

My People's Prayer Book. Vol. 1, The Shema and Its Blessings, Vol. 2,
The Amidah edited by Rabbi Lawrence A.Hoffman.
Jewish Lights Publishing, 1997, 1998. Both volumes £23.99.

Professor Larry Hoffman has been responsible for many fine books to date, but I suspect that it will be the series of My People's Prayer Book, of which six out of eight have already been published, with which he will find his name most frequently associated in the future.

Hoffman has brought together 10 outstanding scholars who contribute to each volume a line by line commentary of the prayers under consideration. These include a feminist theology, general theological reflections, the halakhah of prayer and Chasidic and mystical perspectives among others.

The Hebrew liturgical text is the Ashkenazi standard, and the commentaries surround it on the page rather like commentaries on a page of the Talmud. The commentaries run on to succeeding pages, and my only caveat is that it can initially be confusing to follow from page to page, though the page numbers on which they can be found are always given after the initial opening text.

The jewel in the crown of volume 1 is Larry Hoffman's essay Minhag Ami: Our Diary of Prayer Across the Centuries, and in volume 2 How the Amidah Began: A Jewish Detective Story. In each he writes entertainingly but with impeccable scholarship, and his work is complemented in volume 2 by Joel Hoffman's collection of Amidah prayers from the Cairo Genizah.

My People's Prayer Book is a gem of a series that will please rabbis and lay people alike; it is a source of fascinating information, a great resource for adult education and an inspiration to all to delve deeper into the language, history and theology of Jewish liturgy.

Reviews of subsequent volumes will follow.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh