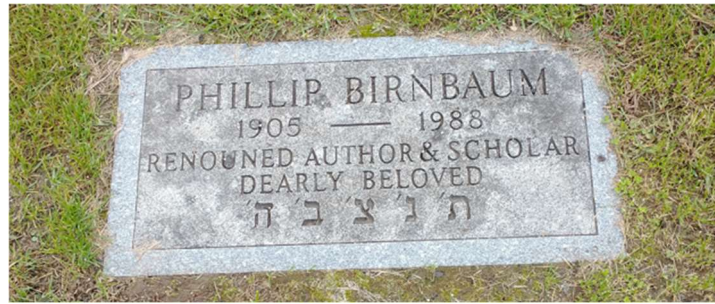


Forgotten Synagogue Classics Part IV

An Accurate Machzor and a Misspelled Matzevah: The Story of Dr. Philip Birnbaum's Prayer Books

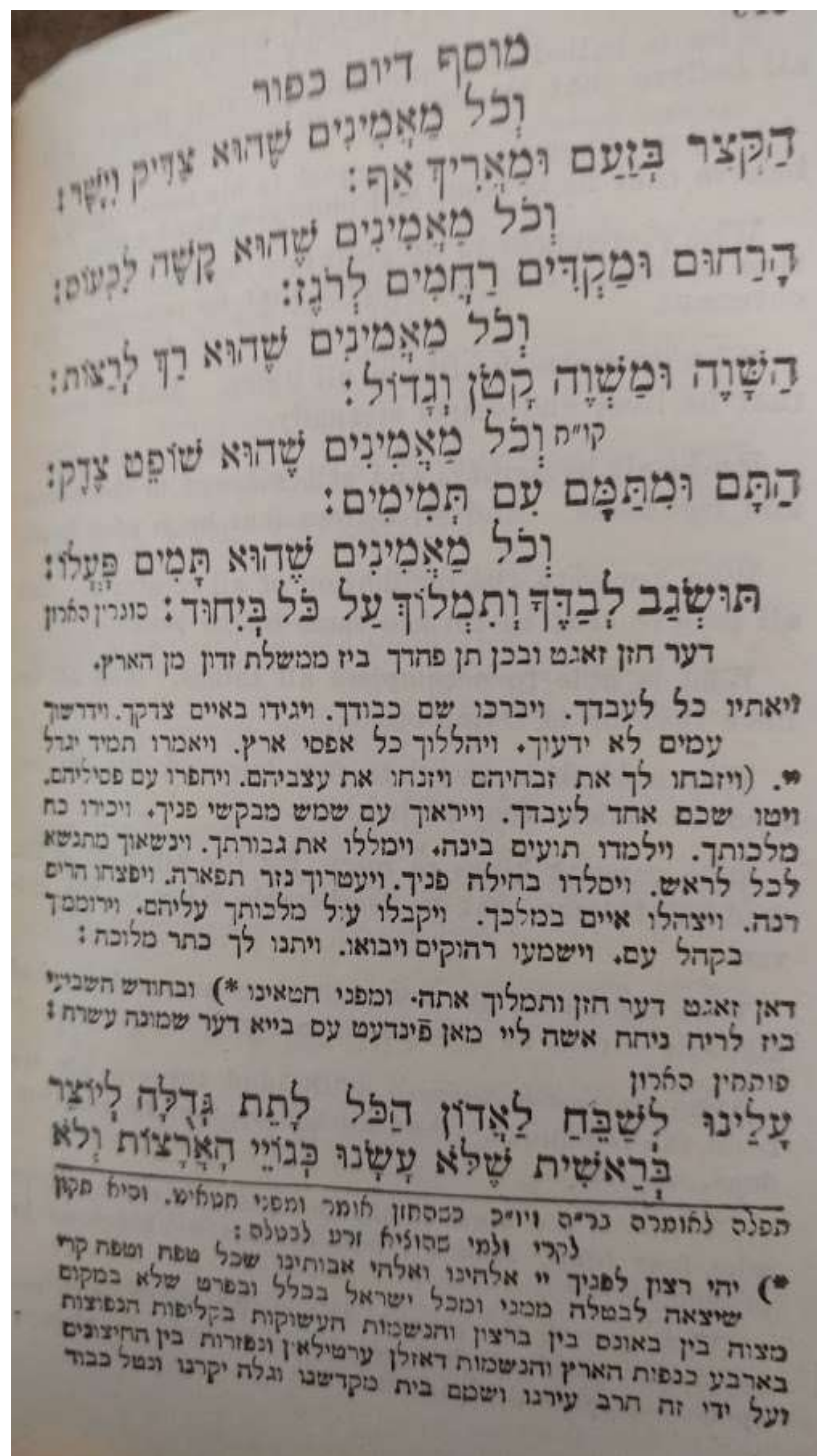


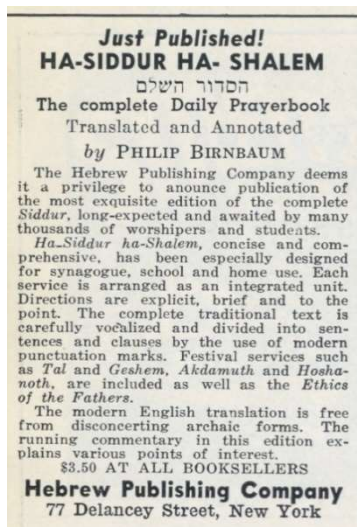
Dr. Birnbaum's old gravestone

Philip Birnbaum (c. 1901-1988)

1) Herman Wouk (1915-2019), *This is My God* (1959)

[The worshipper] is handed a prayer book that strikes him as a jumble, with English translations that for long stretches make little sense. He is apt to observe preoccupied and inattentive worshippers reeling off Hebrew with few external symptoms of devotion, or whispering together while a reader chants a long singsong. Now and then everybody stands, he cannot say why, and there is a mass chant, he cannot say what; or if he dimly recalls it from childhood, he cannot find it in the prayer book. The time comes when the Holy Scroll is taken from the Ark for a parade to the reading desk, the bells tinkling on its silver crown. The reading in a strange Oriental mode seems endless, and he observes that it seems endless to some other worshippers too, who slump in an unfocused torpor, or chat, or even sleep. ... The skeptic leaves—early, if he can—well satisfied that his views are sound, that his religious fancy was a temporary touch of melancholia, and that if the Jewish God exists, there is no reaching him through the synagogue.





3) Birnbaum, Introduction to the Siddur (1949)

For no sound reason the pages of the Siddur are broken up by several type sizes which have a confusing effect on the eyes of the reader. Those who learn the contents of the prayers soon discover that the emphasis suggested by the larger type is in most cases no emphasis at all. Why, for instance, should one part of the Shema be made to appear more prominent than the other?

4) Intro to Siddur

What does it all mean? The answer can be put in one word: confusion. As a result of poor arrangement and inadequate instructions, comparatively few worshipers ever succeed in properly reciting the full Musaf for *Hol ha-Mo'ed Sukkoth*.

In this volume each of the services is arranged as a completely integrated unit so that the worshiper is not called upon to search from page to page and to commute from reference to reference. The directions are explicit, brief and to the point. The traditional text is left intact, carefully vocalized, and divided into sentences and clauses by the use of modern punctuation marks.

5) Intro to Siddur

Some translators, unfortunately, have failed in their task of making intelligible the meaning of the prayers. In their carelessness, they have imitated the antiquated versions of the Bible that abound in phrases like 'yielded up the ghost' instead of died, and filled the Siddur with a mass of words which convey little meaning to the mind of the modern Jew. The general complaint that 'we do not understand what we say' is an indictment against many translations of the Siddur.

A good translation ought to be authentic and free from deceptions. One must not read into the original what is not there. No new poetry should be introduced into the Siddur presumably as the translation of the Hebrew text. The meaning ought to be preserved as close to to the original as possible.

The pronouns thou and thee have been retained where they are addressed to God, since they convey a more reverent feeling than the common you. The diction has not been allowed to reach the level of everyday English in view of the exalted literary tone of the Siddur.

8) Birnbaum Siddur, Acknowledgments (first edition only)

In the course of his work on the Siddur, the author has consulted many authorities for guidance. He is deeply grateful to Rabbi Hayyim Heller for his illuminating suggestions.

The writer is equally indebted to Professors Louis Ginzberg, Abraham A. Neuman, Chaim Tchernowitz, Alexander Marx, Solomon Zeitlin, Saul Lieberman, Joseph Reider, Israel Efros, Boaz Cohen, Abraham Heschel and Simon Greenberg for their helpful advice and encouragement.

9) Birnbaum, Five Megilloth (1973)

Diverse opinions have been held on the subject of the historicity of the book of Esther. ...

None of these [historical] objections, however, are successful in view of the ancient observance of the feast of Purim, which forms a considerable presumption in favor of it being founded on facts. ...

According to the biblical scholar Samuel R. Driver of the nineteenth century, the sacred writer of the book of Esther is well informed on Persian manners and institutions, and commits no anachronisms.

10) Birnbaum, Book of Jewish Concepts (1964)

The purpose of this book is to provide in a single handy volume the essential teachings of Judaism. It is written for those who want an up-to-date and easily intelligible account of basic Jewish concepts, a knowledge of which brings meaning to what may otherwise seem empty phrases. At the present time when we are confronted with widespread indifference, we have great need of a spirituality based upon genuine knowledge of our heritage.

11) Birnbaum, Intro to Siddur

The Siddur is the most popular book in Jewish life. ... The whole gamut of Jewish history may be traversed in its pages; it is a mirror that reflects the development of the Jewish spirit throughout the ages. ...

The Siddur passed through a long process of evolution until it finally emerged as a rich anthology of our literary classics. ...

Judaism demands from its adherents a knowledge of the Bible and the traditions based upon it. Many, however, lack the leisure or the aptitude for such study; hence, the Siddur has developed in a way that enables every worshiper to become familiar with the various forms of Jewish learning and religious expression. ...

It is regrettable that the Siddur, over which many generations have brooded and wept, has never been sufficiently appreciated as a vehicle of Jewish knowledge. ...

12) R. Jonathan Sacks, Introduction to Koren Siddur (2009)

Prayer is the language of the soul in conversation with God. It is the most intimate gesture of the religious life, and the most transformative.



Dr. Birnbaum during his time in Wilmington



Dr. Birnbaum's new gravestone