

***Ohel Sarah: Women's Siddur***

**Mesorah Publications, New York, 2005 various formats and prices**

**A review by Jennifer Stern Breger originally published in "JOFA Book Corner," *JOFA Journal* Winter 2006: 22-23**

---

There is a long tradition of women's *siddurim*. Traditionally, a bride received a *siddur* as a wedding present; in Ashkenazi communities this was often called a *sivlonos siddur*. These *siddurim* were sometimes bound in silver or mother of pearl. One *siddur* in Eastern Europe known as a *Korban Minchah Siddur* was probably first published around 1724 and has been republished many times since. Now we have a new woman's *siddur*, issued by Art Scroll, presented as a "*Korban Minchah Siddur*" available in a choice of fancy bindings.

What does it have to offer? As is traditional in women's *siddurim*, it includes *tehillim* and a collection of *tekhinot* (devotions known in Yiddish as *tkhines*) and prayers in Hebrew with English translation. These are mainly for marriage, childbirth and childrearing, as well as prayers to be said when visiting the *Kotel* and other Holy Sites, and prayers to be recited at a cemetery. These clearly do not cover every occasion for which a woman may want to turn to a personal devotion or supplication, but these are the traditional categories and their inclusion does serve to connect the user of the *siddur* with women of past generations. The *siddur* includes both the *beracha* for separating *challa* and the laws relating to this commandment as well as the laws of candle lighting. The *siddur* contains guidelines about what prayers to say when time is short, how to catch up when one comes into shul late (the *siddur* states firmly that women are generally not obligated to go to shul and the assumption is that when they do go they will be late and "will therefore need to decide which prayers to recite"), and a list of *halakhic* sources. In a section of the general guidelines on "Proper Attire," women are told to wear socks or stockings as well as shoes or sandals when *davening*.

There are precise instructions throughout for what to say and how to say it. In particular there are notes that tend to give reasons why women are not obligated in saying particular prayers. In general the *siddur* takes the mother of young children as the norm, and the stress is on the least that a woman can get away with. Not only does the note for *ma'ariv* say, "For women, *maariv* is an optional service. If you choose to say *maariv*, it would be best to precede its recitation with the words "*bli neder*" without a commitment, to indicate that you are not accepting its recitation as an ongoing obligation," and the note for *Hallel* says, "Though women are generally not obligated to recite *Hallel*, you may recite it, with its blessing if you wish," but for the *Shema* it says, "Women are not obligated to recite the *Shema*, but it is proper for women to recite at least the first verse or two. Saying the rest is commendable if you have time." While it concedes that women have a special connection to the *Shmoneh Esrei* because of Hannah, it

does not quote the *mishna* that says clearly that women are obligated in *tefillah*—i.e., the *amidah*—rather saying that it is considered highest priority at *shaharit* and *minhah* when family obligations allow. It is commendable that at the top of each *Shmoneh Esrei*, the notes refer you to a discussion in the *siddur*, “If your children need your attention, see p xl” explaining what you can do to minimize the interruption in the recitation, but this should be in the general Art Scroll *siddur* as well—surely a man’s children may also need attention at a difficult moment. Every time Mourners *Kaddish* appears, rather than saying that there are different opinions, the notes say clearly, “Although reciting *Kaddish* is a comfort for the soul of the departed, even silent recitation by a woman is generally frowned upon.” For *Birkat Hamazon*, the notes say, “The accepted custom is for a woman never to lead *zimmin* even if only women are present.” In the text of *Birkat Hagomel*, the note says, “according to the prevalent custom, a woman does not say the *Bircas Hagomel*,” and in the background note, “The primary reason given for women not saying *Bircas Hagomel* is that it is immodest for women to take any part in a mitzvah that is typically performed in public.” Although there is a note at the beginning that says some of the prayers appearing in the *siddur* are not recited by women, but are included, “for the convenience of those following the prayers in shul,” when it comes to *Tachanun* (the group of penitential prayers recited in the morning service on Mondays and Thursdays), it is not even included in the *siddur*, and there is a note saying, “Consistent with the accepted custom, you should not say *Tachanun*”, rather than including it and saying that it is questionable whether women are obligated to say it.<sup>1</sup> Regarding *kiddush*, the *siddur* acknowledges the obligation of women in *kiddush* and states, “While most women generally fulfill this *mitzvah* by hearing someone else recite *kiddush*, a woman may also recite it herself.” Regarding *havdalah* it states, “It is preferable for a woman to hear *havdalah* from a man rather than make her own *havdalah*.” There is no mention of whether a woman can include a man in the performance of one of these *mitzvot*. In the section on Succot, the notes say, “In many communities, the women join the men of their family in the *succah* for Festival meals.”

In general, the *siddur* ignores positions (many of them very mainstream) that run counter to the editors’ own positions and viewpoints. There is a range of *halakhically* acceptable positions on many aspects of *tefillah*, but the editors do not include them. For example, the *Arukh Hashulhan* wrote that “it is difficult to explain why women are not particular to pray three times a day” and Rav Soloveitchik considered that women have an obligation of *tefillah* three times a day. The *Shulhan Arukh* stated that women eating together may form their own *zimmin*, and authorities such as the Vilna Gaon and R Shlomo Zalman Auerbach ruled that it was obligatory to do so. Similarly, the editors of this *siddur* do not include the comment of the *Mishnah Brurah* explaining the exemption of women from *zimmin* in the absence of three men, by saying that women were not educated enough to recite it (this excuse is surely not valid for day school

---

<sup>1</sup> This review was based on the first edition of the *siddur*. Possibly due to critiques such as this review, later editions of *Ohel Sarah* do include the text of *tachanun*.

graduates and others today). As regards saying *kaddish*, there are many authorities who consider that women can do so. Rav Soloveitchik ruled that a woman, even if she is the only woman present, may say *kaddish* in a synagogue. In a responsum, Rav Moshe Feinstein mentions that “in every generation it has been customary that sometimes ... a woman who is a mourner will come to shul to say *kaddish*”. None of these views are presented in *Ohel Sarah*.

Also missing in the *siddur* are the views of women. What would make this into a woman’s *siddur* for today would be the inclusion of the thoughts, feelings, views and commentary of religious women. Women *daven* both to fulfill *halakha* and to achieve a closer relationship to the Almighty, and a better expression of this duality would have added greatly to the *siddur*. Certainly the recent *haggadah* of Joel Wolowelsky (“Women at the Seder”) which includes not only laws and traditions relating to women and the *seder*, but also *divrei Torah* and comments written by women, makes the *haggadah* text more meaningful to the female reader. There are also historical *piyyutim* that include or stress the role of women and their inclusion would have been welcome in a *siddur* directed at women.

What is most disappointing about this *siddur* is that it is so minimalist. The message of the notes is: how little can a woman get away with in *davening*? One does not deny that women, according to *halakha*, do not have the same obligations in prayer as men. Nor does one deny that there is something very genuine and authentic about the Jewish woman of former times crying over her *tkhines*. This does not mean that there is anything not genuine or inauthentic about an Orthodox woman today (of whatever age, single, married, widowed or divorced, with children or without, whether possessing a good Jewish education, or a recent *ba’alat teshuva*), participating in *tefillah* to the fullest extent possible and striving to make that participation her “service of the heart.”

Some might say that this *siddur* is not targeted at modern Orthodox women and therefore it is pointless to criticize it. However, the problem is that Art Scroll markets itself heavily in the modern Orthodox world and because of both marketing and presentation, their *siddurim* are used very widely by the modern Orthodox. It is already being produced in twelve editions, including Sephardic and Ashkenazi, regular and pocket-size and in three different colors, but while it is attractive and is in the tradition of women’s prayer books of old, that does not make it the “perfect gift for the contemporary Bat Mitzvah, Kallah, Graduate etc.” as the promotions suggest. What is needed today is the creation of *siddurim* that are sensitive to the spiritual needs of both men and women including, for example, both a prayer for an individual *agunah* to recite and a congregational prayer or *mi-she berach* for *agunot in general*. Such a *siddur* would enhance the *davening* of women today.