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Dissent to “Matriarchy Confronts Patriarchy”

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This paper was submitted, in February 2024, as a dissent to "Matriarchy Confronts Patriarchy: An Addendum to the March 3, 1990 CJLS Paper on Including the Names of the Matriarchs in the First Blessing of the Amidah and a new Pesak Halakhah," by Rabbi Joel Rembaum. Dissenting and concurring papers are not official positions of the CJLS.

Rabbi Joel Rembaum’s Teshuvah “Matriarchy Confronts Patriarchy,” an update to his 1990 Teshuvah “Including the Names of the Matriarchs in the First Blessing of the Amidah,” makes a number of compelling arguments. He responds convincingly to many of Rabbi Golinkin’s critiques of his earlier work, and puts the general practice of adding the names of the Matriarchs to the Amidah on more solid ground, but we have objections to particular aspects of his p’sak that prevent us from endorsing his teshuvah.

Rabbi Rembaum supports more than adequately his overall claim, that it is possible to make changes to the first blessing of the Amidah. We agree with his assessment that Maimonides’ Language in Mishneh Torah Hilkhoh Berakhot 1:5-6 that changing *berakhot* is acceptable only b’diavad, refers to changing the intrinsic formula of the *berakha* (“Barukh ata..”), rather than the specific language of any individual *berakha*.

Golinkin argues that Rambam, in MT Hilkhoh Tefillah 1:9 would prohibit any changes whatsoever to the first and last three *berakhot* of the Amidah. However, Rembaum brings compelling evidence that this is not the most accurate reading. As Rembaum notes, both Ma’aseh Rokeach, and Kesef Mishneh on 1:9 explain that Maimonides, in prohibiting changes to the first *berakhah* of the Amidah, is only referring to personal petitions, but that communal variations that are in keeping with the tone of the *berakhah*, are permitted. They both refer to MT, Hilkhoh Tefillah 2:19, where Rambam explicitly endorses changes that individual communities made to those *berakhot* for the Ten Days of Penitence. He permitted these changes even though they were not contemplated by the Talmud, and not adopted universally (though they now are very widely accepted) We would note that, in addition, it has also now become universally accepted to add piyyutim, even lengthy ones, into these *berakhot*. We therefore must concede that adding Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah to the body of the first *berakhah* is permitted *l’hathilah*.

However some of us feel strongly that the p’sak of the teshuvah, that the text currently found in the *Lev Shalem* siddurim should be the “principal text” of our movement, goes too far in several ways.

I. Making the new language mandatory.

The paper’s essential claim is the argument that there is an inherent flexibility in our liturgy. To require a new “orthodoxy” around this verbiage goes against this very premise. We are particularly concerned that, the teshuvah denigrates the traditional formulation that has withstood the test of time for as far back as the language of the Amidah is preserved, and, though it does not say so explicitly, it might be taken to strike it from future publications of our movement. A

siddur without the traditional language would drive many Conservative/Masorti synagogues to look at options from outside of our movement.

II. Aesthetic/Philosophical Concerns.

There are aesthetic arguments which are, by nature, a matter of taste, but which would argue against the change to the liturgy, or at the very minimum leave space for the original language to stand on equal footing.

1. The first *berakhah* of the Amidah is a pastiche of Biblical phraseology, so that every word or phrase has a Biblical source. So, for example, the phrase “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob” is drawn from Exodus 3:16, while the following phrase “the God, great, mighty and awesome,” is pulled from Deuteronomy 10:17. Our liturgy is frequently enthusiastic in creative re-editing and re-interpretation of its source materials, (for example, as Rembaum notes, dissecting the verses containing the 13 attributes to stop before “*poked avon avot*”). However, our tradition also understands that embellishments, even when well intentioned, are not always salutary. In particular there is a specific concern for “overdoing” it with additions to the first *berakhah* of the Amidah, as reflected in a story found in Berakhot 33b. A person recited the Amidah before Rabbi Hanina, and augmented the first *berakhah* with additional expressions of praise beyond those found in the Biblical text, and Rabbi Hanina scorned him.
2. The feminist aspect of the conversation adds a level of complexity. Rembaum disinters some of the most egregious examples of misogyny in rabbinic literature and liturgy. It is appropriate that our movement has rejected them. However, it is a huge stretch to say that the traditional formulation of first blessing of the Amidah falls into the same conceptual category as physical violence against a spouse. There are real questions of “representation.” Rembaum argues that liturgy cannot be said to be egalitarian if only male figures are represented. However, there are many other places where the liturgy is modified more organically in order to include a variety of role models. Representation, if taken to the extreme, can veer into tokenism. There is also a more fundamental question of whether as daveners we can only connect through the lens of role models of our own gender identity. While Rembaum’s arguments will resonate for many, there are many others who, while committed to egalitarian ideals, might prefer other ways to express those ideals in liturgy.

III. Issues with the specific mandated language

Another area where we disagree with Rembaum’s p’sak is his claim that, even for those who choose to add the *imahot*, only the specific language in *Lev Shalem* is acceptable *lehathila*. It is true that from a pragmatic perspective, in North America this question is somewhat settled for the time being. Our movement in North America has made a significant investment in printed siddurim with this language, and it is the most common language and even the *girsas d’yankuta* – the instinctive language of youth, for a generation of daveners in our movement who choose to include the *imahot*.

However, to the extent that future publications may (or already do, as in the case of *Va’ani Tefilati*) offer variant formulations, or individual communities may choose their own practice, we have several concerns about the specified language. The most serious are centered on the

hatimah, the concluding phrase of the blessing, and the mandate that it be updated to include “*u’foked Sarah*.” but there are others as well:

1. While our tradition allows great flexibility in the internal language of *berakhot*, the *hatimot* are subject to greater rigor. So, for example, as Rembaum notes, TB Berakhot 12b, as codified in MT 2:18, requires specific changes to the third and 11th berakhot of the Amidah for the ten days of penitence. Rabbi Ethan Tucker in his article “Liturgical Change and Its Limits¹” notes two specific challenges to this change. One is that TB Pesachim 117b includes a specific idea that Abraham has a unique status, to the extent that neither Isaac nor Jacob are mentioned in the *hatimah*, and connects it to the midrashic premise that God made a covenant with Abraham that he would get the “last word” in this blessing. At the very least, if one were to take this into account, one would conclude “*Poked Sarah u’Magen Avraham*”). Furthermore, in TB Berakhot 49a, Rabbi Judah the Prince rules that a *hatimah* should not address two different topics. It is true that (as is noted in the Talmudic discussion that follows there) this dictum is often overridden due to competing concerns. For example, on a festival that coincides with shabbat, the *hatimah* for the middle blessing of the Amidah, and for the kiddush both conclude with the threefold language “*mekadesh hashabbat, Yisrael v’hazmanim*”- “who sanctifies the sabbath, Israel and the appointed times.” Nevertheless, there is a sense in which, barring a strong precedent, a singly focused *hatimah* would be preferable. One further issue that arises with the changed *hatimah* is that in a community where there are different practices, having different *hatimot* means a muddled amen from the community.
2. Golinkin and Rembaum both address to the question of the appropriateness of the verb root P.Q.D. to describe Sarah. We believe that the choice is infelicitous. In the past tense “*paqad*” does often have a positive resonance (as in Genesis 21:1, Exodus 3:16 and 4:31, I Samuel 2:21), but it sometimes has a negative one (Numbers 31:49, Isaiah 26:14.. The future tense can also have both positive and negative valence (cf Exodus 50:24-25, but also Isaiah 10:12, 13:). However the “*poqed*” present/infinitive form used in the revised siddur text is almost exclusively negative, referring to revisiting the consequences of sin (cf Exodus 20:5 and 34:7, Leviticus 18:25, 26:16, Numbers 14:18, Isaiah 13:11) Indeed, the text of the Va’ani Tefilati Masorti Siddur, which pays a particular attention to the sensitivity of native speakers of modern Hebrew, omits the word even as it mentions Sarah.
3. Another linguistic mandate that may be challenging to some is the assertion that when adding the matriarchs, they must be introduced with the phrase “*Elokenu v’elokei avoteinu v’imoteinu*,” adding the word for our mothers- *imhoteinu*, as is included in the language of the Lev Shalem. Interestingly, however, Lev Shalem does not translate “*v’imotenu*”, instead rendering the whole line: “our God and God of our **ancestors**, God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, God of Sarah, God of Rebecca, God of Rachael, and God of Leah”. While we recognize that some people hear “*avoteinu*” as “our fathers” and find it important to add “and our mothers”, others hear “*avoteinu*” as “our ancestors”, all of them, male and female alike. One claim sometimes made in favor

¹ <https://www.hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/liturgical-change-and-its-limits>

of saying “*v'imoteinu*” is that the average Israeli in the street hears “*avoteinu*” as fathers. While *v'imoteinu* is the language of the Israeli *Va'ani Tefilati*, we are not sure that this claim is accurate. For example, no one thinks that a *beit avot* is an old age home for men only.

Another argument in favor of saying “*v'imoteinu*” is that all throughout history, when people said this line, they were thinking “Our God and God of our fathers”. We do not believe that either. It is indeed likely that our ancestors would have translated “*avoteinu*” as “our fathers”. But we maintain that if they had been asked the question differently, they would have answered differently. If they had been asked “from whom did you learn about Judaism or about how to be Jewish” or “from whom did you learn about God”, we suspect that many Jews would have spoken about their mothers, grandmothers, and sisters, in addition to their fathers and (male) rabbis. They may have said “fathers”, but they meant “ancestors”.

We believe that adding “*v'imoteinu*” should remain an option, even a popular one, but that it should not be rendered mandatory.

Conclusions

In summary, Rabbi Rembaum has made a strong case that the inclusion of the matriarchs in the *Amidah*, is, in the abstract, a practice that can be justified within the Conservative/Masorti approach to liturgy. However, we cannot fully endorse the specific conclusions of his teshuvah because it does not leave sufficient space for those who continue to find meaning in the traditional liturgy and for those who wish to include the *imahot*, but have concerns with the specific phrasing found in the *Lev Shalem*, and might prefer the alternative language like that found the Masorti *Va'ani Tefilati*.