

Making Women Count

Imahot, Amida and Self-Image

Parshat Bemidbar 5769

By Rabbi Mark B Greenspan

This morning we're going to do something we've never done before in our synagogue – at least not as an official congregational act. During Musaf we're going to include the Matriarchs in the opening blessing of the *Amida*.

No doubt you're aware that there are two versions of this *Berachah* in our *Siddur*: one containing the traditional and familiar text of the *Amida* and the other which includes the *Imahot*, the Matriarchs. Instead of blessing, “the God of our fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob,” the second version refers to God as the “God of our ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob, the God of Sarah, the God of Rebecca, the God of Rachel and the God of Leah. The new version of the blessing ends, “Praised are you *Adonai*, shield of Abraham and guardian of Sarah.”

Our ritual committee recently discussed this matter, and after some deliberation decided to allow for either recitation of the *Amida* but to make the *Imahot* version the ‘official version’ for our congregation. That means that if someone else is leading services, and they're more comfortable using the ‘traditional’ text of the *Amida* that is fine. When the cantor leads services, however, he will use the new version of this blessing. We also considered the possibility of using the traditional version in *Shacharit* and the *Imahot* version in *Musaf*.

Now, before you accuse us of being ambivalent and wishy-washy let me explain our decision. You know the old joke: Orthodox Jews are crazy, Reform Jews are lazy and Conservative Jews are hazy. That is not the case here. First, it's important to acknowledge that the editors of *Sim Shalom* saw fit to include both texts in our *Siddur*. There are strong arguments to be made for both texts of the *Amida*. What we often confuse for indecisiveness is really a respect for pluralism. Many of the issues about which we argue are not questions for which there is only one possible answer or one right way. A person who is looking for absolute certainty in answering the great questions of life has come to the wrong synagogue – this is a place where we listen to the dissonant voices of our tradition and where we respect those who disagree with one another. This is a place where we say: “*Elu v'elu divrei elohim hayim*,” “Both these and these are the words of the living God.” Like Beit Hillel and Beit Shammai at the end of the day we can respect diversity but we also have to make decisions for our congregation – we have to decide what the *halachah* should be.

The first *berachah* of the Amidah is a good example of this. There are strong arguments for and against changing the language of the prayer book. On the one hand, there are ample precedents for making changes in the language of the Siddur in Conservative ideology. We can see this in the opening blessings of the daily service. More than sixty years ago the leaders of the Conservative movement chose to change: “Who did not make me a woman” and “who did not make me a slave” to *she'asani ben horin*, “who made me free,” and *she'asani b'tzalmo*, “who created me in His image.” We can also see this respect for addressing modern sensibilities in the Conservative text of the Musaf *Amida* where we have changed the language from a petition asking God to reinstitute sacrifices to a prayer in which

we recall the sacrifices as an ancient bygone practice. More importantly is the changing role of women in Conservative Judaism. The new language of the Amida reflects our efforts to be more inclusive. In an effort to acknowledge the role of women in Jewish life why should we speak of our tradition only in patriarchal terms? Besides, there are ample examples from our tradition and medieval liturgical poetry for acknowledging the importance of the *Imahot*. We did not invent the *Imahot*; so why not include them in the *Amida*?

But there is another point of view, an “On the other hand,” that must be acknowledged. Some argue that changing the opening blessing of the Amida is a little like re-writing a Shakespearean sonnet – there is an element of chutzpah in thinking we can do a better than the original authors of this blessing. Besides, the language of this blessing comes from the Bible and to change it obfuscates its biblical roots. Whether we agree with the language completely or whether it is as inclusive enough is not the point. The greatness of the text lies in its time honored place in our tradition. It is significant that there was an article just this past week in the Jewish week by a reform rabbi, Leon Morris, who argued that what makes the Siddur great is that it is the Jewish Book of Common Prayer shared by all Jews. When someone walks into our synagogue, they should be able to sing along as we chant the opening words of the Amida, no matter what synagogue they come from. Rabbi Morris argues for a return by all Jews to the classical text of the Amida not on ideological grounds but because having a common text unites us.

Of course the underlying issue with Rabbi Morris’ opinion goes back to an even more fundamental question: What purpose does the Siddur play in our life? Is prayer a reflection of our common heritage or do we use it to give expression to our own unique spiritual identity? And if the second point of view is correct, then where do we draw the line? There is a slippery slope upon which we are standing once we premise the idea that the prayer book should change to reflect new ideas. At what point does the Siddur stop being a Book of Common Prayer for all Jews.

Both of these arguments deserve our consideration. But in the mean time, we as a congregation have a responsibility to decide what we are going to do and how we are going to practice our tradition. While we can disagree we can’t afford to remain indecisive.

Sixty years ago the founders of our synagogue came together to build a congregation. They wanted to found not only a shul but a religious school for their children. They were equally concerned with educating their sons and daughters. Even more important they wanted to sit together as families in a synagogue where both men and women could participate in services freely.

I would argue that their vision put us on a trajectory that has led to this moment in time. Gender would not be a factor in participating in our congregational life. The institution of Shabbat morning Bat Mitzvah, the inclusion of women in the minyan, inviting women to lead services and read Torah were all an outgrowth from the original vision of our founders whether they realized it or not. We have simply taken the core values of our congregation to their logical conclusion – and that includes the decision to include the matriarchs in the Amida.

Of course, change is never easy. We find ourselves uncomfortable with things that are unfamiliar. The words of the Amida are like a well worn pair of shoes that easily slip on our feet each morning. Who wants to buy new shoes that have to be broken in – or don’t quite fit? The words of the *Amida* slip from our tongues even if we cannot read Hebrew. We change them and suddenly the words become unfamiliar – we have to learn them all over again. But traditions shouldn’t be mindless; they shouldn’t be so fixed that we don’t think about what we are saying or whether we agree with them. The words of the prayer book should challenge us to think more deeply about who we are, how we live and what

God wants of us. Adding the *Imahot* is an opportunity to challenge ourselves and to look more deeply at our participation in Jewish life.

Let me end this morning with our *parshah*, *Bemidbar*. The book of Numbers begins with a national census. Tribe by tribe the Torah tells us how many men there are in each tribe, how many families and who were the leaders of the tribes. The purpose of this census was military. As the people prepared to enter the Promised Land, it was important to know how many men of drafting age there were. But in counting the men, the Torah presents us with a troubling image of community. This community is made up of men and not women. The women in ancient Israel were invisible. When the Torah tells us that 600,000 went out of Egypt it is telling us the number of adult men.

So what makes us a community? Shouldn't our community be measured in a way that is inclusive of men and women? Don't women contribute to the quality of our communal life? I remember someone in my early years in the Rabbinate cynically saying, "Of course I count women in the minyan: eleven, twelve, thirteen...." What about the first ten? Don't women, no less than men, make us a community? And if that is the case, then how do we acknowledge and celebrate their presence in Jewish life so we are less patriarchal and more inclusive??

These are important questions; questions with which we will wrestle for years to come. In negotiating the space between tradition and innovation we cannot be too quick to make decision or, for that matter, to forget where we come from. No one should be so arrogant as to think that he has a deeper understanding of our heritage than our ancestors. We are a work in progress and sometimes with the passage of time, we come to more deeply understand our traditions and way of life. If we cut ourselves off from the past than we lose an opportunity to hold on to our identity.

So listen carefully as we recite the *Amida* this morning. Listen to the names of Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. They were extraordinary women. And we are their children no less than we are the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They shaped Jewish life even if the Torah doesn't tell us a great deal about them. And as we say their names let us ask ourselves – what does God expect of me?

Shabbat Shalom