

# Regarding the Inclusion of the Names of the Matriarchs in the First Blessing of the עמידה

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## שאלה

May the names of the Matriarchs be included in the אבות blessing of the עמידה?

## תשובה

The Library *Minyan* of Temple Beth Am, a participatory and egalitarian congregation of observant Jews affiliated with the synagogue I serve, Temple Beth Am, has been studying and discussing the possibility of including the names of the Matriarchs in the אבות blessing of the עמידה. As מרא דאתרא of the synagogue, I was asked to render an opinion.

## The Liturgy is Flexible

I have investigated a number of halakhic sources (noted below) and have come to the conclusion that such a change is warranted. I suggest the following additions to the blessing: after אלוהי יעקב add the words, אלוהי אה, ואלוהי לאה, ואלוהי רחל, אלוהי רבקה, אלוהי שרה; after the term מלך עוזר add the word, ופוקד; and in the חתימה of the אבות blessing, after מגן אברהם add, ופוקד שרה. I consider this suggestion to be valid within the context of Conservative halakhic interpretation and theology. It is my feeling, however, that since this issue deals with the text of the central prayer of

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*The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly provides guidance in matters of halakhah for the Conservative movement. The individual rabbi, however, is the authority for the interpretation and application of all matters of halakhah.*

our liturgy, a prayer that is transpersonal and transcongregational, the opinion of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards should be sought.

While remaining within a framework established in Talmudic times, Jewish liturgy has retained a flexibility that has allowed it to be adjusted and adapted to the spiritual needs of different generations of Jews. A survey of various versions of the עמידה reveals that in the early post-Talmudic period the wording of a number of the blessing of the עמידה was considerably different from the language that eventually became standardized in the later Geonic period. The reader is referred to a fragment from the Cairo *Genizah*.<sup>1</sup> Especially striking is the language of the thirteenth blessing, with its emphasis on the righteous converts and the absence of references to the other categories of righteous individuals found in the later texts. And, an examination of the fourteenth blessing indicates that the tradition of the Palestinian Talmud is retained, and the splitting of the blessing into בונה ירושלים and קרן ישועה, reflecting the *Bavli* version, is ignored or not known. Compared to this sample of post-Talmudic/early medieval liturgy, the subsequent versions of the עמידה reflect considerable change, change that corresponded to the theological needs of later generations.

While it could be argued that this early text represents a transitional version that is too ancient to be considered in a discussion of later twentieth-century liturgical change, I hasten to add that we commonly refer to Talmudic precedents which are even older than these traditions. Furthermore, the Conservative movement's addition of the term בעולם to the *Sim Shalom* prayer harks back to the עמידה of Rabbi Sa'adia's *Siddur*, itself an early text which often differs from the later "standard" versions.<sup>2</sup>

A good example of the impact on liturgy of a significant theological development is Rabbi Sa'adia's reaction to the reference to the light that shines on Zion (אור חדש על ציון תאיר) in the conclusion to the יוצר prayer. Rabbi Sa'adia argued that since the prayer refers to the light of creation and not the light of the Messianic age, such an allusion is unacceptable. Rabbi Sherira, in his response to Rabbi Sa'adia's comment, noted that the reference has always been accepted in the academies and is appropriate for the prayer.<sup>3</sup> It appears as if the people's hopes for redemption overruled Rabbi Sa'adia's plea for ideological consistency. Rabbi Sa'adia's opinion did carry the day, however, in certain Sephardic communities where the phrase beginning, אור חדש על ציון תאיר, is still absent from the standard morning liturgy.<sup>4</sup> This indicates that Jewish liturgical tradition can, indeed, tolerate variations in the basic structure of communal prayer.

## Deviations from Fixed Language

Regarding the matter of deviating from the authorized wording of blessings, the reader is referred to Rambam's *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Berakhot* 1:6,<sup>5</sup> where Rambam indicates that should the worshiper deviate from the fixed language of a blessing (המטבע), the religious obligation associated with the blessing *has been fulfilled* as long as the blessing includes reference to God's ineffable name and his kingship (שם ומלכות) and its wording remains consistent with the established them (ענין) of the prayer. This principle is set forth in the same paragraph in which Rambam allows for the recitation of blessing in all languages. Traditions from *BT Berakhot* 40b and *Sotah* 32a-33a serve as the foundation for Rambam's legislation in these cases.

Admittedly, Rambam is ambiguous with regard to the matter of changing the established liturgy. Although in *Hilkhot Berakhot* 1:6 he allows for the possibility of modifying the language of the prayers, in the preceding paragraph<sup>6</sup> he states that one should not deviate from the versions of the blessings established by Ezra and his court, nor should one add to them or delete anything from them. One who changes the established version (מטבע) is in error. He expresses an even stronger negative opinion in *Hilkhot Kri'at Shema*, where he concludes that one who deviates from the מטבע must repeat the prayer. The *Kesef Mishneh* on *Hilkhot Berakhot* 1:5-6 offers the following resolution of these inconsistencies in Rambam's thinking.

The *Kesef Mishneh* (henceforth KM) distinguishes among four kinds of deviations to which Rambam alludes:

1) The clause in 1:5 beginning ראיך ראי... refers to a change which *fulfills* the religious obligation associated with the prayer but which is not recommended because it still is an unwarranted change. KM designates two kinds of changes which fall into this category:

a) One recites a blessing that conveys the essential concept of intent (מעין) of the established blessing but does so in words different from those of the authorized version.

b) One recites a blessing according to the version established by the sages but adds to it or deletes something from it.

2) When one changes a blessing to the degree that a specific reference to a divine act (e.g. ברכת המוציא) is replaced by a general reference to God's creation and no references to שם ומלכות are included in the blessing, the religious obligation has not been fulfilled.

3) When a general reference has replaced a specific reference, but שם ומלכות are included, though this can be considered an error (טעות), the religious obligation is, nevertheless, fulfilled.

4) The statement in *Hilkhot Kri'at Shema* 1:7, refers to a case where one deviated from the established rules regarding when a פתיחה or a

התימה is used with a given blessing. In such a case, the religious obligation has not been fulfilled, and the blessing must be repeated. KM concludes his comment on *Hilkhot Berakhot* 1:6 by emphasizing that the permissive statement of the Rambam in that paragraph is in a case where one has changed the wording of the blessing while retaining the basic theme and not altering its פתיחה or התימה structure.<sup>7</sup>

From this survey, one can conclude that the notion of liturgical variation is not rejected by Talmudic tradition. The Rambam and his commentators are tolerant of liturgical change as long as it takes place within certain normative parameters. The change that is being recommended in this paper falls within these parameters. The inclusion of references to the Matriarchs in the אבות blessing of the עמידה in no way changes the ענין of the prayer (see below). Other than these additions the language of the blessing, including references to שם ומלכות, remains unchanged, and the התימה-פתיחה structure of the blessing, required by virtue of its being the first in a sequence of blessings, remain intact.

## **RA Liturgical Innovations**

The Rabbinical Assembly has, itself, instituted changes in the liturgy that are more radical than the additions to the אבות prayer suggested above. Rabbi Morris Silverman's removal of the term ואישי ישראל from the *Avodah* blessing of the עמידה in his *Sabbath and Festival Prayer Book* and the parallel shift in the *Siddur* from the future tense to the past tense in the language of מוסף עמידה references to sacrifices represent significant textural and ideological changes in the expression of Judaism's hopes for the messianic future.<sup>8</sup> These are far more extreme than the addition of references to the Matriarchs to the עמידה, since the latter do not negate the intent of the prayer, but rather reinforce it. (This will be discussed in greater detail below.) It should be noted that the Silverman *Siddur* anticipates the issue under discussion in this paper with its change in the Morning Blessings to שעשני בצלמו.<sup>9</sup> Given these changes, it would be hard to imagine how the modifications suggested in this paper could be considered objectionable.

## **Siddur Sim Shalom**

*Siddur Sim Shalom* has continued in the Conservative movement's tradition of evolutionary liturgical change. The additions to the חכנת paragraph of the Sabbath מוסף עמידה, for example, reinforce Judaism's historical Zionist yearnings and, at the same time, recognize the legitimacy of the worship of God wherever Jews may find themselves.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, *Siddur Sim Shalom* begins to address the issue under discussion

in this paper by including references to the Matriarchs in an English alternative to the weekday עמידה and in the שברך מי שברך prayers recited when the Torah is read and with the inclusion of the term בַּת חוּרֵיךְ in the Morning Blessings.<sup>11</sup>

The inclusion of the names of the Matriarchs in the אבות blessing is consistent with the traditions of the Bible, normative Jewish theology and the theme of the first paragraph of the עמידה. In the Genesis accounts the Matriarchs function as significant factors in the unfolding of the covenant between God and the Israelite nation. The אבות blessing functions as an affirmation of the covenantal bond between God and His people, and, given the Matriarchs' role in the development of that relationship, allusion to them in this blessing is most appropriate. Jewish tradition already has recognized within the liturgy the significance of this matriarchal role in the selection of the account of God's remembering Sarah<sup>12</sup> as the Torah reading for the first day of ראש השנה. Continuing in this vein, the addition of the term ופוקד שרה to the conclusion of the אבות blessing is an important reinforcement to a prayer that highlights this unique covenantal bond. (Such an addition would also be consistent with the Hebrew style of the אבות blessing. The term מגן אברהם is a derivative of the use of the root מגן found in Genesis 14 and 15. Similarly, the term ופוקד is a derivative of the root פקד found in Genesis 21.)

## CONCLUSION

Because the *Siddur*, perhaps more than any other compilation of Jewish religious expression, has embodied the ideas that have both shaped and reflected the deepest beliefs and concerns of our people, significant ideological and communal developments and trends have always been represented in our prayers. In a generation when women are assuming a more significant role in the religious life of the Conservative Jewish community, it is appropriate that the prayer that expresses the unity, commitment and lofty aspirations of the Jewish people, the עמידה, be modified so that it can speak to all members of our congregations, male and female alike. The inclusion of the names of the Matriarchs in the אבות blessing of the עמידה is permissible and recommended.

## NOTES

1. I. Heinemann, והאמוראים והתנאים בתקופת התפילה from the Cairo Genizah, p. 24, m. 15.
2. Jules Harlow, *Siddur Sim Shalom*, p. 120. Assaf and Joel Davidson, *Siddur R. Saadja Gaon*, p. 19.

3. Assaf and Joel Davidson, *Siddur R. Saadja Gaon*, p. 37, and see note to line 6.
4. *Siddur Or Vi-Derekh Ha-Shalem*, pp.81-82
5. *Hilkhhot Berakhot* 1:6.
6. *Hilkhhot Berakhot* 1:5.
7. The *Hagahot Maymoniot*, ad loc, also allows for the possibility of changing the wording of blessings. This opinion is based on the discussion in the *Yerushalmi*, *Berakhot* 6:2.
8. Morris Silverman, *Sabbath and Festival Prayer Book*, pp.141, 143.
9. Morris Silverman, *Sabbath and Festival Praryer Book*, p. 45.
10. Jules Harlow, *Siddur Sim Shalom*, p. 434.
11. Jules Harlow, *Siddur Sim Shalom*, pp. 10, 232, 402.
12. Genesis 21.