

Mighty Oaks from Small Acorns

Matthew Miller is probably not a household name, except to those who are very familiar with the world of Jewish books. Matthew spent a short time in Williamsport, the small North Central Pennsylvania city, before moving to England and eventually to Israel, where he has raised his family.

Matthew has made a tremendous impact on the world of Jewish holy books. For most people, reading Jewish prayer books is an ordeal. The most liberal denominations of Judaism utilize translations which are more about current theology and attempts to approximate what the Hebrew intended. Some of those attempts are worthwhile and legitimate.

The traditional world of Jewish prayer books typically has English translations that are confusing, redundant, and barely provide a true image of the Hebrew text. Part of the problem is endemic to the Hebrew language itself. There are those who say that Hebrew is the oldest written language, with other scholars disputing that. Regardless of which school of thought would prevail, the Hebrew language is old. The language can be in large measure described as a language of concept, much like Chinese. English, derived from German, Latin and Greek, is a language of precision. Hebrew is the holy writ, designed to convey spiritual messages and cosmic complexities that have never terribly concerned the English language or its forbearers.

What makes the Koren books unique is that they contain perhaps the first English language traditions not only true to the intent of the Hebrew, but also easily readable, set forth in a user-friendly fashion, and with extraordinarily interesting commentaries. The commentary is typically, although not always, supplied by one of the giants in Jewish thought, Lord Jonathan Sacks. Rabbi Sacks, as his title indicates, is a member of the House of Lords and was, for a time, Chief Rabbi of the English Empire. Sacks followed another great expositor of Hebrew prayer in English, the great Rabbi Joseph Herman Hertz, also a Lord due to his outstanding accomplishments.

Sacks has become something of a trade name in the world of modern Orthodox Judaism. This branch of Judaism believes in the basic essential concepts of Jewish practice and thought, while at the same time maintaining that a person can receive a top-notch secular education and function in the secular world. In other words, being a religious Jew is consistent with being an ethical and involved member of the community at large.

Miller explains that in the 15th Century, when printing first started, there were Jewish publishers. One of the early publishers was not Jewish, but Catholic. He started a press in Venice controlled by the church. He had many Jewish scholars working for him, and he brought out the first editions, the best editions, of the Hebrew Bible. He also brought out

editions of the important Talmudic commentaries, all under church auspices. From the 1520's until 1960, every Hebrew Bible was based on his work. Finally, the Jewish community came around to the point of view that the text and translations should go back to the biblical and post-biblical Jewish commentaries for a solid and accurate translation.

Matt Miller purchased a small company, Koren, which had been in business for a long time. He also started a small press called "The Toby Press," which published fiction and non-fiction. Koren Publishers went to original Jewish sources since the Bible was, after all, written by Jews and in Hebrew.

Once Miller landed on the project, he talked with Rabbi Sacks. The company is relatively young, having been purchased by Miller in 2007. It was launched in the United States in 2009. Other titles have followed rapidly. Editions of the Hebrew prayer books are being published in Israel, as well as North America and England. Koren has become, almost overnight, the leading modern Orthodox publisher. "We certainly burn like wildfire." There clearly has been a tremendous need for translations of Hebrew prayer books with excellent commentary which speak to the highly educated Anglo community.

Over Yom Kippur, I used a Koren Machzor (prayer book), and I found the commentary so excellent that I did not follow the prayers nearly as closely as I do. The explanation of the prayers were written at a level that were clear, concise, interesting, and brought the original text to vibrant life. Miller has worked with other great names in Jewish thought as well, such as Adin Steinsaltz. Koren has now become recognized throughout the English speaking world as publishing the must-have prayer books for the new generation of observant Jews.

Miller points out that there is no reason why observant and religious people cannot "use critical tools to understand" the meaning of prayer in the Bible. "That doesn't mean we can't look for the way the Bible works and was derived." Miller passionately noted, "I want people to think. That's my ambition; I want people to think, think critically...." Miller quoted his wife as saying, "You have to have an open mind, but not so open that your brains fall out."

Fidelity to faith, for Miller and many others, means not only understanding the text and its context, but also having the sincere willingness to be critical. The great Jewish thinkers have always been somewhat critical of Noah, who the Bible says was a righteous man in his generation, because he did not argue with G-d to prevent the destruction of mankind. Both Abraham and Moses demanded justice from G-d. Abraham famously said to the deity, "Shall not a just G-d do justly?" Abraham argued for the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah, obviously not very nice people.

Matthew Miller is reinforcing a tradition in Judaism which goes back to the time of the Bible; that honest, critical study and a serious understanding of the meaning of the text will lead to greater identification with religious principles rather than to less. Both the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds owe a great deal of respect and thanks to Matthew Miller, for bringing

alive his vision of an understandable and colorful religious tradition through clarity and thoughtfulness.

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