

“I Have Poured out my Soul before the Lord:”

Women and Personal Prayer

by Erica Brown

In our tradition we have striking examples of female piety, particularly in the realm of prayer. We need only look to our matriarchs who petitioned for children or to Hannah's moving prayer upon the birth of a long awaited son to see the depths of anguish and thanksgiving that these biblical figures expressed.

Warm and compassionate father! Imperfect woman that I am, poor in good deeds, rich in sins, a fragment, a withered flower, with contrite heart and warm tears do I come to pray before You, great and holy G-d. Grant me a pure heart and firm, courageous spirit...

[Tarnier, Norman, editor. "Take Good Care," A Book of Jewish Women's Prayers: Translations from the Yiddish. Jason Aronson Inc., 1995.]

It is not only in the role of awaiting motherhood that biblical women prayed. We can imagine Miriam picking up the timbrels and gathering the women together to sing in joy upon the crossing of the sea or Devorah's song of human valor and divine agency after battle. Looking forward in time we can finger through the collected prayers of Sara bat Tovim

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photo by Rila Schmeidler

and so many anonymous others who gave us the rich Yiddish *tehinna* (appeal) literature of which the above prayer is a small fragment. These prayers were not the prose poetry of biblical verse but reflected the domestic and emotional anxieties of everyday life.

"With them religion is a life rather than a science."¹ Women wrote hymns of forgiveness and pain, of escorting their children to *heder* (religious school) for the first time and of the import of charity. Although they might, through their own illiteracy, have been cut off from the standard prayer book, their need to pray

■ אמית'ת חורף תשנ"ח

inspired prayer books of their own making.

If we carry this rich prayer history through to our own era, how are we to describe the contemporaneous female contribution to prayer? It appears that the contribution of women cross-denominationally has been and will be to take part on several different levels in more public forms of worship. While this move should not be disparaged nor its spiritual animus maligned, I often wonder whether or not this emphasis on public participation has somehow minimized an emphasis on personal piety. Ideally, a stronger commitment to communal prayer should strengthen a commitment to personal prayer and the two should work in symbiosis.

Laws of Prayer

It is not difficult to establish a clear cut *halachic* (religious laws) imperative for women to pray. The *mishna* (Oral Law) in *Brachot* 3:3 says that

"Women, bondsmen, and minors are exempt from *Sh'ma* and *Tefillin* and obligated in *Tefillah*, *Mezuzah*, and *Birkat ha-Mazon*." *Tefillah* (prayer) is understood as the *Amidah*, the standing benediction. Women's exemption from *Sh'ma* stems from an overall exemption in time bound commandments as outlined elsewhere in the *Mishna*.² Their obligation in the *Amidah* implies that while there is a time frame in which this prayer is said daily,³ the value of prayer overrides the exemption. Maimonides, the Rambam, the 12th century Spanish Talmudist, states that the commandment from the Torah to pray is not bound by time and he, therefore, obligates women in the recitation of a basic prayer containing the elements of praise of God, request, and thanksgiving.⁴ Rabbi Israel Meir Kagen, the *Hafetz Haim*, wrote in his *Mishnah Berurah* at the turn of the century that women should be taught to recite the *Amidah* in the morning and afternoon.⁵ Implicit in his language is that women were not doing so. Rabbi Yehiel Mikhal Epstein, author of the legal work *Arukh ha-Shulkan*, who died at the turn of the century, wrote that he was puzzled why women of his day did not say the *Amidah* three times daily. Despite a clear mandate from rabbinic literature to pray on a daily basis, women were not doing so.

Why did the Sages obligate women to some form of daily prayer?⁶ If we turn to the pages of both the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, we find an astonishing acknowledgment of the primacy of prayer as a form of human expression. "They [women] are required to pray so that each individual can invoke G-d's mercy on himself."⁷ Prayer, is not, as commonly conceived, a burdensome requirement leaving little room for personal expression and spontaneity, but is a sacred privilege. Being able to communicate with G-d and petition for one's needs is so basic to the spiritual

composition of humanity that it cannot be denied women.

Prayer and Women's Issues

Author Cynthia Ozick writes of the dangers of not asking the right questions when it comes to women's issues and that rather than look for the right answer we must "discover the right question."⁸ The right question, I think, is not to ask why women aware of the sources choose not to pray—we have a host of *halachic* (religious legal) "norms" that are clearly defined and nevertheless ignored—the right question is what is it about a woman's daily life which makes the commandment to pray an anomaly?

That some women were and are still not aware of their legal responsibilities in the arena of *tefillah* is an excuse which is becoming an endangered species of sorts. There are simply too many places for women today to get Jewishly educated to claim ignorance. Some women find the all male language of the *siddur* (prayer book) exclusionary. Other observant, knowledgeable women have attained acknowledgement of their intellectual achievements. Their victorious battles led them to open many books. While, ideally they should have been inspired to open the prayer book with frequency, it is hard to fight many battles at one time. Increasing visibility has led many observant women to turn outward rather than inward in their prayer directives. To some, it is more important to make public statements about women's role in the synagogue than in the quiet domain of the home where G-d, rather than the community, is the communicant. These are not judgments, they are merely statements about an uncomfortable reality where women find themselves so breathless trying to catch up that they simply cannot do it all.

And the plague of having to "do it all" is the most disquieting factor in

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the discussion. As many women struggle with the everyday juggle of raising a family, pursuing a career and being an active participant in Jewish communal life, they find that there is too little time for the luxury of prayer. Herman Melville once poignantly wrote that "...beauty is like piety—you cannot run and read it; tranquillity and constancy, with, nowadays, an easy chair, are needed."⁹ The key ingredients to meaningful prayer—tranquillity, reflection, pensive contemplation—are so often absent in the hustle and bustle of a woman's day (or a man's, for that matter) that the thought of making time to pray three times a day makes most women wonder how they can add more hours to the clock.

Why I Pray

I, too, find myself longing for Melville's easy chair. When I was a high school student I began to pray three times a day. It seemed the *halachically* logical position to me and having the time culled out for two of the three prayers in a yeshiva day school schedule certainly assisted. Soon enough, that time was my own to schedule and prayer always fit in somewhere. I remember being told by a rabbinic mentor during a year's study in Israel that single women should not pray three times a day because they would never be able to maintain that level of commitment. College, marriage, work and three children later, I have still maintained my prayer "schedule." I am all too aware of the paucity of my daily offerings, now somewhat abbreviated and almost always rushed, but as much a part of my day as any other domestic or religious ritual. I have considered stopping on several occasions when I felt too blurred to remember if I had said one passage or another. Doubting my own *kavannah*, intention, has still not made me stop. To deny prayer would be to deny privilege.

But I also *daven* (pray) every day because my life is so full. Because I need to make the time to thank G-d for making my life so full. For some women, the onset of children made them stop praying. I pray because I have children. I pray because my first child is a girl and I want her to see, as well as my young sons, that study and prayer is as much a part of my life as it is a part of their father's. I am afraid that what my daughter sees when she goes to the synagogue, that so many women come when more than half the service has concluded, that so many women are not familiar with the cadences of *tefillah* and that there is so much talking on both sides of the *mehitzah* (divider) will leave too

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much negative residue on a delicate spirit. I wonder not only of the privilege of prayer, but the responsibility that women of today have to show the next generation positive models of a prayerful life. People don't learn to pray from reading. They learn to pray from watching. When I pray, I am connected to a historical community of women, those who knew the "right" words and those who made them up as they went along.

Lastly, when I pray I think of the words of Rabbi Dov Baer of Mezritch, that great Hasidic master, "When you begin to pray, you become G-d's garment and G-d speaks words through your mouth. Becoming aware of this you will be overcome by awe and reverence. G-d enters you, as in the phrase from *Song of Songs* (2:9), 'This one peers through the lattice.'¹⁰ In the busy life I lead, I have to make a deliberate effort to put G-d into my life. I understand the verse to signify

the small spaces in between the lattice-work of life through which we allow G-d in to examine and to judge us, to comfort and to listen. When we speak the words of prayer, we become someone else, even if only for a slight moment. We are transformed from our this-worldly existence, even if we weren't really trying. That transformation colors the rest of our day. When we make a little room for G-d in our lives, G-d's presence has more time to influence the rest of our day. Such is the nature of daily prayer. Sometimes amidst a hectic day and with halted speech, we create a few seconds of eternity. ▲

- (1) Freehof, Solomon "Devotional Literature in the Vernacular, Central Conference of American Rabbis, 33 (1923), pp. 375-423.
- (2) *Kiddushin* 1:7.
- (3) See Rav Yitzhak Alfasi, *BT Brakhot* 62.
- (4) Maimonides. "Hilkhos Tefillah, 1:2. *Mishneh Torah*.
- (5) *Mishneh Berurah*, 106:4.
- (6) This is not the place for an in-depth coverage of what daily prayers women are exempt from or obligated to recite. There are several *halachic* guides that serve this purpose adequately.
- (7) *JT Berakhot* 3:3. For the corresponding excerpt from the *Babylonian Talmud*, see *BT Berakhot* 20b.
- (8) Ozick, Cynthia. "Notes Toward Finding the Right Question," from *On Being a Jewish Feminist: A Reader*. editor Susannah Heschel. New York, Schocken Books. 1983.
- (9) Melville, Herman. "The Piazza" in *Billy Budd, Sailor and Other Stories*. Bantam Books. New York, 1984.
- (10) Kushner, Lawrence. *The Book of Words: Talking Spiritual Life, Living Spiritual Talk*. Jewish Lights Publishing, Vermont, 1993.