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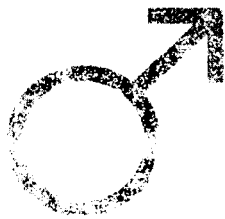
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# DEGENDERING DOESN'T WORK: A PLEA FOR EQUAL CELEBRATION

by Leonard Gordon



THE CONSERVATIVE Movement prayer-book that almost all of us remember from our youths and that many of us still use (affectionately called the “Silverman”) assumed that the praying Jew was male, that divinity is male, and that our collective ancestors were male. The *siddur* referred to members of the congregation “and their wives”; God was always He, and He played male roles such as Lord, Father, or King; and the only ancestors identified in the *Amidah* were Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

With the publication of *Siddur Sim Shalom* in 1985, Conservative Judaism recognized that our world had changed in important ways, and that these social changes would have to find expression in a changed liturgy. In keeping with the Conservative Movement’s commitment to gradualism, and the status of feminism within Judaism in 1985 — coincidentally, the year in which Amy Eilberg, the first Conservative woman rabbi, was ordained — *Siddur Sim Shalom* took a moderate approach to change. In some instances, references to a female presence in Judaism were added in English translations; in others, male gender markers were removed.

Indeed, the general tendency during the 1980s was to “degender” the liturgy whenever possible and add occasional references to notable

women of our past (the matriarchs in *Siddur Sim Shalom*, Miriam in the Rabbinical Assembly *Haggadah*). When we look at the effects of those revisions now, however, we discover that rather than moving the liturgy towards greater inclusiveness, we have instead reinforced gender stereotypes and distanced the Conservative Movement from the dynamic energy of Jewish liturgical renewal.

## I. THE GENDER OF THE PRAYING JEW

In the prayer for the Congregation in the *Silverman siddur* (p. 128), we read:

*May He who blessed our fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, bless the people of this congregation... them, their wives, their sons, their daughters and all their dear ones.* (Emphasis added.)

This prayer assumes that the congregational Jew is male and has a wife and children. The prayer’s language precludes the wife from being among “the people of the congregation.” This assumption is further reinforced in the notes at the end of the *siddur*, in precisely the passage explaining the change that removed the blessing: “Blessed art Thou . . . Who has not made me a woman” from the morning liturgy. The editor comments (p. 381):

*The Preliminary Blessings are part of the benedictions which the Jew offers in gratitude for the gift of the Torah and for the opportunities to perform its precepts. This fact explains why the Jew felt impelled to bless God for not having made him a heathen, a slave, or a woman.* (Emphasis added.)

This note was written for a world in which men were at the center and women existed at the margins of public Jewish life. *Siddur Sim Shalom* (p. 415) changes “their wives” to “their families,” replacing the Hebrew “wives” with the term “and all that is theirs.” In the *siddur’s* note on the change in the morning benediction (p. xxii), we are told:

*Three of the early morning blessings were also modified, to praise God for having created each individual in His image, as a free person, and as a Jew,*

# Degendering Liturgy Two

*Editor’s Note: As women take on more active roles in Conservative Jewish life — whether as rabbis or as synagogue presidents — we grow increasingly aware of logistical concerns that will need to be addressed. One issue that has received a good deal of attention is*

*rather than to express gratitude for not having been created a woman, a slave, or a non-Jew . . .* (Emphasis added.)

Our new *siddur* fails to note the marginal position of women in classical Jewish prayer, and it avoids the critical question of whether or not women are equally created in His image.

## II. THE GENDER OF THE DIVINE

Neither *Silverman* nor *Sim Shalom* rewrite the Hebrew text of the liturgy or its English translation to re-imagine the gender of divinity. *Sim Shalom* does include, however, non-gender-exclusive versions of the *Amidah* prayers for Sabbaths, Festivals, and weekdays. These alternatives, presented without Hebrew versions, are clearly named as reflections of “contemporary concerns and attitudes” (p. xxiv), a marker in the Conservative tradition for concession to change rather than more authentic developments based on traditional models (contrast the note on the revised *Tahanun*, p. xxv).

## III. THE GENDER OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE: PAST AND PRESENT

The classical liturgy, as reflected in *Silverman*, refers to the patriarchs as our ancestors and contains numerous references to such figures as Moses and David and other male biblical heroes. In its “Supplementary Readings,” *Silverman* adds

*continued on page 16*



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references to Jewish women under such headings as "A Woman of Valor," "The Jewish Mother," and "Women in Israel." One especially noteworthy reference to Jewish women can be found in the readings on "Israel's Martyrdom" (p. 291):

*When studying the documents referring to Israel's times of agony, I was struck by the fact that women proved themselves more heroic than the men; and at many a critical moment, it was the desperate courage and the conscience of the women which decided in favor of martyrdom.*

*Sim Shalom*, on the other hand, avoids any readings in praise of women, and the catalogue of sources for the book's readings contains only a handful of readings by women (one of which is "America the Beautiful" by Katherine Lee Bates).

In the alternative *Amidot* of *Siddur Sim Shalom*, the matriarchs are added to the names of their respective husbands, but as Lori Lefkowitz has pointed out in "Made According to His Desire: The Prayers of Woman and the Fears of Man": "Such changes miss the fact that heroines are not parallel to heroes. Sarah is not a female Abraham, and Rachel and Leah do not add up to Jacob" (*Kerem* [1] 1992/93, p. 60). The only

women added to our prayers are heroines because of the status of their husbands, and their stories focus exclusively on life in the tents of Ancient Israel. These images provide our children with only the most traditional gender role models.

#### IV. AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH

*Siddur Sim Shalom* has taken important steps to "degender" the liturgy, removing exclusively male usages for the Divine in its alternative *Amidot*, removing stereotypical references to women as wives and mothers from its readings and meditations, and adding the female partners to some lists of Israel's first families. Nevertheless, these measures miss the point of the liturgical change most needed in many Conservative communities: to re-gender the liturgy as female and male in accordance with the egalitarian vision of the first creation story in Genesis in which "male and female created God them."

As we think about how to make different kinds of changes with regard to gender in our next editions of the *siddur*, I recommend that we pay attention to the diversity of images for God as they change according to the cycles of Judaism, varying with the rhythms of the Sabbath and holidays. On the High Holidays, we imagine God as Ruler, King, Judge, Father, dispenser of

rewards and punishments. By contrast, on Friday night, the Divine enters our homes in female imagery, as beloved bride, lover, and nurturer. Neither image is complete in and of itself, but both of these deeply physical and gendered sets of images need affirmation as they respond to our varying moods and sense of ourselves.

The terms "gender," "sex," and "sexuality" and the relationship among these terms are complicated. Surely, we sometimes need to remove bias by eliminating gender-exclusive language. But sometimes, this effort is misguided in that we assimilate all gender difference to male norms. Women become eligible for the Conservative rabbinate, for example, by "taking on" traditionally male obligations, a position that divides women from one another by creating two classes of women in our communities.

On the other hand, it would be appropriate to recognize specifically female and male biological differences in our liturgy and ritual with prayers, for example, for the onset of menses, at childbirth, at weaning, and at menopause. Simple formulas for "degendering" are counterproductive. No formula can effectively be applied to simplify what must be a sustained, thoughtful, and constantly renewed effort to maintain a liturgy that is authentic, beautiful, meaningful, and true to the range of human experience and religious needs.

By way of example, *Kol Haneshamah* — the experimental *siddur* for the eve of *Shabbat* produced in 1989 by the Reconstructionist Movement — interweaves traditional and contemporary liturgy, creating a gender-balanced service that recognizes the spiritual needs and different historical experiences of female and male worshippers. The most characteristic feature of this *siddur* is its rendering of God's name. Each mention of the tetragrammaton in Hebrew finds a different translation in the English that reflects the multiple nature of our responses to the Divine in life. While numerous gendered images are used, the pronoun "He" is excluded.

This *siddur* points out the task before us. Degendering the liturgy is not possible; we cannot express our relationship to God except in terms of our experiences as Jewish women and men, and in terms of the historical experience of the Jewish people, which has been different for Jewish women and men. Degendering the liturgy will desensitize us to the rich and personal experiences that bring us to prayer, and further alienate us from our bodies, female and male, the cycles of which determine so much in our lives. ®

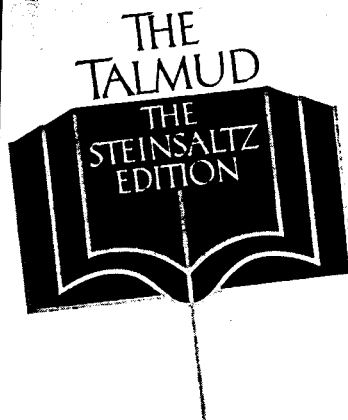
*Rabbi Gordon, a member of the Rabbinical Assembly, is director of the newly formed Havurah of Greater Columbus.*

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