To Whom It May Concern

What is the most important Jewish text? The answer, I believe, is the *siddur*—the book of liturgy. Its importance is derived from the simple observation that it is the book that is most handled and read by Jews. Yes, Jews encounter Torah and *Tanach* with some regularity, but nowhere near as often as they pick up a prayer book. Do a little self-test. When you consider the six-word phrase, the *Sh’mah*, which first comes to mind: morning or evening worship, or Deuteronomy?

The Sages of Rabbinic Judaism seemed to realize this circumstance. Prof. Lee Levine, in his authoritative study of the early synagogue, asserts that the Rabbis initially took little interest in worship; their principal focus in the synagogue was teaching and preaching Torah and Prophets. Organized prayer took place in a separate structure. At some point prior to the promulgation of the Mishnah, they sought to take control of the prayer service, giving it the shape and content we employ to this day. Liturgy, they certainly concluded, was the best vehicle to establish and direct the proper beliefs of Judaism. And so it is now, that the *siddur* is the repository of what a Jew believes.

But, what does a Jew believe? Daniel Boyarin, in his study of the separation of Judaism and Christianity out of the ancient religion of Israel (*Border Lines*), noted that Jews were far more hesitant to push dissenters (i.e., heretics) out of the fold. Although there have been periodic efforts to assert theological orthodoxies, they tend not to be successful (see Seth Kadish’s paper, “Jewish Dogma after Maimonides,” in *Hebrew Union College Annual* 86 [2015]).

While Judaism has resisted a definitive theology, the *siddur* does indeed serve to guide and focus Jewish belief. Hence, Jewish history is rife with the production of various different *siddurim* that reflect the traditions and beliefs of certain Jewish communities. In the nineteenth century there was something of an explosion in prayer book production. For one, technological development in book manufacturing made the mass production and distribution of
siddurim considerably cheaper and easier. Further, the widespread Jewish encounter with modernity created an unprecedented variety of theological responses.

Worship, as opposed to prayer, is essentially a communal experience. It requires a place, a set time, and especially an agreed-upon liturgy. The Reform Movement has been dedicated to personal conscience, and thus has set for itself a particularly daunting challenge in trying to craft a liturgy that can be acceptable to the largest number of those who wish to identify as Reform Jews. The leading section of this issue of the R/JQ is devoted to examining just what that liturgy could be.

The section was engendered by the brief challenge laid out by Seymour Prystowsky. At the heart of any worship service is the One to whom the prayers are directed. Sim raises the fundamental question of who is the God that is the object of Reform (read, modern) Jewish worship. Since the question is directed principally toward Peter Knobel, who served as the chair of the joint (rabbis and cantors) editorial committee whose groundwork has led to the most recent North American Reform prayer books, the Mishkan series, I am grateful to publish Peter’s response. The balance of the contributions, from Mark Sameth, Stephen Wylen, and Edwin Goldberg, provide a rich and varied (necessarily varied) image of the One to Whom our praise is due.1

A Living Book

An edition of the R/JQ often includes a section called “From the Sources.” The reference is limited to the Hebrew and Aramaic texts that provide a foundation of Jewish thought and practice. In this issue, all the contributions draw upon Hebrew Scripture, actually the full range of Tanach, Torah, Prophets, and Writings. Each article is both an exercise in exegetical scholarship and in homiletics. The authors, Jonathan Schraub, David Zucker, Moshe Reiss z’l, Dan Polish, Anson Laytner, and Yossi Feintuch highlight in the sacred nature of Scripture its living quality. The texts spoke to their time. Their writers might or might not have been striving for immortality; it is immaterial. They were people who knew best their own circumstance, a smattering of legendized history, and an expectation that the future would be ideal, but not much different socially and technologically than the present. Yet, we discover in these
articles, and many like them in past issues of the Journal, just how timeless and contemporary their insights could be.

A Distant Mirror

In the Maayanot section, we are pleased to continue Ed Zerin’s translation from Yiddish of maises from B. Yeushson, this time drawing from the Pesach table. It is a further look into another world, a vanished life of pre-Holocaust Poland. David Goldstein reaches further back to the eleventh century, and another vanished world, that of Umayyad Spain, as he examines the military life and courtly poetry of Joseph ibn Nagrella. Neither contributor attempts to contemporize their material, but rather leaves we, the readers, the opportunity to gather how these lost Jewish worlds nonetheless inform and inspirit our own.

Paul Golomb, Editor

Note

1. We can also add the review of Mordechai Schreiber’s Why People Pray, even though it reaches beyond Jews and the siddur.