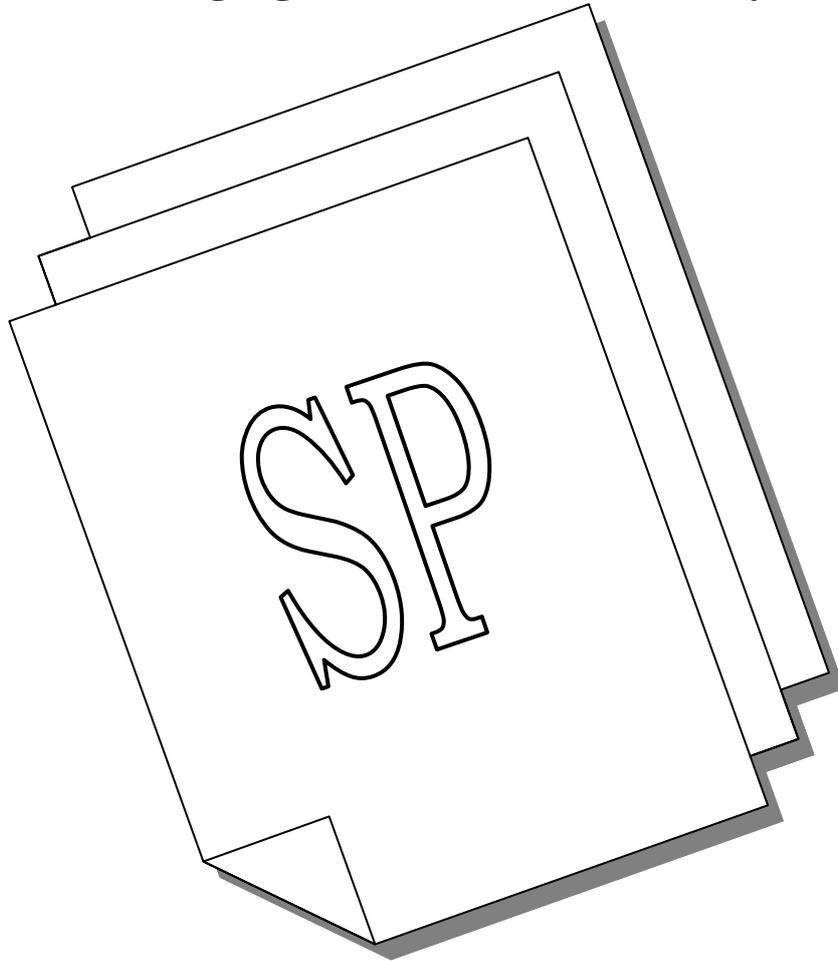


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Feminist Influences on Jewish Liturgy: The Case of Israeli Reform Prayer¹

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Abstract

Gender related issues have been discussed in liberal Judaism in North America since the seventies and are probably the most heated topic in contemporary Jewish liturgy and worship. This article discusses the unique challenges of gender language in Israeli Reform liturgy over the last two decades: inclusive language when referring to the congregation; adding representative female characters; reclaiming and adapting old rituals; creating new rituals; gender-balanced metaphors for God. Arguably the greatest challenge is altering the pronounced gender specification of the Hebrew language. The article delineates the parameters of gender language in Israeli liturgy, where the vernacular is both the Holy language and the language of the prayer.

Introduction

Ask young children what God looks like, and they will most likely give you the description of the king, sitting on his throne with a beautiful crown on his head and a scepter in his hand; ask them what a Jew looks like (or check the images on YouTube or popular cartoons) and you will get the black-coated man with beard and flowing sideburns. Ask school kids about famous Jews and you will hear about Abraham and Moses, Freud and Einstein -- and even Adam Sandler. But where are the women? How is it that we have so little regard for (or knowledge of) millions of Jewish women throughout the ages; mothers, wives, daughters, leaders, scholars, writers, worshipers?

It is true that Liberal Jewish theology expressed a gender-related interest, beginning in Germany (Baader, 2006) ² and spreading from Europe to North-America in the mid 1800s. Women's religious duties as well as everyday life were newly defined as part of the Reform movement in contrast to Orthodoxy. Although femininity experienced a

¹ This article is based in part on a previous article I published in English (Marx 2009: 206-217). A German version of the article will be published in *der Zeitschrift für Frauenforschung & Geschlechterstudien*.

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² Reform Judaism was born in the wake of the French Revolution, when European Jews were recognized for the first time as citizens in different countries. Many Jews settled outside of Jewish districts and ghettos. But after Napoleon's defeat in 1815, Jews again lost their right of citizenship in several countries.

re-evaluation in the direction of greater gender equality, the question of equal participation in liturgy and a gender balanced language did not emerge until the last decades of the 20th century. In the late 1970s and 1980s women gradually started to appear not only as religious leaders and as equal participants in non-Orthodox synagogues in North-America, but, as Hyman (1997) put it, “feminists were increasingly concerned that women’s sensibility and experience be reflected in Jewish life. They hoped that women would be allowed to reshape the rabbinate and the cantorate, rather than simply follow traditional male models. Most importantly, they sought to incorporate women’s voices and thoughts into Jewish liturgy and into the interpretation of classical Jewish texts.” Thus they called for a revision of the prayer book, the *siddur*, liturgical texts for the Holidays, (such as the Passover *Haggadah*) and a thorough examination of life cycle events and rituals.

This paper concentrates on worship, but one should also note that in the last decades, Jewish women stake out new territory and claim for themselves new domains in Jewish scholarship, in fields that used to be engaged by men only, such as Talmud and *Halakha* (legal studies), not only in the liberal movements but also in Modern Orthodox communities. And last but not least, they engage in a feminist *midrash*, which includes the interpretation of biblical and Talmudic texts (Weingarten, Mintz and Biala, 2009).

The gender dilemma in Israeli Judaism

In Israel, the Reform movement, which is called the *Israeli Movement for Progressive Judaism* (IMPJ), dates back to the 1950s, but a serious concern for women’s role in liturgy is a relatively recent development, namely since the last decade of the 20st century. This paper examines the modes of liturgical change with regard to the role and presentation of women in Jewish ritual and worship within Israel: what they do to regain their voice[s] through worship and how they are depicted in contemporary liturgies. Today, gender-related issues are among the most heated issues faced by contemporary liberal, non-Orthodox Jews; discussions on the subject dominate the religious and academic spheres as well as the socio-cultural arena.

This paper is based upon the assumption that the Israeli case is a distinct one compared to the North American treatment of gender in the liturgy, because Hebrew is not only the liturgical language, but also the vernacular for Israeli Jews. This makes it much harder to change liturgy, as it is perceived as holy matter. Another unique aspect of the Israeli liberal liturgy is the fact that it operates in a rather conservative religious environment: both Orthodox and secular Jews in Israel are less prone to experimental approaches toward liturgy and ritual.

The special characteristics and problems arising around women’s worship became especially present in the Israeli realm since the publication of the Orthodox journalist Aliza Lavi’s (2005) book on women’s prayers. Although the book contains and discusses only Orthodox prayers and does not directly deal with gender issues, it served as a catalyst for the discussion of the liturgical language in wider circles. It would be fair to say that until the recent publication of this book (more than a decade after it became a central issue for North American Jewry!), questions of gender and worship were not present on the broader agenda of the Israeli public.

The observation that throughout the ages, most Jewish liturgical texts and recognized public prayers were composed, performed, and transmitted by men is not altogether new; nor is the realization of the very minor role (if any) of women in the public

sphere of Jewish religion. This situation has changed only in the last few decades in North America, largely due to the achievements of the feminist movement in liberal Jewish circles, the ever increasing numbers of Jewish women who serve as rabbis, cantors, educators, community organizers, and lay leaders³. It was their insistence and dedication that has led us to admit the overwhelming extent to which traditional prayers feature only male characters from Jewish tradition (such as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob); refer to the Divine and to worshippers exclusively in masculine language; and address God using masculine attributes and metaphors that hardly relate to women's experiences. Traditionally, women had a marginal role in life cycle events and virtually no public role at all in synagogues. In the former, for example, they appeared officially only in their own weddings, where, however, they kept quiet while their husbands-to-be arranged for their ritual betrothal. It goes without saying that,, they could not lead public worship, they were not counted in the *Minyan* (the required quorum of ten adult worshippers) and had neither reason nor obligation even to attend.

Adding a feminine dimension to liberal liturgy

In recent decades, the non-Orthodox movements, namely the Reform, Reconstructionist and, to some extent, Conservative Jews have made it a priority to mend this situation and to make the liturgy more egalitarian, balanced, and inclusive. It appears that most, if not all, liberal Jews would agree on the importance of and need for such changes, but the movements and the different Jewish centers differ in the means, tone, and extent of the changes that they are willing to make. One can argue that this topic forms a major if not the main dividing line among liberal religious denominations⁴.

The intense interest in gender language over the last fifteen years in Israel was also imported from North America, where a feminist critique of liturgy had been central since the late seventies. It would be fair to say that the initial interest in the US was based on the work of feminist theorists and activists⁵, while in the Israel, the interest was and by and large still is an import of the achievements of North American thinkers. European precedent played little role, despite nineteenth-century innovations in Germany⁶ (it is too early to evaluate the treatment of gender in the German speaking countries today).⁷

The Israeli Reform prayer book, *Ha-Avodah Shebalev*, published by the Israeli Movement for Progressive Judaism (IMPJ) in 1982, still reflects so little interest in

³ The first generation of women rabbis, however, was loathe or at least afraid to be identified with feminism and feminist issues for fear of alienating their male colleagues and congregants. Only later "generations" of female leaders advocated change more openly. One should also note that the first decade of the 21st century witnesses what we may call a feminization of Judaism, with a majority of rabbinical and cantorial students in the US now female. In Israel the gender ratio is still unchanged.

⁴ Regarding gender language in Jewish liturgy, see: Adler 1998: 61-103; Baader 2006; Caplan 2002: 151-154, 220-233; Daum 1992: 183 – 202; Dubin 2002: 165-177 ; Falk 1987: 39 – 53 ; Heschel 1983; Ophir (Offenbacher) 2003: 55-75; Weissler 2005: 53-83. Many articles in the book: Goldstein 2009, touch on the theme of gender, ritual and liturgy.

⁵ Many of the actual feminist liturgists were lay women, such as Marcia Falk, suggesting a whole new innovative liturgical language based on gender inclusiveness (see below).

⁶ The first steps toward gender equality were taken in Germany. I refer first and foremost to the confirmation ceremonies for girls, about a century before the first Bat-Mitzvah ceremony in the United States. See: Herrmann 2008: 91-112.

⁷ A careful examination of the treatment of gender in liberal German liturgy can't be done here. I hope to address this topic somewhere else.

gender issues that the American liturgy scholar Eric Friedland (1991:261) wrote: “The Israel religious progressives’ apparent unconcern with gender terminology might reek of rank heresy to their American siblings” The second edition (1991) pays more attention to gender issues, but until recently, it was only informal prayer handouts and semi-formal publications that attended to gender in fully committed ways. Nowadays, however, no Reform publication will ignore gender questions. An example for this current interest is the *Haggadah* (the liturgical text read in the festive meal of the Passover evening) published lately by the Council of Reform Rabbis in Israel, explicitly acknowledging women who took part in the redemption from Egypt, thus being part of the Jewish people’s foundation, its collective identity and narrative. Its introduction explains:

We have attempted to restore the voices of women to the chorus of Jewish voices reading the Haggadah and learning its story. We have done our best to search out traditional texts and commentaries that relate to women's voices. We focus on Miriam the Prophet and have added a cup of living water to the fifth cup of wine, which symbolizes the hope of redemption. We incorporate our own voices and include a proposal for four daughters, in addition to the traditional four sons (Haggadah laZman haZeh, [2009]: 1).

Next to the traditional text, that deals with the questions and answers of the four sons (the wise, the wicked, the simple, and the son that doesn’t know how to ask), the *Haggadah* features four daughters. The wicked one was transformed as angry, as a result of the postulation that there are no evil children but they may sometime be rather difficult. Let us see the question of the first daughter, the wise one, and the response she gets:

חֲכָמָה מָה הִיא אוֹמֶרֶת? - מָה הָעֵדוּת וְהַחֻקִּים וְהַמִּשְׁפָּטִים אֲשֶׁר הוֹרִישׁוּ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ
וְאִמּוֹתֵינוּ לָנוּ?
אִף אַתָּם אָמְרוּ לָהּ: "עֵדוּת" - עַל שׁוֹם שְׂאִמּוֹתֵינוּ גַם הֵן עֵדוּת לְאוֹתוֹ הַגָּס.
"חֻקִּים" - עַל שׁוֹם שְׁנֵתָנוּ לָנוּ חֻקִּים לְשׁוֹחַ בְּצַלְמֵם וּלְהַשִּׁיחַ בְּהֵם, שְׁנֵאָמַר: "וְאִשְׁיַחָהּ
בְּחֻקֶּיךָ" (תְּהִלִּים קי' ט).
"מִשְׁפָּטִים" עַל שׁוֹם: מַלִּים, שִׁירָה, פְּרָשְׁנוֹת מִתְחַדְּשֵׁת, טִיּוֹב וְתִקּוֹן, שְׂאֵנוּ מְחַיִּבִים
בְּהֵם.

The wise one, what says she?

'What mean the testimonies, and the statutes, and the ordinances, which our fathers and mothers bequeathed you?'

Then you shall tell her: "Testimonies" – for our mothers, too, witnessed that same miracle. "Statutes" – for statutes were given to us to walk in their shade and to meditate in them, as it is said: "and I will meditate in Your statutes" (Psalms 119). "Ordinances" – for words, poetry, regenerating interpretation, betterment and tikkun, to which we are committed.⁸

The text clearly intends to empower women and to encourage them regain their unique voices in the Jewish discourse.

Gender discussion carries unique implications in Israel, where worshippers speak Hebrew – itself a gendered language – and where society (insofar as it is religious at

⁸ The four words in the Hebrew original text consist of an acronym which builds the Hebrew word: *Mishpat*, translated here by Orna Meir to *ordinances*.

all) is rather traditional. From the outset, in Europe and to some extent in the United States, many of the innovations in liberal liturgies were made only in the vernacular, leaving the traditional Hebrew barely touched. In this way, prayer-book editors could hold the stick at both ends: presenting a comprehensible and ideologically acceptable text to worshippers while maintaining the feeling and linguistic authenticity of the traditional and familiar Hebrew prayers. Israeli liturgists, however, face the fact that Hebrew *is* the vernacular (although in a higher and more poetic linguistic register). This unique feature becomes a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it is more urgent for them to alter imbalanced liturgical language, since it cannot be mitigated by altering translations; on the other hand, change is more conspicuous. Even secular Israelis are sensitive to traditional liturgical language, since they fully understand it and are used to hearing it.

The following personal experience may illustrate this complexity: An experienced teacher in an Israeli progressive Jewish kindergarten told me about an ongoing discussion she has had with one of the female rabbis in the movement. This rabbi claims that since equality is an important Reform value, it is crucial to use balanced liturgical language in the kindergarten. She suggested that some of the blessings be recited in the traditional way using the traditional formula: “Praised are You Adonai⁹,” while using a nontraditional feminine language (*Praised are You Yah*) for others. The teacher felt that just exposing children from secular families (where many parents are suspicious of any form of religious observance) to daily prayer -- not to mention having girls wear head cover (*kippah*) and take an active role in the leading service -- is odd enough for their parents, and that changing the well-known blessing formula would seem so unnatural as to be alienating.

When it comes to liturgical texts, contemporary Hebrew speakers must constantly choose between the comfort of familiar liturgical practice and the luxury of adequate ideological, theological, and aesthetic text theory. This makes their task quite complicated and at the same time extremely interesting. The discussions around these issues that are most passionate in Israel (as in the Diaspora and especially in North America) are those dealing with God language—the ways God is depicted and referred to in the prayers. But there are no less than four dimensions of reference to gender in the liturgy of Israeli liberal movements, God language being only one of them: 1. Use of inclusive language to refer to worshippers; 2. Addition of representative female characters; 3. Reclaiming and adapting old rituals, creating new rituals and new ritual opportunities; 4. Gender inclusive and gender-balanced metaphors for God.

The use of inclusive language to refer to worshippers

Liturgical phrases that are perceived as offensive to women, such as the blessing recited by men every morning, “Praised are You the Lord our God... who did not make me a woman” were omitted or revised from all liberal prayer-books right from the outset (Marx, 2005: 345-363). In some, but not all cases when the prayer text appears in the first person, such as the early morning prayer, “I thankfully acknowledge,” the feminine form is added next to the male form: “*Mode/Moda ani*”¹⁰. Regarding nonverbal aspects of prayer, women in Israeli liberal circles tend to

⁹ The epithet Adonai is the pronounced form of the Tetragrammaton, the ineffable name of God.

¹⁰ It is so in *Ha-Avodah Shebalev* for example, but the supplication recited at the beginning of the Bedtime Shema Prayer begins with an only male address: “*Hareini mokhel*” (“I hereby forgive..”)

wear prayer shawls (*tallit*) and sometimes head covering (*kippah*). The use of phylacteries (*tefillin*) is equally rather uncommon for men and for women in the Reform congregations of Israel.

Another important innovation is the public acknowledgment of worshipers during the service. Traditionally, only the father's name is mentioned when a person (and in Orthodox context a man) is called to recite the blessings of the Torah and only the mother's name is mentioned in the framework of the prayer for the sick and other personal (*Mi Sheberakh*) prayers. In the liberal setting, the names of both parents are mentioned whenever a person's name is called in liturgical framework.

Addition of representative female characters

Although using different liturgical means, most liberal prayer-books add the names of the matriarchs of the Jewish people (Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Rachel) to those of the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob), in the first blessing of the *Amidah*, also known as the "Eighteen Benediction Prayer", the central piece of the every service, traditionally recited three times a day. The inclusion of the matriarchs is a clear adoption of American liberal precedent.

Here is the version that appears in the 1991 edition of the Israeli prayer book, *Ha-Avodah Shebalev*:

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו ואלהי אבותינו ואימותינו
אלהי אברהם, יצחק ויעקב,
אלהי שרה, רבקה, רחל ולאה...
ברוך אתה ה' מגן אברהם ופוקד שרה.

*Praised are you Adonai, our God and God of our fathers and mothers
God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,
God of Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah ...
Praised are you Adonai, shield of Abraham and the One who remembers
Sarah.*¹¹

The gender inclusive version is printed (in smaller font) next to the traditional text that includes only the patriarchs' names. The Israeli Reform youth *siddur*, published almost a decade later, prints only the gender inclusive text but in a different form – it mentions the matriarchs side by side with the patriarchs in a generational order:

ברוך אתה ה'
אלהי אברהם ושרה
אלהי יצחק ורבקה
ואלהי יעקב לאה ורחל...

*Praised are you Adonai,
God of Abraham and Sarah,
God of Isaac and Rebecca
and God of Jacob Leah and Rachel ...*¹²

¹¹ It is noteworthy to add that the ending formula of this blessing differs from the American Reform one. It reads, "poked Sarah" ("the One who remembers Sarah"); the most common American version reads "ezrat Sarah" ("the help of Sarah"). The Israeli version was chosen since it is closely related to the words of Genesis 21:1 "And God remembered [*pakad et*] Sarah," and thus reflects a close awareness both of the biblical text and of the grammatical structure.

¹² Hakhavaya shebalev, the Youth prayer book of the Israeli Movement for Progressive Judaism (2000). In this Siddur, Leah comes before Rachel, as she is the older sister, even though Leah rimes

In the blessing for redemption (*Ge'ula*), said after the recitation of *Sh'ma Yisrael*¹³, Miriam's name is added next to the name of Moses and mentioned before him.

מִשָּׁה, מִרְיָם וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לָךְ עָנוּ שִׁירָה בְּשִׂמְחָה רַבָּה, וְאָמְרוּ כֻלָּם:
"מִי כַמְכָה בְּאַלִּים ה', מִי כַמְכָה וְנֶאֱדָר בְּקִדְשׁ נֹרָא תְהִלּוֹת עֲשָׂה פְלֵא" (שמות טו, 11)

Moses, Miriam and the children of Israel exclaim a song to You with great joy, and they all said:

"Who is like You among the mighty?

Who is like You, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders"

(Exodus 15,11)

In this case the liturgy just follows the biblical text, attesting to the fact that both Moses and Miriam led the people in the "Song of the Sea", after the parting of the Red Sea.

All Israelis face the uniqueness of requiring *Mi Sheberakh* prayers (prayers for the wellbeing of individuals and communities) for both men and women who are about to begin their military service. In Reform congregations, such prayers include names of male and female heroes from the Jewish past. "May the one who blessed our warriors Joshua, David and Judah, Deborah, Yael and Judith, bless [the name and names of both parents are added] who is about to join the service of the Israeli defense forces..." The mention of Judith is especially interesting for it is a figure from the Pseudepigrapha and not included in the Hebrew biblical canon (and therefore is in and of itself an act of inclusion).

Reclaiming and adapting the rituals

In Israel, like in the United States, old rituals are being adapted so as to include women, while new rituals are being created to celebrate the feminine experience—that is to say, to mark what had been unmarked (Ochs, 2007: 47-56). Compared to the United States, Israeli liberal women are generally less apt to adopt rituals, prayers and services created by and for women alone, maybe because such events feel too "radical". Yet, in recent years we have witnessed a rise in rituals organized for and attended by women only. Some of them reclaim ancient female rituals, some of them

better with Rebecca. In the Israeli Masorti (Conservative) movement the addition of the matriarchs to the Amidah met a great deal of objection. Rabbi Professor David Golinkin, president of the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem, wrote a halakhic response on this topic. He suggested that "the authentic and traditional way" to include the matriarchs would be to add piyutim (liturgical hymns) to be recited in the middle of the blessing and not in its ending, which, he claims, cannot be changed according to Halakha. As an example, he quotes a hymn composed by Rabbi Dr. Einat Ramon:

נבואה אוהלי שרה, רבקה, רחל ולאה.
ותהי גמילות חסדיהן לפנינו
בכל עת ובכל שעה.

*Let us enter the tents of Sarah,
Rebecca, Rachel and Leah.
May their acts of loving-kindness
be an example to us at all times.*

For now, some Conservative congregations add the matriarchs at the opening and closing of the blessing (as is the custom in all Israeli Reform congregations), while other congregations simply don't mention the mothers at all.

¹³ *Sh'ma Yisrael* are the first words of a paragraph from Deuteronomy 6 (v. 4-9). It is considered to be the closest to a recitation of a creed in the Jewish tradition, together with two other Biblical paragraphs (Deut. 11, 13-21 and Num. 15, 37-41) and liturgical blessings (such as the blessing for redemption, mentioned above). It is recited twice daily, in the morning and in the evening.

adapt existing rituals adding to them feminine aspects, while some are newly innovative rituals that address women's uniqueness¹⁴.

Among the reclaimed ancient rituals lost in the course of history and rediscovered are *Rosh Chodesh* (new month) ceremonies¹⁵; among the adapted ceremonies are egalitarian weddings, baby-girl naming and adult bat-mitzvah ceremonies, which are becoming more popular in Israel as well as in the Diaspora. Among the innovative rituals are a host of new practices marking feminine lifecycle events, such as first menstruation, joining the military service, the beginning of a spousal relationship, becoming pregnant, miscarriage, abortion, fertility treatments, divorce, and menopause. All these rituals are not, in most cases, Israeli innovations. However in Israel they carry special characteristics, for example, in many cases, the Israeli rituals and texts reflect deeper acquaintance with biblical and rabbinic sources, as well as contemporary poetry and literature. They also tend to be more restrained in their approach than those created in North America (see below). Here is a paragraph from an immersion ceremony created for a woman who has experienced a miscarriage. It is composed by the Jerusalemite Reform rabbi Tamar Duvdevany. The text is based upon a traditional liturgical genre of *Piyutei Geshem* (Hymns asking for rain, recited on *Shmini Azeret*, the day after the feast of tabernacles):

ארפה גופי ואטבול במים
תרפא נפשי במים חיים.
ייעטף גופי בתוך המים
תיטהר נפשי במים חיים.
ייעטף גופי בחיבוק של מים
תירחב נפשי במים חיים.

*I'll relax my body and immerse myself in water
May my soul be healed in living water.
May my body be washed by water
May my soul be purified by living water.
May my body be embraced by water
May my soul be nurtured in the living water.*

This prayer is quoted from *Parashat Ha-Mayim*, a book edited by four Israeli Reform female rabbis, and containing a variety of texts and rituals of *t'vilah* (immersion). The book expands the notion and opportunities of ritual immersion far beyond the traditional ones. It will, hopefully be published in 2010.

It may be a cliché, but it is not untrue that women tend to be closer to their bodies than men are to theirs. I believe that the emphasis on incorporating the body in worship (especially compared to classical Reform practice) is attributable to women who have taken on participating, leading, and creating Jewish prayer. Composition of rituals that celebrate or mourn physical experiences is part of this process. While most of these themes are not unique to Israeli women, both their content and form reflect Israeli experience and style. Sometimes, for example, North American liturgical pieces are criticized for being too “touchy-feely” for the *sabras* (native-born Israelis), who tend to be less sentimental and less inclined to show emotions publically. Being

¹⁴ For the term “innovative” as applied to such rituals, see Goldstein 2009: 81-89.

¹⁵ The new day of the month appear as a festive day already in the Bible (Numbers 10:10) and was considered to be especially important for women, who were exempt from work on that day (Talmud Bavli, tractate Megillah 22b). It was only natural for contemporary women to hold special monthly events, rituals, study sessions and gatherings on that day.

acquainted with the Hebrew language and its different layers and registers, Israeli women demand more complex texts, being more restrained and maybe somewhat embarrassed with worship altogether, they feel more comfortable with intellectual aspects of ritual than with explicitly physical ritual behavior. Swaying while holding hands and chanting a single verse over and over again may not be the preferred worship behavior for many Israeli women and most would favor a short study session, textual readings, singing and some contained ritual acts (such as candle lighting).

Interestingly, Rivkah Ben-Sason, an Orthodox woman, was quoted recently in the Israeli press after publicly expressing the need to compose a ceremony to mark divorce¹⁶. Her pioneering, public call may stem from her familiarity with such ceremonies in the non-Orthodox realm (people from the Orthodox camp denounced her as “Reform,” a commonplace charge leveled against innovative Orthodox women), and may also forecast future involvement of the Orthodox in the endeavor to mark women’s lives with meaningful ritual.

Gender-inclusive and gender-balanced metaphors of God

The most radical and less agreed-upon issue in the realm of gender language in prayer involves changes related to addressing God and referring to God’s attributes (Weissler, 2005). Despite the commonly accepted principle in Jewish tradition, that God has no body or physical image, our humanly limited imagery - claim those who call for changing the language to address God - is restricted to human vision and metaphors. We know God by means of our confined imagery that so far has been only male - a king, a father, a warrior, a shepherd, or a judge (Plaskow, 1983: 228). Therefore, many Jewish feminists called for the renewal of the male centered “God’s language”.

Avoiding referring to God in a gendered language is relatively easy in English (and to lesser extent in other European languages), since *He* can be easily changed to *God* without implicating further syntactical changes throughout the sentence. But in Hebrew all nouns, verbs, and adjectives are gendered. Also, as we have indicated above, many feel that it would be too extreme to change the formula of the traditional blessing too radically, as, for example, the poet and liturgy composer Marcia Falk does¹⁷. So instead of changing the traditional liturgy, new texts may be added. *Kavanat Ha’Lev*, the Israeli Reform Machzor (1991), prints next to the liturgical hymn “*Avinu Malkenu*” (“Our Father, Our King”) another poem, “*Sh’khina Mekor Khayeinu*” (“Shekhinah, Source of Our Lives”), in which God is invoked in a feminine voice, and a third *piyut* that is gender neutral. This Israeli inclusive innovation later found its place in North American liberal liturgy as well.

The blessing before immersion in a *mikveh* (ritual bath) ceremony for a bride’s mother composed by Reform rabbis Maya Leibovich and Alona Lisitsa is: “*B’rukha at Yah, Mekor Hakhayim, Hamekhadesh et horuti*” (“Praised [in feminine form] are you Yah, the source of life, who renews my motherhood”). After the immersion, the mother says:

שכינה מקור חיי
האירי הורותי החדשה

¹⁶ Ben Sason’s call was posted on Kolekh, the Israeli Modern Orthodox Women’s website on 27.8.2008, <http://www.kolech.org/show.asp?id=29234>.

¹⁷ In her book (Falk 1996), Falk changes the traditional blessing formula from “Praised are You Adonai, King of the universe” to: “Let us acknowledge the source of life”. See: Falk, *notes*.

לב חכם טעי בי ורוח נכונה חדשי בקרבי
לקבל את בן/בת הזוג של בתי

*Shekhinah, source of my life
enlighten my new (form of) motherhood
Create in me a wise heart
and renew a true spirit within me
to accept the spouse of my daughter.*

In informal or semi-formal prayer sheets and booklets, Israeli Reform liturgists use feminine God language more freely. However, lately two Israeli Reform Rabbis Levi Weiman-Kelman and Maayan Turner created a new text for the morning blessings, in which every blessing uses a different address to God. The varied addresses replace the traditional blessing formula: "Praised are You, Adonai our God, ruler of the universe" in an attempt to enable each worshiper find the right language that may encapsulate his/her religious feelings:

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם אשר נתן לשכוי בינה להבחין בין יום ובין לילה.
ברוך אתה ה' חיי העולמים שעשני בצלמו.
אברך את עין החיים שעשני בן/בת חורין.
ברוך אתה יהוה רוח העולם שעשני ישראל.
ברוך אתה ה' אור העולם פוקח עורים.
נברך את מקור חיינו מלביש ערמים.
ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו צור ישועתנו מתיר אסורים.
נודה לעין החיים זוקף כפופים.
ברוך אתה ה' טוב ונהמטיב רוקע הארץ על המים.
אברך יהוה המקור והמקום המכין צעדי גבורה.
אודה לרוח החיים שעשיתה לי כל צרכי.
ברוך אתה ה' יחיד העולמים אוזר ישראל בגבורה.
נברך את מקור הברכה עוטר ישראל בתפארה.
ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם הנותן ליגף פח.
ברוך אתה ה' אם הרחמים הפעביך שנה מעיני ותנומה מעפעפי.

Praised are You Adonai our God, ruler of the universe, Who granted the rooster wisdom to distinguish between day and night.

Praised are You Adonai life of the universe Who created me in his image.

I shall bless source of life, Who created me a son/daughter of freedom.

Praised are You Yah,¹⁸ Spirit of the universe, Who made me one of Israel.¹⁹

Praised are You Adonai our God, light of the universe, Who opens the eyes of the blind.

We shall praise the source of our lives, Who clothes the naked.

Praised are You Adonai our God, rock of our salvation, Who unbinds the bound.

We shall thank the fountain of life, Who straightens the lowly.

Praised are You Adonai our God, the good and beneficial, Who spreads the land over the earth.

¹⁸ This and the blessing for the fulfillment of all one needs are formed in a feminine voice, using the biblical attribute *Yah* to refer to God.

¹⁹ This blessing refers to God in feminine language, since the word: "Ruakh" (spirit, mind and also wind) is grammatically feminine.

*I shall bless Yah, the Source and the Place (haMakom), Who who makes my steps firm*²⁰

I shall give praise to the Spirit of life, Who granted me with all my needs. Praised are Adonai, The Unique One in all worlds, Who girds Israel with might.

We shall praise the Source of all blessings, Who crowns Israel with glory. Praised are You Adonai, Ruler of the universe, Who gives might to the weary.

We shall praise You Yah, the Mother of mercy, Who casts bounds of sleep from my eyes and slumber from my eye lids (Quoted from Siddur Kol-Haneshama, 2009).

The diversity of this text is manifested not only through varied and multitude gender addresses of the Divine (God as Spirit, fountain, rock etc.), but also in varied voices of the addressor (in singular and plural forms). Rabbi Turner told me that in *Kol HaNeshama* congregation's version, the last blessing: "Who casts bounds of sleep...", is recited quietly, so the list of blessings recited aloud begins and ends with the traditional formula ("Praised are You Adonai, Ruler of the universe..."). This version of the morning blessings appears in the prayer-book of the Jerusalemite congregation *Kol HaNeshama*, a pioneering congregation in its commitment to inclusive liturgical language.

Such texts as the one discussed above often appear in experimental services, but as far as I know, there is only one text that found its way into regularized use in many congregations: it is the ending for the Shabbat *Hashkiveinu* blessing, the blessing asking for Divine safeguarding and protection:

ברוכה את יה הפורשת סוכת שלום עלינו ועל כל עמה ישראל ועל ירושלים.

Praised are you Yah, who spread a shield of peace over us and over all her People Israel and over Jerusalem.

The depiction of God as specifically merciful and compassionate made it especially suitable for use in the feminine form. Indeed this innovation was criticized for reinforcing the female traditional role instead of enhancing the Divine images in a less expected manner. As said before, such revisions are quite uncommon and time will tell if the liberal worshippers in Israel eventually embrace them.

Summary and conclusion

An intriguing paradox underlines the treatment of gender in Israeli liberal liturgy: on one hand, the fact that Israelis fully comprehend the language of the liturgy makes the exclusion of women more acute and disturbing; on the other hand, the comfort and familiarity with the traditional text make it more difficult to radically change it. As for the general public, the challenge is twofold: many Israelis seem to be reluctant to engage in religious observance, and also reluctant to publicly embrace feminism (although many of them incorporate both in their lives), and therefore may perceive any change in the liturgy as "unauthentic." The treatment of gender in Israeli liberal liturgy is greatly influenced by the liturgical innovations in North America. However, because Israeli liberal liturgy operates in a more traditional environment, and because Hebrew is a highly gendered language, its creators seek their own unique voice.

²⁰ The traditional text reads: "Praised...who establishes the steps of man" (*"hamekchin mits'adei gaver"*). The text of this revised blessing uses the same root *gimmel-waw-resh* in a way that avoids the gendered connotations.

Liberal Israeli liturgists seem to realize that total gender balance is hard to achieve under any conditions, let alone in Hebrew. Accordingly, they are more keen to depend on a metaphorical reading of tradition. A personal example illustrates what I mean: I was once criticized by a North American editor who claimed that a prayer I wrote was not sufficiently gender sensitive. I replied:

As a female Reform rabbi in the state of Israel, I am devoted heart and soul to women's issues. Making our prayers accessible to women of all ages is one of my main personal commitments. This is why it is painful for me that sometimes I think we shoot ourselves in the foot when we are not willing to understand some of the liturgical terms as metaphors, which can be used and understood in more than one way.... Please, don't take from me the precious words my foremothers and my forefathers used when they prayed to the creator of the world (Marx 2005-6).

We have to admit that, for now, liberal Judaism and its liturgy, let alone specifically gender-balanced liturgy, are still marginal in Israel, treated with ever-growing overt hostility by the Orthodoxy and with a great deal of suspicion by secularists.²¹ That said, it is equally important to note that Israeli liberal liturgy has an appeal in non-liberal circles: Modern Orthodox women are beginning to seek liturgical responses in nontraditional liturgical language, and secular women are finding new life-cycle rituals meaningful and valuable. Time will tell what the effects of these modern liturgies will be both inside Israel and out, and how they will influence Jewish practice in general. In the meantime, liberal religious Jews in Israel continue to pave the way, in small, but hopefully significant steps.

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²¹ Recently many rabbis and liturgists in Israel as in the Diaspora (especially in North America) are seeking to find inclusive liturgical language to include gays and lesbians. In many ways, as the gender question was the most important one in the last decades, the question of the non-heterosexuals is hotly debated in the current realm of liberal Jewish worship (Kushner and Mitelman, 2008).

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Rabbi Rachel Sabbath Beit-Halachmi – Studying Torah with children



Rabbi Galia Sadan – Bath mitzvah ceremony



Rabbi Alona Lisiza – Preparing boys for Bar mitzvah



Rabbi Ayala Miron – Covering Bar mitzvah boy with Talit (praying shawl)