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The Study of Liturgy: Celebrating Possibilities and Limitations

Menahem Schmelzer, beloved teacher of medieval literature, liturgy, and *piyut* (liturgical poetry) at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTSA), is honored by this festschrift edited by his student and colleague, Debra Reed Blank. Almost every essay in this volume begins with an acknowledgement that the author first learned about the manuscript sources under discussion because Schmelzer brought them to her or his attention during his many years of service as JTSAâs librarian.[1] As such, this volume, as a whole, is as much a testimony to the enduring centrality of the librarian in scholarship as it is a collection of essays on âthe experience of Jewish liturgy.â Wide ranging in scope, these essays are an accurate snapshot of the state of research, illustrating the wealth of material awaiting publication, the need for revisiting prior assumptions, and also the limits of our scholarship.

The title of this volume, *The Experience of Jewish Liturgy*, demonstrates the challenges of liturgical research. Academic research about liturgy faces the same fundamental difficulty as does writing about drama or other âperformedâ forms of human cultural creativity; the âscriptâ or text is much easier to hold constant as an object of study than the enacted ritual that it informs. After describing a wide variety of customs and suggested practices for the observance of the Passover meal, Evelyn M. Cohen concludes her discussion in her essay âSeder Foods and Customs in Illuminated Medieval Haggadaotâ with brave honesty and modesty: âHow faithfully the Seder participants followed, understood or cared about the instructions provided is unknowableâ (p. 38). By and large the essays in this volume reflect on the texts of the historical Jewish liturgy and therefore reflect the learning and worldview of their authors, and, despite the promise of the title, reveal relatively about the âexperienceâ of Jewish liturgy as it unfolded in the shared life of communities over time. Unlike prior generations of scholars, the contributors to this volume acknowledge this reality and do not make claims beyond what the evidence they bring can sustain; the result is perhaps a more sober but honest reading of the historical record, with acknowledgement of the significant gaps in our ability to map the textual and performative history of even some core texts.

Thus, in her discussion of the censorship of the Alenu Prayer, Ruth Langer surveys the conflicting and inconclusive evidence about when this prayer text moved from its original home as an annual recitation in the Rosh Hashanah liturgy to be part of a private recitation at the conclusion of the daily liturgy to a fixed part of the public liturgy. It is clear that an anti-Christian (and, in some versions, anti-Moslem) interpretation was circulating and known across a variety of Ashkenaz Jewish communities in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries. As the language of the Alenu and other prayers was adjusted to respond to the threat of censorship, the polemical interpretation was assigned to the âcleaned upâ euphemistic language. In many texts, perceived negative associations of the word *goy* (nations, gentile) were replaced with *AKUâM*–worshippers of *elilim* (idols) and *mazalot* (constellations). While this was a publicly acceptable replacement for what had been considered by officials as an anti-church slur, privately many Jewish communities whispered that the true meaning of the euphemistic replacement was âworshippers of Christ and Maryâ (in other commentaries: Christ and Mohammed). Even as the manuscript or printed text was censored, whether voluntarily or under coercion, âprivateâ subversive interpretations and explanations of the euphemistic replacements or explanations for the pageâs visible lacunae were popular. We can only guess how subsequent generations of readers and worshipers understood the significance of the obviously deliberate blank spaces where censorship had required that text be removed; this remembrance via absence was often preserved well into the era of printed editions. Here, too, the textual record can only hint at the lived experience across centuries and cultures.

Because of the paucity of historical sources, scholars must be continually cautious about making unfounded reconstructions of the historical record; the strength of the above and most of the other essays in this volume is their readiness to recognize the limits of their sources; to paraphrase the Mishnah, there are those matters that âare like mountains hanging by a string, for they have little textual basis but many conclusionsâ (Hagigah 1:8). In an otherwise convincing discussion of how theological considerations have informed modern liturgical change, Neil Gillman writes that the dispute about whether to reinstitute the traditional words *mâchaiyei ha-metim* (who revives the dead) to the second blessing of the *Amidah*, praising the one âwho revives the dead,â was a central issue in the editorial process for creating *Mishkan Tâfilah*, the most recent American Reform prayer book: âThe ensuing dispute riled the movement for a decade and delayed the eventual publication of the bookâ (p. 99). While there were many reasons, internal and external, for the delay in publication of the volume, I can state (as a member of the bookâs editorial committee) that this particular issue never rose to a matter of wide public conversation and certainly had nothing to do with the timing of publication. Gillman shows that the modern liturgistâs emendations of the historical text are motivated by and proceed no differently than those done by the earliest liturgists as they tried to shape prayers that would resonate for their community; for current editors, though, there is a much longer tradition of what is considered to be authentic text to contend with then there was for a Tanna in the second century.

This volume also brings to light several beautiful examples of previously unknown or underappreciated *piyutim* (liturgical poems). Of special note is Laura Lieberâs â Dew of Rest: the World of Nature in Qallirâs *Gâvurot shel Tal*.â Translating and explicating a *piyut* composed for a once-a-year recitation on the first day of Passover, Lieber both honors Schmelzer–in so far as he had published this *piyut* in a modern edition–and the incredible creativity of Eliezer Qallirâs seventh-century composition. The lengthy poem involves alphabetical acrostics, embellishments of most of the verses in the Song of Songs and all of Psalm 92. In one unit, each stanza is followed by two quotations, each one in turn involving a sign of the zodiac, and much more; yet Lieber regrets that âthis synopsis does not do justice to the formal and thematic intricacyâ (p. 171). I cannot hope in this short review either to do justice to the mosaic beauty of quotation; allusion; and, in its most wonderful feature, the botanical thesaurus the poet uses to describe the natural world, invoking every imaginable (and many perhaps previously unknown) alimentary and ornamental plant in the Hebrew lexicon. The translation is a tour de force worthy of the original.

This volume of lovingly dedicated scholarship is a worthy tribute to Schmelzer and his lifetime of scholarship and service.

Note

[1]. While Susan Einbinder, âMoses Rimos: Poems and Recipes of a Jewish Physician in Italy,â does not cite any JTSA manuscripts that Shmelzer first introduced her to, she does cite his PhD dissertation in a footnote (p. 67n14).

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