase "our Emancipator and our Rescuer" is illustrated with images of ethnically diverse immigrant groups arriving in Israel in 1947, 1950 and 1991.

"Otherwise we'd be inclined to think [the liturgy] is about the ancient world, and what has it got to do with our world? But when we see that a match between a photo and tefilla is striking, we come to see the tefilla is absolutely relevant for our lives," he says. "Then we see that God is with us, and is the Being right in front of us as we pray." ■