

SIDDUR

Any Jewish library would be incomplete if it did not include one more book: a siddur, the Jewish prayer book. The siddur is similar to some of the other books mentioned here: it was compiled over several generations by different people and it relates to the other works mentioned here, specifically to the Tanach, quoting it regularly. Yet the siddur is also different: the siddur is used several times every day by observant Jews and although it does teach us, that is not its main purpose. The siddur's main purpose is to provide us with a formulated mode of communication with God, the words for prayer. The siddur, although it can be studied, is meant to be used for prayer.

Although we find evidence of prayer from Biblical times onward, these prayers were individual and spontaneous; no set 'formulas' were used. With time, as the Jewish religion became more institutionalised, the Temple cult became the center for prayer. Although individual spontaneous prayer always continued, the focus was on the Temple and the rites performed there. With the destruction of the Second Temple, this focus was destroyed. The synagogues began to take on a primary function; congregational prayer gained in importance. Established prayers and set times became increasingly necessary and individual spontaneity in prayer decreased. Slowly, a standardized 'order of prayers' (סדר - order) emerged, and a set structure for the various prayer services was established.

The first real prayer book was the Seder Rav Amram Gaon, written sometime in the 9th century. Jews of Spain asked, (in the form of a responsum) for the correct order and wording of prayer to be said. In response, Rav Amram in Babylon compiled his siddur which included prayers for weekdays, sabbaths, new months, festivals, etc. Although later generations have introduced new prayers, the basis of the prayer service has remained remarkably stable over the generations and throughout the many countries in which Jews have lived.



Besides offering a mode for expressing our own feelings and beliefs, the siddur is quite possibly the best text for learning about the ways Jews have viewed God, the world and history. We learn about Judaism's beliefs, not in a cold systematic way, but through its heart. We cannot forget that the siddur is first and foremost a tool for spiritual **experience**, a book by which Jews strive to connect with that which is in some way a part of them - yet also beyond. It is a book through whose words Jews attempt to convey their deepest feelings: fear and regret, hopes and dreams. By reading the siddur ourselves, we 'eavesdrop' on these communications which are at once very private and at the same time shared by the entire People.

Although differences appear in siddurim of different communities, enough remains similar to ensure unity among the Jewish People. The differences that do exist among different communities express the specific perspectives and needs of those different communities. A contemporary Israeli siddur will often have a prayer for the protection of the soldiers, whereas an English siddur might have a prayer for the Queen! Thus we have in the siddur, with its variations, a balance between uniformity and unity on the one hand, and spontaneity and individuality on the other.

