

Undercurrents of Jewish Prayer by Jeremy Schonfield.
The Littman Library of Jewish Civilisation, 2006. £37.50.

Jeremy Schonfield carries an impressive yichus with him, being the son and grandson of Rabbi Dr Solomon Schonfeld and Chief Rabbi Dr J H Hertz, each of whom made significant contributions to Jewish scholarship.

With Undercurrents of Jewish Prayer, Jeremy Schonfield asserts his undeniable right to be accepted into the first rank of Jewish liturgical scholars, as well as achieving the production of a work whose quality and weight would undoubtedly have aroused his esteemed forebears' pride and admiration, as well, just possibly, as anxiety.

Schonfield's purpose is to analyse in minute detail the first two sections of the daily liturgy, Birkhot Hashachar and Pesukei DeZimra: He does so with a forensic quality that is at times breath-taking for its verve and originality, and its convincing audacity. Before his text by text examination, he considers with a palpable sense of frustration and disappointment the way in which Jewish liturgy, unlike all the other major texts in the Jewish literary tradition, has been largely ignored by scholars, and occupies only a minor place in the traditional study curriculum. He argues for change with almost messianic fervour and no one who completes this superb book will be able to look at a prayer book in the same way again.

Schonfield sets the tone for his approach in the first three chapters, preparing his reader for an analysis that will be minute, lateral, creative and highly convincing, as well as informed throughout by the author's broad scholarship.

In a collection of jewels it is hard to single out some as being primus inter pares, but if forced I would have to nominate the section on tefillin, in which Schonfield demonstrates ambiguities and hidden layers of meaning that will have escaped many; his masterful explanation of the Rabbinical Kaddish; his study of the six psalms with which the Pesukei deZimra concludes, and, almost as an after thought, consideration of the inherent meaning of the juxtaposition in the Sephardi liturgy of the Binding of Isaac with the Priestly Blessing of Numbers 6.

Undercurrents of Jewish Prayer uses the 1973 Siddur edited by the author's father, Sidur Metsuyan (sic), and Rabbi Schonfeld's subliminal presence is felt throughout. The other pervasive luminary is one of the unsung heroes of 20th century Jewish scholarship, Professor Raphael Loewe, a mentor and friend to Schonfield and me.

With Undercurrents of Jewish Prayer Jeremy Schonfield has claimed his place with the giants of liturgical scholarship, Elbogen, Heinemann, Idelsohn and Petuchowski, and produced a work without whose study no liturgy course, or investigation of the Siddur, will be complete.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh