

Is it Time to Include the Matriarchs?



In November I spoke with the Divine Service Committee (DSC) about including the Matriarchs in the first paragraph of the *Amidah* during *Shabbat* and Holiday services. I shared with the committee two diverging opinions in our Movement. I also indicated

that there would be several occasions when we would use the Matriarchal inclusion as a way to gauge the sentiment of the congregation. After that, I would make a recommendation to the DSC and to the Board of the Congregation as to how we should proceed.

One of those dates for trying the inclusion of the Matriarchs will be coming up on February 4. In this article I will summarize my presentation to the DSC so that you will be able to understand the issues. I hope you will be in attendance on February 4, and will share your opinion with me as to how we should proceed liturgically based on your experience and the issues I discuss below.

The first paragraph of the *Amidah*, the essential prayer and focal point of each of our daily prayer services, is known as *Avot*, Ancestors. It affirms and grounds our faith in God as initiated by the generations of the earliest Jews. In the traditional text, only the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are referenced. However, many modern prayer books, including the newer *Siddurim* of the Conservative Movement, offer an option to include the Matriarchs Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. While I have no statistics, my sense is that the inclusion of the Matriarchs is being accepted increasingly by congregations in our Movement.

When I edited *Seder Avodah* in 2008 for our 150th Anniversary, I decided that it was important to have the option of including the Matriarchs in our prayer book. At that time, I wrote in the Preface that should our congregation decide to include the Matriarchs “in the near, or more distant, future... the *Siddur* is ready and usable for that purpose.”

The option to include the Matriarchs is articulated in a paper approved by the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly, which is the deciding body in our Movement on matters of Jewish Law, known as *Halachah*. The paper was authored by Rabbi Joel Rembaum and was approved in 1990.

Rabbi Rembaum argues that this type of change is *halachically* permissible, and makes two salient points.

First, that “In the Genesis accounts the Matriarchs function as significant factors in the unfolding of the covenant between God and the Israelite nation.” In this way, he demonstrates a historical foundation for the assertion made in the prayer that these Ancestors, male and female, were each essential parties to the covenant, and each made significant contributions to the transmission of the covenant from generation to generation.

Rabbi Rembaum’s second point speaks to the symbolism of adding the Matriarchs for contemporary and future generations. He writes: “In a generation when woman 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 *Amidah*, be modified so that it can speak to all members of our congregations, male and female alike.” With the change in liturgy, therefore, it becomes a symbol of the reality of inclusion, and affirms it, not only in practice, but in foundational theory.

The argument against including the Matriarchs in the *Avot* prayer is made by Rabbi David Golinkin, a leader of the Rabbinical Assembly in Israel, in a paper he issued in 2007. Rabbi Golinkin acknowledges the changes in recent decades that have resulted in the inclusion of women on an equal footing with men in our movement. But that, and our feelings to further the sense of egalitarianism, he argues, may not be enough to make this change in a prayer that dates back at least 2,000 years. Rabbi Golinkin argues that one must also “prove that this is permissible from a *halakhic* point of view and appropriate from a liturgical and theological point of view.”

Rabbi Golinkin’s argument on the former point, the permissibility of changing the text of the first paragraph of the *Amidah*, and particularly the closing blessing, is very technical and beyond the scope of this brief article. Suffice it to say that he concludes that from the perspective of Jewish law it is not permissible to change the ancient formulation of this fundamental prayer as Rabbi Rembaum recommends.

Moreover, he finds the change inappropriate on historical and theological grounds. He contends that the Sages who formulated the blessing reflected “a fundamental belief of the entire Bible — that God made a covenant with the Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” and not with their spouses. It was the Patriarchs who were charged with the perpetuation of the nation and its faith. Even though the ancient Sages “created” the very concept of a Matriarchal grouping, which does not appear as a concept in the Bible, and praised them for their role, they did not include

them in this blessing “because *Avot* deals with the plain meaning of the (Biblical) text and they did not want to rewrite history.” To include the Matriarchs in this prayer would be historically inaccurate and revisionary.

Rabbi Golinkin does acknowledge the contemporary desire to create a more inclusive liturgy, and endorses other possible variations that would highlight the Matriarchs, just not the one currently in use since the Rembaum responsum was approved.

I know this must seem dense to many of you. But the crux of the issue is this. Should we embrace the inclusion of the Matriarchs at all of our services as a matter of course, which is a change from our current practice, or continue what we have been doing, referencing only the Patriarchs in the Ancestors paragraph? The argument for inclusion is that this change is *halachically* permissible, affirms the role of the Matriarchs in the ancient foundation of our people and faith, and will be a significant symbol for generations of women to know that they have a place of equality as did the Matriarchs. The argument against it is that there is a *halachic* barrier to the change, and that it would create a prayerful affirmation that is historically inaccurate. In this view, while the goal is admirable, other means must be found to affirm Judaism’s continuing evolution into an egalitarian religion.

Of course there is also one other issue, somewhat simpler, and that is our comfort with a tradition that we are used to. That is totally subjective, but not insignificant.

I hope to see you on February 4. While I have formed my own opinion on this issue, rather than present it now, I first want to hear what you think. There is a principle in rabbinic tradition that we try to understand the will of the people as we figure out what our proper path is. In that spirit, let me know what you think about the experience and about the arguments I have reviewed in this article. Stop me and let’s have a conversation. Send me an email or a letter.

Then we will find out if the time for changing the *Amidah* at AJ has arrived.

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