

Eric Caplan, *From Ideology to Liturgy: Reconstructionist Worship and American Liberal Judaism* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2002), 413 pp.

Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of the Reconstructionist Movement, had generated a series of liturgical texts, beginning in the 1940s, to promulgate his theology. The publication of the first movement-generated Reconstructionist prayer books, the various volumes of *Kol Haneshamah* issued between 1989 and 1999, marks the maturation of the movement and its negotiation between Kaplan's theology and the needs of a new generation. Eric Caplan's *From Ideology to Liturgy* compares these two sets of liturgies and in the process presents the first detailed study ever of Reconstructionist liturgy. In doing so, he provides chapter-length surveys of Kaplan's ideology, the institutional history of Reconstructionist Judaism, and the ideology/ies of post-Kaplan Reconstructionism. He also situates these liturgies within the broader picture of liberal Jewish ritual.

As Caplan's book and chapter titles indicate, his interest is in the ideological statements made by the various liturgies. The opening paragraph of his introduction explains this emphasis, citing Lawrence Hoffman:

... liturgy is a primary vehicle for the articulation of the community's sense of self. A prayerbook is embraced if the ideological message contained within it mirrors people's self-understanding and religious inclinations. To be adopted, it need not be a perfect reflection of group identity, but it must be perceived as the best translation currently available. Through repeated use, the book's message acts as a socializing agent to heighten the ideal image it represents. (1)

Caplan proceeds to organize each of his discussions primarily by ideological categories. Thus, his discussion of Kaplan's own liturgies lists his changes to the received traditional prayer book under the categories of revelation, messianism, physical resurrection after death, Temple/sacrifices, reward and punishment, Jewish chosenness/invidious comparisons to other nations, unedifying text, miracles/supernaturalism, aesthetics and repetition/economy [of language], and holiday Bible readings. Following this comes a discussion of Kaplan's

supplementary material organized as meditations, editorial notes, interpretative versions, and supplementary readings. He includes also a brief discussion of Kaplan's suggestions about the technical aspects of a synagogue service. Many of the sublists are themselves long enough that Caplan has numbered the entries.

Caplan's discussion of the *Kol Haneshamah* series follows a similar list format, omitting the terms underlined above (Caplan's efficient if inelegant method of indicating changes to Hebrew text throughout the book), and adding to the types of liturgical changes: feminism, Zionism/Holocaust, and Sephardi influence; and to the types of supplemental material: guided meditations, lay education/empowerment, layout, commentary, and readings (both subdivided into their ideological categories). Most of these new categories (and other subcategories) respond to the changed reality of the late twentieth century. Because, within each category, Caplan compares the two liturgies, his discussion of *Kol Haneshamah* duplicates much of his discussion of Kaplan's own text.

Caplan also compares the Reconstructionist treatment of these various categories to their appearance in other liberal liturgies. Thus, at the end of the chapter on Kaplan's liturgies and in the chapter following his analysis of *Kol Haneshamah*, much of the list appears yet again.

This strategy generates an exhaustive catalogue of all the various ideological statements propounded by Reconstructionist liturgies and a comparison between the Reconstructionist statements and those of the Reform, Conservative, and (for *Kol Haneshamah*) the Jewish Renewal movements. While this creates a valuable reference book, it makes for neither good reading nor for deep analysis. Only in his brief postscript does Caplan begin to discuss some theoretical positions that might have helped him to organize his mass of data in a more illuminating fashion. It might have been more effective to have placed this discussion of ideology explicitly within a discussion of the struggles to understand the interface between Jewish and American civilizations (or cultures). Then he could have compared this with the struggles of other American religious communities to understand their roles within American secularizing society.

A great part of the shallowness of Caplan's analysis also derives from his choice of sources. Though his interviews with key participants in the process that generated *Kol Haneshamah* give significant insight into how they arrived at their various decisions, this results in a history based on personal recollections — which are not always accurate or complete. Caplan otherwise cites only published sources. He apparently never consulted archives for insights into what people were saying and thinking during the construction of these texts. It is highly likely that Mordecai Kaplan's personal papers include correspondence, reflections, or draft versions that would give important insights into his decisions. The same can be said for archival material from the Reconstructionist movement itself. This sort of research would have allowed Caplan to focus more on the process of producing these liturgies instead of inserting isolated tidbits only as they are relevant to individual ideological topics. As it is clear from his "TIDBITS" that there were significant controversies within the committees producing *Kol Haneshamah*, such a wider view would have been welcome. Because he did not use archival material, Caplan constantly and unnecessarily speculates about people's motives.

Another significant lacuna in this tome is its deep reliance on the prayer books themselves. While liturgical scholars have little recourse when dealing with earlier periods, scholars of contemporary liturgy need to pay attention to the performative aspects of rituals. Liturgies are not words on a page; rather, the words on the page are guides to the performed prayers. Caplan gives only an occasional nod to what congregations actually do or did with these prayer books. Did these liturgies succeed in shaping Jewish identity as their authors intended? How many of the supplemental readings or alternative versions ever received a hearing? While it may yet be too early to judge the impact of *Kol Haneshamah* (and it certainly was when Caplan wrote the dissertation upon which he bases this book), he might have included more analysis of the impact of Kaplan's own liturgy.

Finally, as Eric Friedland has already noted in a review for H-Judaic (<http://www.h-net.org/~judaic/>), Caplan has made many, mostly minor, errors of nuance and fact about non-Reconstructionist liturgies. These detract from the authority of the volume as a whole.

Let me add that in spite of Caplan's thanks to his editor for making his "non-poetic prose... infinitely more readable" (viii), he should banish the passive voice. Contemporary liturgies (and books about them) are not written; people write them.

Caplan presents a detailed summary of the ideological statements found in Reconstructionist prayer books. In many ways, he would have done better to broaden his research methods and write a fuller more analytical study just of Mordecai Kaplan's liturgies, their impact, and the critique of them by the editors of *Kol Haneshamah*, leaving the study of *Kol Haneshamah* itself for a later date and deeper historical perspective. Such studies of Reconstructionist (and other liberal) liturgies would contribute greatly to our understanding of contemporary Judaism. Caplan's volume unfortunately only opens the door.

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