

Review of "Nehalel"--an amazing new Siddur

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The "Nehalel" Siddur is available through nehalel.com; it also may be ordered through Ktav Publishing House.

In Praise of Praising Together - A review essay in Praise of Nehalel (Jerusalem: Nevarech, 2013)

By Rabbi Alan Yuter

This engaging Siddur is the post-modern expression of a thoughtful, educated, worldly, urbane, and religiously sensitive modern Orthodox lay person. The Siddur's magic lies in the originality of its concept, the personal voice that provides an Everyman's perspective as expressed by one thinking and feeling individual, and the public sharing of one person's personal response to prayer.

The Siddur's concept is a call to prayer, Nehalel, "let us praise the Lord together," as individuals in community. This tasteful title is an invitation to the sacred, calling upon individuals to join in the common commitment to prayer. This Halakhic Siddur, as innovative that it is, never strays beyond the legal limits of the Orthodox rubric. It follows the Ashkenazic Nusach.

This Siddur, prepared by Michael Haruni, is dedicated to the memory of his parents; the dedicatory words of which bring to life the visions of religion lived, honestly, naturally, and piously. His mother "lived every smallest and largest moment of her life intensely aware this is happening under the gaze of her Creator." This sensibility permeates the pictures that breathe new life into the old

words of Nehalel.

Nehalel is a visual tribute to this vision. Haruni uses photography to juxtapose nature, Israeli historical and spiritual sights, and the expansive beauty of Creation, all in order to animate the words of the Siddur. This literary technique is not common in Jewish religious literature. The Torah, which contains Laws, Prose and Poetry, and is called “poetry” by God [Deut. 31:19], provides the precedent for Nehalel’s religious—aesthetic agenda. The Laws memorialize the narratives, while the narratives interpret the Laws, and the poetry moves the person toward God, the Creator of the world, the Torah’s Narrator, and Lawgiver. Haruni’s art serves as a visual commentary on the liturgy’s written words, providing the music to which the words are sung as well as the meanings that dart in and out of our souls as we pray. By praising together, Nehalel’s audience finds God in the written word, the historical moment, and in the natural world, all of which are summoned to converge in the spiritual moment of communal prayer.

Haruni’s father’s biography embodied the image of the archetypal Jew who wandered from the oppression of Iran to the freedom afforded by the sacred stones of Jerusalem. Both father and son share the insight that God is the non-slumbering Keeper of Israel; the father, with the faith to suffer adversity on the road to redemption; the son, with the inner vision to make music by harmonizing the insight of eye and ear, the logic of mind and heart, and the passion of conception and conviction.

Haruni, an exceptionally well-informed Orthodox layman, who is neither a professional Judaic scholar nor an ordained rabbi, translates the liturgy accurately, tastefully and thoughtfully. Quibbles regarding details are inevitable; his renderings are always thoughtfully responsive and reveal a thinking and traditional Jewish mind.

The volume opens with a two page picture of billowing clouds, dark green leaved trees, and a pasture that moves from dark to light green. The visual statement being made is that God the Author of Nature is the same God Who gave the Torah and Who hears prayer, the concern of the Nehalel prayer book.

The elegant God Who created nature also gave Haruni, the religious artist, the wisdom to know what he does not know and to seek the learned advice of others more erudite, including some very high powered rabbis and Orthodox academics. This standard of excellence of execution is prefaced by wonderfully inspiring Forward and Introductory essays.

Rabbi Daniel Landes, the senior scholar of Pardes Institute, with his erudite passion for the poetry of prayer, is the perfect choice to introduce this particular prayer book. Following the master Halakhist graced with the poetic soul, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, R. Landes explains to the reader how to change literature into liturgy, how this prayer book is a book which will help one to pray, how to see the invisible Divine light, how to dialogue with God and find answers in the words and scenes of this Siddur. Additionally, R. Landes provides the hermeneutic key that unlocks the theological magic of Nehalel. The reader is asked to see the words and read the scenes visually, and see how everything comes alive, hopefully including the reader/prayer. The volume's title, Nehalel, "let us praise," is the invitation for us to experience this together.

In his introduction to this Siddur, Rabbi Dr. Zvi Grumet, one of modern Orthodoxy's most literate, professional, accomplished, and sensitive souls, focuses on Nehalel's juxtaposition of "word and image;" he teaches that when we pray we talk to God and when we are spiritually open, God talks to us in the words that we use. Note well that R. Grumet is a master teacher whose trove of learning is shaped by his aesthetically and literary sensibilities. By declaring, clearly, correctly and astutely, that Nehalel "is a visual midrash on the liturgy," R. Grumet concisely and precisely points to how the prayer book is to be read, understood, and used.

Ever aware that Maimonides demands that prayer is more than the mantic mumbling of words, Haruni, in his words, says "by juxtaposing of photographs that portray the meanings of the texts," the words merge into the picture. This technique recalls liturgical public reading of the Torah. The reader must not read from a pointed, vocalized text. The reader must supply the vowels and thereby interpret and confront the text with his own, individual, idea contributing mind. Haruni asks his readers to make the effort to pray and spend the time to make prayer meaningful. He also challenges the reader, when engaged in prayer, to soar one's soul, to be sincerely and authentically religious in the prayer moment.

This sensibility is uniquely both modern and Orthodox; in liberal Judaisms, like liberal Protestantism, prayer is not about talking to God. It is about saying and affirming what a particular voluntary community believes or does not believe about God. For most Orthodox Jews, prayer is something to be done, an obligation to be discharged, and when done in a prayer quorum, an exercise to be performed in an identity affirming social context. Yet for the modern Orthodox Jew, real prayer is indeed a statement of what we should believe as we also affirm our place in our own community, but that is only prayer's moral minimum. In

Haruni's words, prayer is premised on "the awareness that we stand in the presence of our Creator," and it is to this end that Haruni's pictures of Creation inform the visualizing individual in prayer by stimulating the soul to spiritual growth.

For Rabbinic Judaism and the prayer rubric it created, the God of nature is also the God of history. After kindling the Shabbat candles, which is redemptive human fire made by human initiative, two contrasting evocative pictures of the Western Wall are presented; one a photo in black and white of old Jews remembering the sad past, which is followed by a dark night view of an orange-yellow fire-like light piercing the darkest of the night. The black and white photo is an epitaph; this contrasts with the fire-like light that praises the God of the past Who brought the dry bones of the Jewish past back to life. This stunning juxtaposition reminded me of the 9th of Av Nahem prayer where it is recalled that God brought the Wall down in fire and with that very same fire will in the messianic future build up that Wall. That picture reminds the visual reader that prayerful future is now, the Shechina has in our time returned before our eyes in mercy to Zion, and so too has Israel returned home.

After offering the liturgical blessings to be recited, those same dazzling colors, yellow and orange, color and comment on the hands of a female reciting the Sabbath candle blessing. When Israel observes the Sabbath, paraphrasing Ahad Ha'am, the Sabbath preserves Israel. Given their juxtaposition, the engaged reader/praying person uses the visual stimulation of the photo to react and more critically, to respond to the literature of liturgy, allowing the liturgy to serve as a stimulating libretto to the prayer enterprise that is called "life."

At the very center of the Shabbat candles photo cast in orange and yellow hues is a small, pure white light. In the next picture, commenting on "those seated in your house have found happiness," the beginning of the weekday prayer recited before the Sabbath, that white light, shining from the East [See Deuteronomy 33:2 and Isaiah 58:10], alluding to the primordial Eden [in Aramaic, "Eedan" means time!], is more pronounced, more visible, and lightens the entire view. This light now emanates from the recesses, shadows, and tunnels of the Wall, deftly and lovingly making the statement that God has indeed come home and so too has His people. This insight is available if we have the inner eye to pray with the Siddur with the perspective of living history.

In modern Orthodox synagogues, Yedid Nefesh, very appropriately and correctly translated as "soul mate," is sung before the Sabbath Greeting, or Qabbalat Shabbat, prayers are recited. The sun, here colored in white light, emanates a

yellow glow above it and an orange glow below it. At this sacred, liminal moment, the prayerful Jew is entering what Abraham Joshua Heschel calls the “sanctuary in time.” The ordering of photos provides the footlight to the high light, that pure white light that we now realize was that Divine light that was created on the first day of creation, that lit Moses’ scrub bush but did not singe it, that shined inside the cloud that guided our ancestors in the wilderness and exile, and now has three residences: [1] in the infinite reaches of the cosmos, [2] in the sacred Temple precinct, and [3] in our praying hearts, if we start the fire. The highlighted passage, in brown/orange, “Light up the earth with your glory and we shall delight and rejoice in You,” animates the shining words. The theological statement here being made is that God’s cosmic light informs and inspires the first person’s inner state of being, delight, which gives rise to an outer expression, to rejoice in the Lord. Here the attentive reader realizes that the volume’s title, *Nehalel*, is the human dialectical response to the personal Divine call.

The Siddur then turns to Psalm 95, where the Hebrew text is set in a cloud-filled sky which flows from the cloud sky white to the oceanic visual blue, anticipating the colors of the Israeli flag, and the wilderness whose sun drenched sand is slowly being covered by the inevitably encroaching Shabbat shadows. Both Hebrew and English texts are shrouded in blue, with the highlighted passage, the words on and by which we are invited to meditate, “The ocean is His—He produced it and the terrain, too, was formed by His hands.” At the moment when the Divine and the ephemeral meet, the Creator and creation both rest, together, and the prayerful Jew responds to the infinite eternity of which the finite individual is a part.

Psalm 98 contrasts the white sky, which happens to be God’s abode [Psalms 115:16], to Israel’s green pasture on the left in all but the end and top of the picture a clearly newly planted Israeli forest on the left. In the upper right distance we see the unredeemed Transjordan hills. Haruni’s highlighted verse, “My pasture and all within will be enraptured, while the trees of every forest sing in exultation,” captures the secret of Creation. We have here the personification—not the deification—of nature. See also Psalm 19:3, where day and night will have something to say and have an opinion to express regarding their Creator, all with the sound of sacred silence. The Creator of the world has chosen His land to be personified, to come to life, and to be renewed by the handwork of His people.

Psalm 97 presents a dark background contrasting on the top of the page with white words, alluding to pSheqalim 6:1, which describes the Torah that was

written with God's first day creation, the white and black primordial and perfect light; at the bottom of the page we find the orange natural light of lightning. As land makes borders for shapeless water, writing enables the writer, both Divine and mortal, to create worlds for words.

This celestial firework show testifies that God is the King of the cosmos. The orange highlighted verse, "His thunderbolts will illuminate the planet, the earth will witness and tremble," announce the Presence of that King. For paganism, the god/king is a tyrant; in Israel, the God Who is King invites His people into eternity. It is as if God calls out to Israel, *nehalel*, let us join together in recognizing God as our king.

Psalm 98's Hebrew text presents a white text on a hunter green background, with the light blue highlighted verse, "Adonai has made his redemption known, and His justice visible to the nations." The secular Ben Gurion is depicted, here wearing an out of character suit and tie, with a picture of Herzl over his head and two Israeli flag banners on either side, in the now famous black and white picture, declaring that Israel a free, autonomous nation state of the Jewish people. The juxtaposition of thunder of the Divine King, given to the secular Ben Gurion, to announce in history what was declared in Heaven in thunder, is full of ancient and modern irony. Haruni's genius in *Nehalel* is its invitation for all, in and with the first person collective plural, to praise God together, with no one losing their voice. Without even a suggestion of a divisive polemic, Haruni's modern Orthodoxy sees sanctity in individual creativity.

Haruni's *Nehalel* is not blindly romantic; it affirms faith in the face of realism. In Psalm 99, God is king and rules all peoples; on the other hand, that terrestrial real estate is also God's earthly footstool; however, the Dome of the Rock and East Jerusalem are not in Jewish hands. The highlighted verse, in blue, "Exalt Adonai our God and worship at His footstool, for He is sacred," reminds the sensitive reader that God and not the State is sacred, allowing the reader the right to read the passage according to his or her own political proclivities. The occasional red of the Palestinian homes and the Golden yellow Dome contrast with the white Temple plaza and blue Psalm verse. Haruni seems to me to be saying that the pattern of redemption is in place; with strength, faith, peace and patience, redemption will continue at God's planned pace.

Above we described the art of artful prayer that the modern Orthodox Jew is open to embrace. The *Siddur Nehalel* is Zionist; it reflects popular, main stream Halakhic opinion, and is a work of soul rather than scholarship, with scholarship informing the narrative of the soul. On the other hand, Haruni carefully asked

scholars to review his work and nothing was suggested that violates the modern Orthodox religious consensus..

At <http://torahmusings.com/2013/02/book-review-roundup-ii/>, we find another view, by Rabbi Ari Enkin:

"I was immediately taken aback by the beauty and structure of the new "Nehalel beShabbat" siddur. This nusach Ashkenaz siddur, containing all the relevant prayers for Shabbat, is extremely unique and represents a fresh new dimension in the publication of siddurim. Similar to the "Nevarech" bencher, the Nehalel siddur is packed with extremely powerful and stunning full-color glossy photographs.... The photographs are intended to assist the worshipper in finding inspiration in the words he is reciting. ...One of the photographs that accompanies Lecha Dodi features a panoramic nighttime view of the Old City of Jerusalem with the words "v'nivneta ir al tila" highlighted.....

As part of the Shir Hama'alot that follow the Shabbat afternoon mincha, Tehillim 123 features the infamous Nazi-Era photograph of a rabbi wearing tefillin being taunted by Nazi soldiers on the streets of Poland with the words "rabat sava la nafsheinu; hala'ag hashananim habooz l'gei yonim".

This siddur is extremely Zionist in nature, complete with the prayer for the State of Israel and the soldiers of the IDF. It also has a prayer for soldiers still missing in action, not to mention a special Harachaman for the soldiers in the Birkat Hamazon. So too, many of the photographs are of Zionist themes, such as the famous Ben Gurion Declaration of independence, Kibbutz and kibbutznik related photographs, as well as highlights of modern aliyah (e.g. "v'hu yolicheinu komemiyot l'artzeinu").

It would be remiss not to point out that many of the photographs in the siddur include women, and in some cases, the sleeve lengths and neckline exposure do not meet halachic consensus.

The "Nehalel" Siddur certainly offers readers a colorful and alternative prayer experience. The typeset is exceptionally crisp, clear, and well-spaced making for a very pleasurable read. The English translation is an impressive merge of modern and ecclesiastical English. The "Adonai" transliteration rather than the more common "Hashem", "God" or "Lord" is an important feature for those who pray in English. Women are well represented with their own zimun, a misheberach and baruch shepetarani for bat mitzva girls, and more. Even those who, for whatever reason, will choose not to use the Nehalel Siddur for regular worship will still find it to be an attractive showpiece and "coffee table" item."

Rabbi Enkin read Nehalel, is impressed by the artwork, and judges the volume for the position it takes, against the benchmarks of Judaism as he understands them.

The book is, for R. Enkin, “extremely” rather than “passionately” Zionist. This seemingly innocent choice of diction implies “excess.” Nehalel is also “Feminist,” allowing what is technically not forbidden but which has been disapproved on policy grounds by the great rabbis whose subjective taste carries the “consensus” which is the benchmark of propriety for R. Enkin’s Orthodoxy. There are indeed non-Zionist Orthodox Jews and Nehalel was not composed for them. R. Enkin is not reviewing, or explicating what Nehalel is doing artistically, religiously, or ideologically; he is measuring the volume against the norms that his social world calls “Torah.”

According to R. Enkin’s world, an ideological view revealed in the review, only an Orthodox rabbi has the right to think religiously and deeply and express oneself creatively. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik’s Halakhic Man, indeed does have the talent, erudition, and qualifying esoteric ancestral tradition to be creative; conventional religious Jews do as they are told to accept what they must because they lack tradition, erudition, and the talent. Therefore, as a pretty coffee table work of art, Nehalel serves a culture function. R. Enkin’s explicit—but not only—problem is “that many of the photographs in the siddur include women, and in some cases, the sleeve lengths and neckline exposure do not meet halachic consensus.” For him, halachic “consensus” refers to the opinions of the Hareidi rabbinic establishment. Hence the polite but patronizing comment that Nehalel may appear on the Orthodox coffee table because it is pretty and the volume makes for unthreatening conversation. What is also here being said, subtly, deftly, yet unmistakably, is that Nehalel does not, for R. Enkin, belong in the main stream consensus Orthodox pew.”

Like Rabbis Landes and Grumet, I initially took no notice of the “offending” photos of Israeli women. And for good and obvious reason. According to Maimonides [Laws of Forbidden Intercourse 21:2], Jewish Law only forbids sexually suggestive non-contact gestures, gazing, and conversation. I have failed to find an explicit, religiously binding Oral Torah norm that clearly requires all Jewish women to cover their elbows. Those who care to act strictly of course have a right to do so; but without an explicit Talmudic norm, the norm may not be imposed on others. The post-Talmudic consensus of some rabbis [a] does not bind all Israel, [b] cannot be claimed to be law until we clarify these rabbis’ identity, jurisdiction, reasoning, and cogency, and [d] why would this restriction apply to a non-suggestive, two dimensional, black and white old photograph.

Haruni has created both a modern Orthodox prayer book and a modern Orthodox artifact that talks to Jews who have no time for silly, unbecoming games. Michael Haruni has not only compiled a wonderful prayerbook, he has shown what

a thinking Jew is able to accomplish; he inspires his readers, among them me, to take God seriously, and he has created a model for modern Orthodox creativity.