



Some Noteworthy Features of the Siddur Avodat HaLev

From the Rabbinical Council of America

Compiled & explained by Rabbi Basil Herring, editor of the Siddur

- I. **Halakhic Aspects of the RCA Siddur**
- II. **Facilitation of Women’s Participation in Prayer**
- III. **Supplementary Prayers**
- IV. **Features of the RCA Siddur Translation**
- V. **Multiple Dimensions of the RCA Siddur Commentary**
- VI. **Range of Commentary Sources**

I. **Halakhic Aspects of the RCA Siddur**

The RCA Siddur features numerous halakhic modalities specific to the Siddur.

1. Throughout the Siddur, halakhic practice and instructions have been reviewed and approved by the halakhic authority of the Siddur, HaRav Hershel Schachter. Generally, the Siddur balances two factors: (1) practices that have been sanctioned by recognized sources in the halakhic literature, and (2) respected minhagim (customary practices) that have been widely adopted and practiced in the Orthodox Ashkenazi community in North America and elsewhere. Where there are multiple acceptable practices, this is indicated by language such as “some follow the practice of...” When such variants relate to actual prayer texts they are placed in parentheses.
2. Rather than relegate detailed halakhic prayer instructions to a separate section, the Siddur conveniently provides numerous and detailed instruction-boxes directly on the relevant prayer pages, wherever questions might arise as to correct practice or procedure. These include instructions for dealing with contemporary circumstances (such as prayer during air-travel or the use of livestock for Kapparot in urban areas, or the correct use of Halakhic Prenuptial Agreements.) Where prayers are duplicated in the Siddur, cross-references to relevant instruction-boxes are provided as needed.
3. In three important, but often overlooked, areas of prayer the Siddur provides more detailed and authoritative halakhic expositions, in separate footnoted essays. These cover the following areas:
 - a. The use of correct nusach (cantillation) and niggunim (melodies) in public prayer
 - b. The full range of correct practices in Keriat HaTorah (Torah Reading)
 - c. The halakhot of correct interpersonal behavior, comportment, and sensitivity in all aspects of public prayer, as delineated in the halakhic sources.



II. Facilitation of Women’s Participation in Prayer

Given the goal of facilitating women’s participation in prayer (whether in public or in private,) the Siddur strives to incorporate halakhically-sanctioned prayer practices and textual formulations for women’s prayer (such as at Birkat Hamazon,) or for when women are present in the synagogue (such as Birkat Hagomel.) So too, the translation seeks to be inclusive of women wherever possible and appropriate. The commentary likewise incorporates numerous explanations of these sensitivities.

The following outlines examples of how the Avodat HaLev Siddur specifically incorporates textual adaptations and halakhic instructions for women’s experience in prayer:

Tefilla Texts	Translation	Halakhic Instructions	Commentary
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modah Ani • Hagomel for women • Zimmun for 3 women • Prayer for Female head of household • <i>Techinot</i> by/for women at candlelighting • <i>Mishe’berach</i>: permutations for women, for new mothers, initiated by women (<i>yiten/titen</i>), for batmitzvah, <i>gomel</i> and response • <i>Kel Malei (yiten/titen)</i> • <i>Yizkor (yiten/titen)</i> • Mother’s prayer after childbirth; special tefillot for boy/girl • <i>Seudat Mitzvah/Zeved Habat</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rabbotai: esteemed companions • <i>Baal Habayit</i> (head of household – not master of the house) • “One” instead of “he” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “One” instead of “he”; and throughout • Daughters reciting kaddish • Women recite <i>hagomel</i> • Three or more women and less than three men • The importance of halakhik prenuptial agreements • On the birth of a girl • Hanukat Habayit: male and female owners saying <i>berachot, tehillim</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “he or she” • Explaining exemptions for women • Importance of women in the history of Tefilat Yisrael • Diversity and Women’s roles • Importance of Women’s Torah study • Women and <i>hagomel</i> explanation • Women are integral part of men’s zimmun • History of women’s <i>techinot</i> • Kissing mother’s hands before Kiddush • Eishet Chayil extended commentary • <i>Baruch she-petarani</i> for batmitzvah • Beruria wisdom/ life experience • Havdala <i>Techina</i> by women • Esther, Hannah, and the female basis of prayer



- *Et kol sarei ha-medinot ha-elu* is translated as “all the (cabinet) ministers of this land” rather than “all the constituted officers of government of this land” or “all officials of this land.”

We have sought to have the translation adhere closely to correct doctrinal positions, reflecting original sources, such as:

- *Mechayei Ha-metim* is translated as “Resurrector of the dead,” rather than “resuscitates the dead” or “revives the dead.” (The Hebrew phrase clearly refers to the cardinal doctrine of the future resurrection of those who are actually deceased, not merely to those who will be “resuscitated” or “revived”; furthermore the tzerei under the yod of “mechayei” makes the word a noun, and not a verb.)
- *Al she-anahnu modem lah* is translated as “in the merit of our giving thanks to you now” (following the Rosh and Bet Yosef) rather than “[we thank You] for inspiring us to thank You” or “for it is for us to give You thanks.”
- *Ve'khol notzar yore gedulato umalchuto* is translated as “every creature shall make His greatness and sovereignty known” to correctly reflect Rambam’s fifth principle of faith (as intended by the stiches of Yigdal respectively), rather than the corrupted texts and translations commonly encountered.

Finally, significant sections of the traditional Siddur are made up of selections from the Book of Psalms, whether entire chapters (e.g., *Pesukei d’Zimra*, the conclusion of weekday Shacharit, Shabbat afternoon, Motza’ei Shabbat, or Hallel) or quotations of individual verses. As is well known, the intricate poetic language of the Psalms often makes them difficult to translate both accurately and lucidly. For this reason:

- This Siddur has elected to utilize the outstanding and acclaimed English rendering of the Psalms found in the Koschitzky edition of the Da’at Mikra Bible. As Rav Aharon Lichtenstein *ztl* wrote, “this lucid and highly readable translation brings the insights and interpretations of the Da’at Mikra commentary to the English-speaking audience of serious and committed students of Tanakh.” And indeed even a brief comparison of this translation to others that accompany other popular siddurim, amply demonstrates the virtues and benefits of this particular translation, not only in terms of accuracy reflecting serious scholarship, but also when it comes to felicity of style and idiomatic usage, that lead to a heightened appreciation of the inspired power and beauty of the Psalms. As but one instance, the reader might compare their respective translations of Psalm 93, (“Hashem *malach*,” or “The Lord reigns.”)
- In addition, an important facet of the new Siddur is that unlike many other Hebrew/English Siddurim, this one contains the entire Book of Psalms in both Hebrew and English translation. The reason for this decision, in spite of having to add many pages to the Siddur



appendix, is that while more and more individuals and synagogues have commendably taken to reciting Psalms for various reasons, unfortunately for many the exercise largely remains one of mechanical repetition of Hebrew words, rather than a precious source of understanding, inspiration, and meaningful prayer.

It is therefore our hope that those who use this Siddur for such purposes will benefit greatly from this comprehensive translation.

V. The Multiple Dimensions of the RCA Siddur Commentary

The RCA Siddur commentary is designed to uplift our prayer experiences by bringing to life the history, sources, structures, as well as major ideas and themes of the traditional prayer book. To this end it utilizes (a) a thorough but succinct presentation of a wide range of classic rabbinic insights into the Siddur, most of them not previously found in a printed Siddur, certainly not in translation, and (b) the utilization of more recent methodologies and perspectives developed by leading contemporary rabbis, teachers, and academicians, to better understand the words of the siddur. The result is a commentary that not only speaks to those of limited Judaic background, but also to the many who are more knowledgeable and familiar with Siddur texts, but seek new insights and inspiration to elevate their prayer experience.

The features of the commentary can be grouped into 8 categories.

1. Halachic Perspectives

- a. Starting with the newly-translated essay on the Shema and Amidah by R. Soloveitchik that introduces the Siddur, there is a consistent methodology of understanding the ideas embedded in the siddur text through a halakhic lens. This entails a thorough exploration of the Talmudic, Midrashic, Geonic, Kabbalistic, early and late medieval halakhic sources, as well as selected modern and contemporary halakhic authorities.
- b. Where necessary to supplement in-text halakhic instructions, the commentary provides further practical guidance and sources culled from the Codes and Responsa literature.
- c. A major theme of the commentary is the interplay between the written and the oral law, to emphasize the crucial balance involving received texts, oral Mesorah and Minhag Yisrael (widespread custom.)
- d. Important and authoritative explorations of the laws of Nusach, Kriyat HaTorah, and normative interpersonal behavior during prayer are found in the supplementary essay section at the conclusion of the Siddur.

2. Utilization of Philosophy, Kabbala, Hasidism and Mussar

- a. Given that numerous prayer texts and practices are drawn from traditional philosophic, Kabbalistic, Lurianic, and Hasidic literature, where such texts are incorporated into the siddur they are identified and explained so as to provide further context and perspective.
- b. The commentary similarly utilizes and quotes the literature of the more recent Hasidic and Mussar movements, including their characteristic mystical and psychological themes.
- c. The philosophic and mystical teachings of R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik and R. Abraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook are given prominent treatment throughout the commentary.

3. Clarifying Historical Sources and Frameworks of Prayer



- a. The siddur is a product of Jewish history and Jewish life in many ages and lands. While some prayers originate in the Talmud, most were added and recorded in the later literature. The commentary identifies such sources, including early siddur manuscripts from the Geonic period, Geniza, the piyyut literature, as well as the writings of leading early medieval scholars, while showing how subsequent events and communal realities in the land of Israel as well as Central and Eastern Europe gave rise to various well-known tefillot.
- b. To this end, the commentary lucidly summarizes recent academic research by respected scholars working in leading universities in Israel, the United States, and Europe.
- c. Seeking both knowledge and inspiration, the commentary occasionally incorporates anecdotal material from the lives of outstanding personalities.

4. Use of Literary and Scientific Perspectives

- a. The commentary is enlivened by then its utilization of a variety of literary approaches to classical texts such as those that have emerged in recent decades. This is particularly true of the Book of Psalms, but it also true of the language of siddur texts generally.
- b. Following the Maimonidean axiom to “take the truth from whoever says it,” the words and ideas of Siddur texts are further illuminated via ideas culled from other disciplines, including physics, biology, psychology, and the literary classics.

5. Religious-Zionist Values

- a. As would be expected from an RCA Siddur, the commentary articulates many Religious Zionist ideas and positions as they relate to the texts, both classic and contemporary, found in any siddur. References to the return to the land of Israel, the State of Israel, and the teachings emanating from Israel are found throughout.
- b. Prayers that are recited (or omitted) on days relating to Israel’s founding and history are explained, as are the special services for those days that the Siddur provides.
- c. The new more precise translations of the Prayers for the State of Israel and the Israel Defense Forces are explained and elaborated upon.

6. Sensitivity to Women in Prayer

- a. The many tefilla texts and translations in the Siddur that reflect sensitivity to women’s participation in public and private prayer are generally sourced and explained in the commentary.
- b. There are numerous places where the commentary highlights the importance of women to the history and development of prayer, starting with the biblical Hannah and continuing through the modern period.
- c. The commentary not only encourages women’s study and use of tefilla texts, it provides concrete expression to such activity by incorporating the work of notable women scholars at various points.

7. The Impact of Contemporary Jewish History on the Siddur

- a. The tumultuous events of the 20th century in Europe and the Middle East, from destruction to rebirth and beyond, are amply reflected throughout the commentary, as well as in several expansive essays found at the back of the Siddur.
- b. So too, the history of American Jews in relation to the larger society is touched on in relevant contexts, from the Pilgrims, to George Washington, and beyond.



8. Social, Communal and Civic Responsibilities

- a. Utilizing a judicious selection of relevant scriptural and rabbinic sources the commentary emphasizes the virtues of Jewish harmony, unity, love, and mutual responsibility, as well as the importance of communal rather than private prayer, in the context of those tefila texts that reflect these priorities.
- b. There is a special sensitivity toward Agunot (chained women,) converts, and the downtrodden, where contextually called for.
- c. In similar vein the commentary underlines our civic responsibilities in relation to the larger society, including obedience to the law and social ethos of the land, respect for governmental and elected officials, and sensitivity to non-Jews.

VI. Range of Commentary Sources

The Siddur Commentary draws on a wide range of sources. In addition to referencing the basic Scriptural, Talmudic, Midrashic, and Geonic literature, the commentary incorporates a wide-ranging and inclusive spectrum of rabbinic sources from the early 11th Century until the modern period. But in addition to a judicious selection of the insights of the great rabbinic leaders, authorities, and teachers reflecting various approaches to Torah and the religious life of the Jew, as found in earlier generations (as would be expected), it also highlights numerous novel insights and analyses of key prayer texts and themes by leading contemporary rabbis, scholars, and academicians.

The following is a selected list of quoted or referenced sources found in the commentary to the first 200 pages of the Siddur (through the Weekday Shacharit Tefilla.) The list, omitting all titles, is divided into two parts: those sources that mainly precede 1980, and those which have mainly occurred since 1980.

Quoted or referenced sources found in the RCA Siddur commentary

Part 1: Preceding 1980

Avraham Berliner	Efraim Urbach	Netziv	Shibolei Haleket
Arizal	Elazar Figo	Or Hachaim	Shimon Schwalb
Aruch Hashulhan	Elie Munk	Orchot Chaim	Shlomo Zalman Auerbach
Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook	Hiddushei HaRim	Rabbeinu Tam	Siach Yitzchak
Avudraham	Ibn Ezra	Rabbenu Yonah	Tosafot
Baal Hatanya	Joseph Soloveitchik	Radak	Tur
Bach	Kitzur Shulchan Aruch	Rambam	Tzadok Hakohen
Bahya	Ktav Sofer	Ramban	Tzelota De'Avraham
Baruch Halevi Epstein	Levi Yitzhak of Berditzchev	Ran	Vilna Gaon
Beit Halevi	Levush	Rashba	Yaakov Emden
Bet Yosef	Machzor Vitri	Rashi	Yaakov Moshe Charlap
Chaim Berlin	Magen Avraham	Rema	Ye'arot Devash
Chaim Dov Chavel	Meir Simchah of Dvinsk	Rosh	Yehudah Ben Yakar
Chaim Kraus	Menachem Mendel Schneerson	Saadia Gaon	Yissachar Jacobson
Chaim of Volozhin	Menachem Sacks	Samson Raphael Hirsch	Yitzchak Elchanan Spektor
Chatam Sofer	Moshe Feinstein	Samuel Belkin	Yitzchok Hutner
David Tzvi Hoffman		Sefer HaChinuch	Zalman Sorotzkin
Efraim Lunshitz		Shela	Zvi Hirsch Chayes



Quoted or referenced sources found in the RCA Siddur commentary

Part 2: Post-1980

Amos Hacham	Devra Kay	Richard Steiner	Yaakov Gartner
Arie Folger	Ezra Fleischer	Rookie Billet	Yaakov Medan
Aton Holzer	Hayyim Tawil	Sara Hammer	Yaakov Nagen
Avi Baumol	Hershel Schachter	Shimshon David Pinkus	Yaffa Eliach
Avraham Walfish	Ilana Turetzky	Sol Cohen	Yehuda Kiel
Basil Herring	Isaiah Wohlgemuth	Yaakov Ariel	Yitzchak Etshalom
David Berger	Mosheh Lichtenstein	Yaakov Blidstein	Yoel Ben Nun
David Fohrman	Nechama Leibowitz	Yaakov Elman	Yonasan Sacks
Deena Rabinovitch	Reuven Melamed		Zohar Amar