

# MISPLACED MATRIARCHS

## A Pedantic Message from Rabbi Tilsen

The modern version of the opening blessing of the Amida used in some Reform and Reconstructionist *siddurim* (prayer books) and *mahzorim* (festival prayer books) is now an unwelcomed and confusing option in Conservative prayer books, which are otherwise among the finest available. Before presenting the problem, let us review the place of this blessing and its history of development.

The *medial* blessings of the Amida were formulated at the end of the first century of the common era in rabbinical conclaves with the understanding that individuals were free to elaborate on the basic text. This invitation to personalization is expressed in our Siddur Sim Shalom, for example, in the added elaboration to the prayer for healing. More widely known are the many additions of *piyyutim* (poems) for Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur, most medieval or ancient but different in each edition.

However, the *opening* paragraph of the Amida, often referred to as the “Avot” (ancestors) blessing based on a key word, is a carefully constructed literary unit based on ancient texts. By rabbinic rule, its language and that of two following blessings cannot be changed, in part so that it can remain a universal element unifying the Jewish People and expressing core ideas, and in part because it is not intended as a place for individual expression or petition. The long-standing exceptions to this rule are phrases such as “*zokhrenu le-hayim*” added or substituted on the Yamim Noraim (Days of Awe), and the seasonal variations “*mashiv ha-ruah*” (winter) or “*morid ha-tal*” (summer). Beyond those, no change was allowed to these

blessings.

In the twentieth century, the overwhelming need to recognize and elevate the status of women in Jewish civilization impelled the Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, to endorse what had become a popular practice in our communities of adding the names of the matriarchs Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah to this blessing. While we may debate the choice of name order or even the merits of *these* four women instead of Miriam, Ruth, Mikhal or Esther, or even Bilhah and Zilpah for that matter, this wording was the only one approved by



the Chancellor and has become the most widely used, preserving the value of the commonality of the liturgy while elevating the status of women for good reason.

The particular wording that appears in our *Siddur Sim Shalom* reflects a very common traditional formulation of matriarchs, that is, *these* four in *this* order. While calling the God of Israel “God of Sarah” or “God of Rebecca” has a sound basis in the Biblical text and the common midrash, the equation of the God of Israel to “God of Rachel” and “God of Leah” is somewhat dubious. Nevertheless, for literary, historical and perhaps ideological reasons, this formula is standard and there is no permission in our communities to deviate from it.

To this point, all is well and good.

The offending phrase inserted in some modern prayerbooks is the misplaced word “*ve-immoteinu*,” “our matriarchs.” Remarkably, the otherwise fine Conserva-

Continued on **Page 16**

### Misplaced Matriarchs

Continued from **Page 15**

tive *Mahzor Lev Shalem* has this insertion in the Hebrew (“ve-elohei avoteinu ve-immoteinu”) but not in the English (which reads “and God of our ancestors”), and demarcated by square brackets. The word, as misplaced here, is either a grammatical monstrosity or a radically heretical theological claim. Here is why this is so:

The blessing as we have it, including the names of the four matriarchs, is presented here phrase by phrase, in English; those who know the Hebrew probably know it by heart.

Blessed are  
You  
Adonai  
our God  
and God of our forebears (Heb. avoteinu)  
God of Abraham  
God of Isaac  
And God of Jacob  
God of Sarah  
God of Rebecca  
God of Rachel  
And God of Leah.

This formulation repeats the word “God of...” because that is simply the most elegant Hebrew style, and perhaps one might say it means to teach us that even though our ancestors experienced God very differently from one another, we are still talking about the same God (or the same “idea” or “thing”). It places each reference to God in apposition, that is, it places them as equals, making it clear that they refer to the same thing (i.e. the same God).

The problematic and incorrect insertion in the Hebrew renders the phrase “Elo—heinu ve-lo-hei avoteinu ve-immoteinu.” The only way this can be construed in Hebrew (at least if we have any rules of language, and certainly in the register of Hebrew used in the liturgy, not to mention Bible and other literature), has “ve-immoteinu” in apposition:

...  
Adonai  
our God  
and God of our forebears  
and our mothers  
God of Abraham ...

After 3,000 years (or at least 2,000), we have resurrected the Mother Goddess, or Adonai’s consort Ashera, or perhaps adopted a new form of ancestor worship.

It says, “Adonai = our God = God of our forebears = our mothers = God of Abraham.” That is because the *semikhut* (conjoined noun form) in Hebrew allows only a single word or unit as the *somekh* (element to which the prior word or term, called the *nismakh*, is attached). If one can find an acceptable *somekh* with more than one word, it surely does not include an attached pronoun (the “—einu” ending). Yo bro I am talking about proper Hebrew, not Tel Aviv slang or some Aramaic pidgin.

The author might have meant to say “God of our Patriarchs and Matriarchs,” but Hebrew normally does not form *semikhut* (conjoined word series) in this way. Even if one were to accept this unlikely construction as legitimate, the most normal way to construe it is as I have presented it, equating God and our mothers.

In *Mahzor Lev Shalem*, two versions of the opening blessing of the Amida are presented, side-by-side. On the left side, the blessing includes the names of the four matriarchs, and has the word “ve-immoteinu” surrounded by square brackets. It is possible that a reader might interpret the brackets that surround the word “ve-immoteinu” to mean “substitute this word for the previous word” or as a commentary, or an optional addition or an addition required just on certain occasions (such as Shabbat). Unfortunately, siddurim use parentheses and brackets in inconsistent and sometimes convoluted and confusing ways.

If the brackets are construed to indicate an optional substitution, the word would by no measure improve the blessing, and would mean taking away an important and well-established idea: It would remove reference to non-female ancestors other than the three named. Surely no one intended that.

As a practical level, having the unexplained option of a word in brackets, even more than the two side-by-side options, wreaks havoc in a community such as ours where any one of dozens of individuals may serve as *shaliach tsibur* (prayer leader). Synagogue etiquette and *halakha* (law) demand that the leader use the text set before him or her by the congregation. This text, with multiple options, some of which would be “wrong” by all accounts (such as substitution instead of addition), and some of which would be the

Continued on **Page 17**

### Misplaced Matriarchs

Continued from Page 16

wrong choice for the particular community, guarantees error and conflict surrounding what is by all accounts a central passage in the liturgy, no matter how hard the rabbi or conductor may try to offer clear directions.

Even if one were to say “let the grammar be damned,” the phrase suffers an additional problem. The word “*avot*” (with the attachment “-einu” making it “our”) means “ancestor, forebear, principal,” and can be used for inanimate things that serve as a base or category head (as in “*avot melakha*,” “categories of labor”), as well as the more narrow meaning “father.” In rabbinic literature, the word “*avoteinu*” is sometimes applied to the list of matriarchs alone, without males, demonstrating that the term is meant in its generic sense. The position of the word before a long list of appositives (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob; Ha-El, etc.) further indicates that it is probably not meant to merely introduce a list of specifics but rather stands on its own.

So even if we understood the phrase as a mutant *semikhut* form, we might initially construe it as “God of our forebears and matriarchs,” suggesting that our matriarchs are not a subset of our forebears but rather a distinct group. Alternatively, if this forces us to disambiguate “*avoteinu*” as “patriarchs,” then it would lead us to so understand other occurrences of the word in the liturgy, that is, to understand “*avoteinu*” in the limited sense of “patriarchs” excluding matriarchs, which would be both inconsistent with the generally accepted meaning and utterly counter to the purpose of including the matriarchs in the first place. Adding the matriarchs here causes them to be ejected in every other place the word “*avoteinu*” occurs.

The result of this awkward and incorrect wording is to

force readers to say, “the phrase ‘our matriarchs’ doesn’t belong here” – suggesting “our matriarchs don’t belong here” -- precisely the opposite of the editors’ presumed intent.

While the grammar offered in this new version of the prayerbook is wrong, there is of course a way to correctly state what might have been the intent. One would simply add the word “God of”:

our God  
God of our forebears / patriarchs  
and **God of** our matriarchs

This alternative, while grammatically correct, still suffers from the problem of interpretation described above. The mahzor *On Wings of Awe* to its credit does in fact use this grammatically correct formulation, but blows it later in the paragraph by adding the same word in another phrase where it is grammatically impossible or very clumsy, “*hasdei avot ve-immahot*” and makes the same grammatical mistake in another insertion later.

The better way to attain a worthy outcome is to leave the opening blessings of the Amida as they are, which include the names of the four matriarchs, and add references to our female historical leaders and role models elsewhere in the liturgy where their placement might enhance the liturgy and in ways that are grammatically correct and sensitive to the literary quality and style. Happily, there are a number of such places just waiting for the arrival of these women like a traveler watching for lost luggage. While the opening blessing of the Amida holds an elevated place in our liturgy, the insertion here is tantamount to tokenism, and in any case, we assert, the desired result could be better obtained by using our tradition’s “binders full of women” and sprinkling them generously throughout.



### Book of Life

Sisterhood is honoring Carole & Paul Bass as 2014 Book of Life honorees. Book displayed in lobby; inscriptions \$18 from Sisterhood.

### Rabbi’s Annual Report

Rabbi Tilsen’s Annual Report for 2014 (July 2013 – June 2014) is available at [www.beki.org/tilsen/annual14.pdf](http://www.beki.org/tilsen/annual14.pdf) and in the literature rack

in the lobby. The report supplements the reports of synagogue committees and describes highlights, progress and challenges of the past year. It also offers occasional prospective comments.