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JOFA Journal

JEWISH ORTHODOX FEMINIST ALLIANCE

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From Our President

Let There Be No Stumbling Block…

By Carol Kaufman Newman

This issue of the JOFA Journal is devoted to the subject of prayer. Maimonides believed that prayer once a day, every day, is a Torah based obligation, and one that is required of men and women alike. Prayer is a topic that we, as Orthodox Jews, often find difficult to discuss. Many of our *halakhic* practices are so ingrained in our lifestyle that we carry them out without giving much thought to what we are doing—and with prayer, to what we are saying. We must, however, overcome our discomfort and confront an issue that is very important to the Orthodox community.

A major challenge we face is how to make our prayers meaningful—to pray with sincerity—when our *siddur* is set and unchanging. This is a dilemma we all face, men and women. For women, however, the problem of prayer is even more poignant. Most often, the text ignores the fact that women are also praying. I can think of only one *siddur* in which the morning blessings include the grammatical forms for both men and women. The prayers evoke the patriarchs, almost never the matriarchs. I am moved at the blowing of the *shofar* but when we say the prayer that follows which asks God to treat us with mercy "as a father is merciful to his children (sons)", I feel excluded. I am often troubled that the language of God is all male. When *tachanun* (the group of penitential prayers said on Mondays and Thursdays in the morning service) speaks of being despised like the blood of a menstruant, I am saddened. And on Friday nights, when I read *ba'meh madlikin*, and I reach the passage about women dying in childbirth as a punishment for neglecting to be careful with three commandments: lighting candles, *mikvah* and *challah*, I am pained.

I do not have a solution. For now I can only present the problem and hopefully open up a dialogue. Many synagogues, sensitive to these issues, have included the matriarchs in certain prayers. Many have ceased saying out loud the blessing thanking God for not creating one a woman. Many have stopped saying *tachanun* on Mondays and Thursdays when a bride is present or a baby girl is born, just as they do for a groom and a baby boy's birth. I applaud the courageous rabbis who have made these changes.

I have been conducting an informal survey over the last month. I have asked many women if they find that the language of the *siddur* hinders their prayer. The first friend I asked immediately responded that what bothered her was *Tefillat Geshem* (the prayer for rain that is said on *Shemini Atzeret*). Surprised, I asked her why. Because, she said, the composers of the prayer obviously worked so hard at trying to find males that had something to do with water when we have Miriam, who we are told was responsible for providing water during forty years in the desert, and she is not mentioned! The next friend I asked about God always being referred to as king and father also told me that it did not bother her—but what did make her furious was the prayer *Hu Ya'anenu* (He Will Answer Us) in *Selichot* and in *Ma'ariv* after *Kol Nidrei*. All this text about men whom God has answered and nowhere is there mention of Rivkah or Hannah and so many other women that God also answered. Many of the women I spoke to still feel upset when they hear the blessing "*shelo asani isha*" (who has not made me a woman) And many told me that in their heads they add the matriarchs when they pray. I also spoke to a woman who told me that she is, as I am, bothered by *shirat ha'yam* (the song at the crossing of the Red Sea) that is recited every morning. It ends so abruptly and leaves out the two beautiful sentences about Miriam and the women singing and dancing with joy. These two sentences would have acknowledged the women as part of the miracle.

...continued on page 2

Separate but Equal? Feminism and Post-Feminism in *Birkat Hamazon*

By Debby Koren

In this era of third-stage feminists, cultural feminists, and post-feminism, I often find myself feeling that I am of an older, out-dated generation. Many women today glorify the "women-only" experience. They value the opportunity to create new women's prayers and religious experiences, while feeling that the liturgy and ceremonies created by men were created for men and do not "speak" to women. My reaction to these ideas is that though most great science, mathematics, music, art, and literature were also discovered and created by men, I will not deny myself participation in these great endeavors of humankind, nor do I feel that they "speak" to men only. Further, I am not interested in living in a women-only world, creating art, music, and literature that is meant for women only. Similarly, in the religious world, I wish to partake of the vast religious experience, which heretofore was created by men, mostly for men, but based on one Torah that was given to both men and women. I do this with the hope that greater participation by women will eventually influence the continuum of *halakhic* development.

Beyond my appreciation for our vast Jewish legal system and codes, liturgy and ceremony, is the *halakhic* aspect of partic-

...continued on page 2

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President's Message

...continued from page 1

My brother and I were discussing prayer the other day. He pointed out to me that the word for prayer in Hebrew—*l'hitpallel*—is reflexive. He sees it as meaning that prayer gives us the opportunity to turn inward—to focus on our lives and our relationships. This made me think of all the positive aspects of *tefillah*. I love the end of the *Amidah* where we say "*ntzor leshoni merah*"—guard my mouth against speaking evil. And I am always moved when I get to the section in *Modim* that thanks God for the everyday miracles—and I stop to think of my family, my friends, my good fortune.

On *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* before the beginning of the *musaf* service, the *hazan* says a special prayer asking that he be worthy to lead the congregation. It is extremely moving and towards the end he says:

V'al y'hi shum michshol b'tefillati
And let there be no stumbling block before my prayers.

These words resonate for me. It is my wish that we can all find a way to make our prayers meaningful so that we can pray *b'lev maleh simcha*—with hearts full of gladness.

Birkat Hamazon

...continued from page 1

ipation by women. So long as we accept the *halakhic* system as the system by which we live our lives, we are subject to the status that it defines for the *mitzvot* and for those who observe them. In the *halakhic* system we follow, only those who are obligated (at the same or higher level[1]) in a particular *mitzvah* can perform the *mitzvah* on behalf of another.[2] The lesser obligation or exemption of women in many *mitzvot* is one of the prime *halakhic* reasons given for women not being allowed to fulfill public religious positions. Other reasons such as *tzniut* (need for modesty), *pritzut*[3] (fear of loose morals), *zila milta*[4] (undignified behavior), and *kevod hatzibbur*[5] (honor of the community) are not truly *halakhic*, but rather values and public policies that, at times, are enacted when *halakhic* arguments fail to prevent women from fulfilling a particular role that *halakhic* decisors believed should be reserved for men only. When studying the *halakhic* literature and codes, we find more allowances for women to perform public functions than is commonly granted today. Further, we find that there is room for redefining what is considered *tzniut*, *pritzut*, *zila milta*, or *kevod hatzibbur*, according to societal and communal standards[6].

Let us consider the example of *birkat hamazon*, the grace after meals. Some women are troubled by the words, *al brit'kha shehatamta bivsareinu* "for the covenant that you have inscribed on our flesh." in the second paragraph. They wonder how women can relate to those words. Are they not words composed by men with men in mind? Should not women recite a different text, more appropriate for women?

When one considers changing the text of the statutory prayers and blessings, one must be very aware of the *halakhic* implications of doing so. The Talmud attributes the composition of the second *berakha* (for the land) to Joshua[7]. However, though the major elements of *birkat hamazon* are in place in the Talmud, the specific text evolved over the centuries. Manuscripts and genizah fragments show that the text that is included to mention the covenant (clearly understood to mean circumcision), was much simpler in its early form. In ancient fragments we find the text "we thank You Lord our God for the desirable, good, and spacious land, covenant and Torah" without saying "the covenant that You inscribed on our flesh.[8] This simple

All the illustrations in this issue come from *"Hear Our Voices: Women At Prayer"* by Jerusalem artist Eliahu Schwartz, and are reprinted with permission of the artist. The book contains 53 drawings of women praying at the Kotel.

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mention of covenant and Torah are found in the versions of *birkat hamazon* of Rambam and Sa'adia Gaon and other manuscripts.[9]

The obligation in *birkat hamazon* is considered a Torah obligation.[10] We learn in the *Mishnah* that women are obligated in *birkat hamazon*.[11] However, it is important to realize that there is a dispute in the Talmud whether women's obligation in *birkat hamazon* is a rabbinic obligation or a Torah one, and even if it is a Torah one if it is the same obligation as that of men. In *Berakhot* 20b we find the following question:

> Ravina said to Rava: is *birkat hamazon d'oraita* or *d'rabbanan* for women?

Rashi (ad. loc.) presents an explanation for why one might think it is only rabbinic for women: it states (Deut. 8:10) "for the good land that God gave to you" and the land was not divided among the females.[12] The *Or Zarua* explains that Rashi held the opinion that women were obligated in *birkat hamazon* as a Torah obligation, but that their obligation was different from that of men.[13] The *Tosafot* (ad. loc.) disagree with Rashi about the reason for the uncertainty:

> But this is surprising! After all, we could present the same difficulty regarding priests and Levites, who also did not take a portion of the land, but we would not say that they cannot fulfill the obligation of *birkat hamazon* on behalf of others (because of a lesser obligation)! Rather, the reason that there could be uncertainty as far as women's obligation is because it says "for the covenant that you have inscribed on our flesh and for the Torah that you have taught us,"[14] neither of which applies to women, and it says in *Berakhot* 49a[15] that whoever does not mention the covenant and Torah in *birkat hamazon* does not fulfill his obligation, so here, because they are not able to mention the covenant and Torah, they are only obligated rabbinically.

However, at the same time, the *Tosafot* offer an argument that allows inclusiveness of women in obligation but not necessarily in the text:

> However, perhaps it could be said that the requirement to mention the covenant and Torah refers only to men, who are obligated in circumcision and Torah, and does not affect women or their obligation, so that they are obligated in *birkat hamazon* by the Torah just as in any other *mitzvot* that are not time-bound.

This argument would imply that women have the same level of obligation as men do, but are not required to say the same text. In contrast, according to Rav Hisda, Rav held the opinion that since women are not obligated to say these things in *birkat hamazon*, neither are men! In *Berakhot* 49a we find the following dialogue between Rav Hisda and Rabbi Zeira.

> **Rav Hisda:** When I was invited to the Exilarch and I said *birkat hamazon*, Rav Sheshet straightened his neck to me like a snake (an expression meaning he got very angry with me).
> **Rabbi Zeira:** Why?
> **Rav Hisda:** Because I did not say "the covenant" nor "Torah" nor "(David's) kingdom".
> **Rabbi Zeira:** And why did you not say (these)?
> **Rav Hisda:** (I acted) according to Rav Hanan'el in the name of Rav: "whoever did not say 'the covenant' and 'Torah' and 'the kingdom fulfilled his obligation." – "The covenant", because this is not relevant to women (who are also obligated in *birkat hamazon* and so it must not be critical to say it), and "Torah" and "kingdom" because they are not relevant to women nor to slaves (who are all obligated in *birkat hamazon*, and so those elements must also not be critical to completing *birkat hamazon*).
> **Rabbi Zeira:** And you ignored all of the Tanna'im and Amora'im (who state that you must include those matters in *birkat hamazon* to fulfill your obligation[16]) and did it according to Rav!

According to that dialogue, we understand that women have the same Torah level of obligation as men (otherwise Rav would never have thought what he did and Rav Hisda would never have followed that approach) and we can deduce that Rav thought that men and women could say the same version of *birkat hamazon*. However, Rav's allowance for men (to not mention the covenant, the land, and Torah) did not become *halakha*. It is clear that Rav's is a minority opinion and that the ruling is that these things have to mentioned as Rebbe, R' Eliezer, and R' Abba state.

Thus far, we are left with the possibility that either women are obligated at the same level as men, but do not have to say (or possibly may not say) the same text, or have a lesser obligation than men because the (men's) text is not relevant to them. In his gloss to the *Shulhan Arukh* the Rema rules:

> Women and slaves do not mention the covenant (circumcision) and Torah, as women are not members of the covenant (i.e., are not circumcised) and slaves are not learned in Torah.[17]

Though usually Ashkenazi practice is in accordance with the Rema, in this case, the practice is in accordance with the *Mishnah Berurah*[18] and the *Magen Avraham*, that women should mention the covenant and Torah in the second paragraph. The *Magen Avraham* explains ad.loc.:

...continued on page 14

Meaningful Prayer: A New Community

By Lisa Schlaff

I run into a bind every time I try to describe *Darkhei Noam*. I say that it is a *minyan* on the Upper West Side of Manhattan with a *mechitzah*, at which a woman leads *pesukei dezimrah* and the *tefillot* surrounding *kri'at hatorah*, a man leads *shacharit* and *musaf*, and both men and women *layn* and receive *aliyot*. When I rattle off this lengthy descriptive list, I feel more like I am ordering at Starbucks (tall, decaf, skim latte) than describing a *minyan*. The experience of the *minyan*—what it means to pray in an inclusive atmosphere, gets lost in all of the words. Therefore, rather than focus on who stands where and who says what, I want to explore what it means to pray in community, and why the atmosphere at *Darkhei Noam* fosters a positive experience for women.

Tefillah is about transcendence—moving outside of ourselves and connecting to God. Praying *be-tzibbur* is a prerequisite to transcendence. Joining our voices with others enables us to think beyond ourselves, helping direct our voices to the One beyond ourselves. Similarly, *kri'at hatorah* was established as a communal learning experience, in which we connect both to community and to our central text. *Tefillah* and *kri'at hatorah*—as acts of communal transcendence—establish our identity as a *tzibbur*. If we maintain that women assume a passive role in these rituals we are in effect saying that, even in our day and age, women are not fully part of the community. We need to ask ourselves if true prayer can occur in an atmosphere of exclusion.

When a group of people met in the winter of 2002 to speak about starting the congregation that became *Darkhei Noam*, we primarily spoke of creating a meaningful *tefillah* experience. Part of what this meant to us was being as inclusive of women as possible within our understanding of *halakha*. But at that initial meeting we spent most of the time discussing other elements of creating a meaningful *tefillah*, such as how much singing we wanted to incorporate, and what prayers we thought should be recited aloud. Inclusiveness is a means to meaningful prayer, and not an end in itself.

Recently, we conducted an informal survey asking people why they attend *Darkhei Noam*. We were pleasantly surprised that the most common answer was not "it's inclusive" but rather, "it's a good *davening*." To those who attend the *minyan*, active involvement on both sides of the *mechitzah* enhances the experience of *tefillah*. When we create an atmosphere of inclusiveness, we have readied ourselves for prayer.

Introducing change in a traditionally minded community is not an easy matter—nor should it be. But people constantly speak of how natural the *tefillah* feels, of how they do not feel like they are doing something different, or radical. There are many women who attend *Darkhei Noam* who are still hesitant to take an *aliyah*. But these women turn down *aliyot* by saying, "please ask me next time." And we do. These women come because when public space is shared, we all participate instead of watch, talk less and pray more, and sing louder.

For me, the importance of *Darkhei Noam* is not that it provides me the opportunity to *layn* or serve as a *ba'alat tefillah*. I do not have a deep desire to do either, and if I did, I could fulfill it at a women's *tefillah*. The importance of *Darkhei Noam* is that it creates an authentic community in which the women's section is active rather than passive, in which I know each time I enter the *davening* space that I am valued as a member of this community.

> "*Tefillah* is about transcendence—moving outside of ourselves and connecting to God"

The conflict between *halakha* and inclusiveness is not a new one, and yet the struggle continues to shape the contours of our lives. In situations in which there are *halakhic* options, the choices we make reveal our values. *Derakheha darkhei noam ve-chol netivoteha shalom*. The ways of Torah are ways of pleasantness and all of its paths are peaceful. It is my hope that our communities and our leadership value a *halakha* that is *noam*, a *halakha* that will help us experience the transcendence of prayer.

Lisa Schlaff teaches Gemara *and* Tanakh *at the SAR High School in Riverdale, N.Y.*

JOFA Regional Conferences 2004/2005

The JOFA conference in Baltimore, MD, co-sponsored with MERCAZ/Beth Tfiloh Congregation took place on December 19, 2004, and was a resounding success. The conference was entitled **"*M'chayil L'chayil*—From Strength to Strength: Shaping our Jewish Experience."** In a full array of parallel sessions, the conference explored women's relationships to Jewish ritual, paying particular attention to life cycle events, the synagogue and Torah study. Plenary addresses were given by Belda Lindenbaum, VP of Development, Rabbi David Silber, founder and Director of the Drisha Institute, and Bat Sheva Marcus, VP of Communications.

Participants at session of Baltimore Regional Conference December 19, 2004. Photo by Marian Frankston

"Choosing Limits: Limiting Choices: Women's Status and Religious Life," a regional conference co-sponsored with the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute, will take place at Brandeis University, Waltham Mass. from Sunday evening March 13 through Monday March 14, 2005. Sessions will explore the complex set of choices and issues that Orthodox women face as they balance their love for and loyalty to tradition with their desires for individual determinism and self-expression. For more information on this conference, visit **www.jofa.org**, email **conference@jofa.org** or call **888-550-JOFA**.

A Mighty Spirit: Praying Like Hannah

By Wendy Amsellem

Hannah, mother of the prophet Samuel, is often cited as the ideal person that one should emulate in prayer.

> R. Hamnuna said: How many important laws is it possible to learn from these verses about Hannah? "And Hannah, she spoke in her heart". From this we learn that one who prays must direct his/her heart. "Only her lips moved". From this we learn that one who prays must enunciate the words with his/her lips. "And her voice was not heard": From this, that it is forbidden to make one's voice loud in prayer. (Talmud Bavli *Berakhot* 31a)

R. Hamnuna is fascinated by Hannah's prayer. He begins with an exclamation, "How many important laws is it possible to learn from these verses about Hannah!" He then proceeds with a meticulous analysis of Hannah's prayer - her intentions, the movement of her lips, the sound of her voice. From every one of Hannah's gestures and inflections, we can learn how it is that we must pray. The Talmudic passage continues with other Rabbis offering other important lessons to be gleaned from Hannah's every word. Hannah seems to be the model for how to appeal to God. Yet, a close reading of the text of Hannah's prayer can leave one confused about precisely what it is that Hannah is praying for.

As the book of Samuel I opens, it seems obvious that Hannah desperately wants a child. The very first thing we are told about her is that she is childless, while her husband's other wife, Peninah, has children. Each time the family travels to God's tabernacle in Shiloh, Peninah so upsets Hannah about her barrenness that Hannah cries and cannot eat her portion of the sacrifice. Finally, one year, Hannah gets up from the family meal and goes to pour out her bitterness and pain to God.

At this point, Hannah, who has desperately wanted a child for years, makes a shocking petition:

> "She vowed a vow saying, 'God of hosts if you will see the bitterness of your maidservant and remember me and do not forget your maidservant and you will give your maidservant a male child, I will give him to God all of his days . . ." (Samuel I 1:11)

At first glance, Hannah's request makes no sense. If she had so longed for a child, why is she giving him up even before she has him? How much does she really want the child if she can so quickly relinquish him?

There are several ways to read Hannah's request. One possibility is that she does not want a child for the child's sake, but rather to prove her fertility to Peninah. The main motivation for Hannah's prayer is Peninah's mockery and so it is not essential that Hannah raise the child, only that the child exist.

This is certainly not a flattering view of Hannah and given that the Rabbis hold Hannah up as the model for prayer, it is unlikely that they would have viewed Hannah's petition as a petty revenge attempt.

Another possibility, suggested by Channa Lockshin-Bob, is that perhaps Hannah's request is indicative not of a selfish desire to one-up Peninah, but is instead proof of her entirely selfless motives in requesting a child. Hannah does not want a child for her own benefit but rather because she thinks that it is important for the world that her child exist. Thus she is willing to relinquish any personal hold on her son, promising him to God even before he has been conceived.

Rabbi David Silber claims that Hannah's motivation, while selfless, had a very specific political and religious aim. Hannah and her family came to the tabernacle on a regular basis. They must surely have witnessed the gross abuses of Eli's sons who were the acting priests. Rabbi Silber suggests that Hannah specifically wanted a son in order to give him to God, so that her son could strike out at the corrupt priestly practices and restore honor to the house of God. Later, when Hannah prays a second time after her son's birth, she describes the victory of the righteous over the wicked. According to Rabbi Silber, this prayer is not about Hannah's triumph over Peninah but rather it expresses her hope that her son will be victorious over the immoral priests.

While all of these suggestions can work as possible readings of the text, it is still worth noting the powerful irony in Hannah's prayer. She is a woman who longs for a child and yet with the same breath that she asks for him she renounces her claim to him. Talmud *Bavli Berakhot* 32a-b suggests that Hannah teaches us how to pray, and I think that perhaps this tension in her prayer between desire and renunciation is part of her lesson to us. When we approach God in prayer, we come simultaneously with our own private needs and desires but also with the fervent hope that God will allow us to act as part of a divine plan. We want that which we want with our whole hearts, but we want also to want that which is God's will. We hope that our desires are part of God's plan, but we are aware that this is not always the case. Hannah's power lies not in her ability to subsume her wants to God's will. Rather, it is her ability to desire something with the full desperation of her being and yet simultaneously be willing to renounce it in the face of a greater Divine plan.

After Hannah's son Samuel is born, she prays a second time, recounting poetically her exultation in God's deliverance. Even as she knows that she must soon give up the son that she had endlessly longed for, she recounts in sublime terms her rejoicing in the triumph of God's plan:

> The enemies of God will be terrified,
> God will thunder on them in the Heavens
> God will judge the ends of the earth
> And give strength to His King and raise up the horn of His anointed one.
> (Samuel I 2:1-10)

Hannah sees beyond her own situation and casts her story in universal terms. Her private desires have become a part of God's plan and thus she feels God's salvation even as she is parting with her son. It is appropriate that it is Hannah with her transcendent ability to both desire and relinquish who serves as our model of prayer through the ages.

Wendy Amsellem is a faculty member at Drisha Institute and is pursuing a Ph.D. at New York University.

JOFA Letters to the Editor

JEWISH ORTHODOX FEMINIST ALLIANCE

The following letters were received in response to our last issue, "From the Other Side of the *Mechitzah*."

Compassion and Sensitivity in *Pesak Halakha*

Considering our differing positions, it was not unexpected that my contribution to this summer's *JOFA Journal* should immediately follow that of Rabbi Professor Daniel Sperber. My respected friend and colleague argued that sensitivity and compassion are virtues in *pesak*. Surprisingly, perhaps, I agree. I have no problem with these qualities determining what questions we ask, and what issues we choose to reinvestigate and reevaluate. But I do reject empathy and sympathy—rather than *emes* (truth of analysis)—as determinants in what answers we give. Unfortunately, when it comes to feminist issues, too many distinguished members of the Rabbinate are guilty of "*Ahava mekalkelet et ha-shura*—Love/compassion often clouds one's judgment and conduct" (*Bereshit Rabba* 55:11; cited by Rashi to Gen. 22:3). These rabbis are lauded by some for their "enlightened" and "sensitive" rulings. But all too often, hiding behind these glowing reviews is very poor *pesak*—lacking solid scholarship and documentation, clear reasoning, and insightful analysis.

To justify his position, Prof. Sperber invokes the tragic instances of *mamzerut* and *iggun* as precedents, where *halakha* itself instructs the *posek* to be lenient, if legally possible. In actuality, however, these cases are the exceptions that prove the rule. The *rishonim* and *aharonim* explain that biblically a doubtful *mamzer* is not prohibited, and that determining a spouse's death does not always require two witnesses. Rabbis of the *Talmud* were the ones who were stringent; but, at the same time, they instructed decisors to search for grounds for leniency. What's more, the real uniqueness of *iggun* and *mamzerut* is that we follow the basic *halakha*—even if in other circumstances we might have taken a stringent position into consideration.

As a practical example of the use of sensitivity, Prof. Sperber justifies women's *aliyot* by suggesting that *kevod ha-beriyot* can be utilized to set aside *kevod ha-tsibbur*. An in-depth survey of the responsa literature makes it clear, however, that this approach is seriously flawed for a host of reasons. Four follow: (1) It is illogical that the honor of the individual should have priority over that of the community. (2) *Kevod ha-beriyot* requires an objective standard - not a subjective one. (3) The "dishonor" must result from an act—not from something that was not done. (4) *Kevod ha-beriyot* can only temporarily set aside a rabbinic ordinance, not uproot it completely.

Indeed, sensitivity and compassion may well be virtues in *pesak*—but *emes* is inviolable.

Rabbi Aryeh Frimer
Rehovot

Though I enjoyed Professor Sperber's encouraging article in the summer 2004 issue very much, I think, unfortunately, that not all the *halakha* he discusses is as compassionate as he suggests or as we would wish. In particular, Professor Sperber states that there is no such thing as a *safek mamzer* (uncertain *mamzer*). From what I have studied on this issue, this is so from the Torah law (*d'Oraita*), but Rabbinic law (*d'Rabbanan*) decided otherwise. See, for example, Rambam, Laws of Forbidden Relations 15:21 and *Shulhan Arukh* EH 4:24. It is because of the problem of a *safek mamzer* that in the numerous responsa in which rabbis seek methods to allow a possible *mamzer* to enter the community of Israel, they look for multiple reasons (*safek s'feka*) to cast doubt on the *mamzerut*. It is stated in many responsa that though the *safek mamzer* is allowed, according to Torah law, the Rabbis have forbidden such a child, and thus additional reasons to allow him/her are sought.

Debby Koren
Jerusalem

Daniel Sperber responds to Debby Koren:

Thank you for your comment. But what I tried to indicate was the direction in which the *halakha* should be determined. The fact that the Rabbis tried to modify their own *humrot* (stringencies) with regard to *safek mamzer* and sought additional techniques to ease the problem caused by his/her status only strengthens the point I was trying to make.

I would further refer to the TAZ (17th century rabbinic authority) to Yoreh De'ah 141, subsection 2, who writes as follows: "Every place where there is a reason (*sevara*) to rule "permittingly" or prohibitingly" (*le-heter o-le–issur*), one should tend to leniency, for we hold that in all cases we do not establish a prohibition (*issur*) out of doubt other than when the prohibition has been established".

This passage is frequently cited in the responsa literature, and surely gives the *posek*–decisor clear direction.

Conscientious Consciousness

I enjoyed the variety of articles in the summer 2004 issue of the newsletter, "From the Other Side of the *Mechitzah*". I have long felt that many women, given the opportunity, might approach *tefillah* differently than men. This may be one reason that a twice monthly Shabbat *minhah* women's *tefillah* group felt stiff and contrived. All of the participants had come to *davening* as adults. We modeled what we knew by observing "the other side of the *mechitzah*". Our *davening* didn't feel natural. After meeting and *davening* for a number of months, we abandoned the *davening* and began sharing the third meal of Shabbat and giving *divrei Torah*.

What has been more satisfying is the annual women's *Simchat Torah* gathering organized by my Shabbat women's study group. Each year over the past four years, it has had a different feel. For three years it was hosted by a single synagogue, although under different rabbis. The first year we were given our own space. First we *davened*, then we danced. Forty women joined in dancing the seven *hakafot*. One of the women in the study group had composed a *niggun* in honor of the dancing. The ability to create a women's space to celebrate with a Torah was powerful and profound.

The following two years were less fulfilling for different reasons. One year we were unable to dance with a Torah and so danced with *humashim*. The following year, we had a Torah, but the rabbi insisted we keep the women's energy in the communal room. Ultimately, we realized that the creation of the energy between women was a significant part of our celebration with the Torah.

This year we met in a private home. The singing and dancing were spirited, shared across generations by teens as well as women in their 70's. This was new for the older women and they were invigorated. The voices of the women blended and harmonized; the melody of song and the joy of dance were inseparable. This essentially feminine energy was dynamic and spiritually uplifting. It is this experience we seek when women *daven* together; one that is spontaneous, natural and coheres with traditional meaning.

Sari Horovitz
Denver, Colorado

Joel Wolowelsky's letter, which focused on the issue of *berakhot* and format of women's *tefillah*, brings to mind a student of the Internet asking whether or not commerce should be conducted in DOS or Windows. It is so beside the point, and so outdated an issue as to appear to have missed the entire Internet revolution while plugging in the monitor.

Women's *tefillah* groups have long ago resolved the issue of format and *berakhot*. They resolved the issue by deciding that each *tefillah* will have its own character, its own "*posek*" and each will "do its own thing." Some say *berakhot*, leaving out the *berakha* during the morning *tefillah*; more and more do not. (Since Joel Wolowelsky's point was, long ago already, well taken.) It is a non-issue.

The number of women's tefillah groups is probably not growing. It no longer needs to. Why? Because the groups have achieved their goal, better and more thoroughly then any of us involved in the early days could have hoped for.

- They are fact on the ground for *Simchat Torah* and Purim. Period. There are now well over a hundred groups that meet around the world for those holidays. They are, with or without knowing it, a direct outcome of the women's *tefillah* movement.
- They have spawned a new generation of women who have taken up the mantel of the "Mendel Shapiro *minyanim*." For many of us, that's what we really wanted anyway even if we couldn't have formulated our desire concretely.
- They have become an option, throughout much of the modern orthodox community—for *bat mitzvah*, *aufruf* and baby naming, filling the hole many women felt in life cycle rituals.

None of us involved in the early days could possibly have known which element of women's *tefillah*, the inherent education, the comfort level with synagogue skills, the confidence they build or the new-found commitment they engender—was the most crucial. None of us could have presumed to suggest where this innovation would lead.

Now we know.

Questioning ritual minutia or the current number of regularly-meeting groups is irrelevant and misses the point. Women's *tefillah* groups have forever transformed the horizon of the Orthodox women's prayer experience in ways far more powerfully than I, for one, would have anticipated.

Bat Sheva Marcus
Riverdale, New York

Joel Wolowelsky responds:

I cannot offer an informed opinion on whether in fact the founders of women prayer groups never hoped that their enterprise would evolve into important communal institutions or whether they are disappointed that this was not to be the case. But I do think that it is far from obvious that women's Purim *megillah* readings were a direct outcome of these groups. The *megillah* readings developed first in the context of serious women's learning programs; they had full *halakhic* legitimacy and the endorsement of serious *halakhic* personalities. I think they would have spread much more quickly had they not been confused with the prayer groups being debated at the time.

I made no claim that women involved in serious learning programs would not be interested in participating in public prayer, and I certainly do not maintain that position. Indeed, serious Torah study drives one to study and pray with others to share these religious experiences. But such individuals would be drawn only to communal prayers that have authenticity. That would include traditional *minyanim* (in which receiving an *aliyah* is a very small part of the total prayer experience for any participant) and women's prayer groups which are committed to exploring new opportunities for religious growth that are available in the absence of a *halakhic minyan*. That might certainly include use of a *sefer* Torah, but it surely will exclude anything that could be interpreted (or misinterpreted) as mimicry.

I had not mentioned new *minyanim* like *Shira Hadasha* before as I had not then formed any firm opinion about them—and still have not. But as they have been mentioned, let me say that their emergence should make us realize that discussing why the original women's prayer groups did not blossom is important. Those who do not understand the past wind up repeating their mistakes.

No doubt there will be criticism of these new *minyanim*. If their sponsors react in the spirit of some past debates—"we do our own thing and you do yours"—then they can expect the same evolution into a few stand-alone *minyanim* that have little communal impact (as much as they might be important and rewarding to their individual participants). On the other hand, if they address these criticisms and make adjustments when necessary, they may yet find that a very important new institution in the Orthodox community has been created. This is hardly a non-issue.

To Pray as a Jewish Woman: A Personal Perspective

By Sylvia Barack Fishman

One of the key goals of the Women's *tefillah* movement is to provide observant Jewish women with the liturgical knowledge, regular opportunities, and communal acceptance so that each woman can "pray as a Jew," to borrow the title of Hayim Halevy Donin's useful book. The premise is not that Orthodox women try to pray like Jewish men, but rather that they take responsibility for regular codified prayer and Torah study, together with other Jews.

The image of women thus occupied should never have been controversial, of course. Rabbinic authorities have almost universally ruled that women should recite the *Amidah*. Maimonides posited that women's prayer—the service of the heart—was necessary at least once a day, and Nachmanides ruled that women should pray both morning and afternoon because they, no less than men, yearn for divine mercy for themselves and their families. Rabbi Yechiel Michael Epstein (1829-1908) explained that Rashi and the *Tosafot* expected women to pray three times a day, albeit they were not responsible for time constraints. Indeed, many of us had grandmothers—pious, "beshaiteled" European women—who prayed daily and with great seriousness and dignity.

But perhaps because the obligation for group prayer and the ability to "count" for a *minyan* (prayer quorum) was exclusive to Jewish males, the women's *tefillah* movement had a revolutionary aura. Some women, feeling that the liturgy was "masculine" because of elements such as the recitation of *shelo asani ishah* (praise to God for not having created one a woman) and the masculine exclusivity of the Patriarchs invoked at the beginning of the *Amidah*, also felt that women praying publicly together meant trespassing on a male preserve.

My thoughts today focus on another aspect of praying as a Jew—the personalizing of prayer. For centuries, inserting personal prayers into and between codified liturgies was a desirable activity. As Donin notes, the Talmud mentions eleven sages and the supplications that each customarily added to the *Shemoneh Esrei* (*Berakhot* 16b-17a). The prayer of Mar, son of Rabina, a fourth-century rabbi, became a favorite and found its way into the prayer book at the end of the *Amidah*. Thus, the powerful ending of our current silent devotions began as one of many personal prayers.

Ironically, in recent decades Orthodox girls and women are far more likely to learn than Orthodox boys and men that it is appropriate to personalize even the highly codified daily prayers. Female learning environments more often instruct that when one comes to the sixteenth blessing of the *Amidah*, the *shema kolaynu*, (Hear our voices) for example, "it is permissible, even desirable, to introduce extemporaneous requests… which may be said in any language." Yet, many men report having gone through more than a decade of day schools and *yeshivot* without being encouraged to personalize their prayers.

"For centuries, inserting personal prayers into and between codified liturgies was a desirable activity."

Why has the personalizing of prayer become more common among women than men? The answers are sociological and historical. Jewish societies have encouraged women to personalize their prayers in many settings, the most ubiquitous being the lighting of the Shabbat candles. My mother taught me what her mother taught her: that each circling of our hands choreographs a beloved group of people to request blessings for—ourselves, our children, the community, the Jewish people.

The diverse tradition of *tkhines* also supported quotidian, personal prayer. As the many books of women's prayers now translated into English show, women's prayers spanned the gamut of daily life. It is easy to see the drama of a *tkhine* for going into labor, but one of my favorites is a prayer for baking bread: as she puts the loaves into the oven, the woman calls on the angels in heaven to come down and "make this bread rise." What a testimonial to the dignity and importance of women's work!

Because women were expected to pray throughout the day and the week as they went about their various tasks, the activity of personalizing prayer seemed natural, both to ordinary women and to the people who educated girls. For men, in contrast—especially as, in reaction to modernity, Orthodox life became increasingly rigid, text-based, and suspicious of innovation—many boys' schools and *yeshivot* moved away from encouraging the personalization of prayer. Typically in boys' schools and yeshivot, spontaneity and creativity are feared, and even the personal dimension of judgment is suspect. Boys are more pressured to "toe the line" and conform to *halakhic* and liturgical norms, and thus personalization of prayers—which cannot be monitored and regulated—has been de-emphasized in recent decades.

As I think back, especially in relationship to family and life cycle events, the personalization of prayer has been deeply meaningful to me in three ways:

First, prayers in the regular, codified liturgy have suddenly emerged vividly. For example, in the first painful weeks after my mother, *zt"l*, passed away, I found *elohei neshamah shenatatah li tehora hi* in the preliminary *Birkhot hashahar* service oddly consoling. "The soul that You gave me is pure; You created it; You fashioned it; You breathed it into me…One day You will take it away from me…As long as my soul is within

me, I give thanks to You…" Staying in the synagogue for my first complete *Yizkor* service, I read a sentiment from the book of Ecclesiastes with similar resonance: After death the body returns to the earth, where it originated, and the soul returns to God, where it originated. Despite my all-too-common doubts, that image of my mother's soul rejoining something indefinable but infinite seemed profoundly right.

On a happier note, one Friday evening on vacation in Vermont, each person in my family welcomed Shabbat at his or her own pace. As I stood alone on a balcony overlooking an exuberant mountain stream, the psalmist's evocation of loudly melodic waters, *mekolot mayyim rabbim*, in Psalm 93 seemed overwhelmingly and joyously appropriate.

Second, moved by powerful personal events, I have experienced with gratitude a sense of divine presence, and, like innumerable women before me, have uttered unscripted prayers. Many of those moments, happy or sad, were related to my children. More than two decades ago, sitting in a new synagogue on *Rosh Hashanah* and reading about infertile biblical women, I "lost it" and was swept away in tears. I knew I was fortunate to have wonderful children, but I had recently endured three miscarriages in a row, and yearned for another child. I composed my own prayers that year. One year later, I sat in the same synagogue utterly nauseated, thrilled to be pregnant, but also, at age thirty-eight, more than a little fearful. Somehow I found myself once again "talking" to God. After praying, I felt calm: I felt that God was with me, and would give me the strength to deal with whatever came next.

Third, I am glad for every opportunity to insert my own special pleadings into the regular service—health for sick friends or relatives, happy events for the ones we love, a true and joyous peace for Israel. I am not really sure how I feel about *hashgacha pratit*, the divine ordering of and interference into daily life and human history, but I know that I need to say those prayers.

The personalizing of prayer is an historical Jewish conception. One can look at the moving sentiments that bracket the *Amidah*: "Please God, open my lips and my mouth will tell your praise," we begin, and then we conclude by saying, "May the words of my mouth be acceptable to you." The conversation with God is pictured as a two-way, intimate dialogue that has to begin before it even begins, much like a powerful verse in the Song of Songs: "Draw me after you and we will run."

The *Rosh Hashanah* before my daughter got married we sat together in the synagogue. In one sweet and unforgettable moment she turned to me and asked, "What do you think about when you say, '*Hashem sefatai tiftakh ufi yagid tehilatekha?*'" Then she said, "I think about the all the things we women are doing to be able to draw closer to *Hashem*." That is one important meaning of Orthodox feminism and women's *tefillah*, our legacy as women and as Jews. Observant women have much to offer Orthodox life as a whole by bringing personalized prayer into public focus as the birthright of both men and women. May it be God's will that the meditations of our hearts bring strength and joy to our communities, our families and to ourselves.

"I am glad for every opportunity to insert my own special pleadings into the regular service"

Sylvia Barack Fishman, member of the JOFA Board of Directors, is Professor of Contemporary Jewish Life at Brandeis University, and Co-Director of the Hadassah–Brandeis Institute. Her most recent book, Double or Nothing? Jewish Families and Mixed Marriage, *is arousing lively communal debate.*

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Making Room for Moms in *Shul*: A Checklist

By Karen Miller

During three rounds of three-day *yamim tovim* this year, my husband and I had plenty of time to juggle the somewhat conflicting desires of tending to our young children, and at the same time trying to achieve a meaningful *davening* experience (and in some way attempting to expose our children to what a meaningful *davening* experience can be). We arranged our own babysitting for the extended *davening* of *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*. However, this is not an ideal which I would like to depend on regularly since it means my children do not get exposed to *shul*, and that *shul* does not become a family experience.

I therefore think *shuls* and communities need to put more thought into how to accommodate parents of young children. For this reason, my husband and I (in consultation with a few friends) have compiled the following checklist that rabbis and people grappling with this issue can refer to when attempting to enhance the *shul* experience for this section of its constituency.

I know too many mothers who stay home on Shabbat morning or only make it to *shul* for *musaf* because they find that the *shuls* do not tolerate or involve their small children inside *shul* and also do not provide proper childcare outside of *shul*. Mothers like me, along with their supportive husbands, who need this situation to change can suggest some of these ideas to their rabbis or *shul* boards. JOFA seems the natural forum in which to discuss this issue.

Does your *shul* provide any or all of the following?

1. Staggered *minyanim* so that fathers and mothers can alternate between looking after their children and *davening*.
2. A nursing room exclusively for breast-feeding mothers (including a closeable door, a comfortable seat, possibly access to some drinking water).
3. Groups carefully designed for children of different ages. The youngest children need close supervision, toys and snacks. There should be age-appropriate *davening*, *divrei Torah*, *berakhot* and educational stories interspersed with games. This daycare should begin close to the beginning of *tefillah* time.
4. Enthusiastic inclusion of children in the main *tefillah* (for instance, allowing children to accompany their father to the *bimah* for an *aliyah*, bringing children up to the *bimah* for *Anim Zemirot* and *Adon Olam* and allowing children to open and close the ark).
5. Sensitivity to children in the way *davening* is conducted (the entire service should not be unnecessarily extended because children just cannot sit for such long periods of time).
6. A separate *minyan* (or *musaf* service) designated for this part of the constituency, which does not mind the noise generated by children. Some *shuls* have *Tot Tefillah* for young children together with their parents.

Since not all *shuls* have the resources to accomplish many of the above suggestions, another possibility would be to have a *toranut* schedule, where several parents could alternate running a Shabbat morning program for the children.

JOFA is interested in hearing your ideas for how to make "more room for moms in *shul*". Please send your suggestions to jofa @jofa.org so that we can publish them in a future JOFA Journal, or share your views by joining our Women and Synagogue discussion group. To join, visit our website **www.jofa.org**, and click on "discussion forums".

Karen Miller is working toward a Ph.D. in Rabbinic Literature at New York University. She has taught at the Drisha Institute and is a member of the JOFA Board of Directors.

Yearning to Connect: Women and Synagogue Prayer

By Marcy Serkin

Tefillah is an issue that Orthodox feminists have discussed endlessly. Here I make a distinction between *tefillah* and the synagogue experience. The latter is being addressed with some success in several communities. *Mechitzah* specifications, placement of the ark that holds the Torah, placement of the podium, women's voices being heard during *kaddish*, the calling up of women to the Torah—all of these and other matters are being slowly resolved. While these changes have yet to travel to many, probably the majority, of communities, it is likely that eventually a comfortable number of synagogues will offer a more welcoming structure to women. The slow transition will feel endless and frustrating to many of us, but that seems to be the way that change works in our world. The progress of women's Torah scholarship, which is a success story, was, and continues to be, much the same.

However, when it comes to *tefillah* itself, to the words on the page—there be dragons. Despite the expressions of dissatisfaction that women have shared with each other regarding certain *tefillot*, we have not clearly determined what features we are looking for in a new system. We know what we do not want. We know that we are disturbed, hurt and insulted by the negative treatment of women in some *tefillot*. We know that we are frustrated and angered by a liturgy that reads in places as if women do not even exist. We know that our experience of *tefillah* is far from optimal because these matters distract us even as we try to pray with our hearts open to God. The classic examples, of course, are the blessing in the morning service in which men thank God for not having made them women, and the repeated mention of our forefathers with no reference to our foremothers. Particularly in the former case, apologetics abound, but we have long since dismissed such glib, inadequate answers. With what shall we replace them? What developments in *tefillah* will meet our needs? Is there an agenda we can agree upon? Conversation with many friends has revealed that a large number of women are mentally changing the words as they pray to avoid some of the conflict they experience. Others have simply decided they can live with the cognitive dissonance of reciting *tefillot* that clash with their view of themselves. And sadly, as we know, many women opt out of the discussion altogether and simply avoid praying, at home, falling back often inaccurately, on the dispensation that prayer is a time dependent commandment and therefore not binding upon them, and at *shul*, standing outside and chatting.

Part of the difficulty in answering these questions is that the purpose of prayer in the Jewish tradition is not often clearly articulated. I have been taught variously that we pray to emulate our forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; that we pray because it is something we need, not something God needs; that we pray because of the *halakhic* obligation to recite certain prayers at certain times. None of these answer the question of what prayer accomplishes and what role it plays in our lives.

I have sometimes accompanied my husband to the early morning Shabbat *minyan* that he favors. It is a quiet, serious service that begins at 7:00 am. There is rarely more than one other woman present. I enjoy this service for several reasons, even though it is the antithesis of the feminist experience. It takes place in a stately old synagogue that feels as if it could easily have been transported to Brooklyn from a *shtetl* in Eastern Europe. The traditional architecture, the elderly men chanting nearly unintelligibly, the very dust wafting from the pages of my prayer book make me feel richly connected to my past. And, I have the opportunity to be an observer rather than a participant. Many women will exclaim that we have always been observers and that this is exactly what we seek to remedy. I agree. But because we have been striving to become participants, for me, at least, it had been a long time since I had taken a good look at the male experience of prayer. Clearly it is a bonding experience, something very necessary to the perpetuation of community. It is something of a Jewish football field as well, where men have the opportunity to play out power struggles, enhance their self esteem and determine where in the structure of their society they fit. All of these have, right or wrong, have been the basis of stable Jewish communities. While similar activities occur in the workplace and in other situations, it is only in the synagogue that they play out in Jewish life. Though I hesitate to say so, the actual *tefillot* seem largely subordinate to this purpose.

Another observation that I have made while at this synagogue, is the manner in which the *tefillot* are recited. While women have been conditioned to pray quietly, prayer on the male side of the *mechitzah* is, to say the least, an interactive experience. From a soothing mumbling that washes over me, to random gesticulations and exclamations, to the draping of a *tallit* over the head, to the repetition time after time of exactly the same syllables in the same way, the manner of prayer employed seems to have been designed to create a state of meditation, a state in which the mind empties and God may enter. While this has been the hallmark of Eastern religion, it is difficult to observe Orthodox Jewish men at prayer and not see some similarity.

This is the male experience of prayer (at least from my observations as an outsider). Is this what we too, as Orthodox feminists, want from prayer? Are we looking for a powerful communal bonding within a Jewish context? If that is the case, it is not *tefillah* that we need to address; it is more likely the synagogue innovations we are making that we need to reexamine. Are we looking for an experience of God? Are we yearning to connect with our foremothers? The answers to these questions and others will allow us to set an agenda and begin the painstakingly slow process of change.

Marcy Serkin, former Executive Director of JOFA, is currently the Associate Director of Donor Relations at Yeshiva University, where she also teaches English Composition.

The Road to Wearing a *Tallit*: Why an Orthodox Woman Wears a *Tallit*

By Bat Sheva Marcus

I will never forget the first time I saw a woman wearing a *tallit*. I was 27 years old, living in Israel and attending the first International Conference on Women and Judaism. I arrived early, stumbled upon the "wrong" room and came upon a room full of women praying. Many had on *tallitot*, *tefillin* and *kippot*.

I thought I was going to throw up.

To me it looked awful. It looked like a mockery of everything I loved. It seemed to me a caricature of the pictures I held close to my heart, of my father standing in the early morning in a faintly lit room wrapped in *tallit* and *tefillin*. I backed out of the room, and went into the ladies room to calm down. Even then, I was rational enough to be annoyed at myself for my violent overreaction.

So here I am, 15 years later, a *tallit*-wearer. I often marvel at the transitions we go through in our lives.

I cannot pinpoint exactly when my feelings began to change, when my sense of disgust transformed itself into an indefinable longing, when I began to look over the *mechitzah* at my husband wrapped in the white *tallit* and find that I too wished I could be wrapped in white, feeling cool cotton transport my existence into a space of holiness. Somewhere, somehow my feelings had changed.

Maybe it was that I got older, and as I got older right and wrong often seemed less set in stone. Meeting different people, discussing issues openly, somehow I found out that in so many areas of my life, right and wrong were not quite as black and white as I had originally assumed them to be.

Maybe it was also that I could not seem to get myself into a good space for *tefillah*. I grew up in the day school system, praying daily. I grew up in a home where *tefillah* was expected to be a part of my daily life, even on vacation days, but I never really *davened*. Usually I daydreamed. Often I moved my lips to mimic the prayers. And then I found myself an adult, no longer praying to fulfill someone else's expectations, yet unable to sustain regular, daily, ongoing prayer. The agonizing fact was that, philosophically, I believe prayer to be critically important in our lives. It is a chance amidst the chaos and the self-centeredness of our generation to stop and thank God for all the everyday miracles, for our children, our community and our health. So here I was, 35 years old, still struggling with daily prayer and full of frustration and guilt over it.

And then my daughter was born. If I knew one thing as a parent it was that if she did not see me *davening* daily, it would be hard, if not ridiculous to expect her to. In my heart of hearts I knew that if I did not want her to grow up with the same struggle, it was time for me to resolve the issue once and for all.

And then my oldest son celebrated his *bar mitzvah*.

I watched with growing wonder and no small sense of envy, the excitement with which he approached the tangible elements of becoming an adult in prayer. The day his *tefillin* arrived from Israel, he ran to the neighbor to pick them up. He tried them on. He was in love with his *tefillin*. He went with my husband to buy a *tallit*. He tried it on. He looked at himself in the mirror. He tried it on again. I watched, and my sense of amazement grew.

I went to his yeshivah the day of his school *bar mitzvah*, and the pride and excitement in the boys, newly wearing *tefillin*, was tangible. They felt grown up. Much like a married couple wearing wedding rings, you could tell that they felt a sense of responsibility and a sense of commitment. And the girls? They sat, as they always had, on their side of the *mechitzah*, some *davening* quietly, some just moving their lips. And I felt a sense of loss and sadness. I decided that day that my daughter too must have, at her bat *mitzvah*, a tangible expression of her commitment to prayer and a transitional object that would allow her to feel like an adult in her relationship to prayer.

I spent a great deal of time thinking over the issue. Somehow *tefillin* seemed less obvious. For me, there was something decidedly masculine about *tefillin*. And then again, *tefillin* carried with it so many more *halakhic* concerns. But *tallit*, that seemed almost perfect. White cotton, white silk, soft cloth, wrapping yourself in gentleness, in holiness all tied to the *tzizit*, to which so many prayers refer. And this garment carried with it negligible, if any, *halakhic* concerns. The Rambam (*Hilkhot Tzizit*, III:9) states that a woman may wear a *tallit*. And although the Rema in his glosses to the *Shulhan Arukh* disputes this position, the only reason given is "*yehora*" or religious arrogance.

So I made the decision. I would wear a *tallit*.

That was three years ago. From that day to this, I have not missed *davening* one day. I love the soft feel of the *tallit* as I wrap it around me. Whenever possible I daven outside, on the porch, so that the sun can shine through on me, and in my fantasy, I am wrapping myself in the warmth of the *shechina*.

> "I am struck by how much we can change and grow and learn."

Do I concentrate on the *tefillah* everyday or even most days? Certainly not all of it; probably only parts of it. Is my *davening* where I would like it to be? No. But it is so much better than before.

Am I seeing the *tallit* as a magical solution? For me it was. Well, perhaps not magical. Maybe mystical. But somehow it manages to serve for me as both an expression of serious and deep commitment and a tactile experience with which I can connect daily.

I look back at my transformation and what strikes me most is not that I now wear a *tallit*, but rather my own sense of transformation. I am struck at how much we can change and grow and learn. I look at myself as a young woman who thought the idea of wearing a *tallit* was disgusting, and I see myself today wearing a *tallit* daily, and I wonder what tomorrow will bring.

Bat Sheva Marcus is a founding member of JOFA and serves on its Executive Committee.

FROM THE EDITOR

JOFA recognises that there are many times and situations in life at which prayer is particularly difficult for Jewish women, when it is hard to find meaning in the texts and when synagogue frameworks appear unwelcoming. We would like readers to share their experiences by writing to **jofa@jofa.org** or by joining our Women and Synagogue discussion group. To join, visit our website **www.jofa.org** and click on "discussion forums". We would also like to hear of ways in which individuals have been able to make their prayers more meaningful at different stages of their lives.

JOFA Book Corner

JEWISH ORTHODOX FEMINIST ALLIANCE

Seyder Tkhines: The Forgotten Book of Common Prayer for Jewish Women

By Devra Kay
Jewish Publication Society, 2004 $30.00

For women seeking a window into the inner lives of our foremothers, as well as a precedent for women's prayers, the *tkhine* literature is a wonderful resource. However, the *tkhines*, written in Yiddish and often printed in a specific typeface called *vaybertaytsh*, are mainly inaccessible to today's English readers. Devra Kay's book is a valuable translation of and commentary on an early collection of *tkhines* that first appeared in 1648 and continued to be printed and reprinted for about 70 years, often within the regular *siddur*. This collection has not been translated before. Kay shows how Seyder *Tkhines* presented an alternative daily liturgy for women to that of the *siddur*, and explains how the individual *tkhines* were based on a restructuring and reformulation in Yiddish of the individual Hebrew prayers in the *siddur*, extending their contents to encompass *mitzvot* that do not appear in the standard liturgy and are relevant only to women. While most of the *tkhines* of the past were printed, there are a few manuscript *tkhines* that have survived. Kay translates a 17th century Yiddish manuscript of a collection of prayers specially written by hand for an individual pregnant woman, as well as some other prayers and Yiddish songs. While it is unfortunate that the Yiddish texts themselves are not included in this volume, Kay has done us a great service in providing these translations together with her suggestive analysis of the texts and their contexts.

Pious and Rebellious: Jewish Women in Medieval Europe

By Avraham Grossman
Brandeis University Press, University Press of New England 2004 $65.00 (hardcover) $29.95 (paperback)

In this book, Abraham Grossman, professor of Jewish History at the Hebrew University, presents a clear and penetrating analysis of the status and role of Jewish women in Europe between 1000 and 1300. He lays out ten ways in which the status of women improved markedly in Germany and France in this period, particularly when compared to that reflected in the Babylonian Talmud, and also as compared to the situation of Jewish women in Moslem countries. He includes the increased role played by Jewish women in economic activity, the determination that women had the right to say *berakhot* connected with time-linked commandments, and the bans of Rabbeinu Gershom against polygamy and against divorcing a woman against her will. He also considers spheres in which the position of women deteriorated – such as the greater strictures on menstrual purity and the ways in which secular and religious authorities tried to curtail the expansion of women's roles. The details which he gives about matters as varied as violence against women, girls' education, medieval wedding ceremonies and women's role in Jewish martyrdom are truly fascinating. This erudite and masterful book, published originally in 2001 in Hebrew, has already had a profound impact on the way historians view medieval Jewish history. It is only unfortunate that this book is an abridged translation; readers of Hebrew are advised to refer to the Hebrew edition as well for much added richness of material.

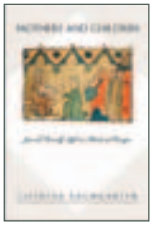
Expecting Miracles: Finding Meaning and Spirituality in Pregnancy through Judaism

By Chana Weisberg,
Urim Publications, 2004 $27.95

The theme of this book is the spiritual meaning that Judaism brings to pregnancy and birth. Written by a *ba'alat teshuva* from Baltimore who lives in Jerusalem, this intensely moving book contains the author's interviews with 24 Orthodox mothers in Jersualem about their pregnancies. Most of them are "Anglo Saxon" immigrants; many only became observant as adults; many live in the *haredi* community. All of them see pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood as opportunities for increased closeness to God. The women speak very frankly about difficulties and obstacles such as infertility, miscarriages, and high-risk pregnancies and births. Through their descriptions of their pregnancies as spiritual journeys, we get an intimate look at the inner lives of these women, and how they are empowered by seeing themselves as God's partners in the creation and care of their children. One mother says that she does not believe it possible for a woman to give birth without believing in God. A Hasidic *rebbetzin* told Weisberg that during her pregnancies she always thinks of the fetus she is carrying as a *sefer Torah*, as every child is a living Torah. Another woman focuses on prayer and performing more *mitzvot* during her pregnancies so as to have God-fearing children. Each of the nine chapters of the book is aimed at helping readers grow spiritually along with their babies during their pregnancies. Weisberg includes interviews with two midwives and also with Rabbanit Chana Henkin of Nishmat and other female educators, a kabbalistic birth meditation and teachings on birth based on the teachings of Nachman of Bratzlav.

Mothers and Children: Jewish Family Life in Medieval Europe

By Elisheva Baumgarten
Princeton University Press, 2004 $39.50



This book deals with family relationships in medieval Jewish communities in Northern France and Germany, concentrating on the special roles of mothers and children. Using a wonderful array of sources, Baumgarten, a lecturer in Jewish history and in the Gender Stud-

ies Program at Bar-Ilan University, opens a window for us into aspects of pregnancy, midwifery, birth rituals, nursing, including the use of wet nurses, and childrearing. While there were no sources for this period written by women, Baumgarten draws from medieval responsa, commentaries and medical tractates, ethical literature such as *Sefer Hasidim*, as well as an approach based on her understanding of issues of gender and society in medieval Europe. She shows how the everyday interactions of Jewish and Christian women, many more than previously supposed, led to numerous shared practices and beliefs, and points out parallel practices and developments as well as central differences between Jewish and Christian practice. Among other things she details the role of the *ba'alat brit* in the 12th and 13th centuries at the circumcision ceremony – the woman who often would bathe the baby, bring him into the synagogue and hold him on her lap during the ritual, a role that was curtailed by the 14th century. This fascinating and detailed book helps us to have a richer knowledge of the past and a fuller understanding of daily life and what the historians call material culture in the world of our mothers.

And Rachel Stole the Idols

By Wendy Zierler
Wayne State University Press, 2004 $49.95

Wendy Zierler is assistant professor of modern Jewish literature and feminist studies at H.U.C.-J.I.R and has spoken at JOFA conferences. In this trail-blazing book, she uses the story of Rachel and the *teraphim* in the Book of Genesis as a paradigm for women taking hold of a man's tradition and making it their own. There were very few women who wrote in Hebrew throughout most of Jewish history; however, in the 19th century this changed. Zierler's book traces how three generations of women writing both prose and poetry have claimed "a voice in a Hebrew literary culture in which women's voices were hitherto conspicuously absent". Zierler ranges expertly over works of familiar names like Rachel Morpurgo, Leah Goldberg, Rachel, Esther Raab and Zelda (who, Zierler relates, was a teacher of Amos Oz and is described by him in a recent verse novel). Often providing her own translations, Zierler also introduces the reader to works of less familiar writers such as Sarah Foner, and Yocheved Bat-Miriam, using a backdrop of contemporary feminist theory to analyze their writings. Especially fascinating is her analysis of the use that the writers make of the stories of women in biblical and rabbinic sources, and how they recast the images of these women. There are wonderful poems about Eve, Lillith, and Hagar, and about Miriam, Deborah, and Hannah that give us new insights into the Biblical texts. Zierler provides both the original Hebrew texts and translations of the poems.

The Passions of the Matriarchs

By Shera Aranoff Tuchman and Sandra E. Rapoport
Ktav, 2004 $35.00

As we read the *parashot* of *Sefer Bereshit*, we all look to understand the roles of the *imahot* in the foundation of the Jewish people. What we can learn from their experiences and to what extent we can take them as role models for our very different lives today? While the biblical text itself gives us very little detail of their lives, this book delves into Talmudic and Midrashic sources and an impressive range of traditional commentators to expand our understanding of the biblical foremothers. From their close reading of the text, the authors skillfully raise many questions and suggest answers based on classical and modern sources. They make accessible many commentators who have not been translated into English, including Chizkuni, Alsheich, the Kli Yakar, the Netziv, and the Meshech Chochmah, as well as the more familiar Rashi, Ramban, Sforno, and Hirsch. The historical context of all the commentators cited is explained in the glossary. The writers also draw on the writings of Nechama Leibowitz, Rav Soloveitchik and Aviva Zornberg. The insights in this book make it particularly valuable for women's studies groups, and it would make an excellent *Bat Mitzvah* gift. It is also vital reading for all teachers of *Tanakh*, since it is so important that both boys and girls learn to explore the inner lives and experiences of the matriarchs.

Birkat Hamazon *...continued from page 3*

At the end of chapter 47 (in Orah Hayyim 47, 14), the *Shulhan Arukh* states that women are obligated to say the *berakha* for learning Torah and I explain there that this is because they are obligated to learn the *mitzvot* that are relevant to them. In *Yoreh De'ah*, chapter 246, 6 (regarding the obligation to learn) I explained that the verse "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob" that it is referring to the women. If so, why should the women not say "for the Torah that You have taught us"? … they (women) can say "for the covenant that You have inscribed on our flesh" according to those who say that women are as if they are already circumcised.

The notion of a woman being considered as if she is already circumcised derives from an opinion in the *gemara* (*Avodah Zarah* 27a) that a woman is considered circumcised even though she has not obviously been circumcised in practice.[19]

The Implications Today

The *gemara* in *Berakhot* asks[20], what are the repercussions of determining whether women and men have the same obligation in *birkat hamazon*? The *gemara* explains:

If you say that women are obligated *d'oraita*, then those who are also obligated *d'oraita* (free men) can fulfill their obligation (by listening to a woman). But if you say that women are obligated *d'rabbanan*, then you have the situation of those who are not obligated in this and (we have the rule that) if someone is not obligated (or has a lesser obligation) then s/he cannot fulfill the obligation on behalf of others (or a person with greater obligation).[21]

What are the repercussions of this for us? Why does it matter if women have the same obligation as men, and whether they use the same text? After all, when does any one say *birkat hamazon* for another? An important repercussion relates to a mixed *zimmun*.[22] There are two reasons given why men and women cannot form a *zimmun* together. One is the different level of obligation in *birkat hamazon* or a different text for it,[23] even if the obligation is the same, and the other is *pritzut* (fear of loose morals). If the first is not an issue (because men and women have the same level of obligation and say the same text),

"A unified collective text of *birkat hamazon* serves the goal of one Torah for all the Jewish people... "

then the matter of *pritzut* is relatively easy to put aside—many early authorities argue that *pritzut* is not a problem and only relates to women and slaves in the same company.[24] According to the usual understanding of a *mishnah* in *Berakhot*[25], normative *halakha* does not permit a mixed *zimmun*. However, a very small minority of early authorities understood the *mishnah* in a different way to conform with a *baraita*[26] that suggests that women and men can be included in the same *zimmun*. Women who would prefer a different text are thus playing right into the hands of those *halakhic* decisors who would prefer a solid *halakhic* reason never to allow a mixed *zimmun*, regardless of community norms of *pritzut*, thereby automatically requiring that only a man lead the *zimmun* at any mixed gathering. For those of us who envision a time when women and men will have equal *halakhic* status and can participate together at public events, a unified, collective text of *birkat hamazon* serves the goal of one Torah for all the Jewish people, rather than a gender-defined Torah for each gender. Separate is not equal.

Debby Koren teaches computer networking at Hadassah Academic College in Jerusalem. She is currently studying towards a Masters degree in Jewish Studies, with a major in Halakha *and Talmud.*

[1] E.g., *d'oraita* vs. *d'rabbanan* (from the Torah or rabbinically mandated). A *mitzvah* that is from the Torah has a higher level of obligation than one that is rabbinically mandated. Thus, someone who is only rabbinically obligated to do the *mitzvah* cannot perform the *mitzvah* on behalf of someone who is obligated from the Torah. This is the normative *halakhic* ruling.

[2] Mishnah *Rosh Hashanah* 3. 8, and other sources.

[3] See Yehuda Herzl Henkin, "The Significant Role of Habituation in *Halakha*," Tradition, 34, 3, Fall 2000, and "*Hirhur* and Community Norms," Equality Lost: Essays in Torah Commentary, Halacha, and Jewish Thought, Urim, Jerusalem, 1999.

[4] See Rochelle L. Millen, "Social Attitudes Disguised as *Halakhah: zila milta, Ein Havrutan Na'ah, kevod hatzibbur*," Nashim, 4, Fall, 2001, pp. 178-192.

[5] See Daniel Sperber, "Congregational Dignity and Human Dignity: Women and Public Torah Reading," Edah, 3:2, 2002, and "*K'vod Hatzibbur Ukh'vod Hab'riyot,*" De'ot, 16, 2003; Mendel Shapiro, "*Qeri'at ha-Torah by Women: A Halakhic Analysis,*" Edah, 1:2, 2001.

[6] All of the sources in notes 3-5 include discussion on this point.

[7] *Berakhot* 48b.

[8] Many of the manuscript texts can be found in: Louis Finkelstein, *The Birkat Ha-Mazon*, The Jewish Quarterly Review, Vol. 19, 1928-1929.

[9] Though the covenant referred to is the circumcision, I suspect that such a text would be less offensive to women, given the fact that women, too, have a covenant with God, albeit not inscribed on our flesh. In that this text exists in several manuscripts, the requirement to mention the covenant could be fulfilled by men using this formula, while at the same time being more inclusive of women. In the author's humble opinion, we should consider making an effort to return to this ancient version.

[10] *Berakhot* 48b. There are other sources used to reach the same conclusion, i.e., that *birkat hamazon* is a Torah obligation.

[11] Mishnah, *Berakhot* 3, 3.

[12] Should this, therefore, present another reason for some women to feel that the text is not appropriate for them?

[13] *Sefer Or Zarua*, II, 368.

[14] Giving yet one more reason for some women to feel that they ought to have a different text!

[15] This is the opinion of R' Eliezer on 48b, R' Abba and stated in the name of Rebbe (Yehuda HaNasi) on 49a.

[16] Ibid.

[17] *Orah Hayyim*, 187, 3.

[18] *Bi'ur Halakha*, 187, 9. The *Hafetz Hayyim*'s reasoning is different from *Magen Avraham*, which is presented in this article.

[19] For an extensive discussion of this idea and its expression in post-Talmudic literature, see Yael Levine, "*Isha k'man d'm'hila damya,*" Masekhet, 2, 2004.

[20] *Berakhot* 20b.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Another repercussion that is not discussed in this paper or in our citation from the *gemara* is the ruling on whether a woman will say *birkat hamazon* in the event that she does not remember if she said it already, or if she included the correct paragraph for Shabbat, for example.

[23] Originally, the person who led the *zimmun* also recited *birkat hamazon* for the group, so that the two obligations are intertwined.

[24] This is based on *Berakhot* 45b.

[25] *Berakhot* 7, 2.

[26] *Arakhin* 3a.

Mission Statement of the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance

The Alliance's mission is to expand the spiritual, ritual, intellectual, and political opportunities for women within the framework of *halakha*. We advocate meaningful participation and equality for women in family life, synagogues, houses of learning, and Jewish communal organizations to the full extent possible within *halakha*. Our commitment is rooted in the belief that fulfilling this mission will enrich and uplift individual and communal life for all Jews.

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