

Female Sages and Adding the Imahot¹

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Prologue

In the short speech I gave on the occasion of my receiving *semikhah* from Yeshivat Maharat, I suggested that ordination of women as rabbis represents a paradigm shift that calls for the reformulation of the *mesorah* not only as *Pirkei Avot*, but also as *Pirkei Imahot*. As such, I offered a new formulation of the things that sustain the world, not just three things, corresponding to the *avot* (the three forefathers), as seen in *Pirkei Avot* 1:2 and 1:18, but four, corresponding to the *imahot* (the four foremothers).² I offered these four things in an effort to highlight what has changed with the advent of women's learning, teaching, and leadership, and how these changes ought to inform Jewish leadership and decision making going forward:

על ארבעה דברים העולם עומד: על הלימוד, ועל האהבה, ועל שוויון ושלמות.

The new world of Jewish women's spiritual and halakhic leadership stands:

- a. *Al halimmud*, on learning: Women's Torah learning has transformed everything in ways that we have only begun to appreciate. By this, I

1. Many thanks to my *teshuvah* advisor R. Ysoscher Katz for his incisive and helpful feedback and suggestions; to R. Dov Linzer for the *teshuvah* writing workshop that helped initiate this project; to my *hevruta*, R. Lindsey Taylor Guthartz and my life and learning partner, Daniel Feit, who each helped me incubate its fundamental arguments.
2. I will note that there is a strain in rabbinic literature that enumerates six foremothers so as to include Bilhah and Zilpah, and draws an analogy between these six mothers, the six days of creation, and the six orders of the Mishnah. See for example *Bamidbar Rabbah* 12, *Shir Hashirim Rabbah* 6, *Esther Rabbah* 1.

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mean that critical masses of women have developed the knowledge and assumed the spiritual leadership powers that enable them, for the first time in history, to contribute substantively to the liturgical and legal discourse and its communal implications.

- b. *Al ha'ahavah*, on love: Love is at the center of our daily liturgical declarations of faith — *ואהבת את ה' אלוהיך* — and at the center of our ethical convictions — *ואהבת לרעך כמוך*. And yet it appears on neither of the prior Pirkei Avot lists of sustaining values. One contribution that feminist psychology, theory and women's leadership and teaching can offer is the restoration of love to the primary place that it ought to occupy in our religious consciousness: love of God, love of Torah, love of family, and love of humanity.
- c. *Al shivyon*, on equality: The first chapter of the Torah teaches that all human beings are created *Betselem Elokim*, in the image of God. Longstanding trends in human society and in *halakha* have militated against the promulgation of that divinely ordained value. The full enlistment of women in Jewish leadership, decision making, and spirituality bring us closer to the actualization of that principle of equality and fundamental human dignity.
- d. *Va'al shlemut*, on wholeness: If God is often presented in *midrashic* tradition as *Hamelekh she-hashalom lo*, the King whose domain is peace; or in the *Amidah* liturgy, as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to the exclusion of the founding foremothers of our nation, the feminine noun *shleimut* urges us to consider the *Havaya she-hashleimut lah* — the Divine Being defined by wholeness and inclusivity. The principle of *shleimut* urges us in our current moment, where we see more and more women entering the ranks of Jewish leadership and scholarship, to develop a more inclusive theology, liturgy, social view, and religious practice that stands for true wholeness and inclusivity in our community and in the world.

I mention all of this as an overture to the following consideration of liturgical change and the desire to see women's voices in Orthodox liturgy, beginning with the addition of the *imahot* in the thrice-daily *Amidah* liturgy. In addressing this issue, as a newly-minted Orthodox rabbi, one who has over the past three years attended daily *minyan* and confronted, viscerally and painfully, the utter absence of women's voices in our *siddurim*, I consider it important to

approach this question in terms of the precedents provided by tradition but also with an awareness of what tradition has yet to actualize. My hope in presenting these core values of learning, love, equality, and wholeness, principles that arise from our tradition but that have not yet been adduced as core values or as *halakhic* meta-principles, is to call attention to the absent perspective and contributions of חכמות (female scholars) in the formulation of the מטבע שטבעו חכמים — the liturgical coinage fashioned and stamped by the (male) scholars of our past. The plain fact is that half the community was unrepresented in the process and the substance of the original coinage, not to mention in the centuries-old conversation about liturgy that ensued. Women’s perspectives are needed both to offer new interpretations of traditional sources on Jewish liturgy and to suggest alternative coinages.

As such, I begin with contemporary, women-centered readings of two Talmudic sources.

בו לא כיזבו בו: You Should Not Speak Falsely About God

The first source, from BT Yoma 69b, deals specifically with liturgical change:

והא דרב מתנא מטייא לדרבא יהושע בן לוי דאמר רבי יהושע בן לוי למה נקרא שמן אנשי כנסת הגדולה? שהחזירו עטרה ליושנה. אתא משה אמר (דברים י, יז) האל הגדול הגבור והנורא אתא ירמיה ואמר נכרים מקרקרין בהיכלו. איה נוראותיו לא אמר נורא אתא דניאל אמר נכרים משתעי בדים בבניו איה גבורותיו לא אמר גבור אתו אינהו ואמרו אדרבה זו היא גבורת גבורתו שכוּבש את יצרו שנותן ארך אפים לרשעים ואלו הן נוראותיו שאלמלא מוראו של הקב"ה היאך אומה אחת יכולה להתקיים בין האומות. ורבנן היכי עבדי הכי ועקרי תקנתא דתקין משה אמר רבי אלעזר מתוך שידועין בהקב"ה שאמתי הוא לפיכך לא כיזבו בו.

This interpretation that Rav Mattana said corresponds with the opinion of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, who said: Why were the members of the Great Assembly called by that name? Because they returned God’s crown to its former glory. How so? Moses came and said in his prayer: “The great, the mighty, and the awesome God” (Deuteronomy 10:17). Jeremiah the prophet came and said: Gentiles are carousing in His sanctuary; where is His awesomeness? Hence he did not say “awesome” in his prayer: “The great God, the mighty Lord of Hosts, is His name” (Jeremiah 32:8). Daniel came and said: Gentiles are enslaving His children; where is His might? Hence he did not say mighty in his

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prayer: “The great and awesome God” (Daniel 9:4). The members of the Great Assembly came and said: On the contrary, this is the might of God’s might, conquering inclination in demonstrating patience toward the wicked. And God’s awesomeness is thus: Were it not for the awesomeness of the Holy Blessed One, how could one lone people survive among the nations? The Gemara asks: And the Rabbis, i.e., Jeremiah and Daniel, how could they do this and uproot an ordinance instituted by Moses, the greatest teacher, who instituted the mention of these attributes in prayer? Rabbi Elazar said: They did so because they knew of the Holy One Blessed be He, that He is truthful and hates a lie. Consequently, they did not speak falsely about God.

R. Joshua ben Levi’s teaching here deals with the *nusakh* of the Avot blessing and the notion of liturgical/historical truth, acknowledging that under certain historical circumstances, changes might need to be made to liturgy so as to make the prayer ring true. Here, a liturgical formula, attributed originally to Moses, is modified to represent contemporary reality, with the prophets Jeremiah and Daniel remade after the manner of the sages. The words **נורא** and **גבור** are removed from the Avot blessing in order to reflect the Jewish experience of exile and the felt reality of not having been protected by a purportedly awesome and courageous God. According to R. Joshua ben Levi, the greatness of the Men of the Great Assembly was that they found a way to restore the relevance of that original liturgical formula by reinterpreting the meaning of God’s **גבורה** and **מורא** for their time. Writing from a position of political powerlessness, they fashioned an alternative liturgical theology where the notion of manly (from the root **ג.ב.ר**) might was radically redefined as the capacity to conquer one’s “*yetser*” (inclination).³ The ostensible message of this Gemara is twofold: 1) respect for liturgical truth and the need, in some instances, to adapt the liturgical formula to historical, social or cultural experience and 2) concomitant respect for tradition that encourages creative exegesis to reframe or re-invigorate liturgical truth.

3. Cf. the statement attributed to Ben Zoma in Mishnah Avot 4:1, and the prooftext for this idea, from Mishlei 16:32 **מגיבור**, **טוב ארך אפיים**. It is worth noting, of course, that the verse in Proverbs pits “*gevurah*” (might) against the virtue of being slow to anger, whereas Ben Zoma and then Men of the Great Assembly, alike, redefined might as the capacity to conquer one’s inclinations, and this applies not just to Jewish men in the seemingly impotent condition of exile, but to God, too.

A feminist, *hakhamot*-centered perspective on this source yields additional insights. If Jeremiah and Daniel were noted for their liturgical honesty (and their belief that God upholds the truth), and the rabbis are praised for a radical reinterpretation that fashions an image of God after the image of exilic Jewish men, then these are useful precedents. Why should literate, committed, praying women — and anybody else who cares about theological and liturgical truth — not do the same, and renew the glory of the liturgy in light of the broader meaning of the *avot* as encompassing both the foremothers and the forefathers? The liturgical *matbe'a* ought not to be so hardened by *halakha* as to be unwilling to admit this more correct representation of Jewish history and of God. Indeed, although the Avot blessing is often placed in a category of inflexible blessings that one ought not amend, this Talmudic *midrash*, attributed to a third century Palestinian *amora*, accepts as fact that this blessing was repeatedly amended in preceding generations. Deletions were made to the blessing, despite its Mosaic provenance, and then, as a result of creative exegesis, the deleted portions were re-added. In short, the supposed inflexible blessing is not so inflexible after all.

There are those who might argue that this is an incorrect reading: that the men of the Great Assembly modeled a way to ensure the future relevance of the blessing through creative re-interpretation and that later *poskim* codified the blessing in its current form. I contend, however, that a useful analogy can be proposed between the deletions and additions made to the Avot blessing and the idea of adding the *imahot* to the same blessing. As we shall see below, rabbinic sources are rife with material on the *imahot*, their significance to the covenant, and their unique merit. Yet, somehow, all of this was omitted from the *matbe'a*, in effect impoverishing the liturgical picture of God's covenantal relationship with our ancestors, forefathers and foremothers alike. For a woman committed to the thrice-daily spiritual exercise of prayer to confront this exclusively masculine, limited *matbe'a* is to experience not merely a slight against the history and memory of the matriarchs but also against God and divine providence. As such, the current coinage might be construed as constituting a form of *בנינו בן*, a liturgical distortion of truth. If the Men of the Great Assembly restored the divine crown to its former glory by adding back divine might and awe-inspiration, so too, contemporary *hakhamim* and *hakhamot* might correct the theological and historical wrong of identifying God only with the forefathers by including Sarah, the founding first mother, along with Abraham, as objects of God's protection. In this sense, adding the *imahot* might be seen as a corrective redefinition of divine *gevurah* and *haganah* for our times.

כדי לעשות נחת רוח לנשים — In Order to Bring Spiritual Gratification to the Women

The second source, often invoked in discussions of the permissibility of women observing time-bound commandments to which they are considered exempt (even forbidden!), is BT Hagigah 16b:

מיתבי: דבר אל בני ישראל... וסמך, בני ישראל סומכין ואין בנות ישראל סומכות. רבי יוסי ורבי ישמעאל אומרים: בנות ישראל סומכות רשות. אמר רבי יוסי: סח לי אבא אלעזר: פעם אחת היה לנו עגל של זבחי שלמים, והביאנוהו לעזרת נשים, וסמכו עליו נשים. לא מפני שמכיחה בנשים – אלא כדי לעשות נחת רוח לנשים.

The Gemara raises an objection from a *baraita*: “Speak to the children of [*benei*] Israel...and place hands” (Leviticus 1:2, 4). This means that we learn that the sons [*benei*] of Israel place their hands, but the daughters of Israel do not; Rabbi Yose and Rabbi Yishmael say: It is optional for the daughters of Israel to place their hands. Rabbi Yose said: The Sage Abba Elazar told me that on one occasion, we had a calf for a peace-offering, and we brought it to the Women’s Courtyard, and women placed their hands on it. We did this not because there is an obligation of placing hands in the case of women, but **in order to offer spiritual gratification to the women.**⁴

In this Gemara, R. Yose in the name of R. Eliezer adduces a new principle: that there is value to departing from regular practice, even transgressing the law of a woman “performing work or activity on an animal that has been designated as *heqdash*,”⁵ in order to gratify the spiritual aspirations of women. The Gemara concludes that women were not required to perform the act of placing their hands on the sacrificial animal. Nevertheless, they were offered the spiritually pleasurable opportunity to do so. In other sources, most notably, in the commentary of the Rosh (R. Asher Ben Yehiel, 13th century) on BT

4. Rabbi Daniel Sperber discusses this source and concept as part of his presentation of the *halakhic* value and concept of *kevod habriyot* in *Darkah shel halakhah* (Jerusalem: Reuven Mass, 2007), p. 80–81.

5. See Judith Hauptmann’s discussion of this sugya in *Rereading the Rabbis* https://www.sefaria.org/Rereading_the_Rabbis%3B_A_Woman's_Voice%2C_10_Ritual.62?ven=Rereading_The_Rabbis:_A_Woman%27s_Voice._By_Judith_Hauptmann&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en.

Rosh Hashanah 4:7, this principle of bringing spiritual gratification to women is extended to a discussion of other *mitzvot*, too:

אין מעכבין את התינוקות מלתקוע הא נשים מעכבין והתניא אין מעכבין לא את הנשים ולא את התינוקות מלתקוע. אמר אביי לא קשיא הא ר' יהודה והא ר' יוסי ור"ש. דתניא בני ישראל סומכין ולא בנות ישראל סומכות דברי ר' יהודה ר' יוסי ור"ש אומרים נשים סומכות רשות והיה אומר ר"ת(צ) אע"פ שסתם תנא דמתני' כרבי יהודה הלכה כר' יוסי דנימוקו עמו *ואמרי' נמי בפרק המוצא תפילין (דף צו א) דמיכל בת שאול היתה מנחת תפילין. ואשתו של יונה היתה עולה לרגל. ומעשה רב. וכן ההוא עובדא דפרק אין דורשין (דף טז ב) הביאוהו לעזרת נשים וסמכו עליו נשים כדי לעשות נחת רוח לנשים. וגם היה אומר ר"ת דנשים יכולות לברך על מצות עשה שהזמן גרמא. אע"פ שהן פטורות ואין כאן משום ברכה לבטלה (רא"ש מסכת ראש השנה פרק ד' סימן ז)

One need not prevent children from sounding the shofar on Rosh Hashanah. Implied is that if women wish to sound the shofar, then one prevents them from doing so. But isn't it taught in a *baraita* that one doesn't prevent women or children from sounding the shofar on a Festival? Abaye answers: This is not a problem, as the mishnah is in accordance with the opinion of Rabbi Yehuda, while the *baraita* accords with Rabbi Yose and Rabbi Shimon. As it is taught in a *baraita*, "Speak to the children of Israel ... and place hands." This means that we learn that the sons [*benei*] of Israel place their hands, but the daughters of Israel do not, this is the statement of Rabbi Yehuda. Rabbi Yose and Rabbi Shimon say: It is optional for women, and one would say that even though the ruling in the Mishna typically goes with R. Yehuda, in this case, the ruling sides with R. Yose, as he provides reasoning. Furthermore it is said in the chapter of "He who finds Tefillin" [BT Eruvin 96a] that Mikhal, the daughter of Saul, would lay *tefillin*, and the Sages did not protest against her behavior, as she was permitted to do so. Similarly, the wife of Jonah would make the festival pilgrimage and the Sages did not protest against this practice. And this is a practice of a Rav [which would have a superior force in *halakha*]. Similarly, the case in Hagigah 16b, where they brought an animal to the woman's courtyard, and the women placed their hands on the animal, in order to spiritually gratify the women. Furthermore, Rabbeinu Tam teaches that women are permitted to make blessings on commandments that are time bound, even

though they are exempt, and there is no issue, in this regard, of saying a blessing in vain.⁶

By analogizing the case of the animal brought into the Women's Courtyard with the general category of time-bound ritual commandments from which women are exempt, the Rosh effectively extends the principle of *כדי לעשות נחה לנשים* beyond its original provenance to the notion of women's ritual involvement. Despite women's exemption from a whole category of mitzvot, the rabbis recognize women's spiritual yearnings and allow them to perform even those rituals from which they are exempt, and with a blessing! If this sensitivity to women's spiritual aspirations is demonstrated with regard to rituals from which women are exempt, how much more so should this principle extend to areas such as tefillah, where women are fully obligated in the same measure as men? As the Rambam teaches (Hilkhot Tefillah 1:2):

6. See Tosafot Eruvin 96a, which quotes Rabbeinu Tam as saying the following:

נשים סומכות רשות – מכאן אר"ת דמותר לנשים לברך על כל מצות עשה שהזמן גרמא אע"ג דפטור
רות כמו מיכל בת שאול שהיתה מסתמא גם מברכת

Here Rabbeinu Tam adduces the example of Mikhal the daughter of Saul in order to claim that women are permitted to say the blessing of “*asher kidshanu bemitsvotav*” when performing *mitsvot* that they are exempt from, even though some might claim that this constitutes a *berakhah levatalah*. Remarkably, Rabbeinu Tam simply asserts that Mikhal simply said these *berakhot*, as if there was nothing controversial in the act whatsoever. And even though Mikhal was an aristocrat, whose life differed from the regular run of women, her example is seen not as an exception but as proof that all women are permitted to recite such blessings. It is important to note that there is a strain in Ashkenazi *psak* that does not accept the permissibility of women laying *tefillin*. In his gloss on Shuklhan Arukh Orah Hayyim Hilkhot Tefillin 38:3, where R. Yosef Caro rules that women and slaves are both exempt from laying *tefillin*, the Rema adds as follows in the name of the 13th-14th century legal compendium, the Kol Bo: ואם הנשים רוצין להחמיר על עצמן מוחין על עזמן מוחין — If women wish to be stringent with themselves and to take on the *mitzvah* of *tefillin*, they should be stopped from doing so. The Mishna Berura explains this position on the basis of a notion that in order to wear *tefillin*, one must have a clean body (*guf naki*) and women are not generally careful about maintaining this sort of cleanliness, a view that seems to be connected to a form of menstrual taboo. For background sources for this strain in Ashkenazi thinking about women's bodies in relation to *tefillin* see the position of the Ri as presented in the commentary of the Tosafot on Eruvin 96b: “For in the matter of *tefillin* women and slaves are like minors who have not yet reached the age of educability, that if they want to lay them we do not allow them because it might disgrace the *tefillin*.”

לפיכך נשים וְעבדים חייבין בתפלה לפי שהיא מצות עשה שלא הזמן גרמא אלא חייב מצוה זו כך הוא שיהיה אדם מתחנן ומתפלל בכל יום ומגיד שבחו של הקדוש ברוך הוא ואחר כך שואל צרכיו שהוא צריך להם בבקשה ובתחנון ואחר כך נותן שבח והודיה לה' על השוכה שהשפיע לו כל אחד לפי כחו:

Accordingly, women and slaves are under an obligation to pray, this being a duty, the fulfillment of which is not time bound. The obligation in this precept is that every person should daily, according to his ability, offer up supplication and prayer; first uttering praises of God, then, with humble supplication and petition ask for all that he needs, and finally offer praise and thanksgiving to the Eternal for the benefits already bestowed upon him in rich measure.

Given women's full obligation⁷ to pray daily, with the attendant requirement to offer proper praise of God, should not some measure of *ruah* be extended to women to enable them to offer their praise in a spirit of truthfulness, sincerity, and dignity? Given the rabbis' demonstration of the principles of *ahavah*, *shivyon*, and *shleimut* through their willingness to depart from regular practice to show loving appreciation for women's spiritual strivings, ought we not attempt to act in a similarly inclusive and loving manner?⁸

7. In contrast to the Rambam who insists on women's full obligation in *tefillah*, the Magen Avraham (R. Avraham Gombiner, 1635–1682) in Shulkhan Arukh Orah Hayyim 106:2 argues that women are obligated but not to the same extent as men. He writes that according to the Rambam, women are biblically commanded to pray, but “biblically, it is sufficient to recite one prayer a day, in any formulation that one wishes. Therefore, most women have the practice of not praying regularly, because immediately after washing their hands in the morning they say some request, and this is biblically sufficient, and it is possible that the sages did not extend their obligation any further. But the Ramban thinks that *tefillah* is rabbinic, and this is the opinion of most decisors.” R. Ovadia Yosef follows this view that it is sufficient for women to utter one small prayer of request. See *Shut Yabia Omer* 6:17. The Mishna Berurah (106: 4) points out, however, that most of the *poskim* rule in line with the Ramban against the Rambam, and quoting the Sha'agat Aryeh, the Mishna Berurah rules that indeed, women are obligated in *tefillah*, and that they ought to say Shema with its blessings too, in order to juxtapose *geulah* with *tefillah*:

וכן עיקר כי כן דעת רוב הפוסקים וכן הכריע בספר שאגת ארי' ע"כ יש להזהיר לנשים שיתפללו י"ח ונכון ג"כ שיקבלו עליהן עול מלכות שמים דהיינו שיאמרו עב"פ שמע ישראל כדאיתא בסימן ע' ויאמרו ג"כ ברכת אמת ויצונו כדי לסמוך גאולה לתפלה כמו שכתב המ"א בסימן ע' וכו' לענין שחרית ומנחה אבל תפלת ערבית שהוא רשות אע"פ שעכשיו כבר קבלוהו עליהם כל ישראל לחובה.

8. The *Alei Tamar* (Yissoschar Tamar, 1896–1982) on Berakhot 9 extends the usage of this term to pertain to the formula of the morning blessings, which might be deemed insulting to women.

With these principles and sources in mind, I now survey the history of past efforts to add the *imahot* to the Avot liturgy and analyze the relevant material pertaining to the interdiction against changing the liturgical coinage of the rabbis.

The Argument from Tradition: Historical Survey

Efforts to include the *imahot* in the Amidah liturgy began in the U.S. in the early 1970s, in the wake of the *Havurah* movement and the ordination of Sally Priesand by HUC-JIR in 1972.⁹ Religion scholar Chava Weissler recalls attending a Jewish Women's and Men's Conference in 1973, where she led a creative Friday night service that included mention of the *imahot*. In 1976, Rabbi Laura Geller (ordained by HUC-JIR in 1975) called for the *imahot* to be included in the liturgy when she assumed a position at the USC Hillel. The same year, Brown undergraduates Naomi Janowitz and Margaret Moers Wenig (later ordained by HUC-JIR and a current HUC-JIR faculty member) published *Siddur Nashim*, which includes the matriarchs.¹⁰ In the ensuing years, the inclusion of the *imahot* became a widespread practice in the liberal denominations of Judaism,¹¹ including the Masorati and Conservative movements.

In a 2012 essay surveying the history of these changes, historian and former YULA Judaic Studies teacher Sara Smith contrasts the liturgical changes in those movements with the resistance to them in Orthodoxy:

The question of whether or how to insert the Imahot into the Amidah is almost non-existent within Orthodox circles because Orthodox Judaism is bound by a halakhic process that intentionally

9. Prior to Sally Priesand there was Regina Jonas, ordained by Rabbi Dr. Max Dienemann in Germany in 1935.

10. Sara Smith, "The Imahot in the Amidah: A History," *Contemporary Jewry* 32:3 (October 2012, Vol. 32, No. 3 (October 2012), pp. 314.

11. The Reform movement addressed the question of whether to add the *imahot* to the liturgy and in what form, and whether Bilhah and Zilpah ought to be included among the foremothers in the CCAR Responsum 5763.6. See <https://www.ccar-net.org/responsa-topics/matriarchs-in-the-tefilah/> for the text of the *teshuva*. The reasoning provided is similar to that of a Conservative movement *teshuva* written by Joel Rembaum discussed below.

makes change slow and difficult. Rabbinic tradition considers the Amidah to be a sacred text and sets up barriers to prevent actions that would lead to meddling with the text. Still...the underlying issues of inclusivity and sensitivity toward women are increasingly present in some liberal Orthodox communities. In many of these, the quest for a functional alternative to changing the Amidah has resulted in a number of other liturgical changes. Some of Orthodoxy's rabbinic and lay leadership have responded to the growing desire to create an inclusive liturgy by adding the *Imahot* to prayers and texts that are of a less inflexible nature than the Amidah. These texts include, but are not limited to, the *Mi Shebeirach* prayers (prayers for members of the community in need of healing or assistance), *Birkat Hamazon* (grace after meals), and the *Ushpizin* (list of guests invited into the *sukkah*) text.¹²

Despite general resistance in Orthodoxy to liturgical change to the statutory parts of *tefillah*, the changes to more flexible prayers have found their way into individual Orthodox communities, demonstrating that the liberal origins of the push for change do not disqualify these changes in the eyes of at least some elements within Orthodoxy.

In 1990, Rabbi Joel Rembaum of the Conservative Rabbinic Assembly published a responsum¹³ defending the inclusion of the *imahot* in the *Avot* blessing on the following grounds:

- A general belief in the flexibility of liturgy to adapt to the needs of different generations, as well as historical evidence of certain changes in the formulation of the Amidah blessings.
- A selective reading of Rambam *Hilkhot Berakhot* 1:6., which indicates that should the worshiper deviate post-facto from the fixed language of a blessing (*מטבע*), the religious obligation associated with the blessing will have been fulfilled so long as the blessing included reference to God's

12. Ibid, p. 233–323.

13. Rabbi Joel E. Rembaum, “Regarding the Inclusion of the Names of the Matriarchs in the First Blessing of the עמידה” https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/halakhah/teshuvot/19861990/rembaum_matriarchs.pdf. This responsum was adopted by the CJLS on March 3, 1990 with nine votes in favor, six opposed, and four abstentions (9–6–4). The names of voting members are unavailable.

ineffable name and kingship (שם מלכות) and the wording of the blessing remains consistent with the established theme (ענין) of the prayer. This principle is set forth in the same paragraph where 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. Rembaum acknowledges that in the preceding *halakha* (Hilkhot Berakhot 1:5, the pre-facto *lehatkhillah* scenario), the Rambam says that one may not deviate from the blessing formula composed by Ezra.¹⁴ Nevertheless, based on R. Yosef Caro's Kesef Mishneh commentary on Rambam (Hilkhot Berakhot 1:5), Rembaum concludes that liturgical variation is not rejected by Talmudic tradition.

- The Rambam and his commentators, Rembaum claims, tolerate liturgical change within certain normative parameters. Making small additions or subtractions, or paraphrasing the original formula while preserving the theme and intent of blessing, is permissible. According to Rembaum, adding the *imahot* falls within these acceptable parameters.¹⁵
- On this basis, Rembaum concludes that adding the *imahot* is warranted and appropriate for a generation when women are assuming more significant roles in the religious community. In his view, "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."

Rembaum's responsum in favor of the inclusion of the *imahot* in the Avot blessing receives historical and *midrashic* support in an essay on the *imahot* in rabbinic literature by his Conservative rabbinic colleague R. Alvan Kaunfer, who identifies 76 instances of the founding role and merit of the *imahot* in rabbinic literature.¹⁶ According to Kaunfer, "It would seem that at least to some

14. Rambam Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Berakhot 1:5:

ונסח כל הברכות עזרא ובית דינו תקנום. ואין ראוי לשנותם ולא להוסיף על אחת מהם ולא לגרע ממנה.
 וכל המשנה ממשבע שטבעו חכמים בברכות אינו אלא טועה.

See also, Rambam Hilkhot Keriyah Shema 1:7:

כללו של דבר כל המשנה ממשבע שטבעו חכמים בברכות הרי זה טועה וחוזר ומברך כמשבע.

15. Rembaum does not distinguish between *lehatkhillah* and *bedi'aved* in this case, which opens him up to critique, as we shall see.

16. Alvan Kaunfer, "Who Knows Four? The Imahot in Rabbinic Judaism" *Judaism*. Win '95 44(1): 94-103.

rabbinic sages, the Matriarchs were deemed worthy of mention as founders of Judaism, along with their male counterparts” and that *zekhut imahot* existed as “reserve of merit to be tapped in prayerful supplication.”¹⁷ Against the charge that interest in the *imahot* is an “invention of the past decade,” Kaunfer effectively demonstrates that the *imahot* were central to rabbinic literature.¹⁸

Kaunfer’s argument does not succeed, however, in parrying the critique of the Rembaum responsum on *halakhic* or theological grounds. Indeed, the thinness of Rembaum’s consideration of *halakhic* sources makes it a ready target for the more *halakhically* conservative members of the Conservative movement. In a 2001 rejoinder (revised and republished in 2007), Rabbi David Golinkin, current President of the Schechter Institutes Inc., targets Rembaum’s selective reading of the Rambam and his apparent failure to distinguish between post-facto changes to the liturgy, which the Rambam appears to accept (Hilkhot Berakhot 1:6), and changes before the fact (*lehatkilah*), which the Rambam appears to oppose (Hilkhot Berakhot 1:5, Hilkhot Kriyat Shema 1:7).¹⁹ But Golinkin doesn’t restrict his criticism to what he considers Rembaum’s shoddy reading of Maimonides. Rather, he adds the following objections, based on the purportedly fixed character of the opening blessings of the Amidah, and a biblically-based, immutably patriarchal notion of the Covenant:

- According to Rabbi Golinkin, the idea of adding the *imahot* to the conclusion of the Avot blessing is unprecedented in the last 2,000 years, disqualifying it from the outset. Of course, the fact that something hasn’t occurred previously doesn’t in and of itself make it forbidden, hence the phrase, *Lo ra’inu eino ra’ayah*.²⁰
- The *Magen Avraham* ending of the Avot blessing, Rabbi Golinkin argues, is based on a biblical verse (Genesis 15:1), and thus should not

17. Ibid, p. 95.

18. Ibid, p. 101.

19. David Golinkin, “Question: There is a custom today to add the *Imahot* to the first blessing of the *Amidah*. Is it permissible to do so according to Jewish law?” *Responsa in a Moment* 1: 6 (February 2007) <https://schechter.edu/a-responsum-concerning-the-addition-of-the-imahot-matriarchs-to-the-amidah-silent-devotion-1-responsa-in-a-moment-volume-1-number-6-february-2007/>.

20. See Mishnah Eduyot 2:1–2 and Mishnah Zevahim 12:4. For discussions of when unprecedentedness does serve as proof, see Aryeh Klapper, “Does ‘It’s Never Been Done’ Imply It Never Should be Done?” <https://moderntoraleadership.wordpress.com/2017/03/31/does-its-never-been-done-imply-it-should-never-be-done-part-2/>.

be changed. In fact, this is not quite true, as “*magen Avraham*” is not a verbatim quotation of Genesis 15:1, and thus itself marks a change.

- There is no reference in the Bible, says Rabbi Golinkin, to a God of the foremothers: in his view, the phrase ‘God of Sarah, God of Rebecca, God of Rachel, and God of Leah’ is not “biblical Hebrew because God did not make a covenant with the Matriarchs.” In my view, this part of Golinkin’s argument reflects a problematic, literalist, and static notion of the covenant, which would seem to be antithetical to any developmental theory of the relationship of God and Israel. By this calculus, anything that didn’t happen in biblical times ought to remain outside the *halakhic* pale. It is worth reiterating, in this context, the rabbis’ and later commentators’ willingness to acknowledge the dynamic, evolving nature of such notions as merit and covenant. As we will explore further below, the Gemara in Shabbat 55a asserts in the name of Shmuel that תמה זכות אבות; we’ve depleted our *zechut avot*. This then raises the obvious question if it is at all appropriate still to recite the first *bracha* in the Amidah, which is about זכות/חסדי אבות, since those merits have dissipated. R. Tam, introducing a new concept, says זכות אבות תמה אבל ברית אבות לא תמה. The idea of ברית אבות claims that, even if we have exhausted זכות אבות, the covenant persists. This enables R. Tam to salvage the first *bracha* by reinterpreting its meaning to be about *brit*, not about *zekhut*. This is but one example of how historical reality rendered certain formulations obsolete and how creative reinterpretation can salvage liturgical meaning. Adding the *imahot* might be seen as a similar, traditionally grounded innovation.
- In Rabbi Golinkin’s view, the Sages did not include the matriarchs because Avot deals with the plain meaning of the biblical text and they did not want to rewrite history. It is not at all clear to me, however, that the Avot blessing deals only with the plain meaning of the text given the references to “the bringing of a redeemer to the sons of their sons” (“*meivi go’el livnei beneihem*”), which is not a term that appears in Bereishit.
- Rabbi Golinkin contends that adding the *imahot* to the Avot blessing constitutes a falsification of history, tantamount to changing Lincoln’s Gettysburg address. This, I would charge, is a spurious analogy, as the Gettysburg address was a speech authored by a particular man for a particular occasion. While recited in ceremonial contexts, that speech never pretended to serve as the ongoing spiritual script and liturgy for an entire people for all time. Hence, there would be little need to amend

Lincoln's speech, whereas the need for a relevant and truthful liturgy might necessitate liturgical change in certain circumstances.

- In addition to these biblical/historical objections, Rabbi Golinkin argues that egalitarian style "impoverishes our tradition, by making everything in Judaism homogenous and *parve*." It is unclear to me what "*parve*" means in this liturgical context. As far as homogeneity goes, it seems to me that the liturgical tradition is already highly homogeneous, given that it includes, with very few exceptions, only male voices and personalities despite the plethora of invocations of *zekhut imahot* in other rabbinic sources. And if biblical sources are meant to set the standard, why, in codifying the liturgy, did the rabbis and their descendants excise even such biblically-based women's prayers as Miriam's part in the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15:20–21) and Hannah's prayer in I Samuel 2?
- Finally, quoting an article by Debra Reed Blank, but no other textual proof, Rabbi Golinkin argues that liturgy is "meant to connect us to the past rather than be relevant."²¹ I fail to be persuaded that this is the sole objective of liturgy, especially since rabbinic statutory prayer constitutes a break from Temple worship while the style of our recitation of the Amidah, in emulating Hannah rather than Eli, similarly marks a shift from one cultic mode and period to another. I contend, in fact, that our liturgy aims to construct a bridge from the past to the present and the future, providing a traditionally grounded literary and spiritual vehicle to express our sense of history as well as our yearnings for things to come. As such, it very much needs to be relevant to every generation and not stuck in a mode antithetical to contemporary values.

After all of this, Rabbi Golinkin suddenly shifts direction and tone, expressing sympathy for the desire to add the *imahot* to the liturgy and claiming that his problem is not so much with the goal of this addition, but with the particular method of adding the *imahot* to the opening or closing of the blessing. Instead, he supports the genre of *piyyutim*,²² recommending that the following addition

21. See Deborah Reed Blank, "Liturgical Theory and Liturgical Change," *Conservative Judaism* 47: 2, (Winter, 1995): 53–63.

22. This is somewhat ironic, given his earlier focus on a proper reading of Maimonides and the Rambam's long-standing opposition to adding *piyyutim* to the core sections of *tefillah*.

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by his Schechter colleague, Rabbi Dr. Einat Ramon, be inserted after the words “למען שמו באהבה”:

נבואה אהלי שרה, רבקה, רחל ולאה,
ותהי גמילות חסדיהן לפנינו בכל עת ובכל שעה

We shall enter the tents of Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah
And their acts of lovingkindness shall be before us always and for
all time.

This is an intriguing addition, but it is not more authentically traditional than simply adding “*ufoked Sarah*” or adding “*veSarah*” the end of the Magen Avraham blessing, given how in rabbinic sources the *hesed* and *zekhut* of the *avot* and *imahot* often appear in tandem. The verb *navo’ah* also strikes me as infelicitous given that it addresses us, the pray-ers, rather than God, and given the sexual connotations of “*bi’ah*” especially in the “tent” context.

In referring to Ramon’s *piyyut*, Golinkin also cites a scholarly essay by Ramon, which provides additional theological support from rabbinic *midrash* for the invocation of *imahot* in the Amidah.²³ Golinkin cites Ramon as part of his effort to reject the adding of the *imahot* to the *matbe’a* of the Avot blessing — specifically the opening and closing thereof — but by so doing, he helps support the argument of those who wish to advocate for this change.

According to Ramon’s “The Matriarchs and the Torah of Hesed (Loving-Kindness),” “The invocation of the matriarchs should be seen as a reference to divine lovingkindness (*hesed*) as embodied in the personal example of the acts of loving-kindness that the matriarchs of the Israelite nation brought to bear on their surroundings. These acts of loving-kindness are perceived in the *midrash* as an ultimate expression of the monotheistic-ethical perspective in which loving-kindness is viewed as the epitome of the covenant between humans and the Divine.”²⁴ In direct contrast, then, to Rabbi Golinkin’s insistence on the historically patriarchal nature of the biblical covenant, Ramon suggests that the egalitarian mention of the matriarchs in the Amidah emphasizes that the covenantal relationship with God unfolds through a wide range of daily activities and experiences relating to *hesed*. While she concedes (and laments)

23. Einat Ramon, “The Matriarchs and the Torah of Hesed (Loving-Kindness),” *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women’s Studies & Gender Issues* 10: 2 (Fall, 5766/2005), Jewish Women’s Spirituality, pp. 154–177.

24. Ramon, pp. 154–55.

the patriarchal worldview that led the rabbis to exclude the *imahot* from the liturgy and to downplay women's formative contributions and relationship with God, she does not insist on the virtue of leaving this liturgical bias unchecked. "Ironically," Ramon notes, "as a result of the exclusion of Jewish women over the generations from public religious affairs, *gemilut hasadim* became perhaps their [Jewish women's] most central religious activity."²⁵ Given that, it would be an appropriate and salutary corrective to invoke the *hesed* and *zekhut* of the foremothers (and, by extension, of their female descendants) in this opening blessing of the Amidah. It would also correspond to the divine attribute of *גומל חסדים* mentioned in this very *bracha*.

More recently, the concept of *zekhut imahot* has been explored in a 2018 article by Fordham Professor and Maharat Advanced Kollel graduate ('23) Sarit Kattan Gribetz. In this article, Kattan Gribetz²⁶ demonstrates the importance of *zekhut imahot* and argues that "the figure of Rachel stands most prominently among the matriarchs whose merit assists her descendants."²⁷ Already in tannaitic sources, and more so in amoraic sources, Rachel's deeds during her lifetime as well as her intercessory prayers on behalf of her children in future generations are presented as no less effective or powerful than those deeds of her male counterparts."²⁸ The significance of Rachel is reflected in the selection of poems about her that appear in the appendix to this essay. Some sources also see biblical references to *הרים וגבעות* (mountains and hills) as symbolic of the *avot* and *imahot*, with the mountains representing the forefathers and the hills, the foremothers.

I will note that some more recent sources place the matriarchs' merit not merely alongside but above that of the patriarchs. As previously mentioned, BT Shabbat 55a states in the name of Shmuel that *תמה זכות אבות*, that the merit

25. Ibid, p. 160. See Jeremiah 31:14: *ושבו בנים, מנעו קולך מבכי, ושמוע רחל מבכה על בניה, מגעו קולך מבלתי לגבולם*

26. Sarit Kattan Gribetz, "Zekhut Imahot: Mothers, Fathers and Ancestral Merit in Rabbinic Sources." *Journal for the Study of Judaism* (2018): 263–296.

27. The centrality of the *imahot*, Rachel, in particular, can be seen not just in the plethora of rabbinic sources surveyed by Kaunfer and Kattan Gribetz, but also in such mystical / liturgical practices as Tikkun *hatsot*, which include sections entitled Tikkun Rachel and Tikkun Leah. See https://www.sefaria.org/Siddur_Edot_HaMizrach%2C_The_Midnight_Rite%2C_Tikkun_Rachel?lang=bi

28. Ibid, p. 263. Kattan Gribetz notes that in a number of *midrashim* Rachel appears alongside Abraham, in terms of their shared special merit. See pp. 276–286.

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of the forefathers has lost its potency before God. The Sefat Emet (R. Yehuda Leib Alter, Poland, 1847–1905) insists that while the merit of the forefathers may have expired, that of the matriarchs remains in force:

ויתקיים לנו במהרה מאמר מקפץ על הגבעות. גם הרים הם אבות. וגבעות זכות אמהות (ר"ה י"א ע"א) והנשים רחמנים ביותר כמ"ש חז"ל ששלחו לחולדה הנביאה (מגילה י"ד ע"ב) כן יעשה לנו עתה בזכות אמהות לכן גם למאן דאמר תמה זכות אבות זכות אמהות לא תמה! (שבת נ"ה ע"א).
(שפת אמת פסח תרמ"ב ד"ה בשיר)

Speedily shall it come to pass, bounding over the hills. "Mountains" are the forefathers. And "hills" are the merit of the matriarchs. (BT Rosh Hashanah 11a). And women are especially compassionate, as our Sages of blessed memory wrote with respect to those who sent for Hulda the Prophetess (BT Megilah 14b). So, too, should it happen with us by virtue of the matriarchs, in accordance with the one who wrote that the merit of the forefathers ceased but that of the foremothers did not cease. (BT Shabbat 55a) — Sefat Emet, Pesah, 642, "In Song"

The Tsafnat Pa'aneah (R. Joseph Rosen of Dvinsk, 1858–1936) ערך זכות וחוב אופן ד' makes a similar argument about the enduring power of the matriarchs' merit (as opposed to the depleted merit of the patriarchs), arguing that the Israelites were redeemed from slavery in Egypt on account of the merit of righteous women. The Torat Yehiel (R. Akiva Yosef Schlesinger, 1838–1922) makes perhaps the most forceful and relevant arguments for our purposes:

וזכרתי את בריתי יעקוב ואף את בריתי וגו' בחו"כ איתא את זה לרבות זכות האמהות דאל"כ הול"ל ברותי עם אברהם יצחק יעקב אע"כ כל אלו את לרבות ... ואם תמה זכות אבות (שבח נה) זכות אמהות לא תמה ובזכות נשים צדקניות גואלינו ה' צבאות וכן בברכה א' דשמו"ע אצל אלהי אברהם כוונתנו "שרה" שאמרה גרש האמה הזאת ואת בנה וגו' (בראשית כא), אלהי יצחק "רבקה" שלקחה הברכות ליעקב, אלהי יעקב "רחל ולאה" שבנו שתייהם את בית ישראל וגו' (רות ד). (תורת יהיאל עקיבה יהוסף שלעזינגער) בחוקותי אות פח)

And I shall remember my covenant with Jacob and my covenant with Isaac and my covenant with Abraham ... In Behukotai this is brought to add the merit of the matriarchs, for it shouldn't have been said that way, rather the text should have said "My covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob," rather, all this comes to add [the matriarchs] ... And if the merit of the patriarchs ceases to be, the merit of the matriarchs does not cease (BT Shabbat 55). And so with the first blessing of the

Shemoneh Esrei (Eighteen Blessings of the Amidah), we also intend to refer to Sarah, who told Abraham, “Expel this maidservant along with her son...” (Genesis 21); the God of Isaac refers to Rebecca, who took the blessings for Jacob; and the God of Jacob refers to Rachel and Leah, whose sons built up the House of Israel (Ruth 4) (Torat Yehiel Yosef Schlesinger, Behukotai 88).

According to R. Schlesinger’s commentary on Parashat Behukotai 88, the repetition of the word ‘*brit*’ in relation to each of the patriarchs is meant specifically to refer to the covenantal merit of the foremothers. And in the first blessing of the Shemoneh Esrei, when we invoke “*Elokei Avraham*,” we actually refer to the God of Sarah and to her divinely endorsed insistence that Isaac inherit and not Ishamel. When we invoke “*Elokei Yitzchak*,” we actually refer to the God of Rebecca who masterminded Jacob’s claiming of the blessing from his father Isaac; and when we invoke the God of Jacob, we are speaking really of the God of Rachel and Leah who together [with the handmaids] built up the house of Israel. If that indeed is the intention of the blessing, then, why not explicitly mention Sarah’s name?

Similarly, in his commentary on Parashat Balak 99, R. Schlesinger invokes the example of Rachel, who cries on behalf of her exiled children in Jeremiah 31:14–16, as proving that *זכות אמהות אין לו גבול* — there is no limit to the efficacious merit of the matriarchs. The variety and quantity of such sources offers ample precedent from tradition for invoking the matriarchs together with the patriarchs in the Avot blessing of the Amidah.²⁹

29. See for eg., the gloss on Shir Hashirim 2:8 in BT Rosh Hashanah 11a; the statement in the name of R. Yudan in Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 50, a, Chapter 10, Halakha 1. Other *midrashim* interpret the repetitions that are part and parcel of the poetics of biblical parallelism, identifying one part of a verse from Song of Songs with the merit of the fathers and the other with that of the mothers. (See Shir Hashirim Rabbah 2:9:4 and Bamidbar Rabbah 9:13). Bereshit Rabbah 39:11 traces three uses of the word *gedulah* and four uses of *berakha* in the stories of Abraham and concludes that the former three attribute greatness to the fathers while the latter four attribute blessing to the mothers; Shir Hashirim Rabbah 2:9:4. More recent sources include the Haggadah of the Maharal, which sees the merit of the forefathers and the foremothers as represented together in the rituals of the Passover seder, with the three forefathers invoked by way of the three *matsot* and the four foremothers in the four cups of wine.

Liturgical Change and the Idea of a Fixed Rabbinic Liturgical Coinage (מטבע שטבעו חכמים)

All the *halakhic* sources analyzed thus far are products either of the Conservative movement or the Academy. All that changed, however, with the founding of JOFA, which invited Rabbi Daniel Sperber to address these issues, leading to the publication of Rabbi Sperber's *On Changes in Jewish Liturgy: Options and Limitations* (Urim, 2010). This book offered a comprehensive, copiously sourced treatment of a wide range of issues relating to liturgical change from the perspective of Orthodoxy and traditional *halakhic* interpretation, covering such broad topics as "The Constant Evolution of Our Liturgical Text," "The Legitimacy of Change," and "The Limits of Flexibility of Change in Our Liturgy," as well as specific studies relating to the addition of *piyyutim* and Hasidic changes in prayer *nusakh*. It would be unwieldy and redundant for me to recapitulate every aspect of R. Sperber's analysis. I will, however, highlight sources that serve as lodestars for his approach and summarize his reading of key sources relating to שינוי המטבע.

Rabbi Sperber begins with Talmudic epigraphs that speak to the rabbinic desire for prayer to have the character of genuine supplication and be less ossified and formalistic:

רבי אליעזר אומר כל העושה תפלתו קבע וכו': מאי "קבע"? אמר רבי יעקב בר אידי אמר רבי אושעיא: כל שתפלתו דומה עליו כמשווי. ורבנן אמרי: כל מי שאינו אומר בה בשון תחנונים. רבה ורב יוסף דאמרי תרין יהו: כל שאינו יכול לחדש בה דבר.

Rabbi Eliezer says: One whose prayer is fixed, his prayer is not supplication. What is "fixed?" Rabbi Ya'akov bar Idi said that Rabbi Oshaya said: Anyone for whom his prayer is like a burden upon him. The Rabbis say: Anyone who does not pray in the language of supplication. Rabba and Rav Yosef both said: Anyone unable to introduce a novel element. (BT Berakhot 29b)

Keeping in mind the goals of sincerity and truth, on the one hand, and of conservation, on the other, R. Sperber sets out to investigate the historical, *halakhic*, and *hashkafic* issues surrounding liturgical change. He cites the opinions of many scholars who reject such changes, such as R. Hirz Scheur, Rabbi of Mintz, who inveighed against the amendments of the German Reformers, deeming liturgical change as "the worst aberration from Jewish faith," which

threatens to “split Judaism into two religions.”³⁰ He is careful to note that the changes targeted in that case relate to the excising of any mention of the coming of the Messiah, the return to Israel, and the re-establishment of the Temple, major doctrinal changes that are not comparable to the desire to include the *imahot*, who were always part of traditional Jewish sources.

Rabbi Sperber traces this aversion to change back to the early Geonim and stretching into the twentieth century, with the writings of R. Soloveitchik, who considered God fundamentally unapproachable and prayer possible only by sacrificing all ego. Against these naysayers, R. Sperber mounts the historical counterargument of the “constant evolution of the siddur,” bringing examples of variant texts and changes to various blessings in the Amidah, including “*birkat hashanim*,” “*refa’einu*,” “*shema koleinu*,” and “*lamalshinim*,” as well as a consideration of *siddur*-printing and its role in conveying the impression of an enduringly stable liturgy.

Chapters 8 and 13 deals with the notion of שינוי המטבע, specifically those sources in the Talmud and Rishonim that appear to forbid liturgical change, beginning with BT Berakhot 40b:

נימא קתנאי: ראה פת ואמר: “כמה נאה פת זו, ברוך המקום שבראה” – יצא. ראה תאנה ואמר “כמה נאה תאנה זו, ברוך המקום שבראה” – יצא, דברי רבי מאיר. רבי יוסי אומר: כל המשנה ממשבע ששבעו חכמים בברכות – לא יצא ידי חובתו. נימא רב הונא דאמר ברבי יוסי, ורבי יוחנן דאמר ברבי מאיר! אמר לה רב הונא: אנא דאמרי אפילו לרבי מאיר, עד כאן לא קאמר רבי מאיר התם, אלא היכא דקא מדכר שמייה דפת, אבל היכא דלא קא מדכר שמייה דפת אפילו רבי מאיר מודה. ורבי יוחנן אמר לה: אנא דאמרי אפילו לרבי יוסי, עד כאן לא קאמר רבי יוסי התם אלא משום דקאמר ברכה דלא תקינו רבנן, אבל אמר “שהכל נהיה בדברו” דתקינו רבנן, אפילו רבי יוסי מודה.

Let us say that this parallels a tannaitic source, as it was taught in a *Tosefta*: One who saw bread and said: How pleasant is this bread, blessed is the Omnipresent Who created it, fulfilled his blessing obligation. One who saw a fig and said: How pleasant is this fig, blessed is the Omnipresent Who created it, fulfilled. This accords with Rabbi Meir. Rabbi Yosei says: One who deviates from the formula coined

30. From “*Eleh divrei haberit*,” 1819. Quoted in Daniel Sperber, *On Changes in Jewish Liturgy* (Israel: Urim, 2010), p. 12. The larger issue at play here is the *issur* of *lo titgodedu*, a Talmudic derivation based on a creative reading of Deut. 14:1, which prohibits ritual cutting of one’s flesh, but which BT Yevamot 13b extends to departures from regular *halakhic* practice, which might lead to the creation of many different groups with different practices.

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by the Sages in blessings, did not fulfill his obligation. If so, can we say that Rav Huna, holds in accordance with Rabbi Yosei; and Rabbi Yoḥanan, holds in accordance with the opinion of Rabbi Meir? Rav Huna could have said to you: I said my statement, even in accordance with the opinion of Rabbi Meir, as Rabbi Meir only stated his opinion, that one who alters the formula of the blessing fulfills his obligation, there, where the individual explicitly mentions the term bread in his blessing, but where he does not mention the term bread, even Rabbi Meir agrees that he did not fulfill his obligation. And Rabbi Yoḥanan could have said to you: I said my statement, even in accordance with the opinion of Rabbi Yosei, as Rabbi Yosei only stated his opinion, that one who alters the formula of the blessing does not fulfill his obligation, there, because he recited a blessing that was not instituted by the Sages; however, if he recited: By whose word all things came to be, which was instituted by the Sages, even Rabbi Yose agrees that, after the fact, he fulfilled his obligation to recite a blessing.

Rabbi Sperber notes that there is a debate between R. Meir and R. Yose about changing the *nusah* of blessings; R. Meir is more permissive, but the discussion remains inconclusive. In the version of the same story that appears in the Yerushalmi Berakhot 6:2, however, the *halakha* follows R. Meir's more permissive opinion:

תני רבי יוסי אומר כל המשנה על המטבע שטבעו חכמים לא יצא ידי חובתו...רבי מאיר אומר אפילו אמר ברוך שברא החפץ הזה מה נאה הוא זה יצא רבי יעקב בר אהא בשם שמואל הלכה כר' מאיר...

R. Yose taught: One who alters the formula of the blessing does not fulfill his obligation... R. Meir says even one who says "Blessed is he who created this thing, how wonderful it is, fulfills his obligation. R. Yaakov bar Aha said in the name of Shmuel: The *halakha* is in accordance with R. Meir...

Rabbi Sperber cites a number of *poskim* (R. Hai Gaon, Tosfot of R. Yehuda on Berakhot 40b and others)³¹ who, on the basis of this ruling in the Yerushalmi

31. The Rosh on Berakhot 40b seems to support the ruling of R. Meir, insisting that what is really at stake in ensuring the correctness of a blessing is that one mention God's name and the notion of *malkhut*:

רא"ש מסכת ברכות פרק ו

[דף מ"ב] ועל כולם אם אמר שהכל וכו'. אמר רב הונא חוץ מן הפת ויין רבי יוחנן אמר אפילו פת

that favors R. Meir, permit changes to the blessings composed by the Sages (Sperber p. 94). Most of the examples of change that he cites relate to changes to the *birkot hashahar*, for example, the *שלא עשני גוי* blessings, in light of anti-Semitism and fear of the censor.

He also considers the relevant sources in the Rambam that have already been mentioned with respect to the Rembaum Conservative responsum and the Golinkin dissent:

Rambam, *Hilkhot Kriyat Shema*, Chapter 1:7 shows little openness to any

ויין(ע) וקיימא לן כרבי יוחנן לגבי רב הונא וכן נמי הא דפליגי רבי מאיר ורבי יוסי דרבי מאיר קאמר אם אמר על הפת ברוך המקום שבראו יצא ורבי יוסי קאמר כל המשנה ממטבע שטבעו חכמים בברכות לא יצא ידי חובתו קאמר עליה בירושלמי אמר רבי יעקב בר אחא בר שמואל (פ) הלכה כרבי מאיר **וגם לכאורה ר' יוחנן כרבי מאיר סבירא ליה אלא דהגמרא קא דחי לה. הא דקאמר רבי מאיר אם אמר על הפת ברוך המקום שבראו יצא מיירי בין בברכת המוציא ובין אחר אכילה ויצא בה ידי ברכה ראשונה כדאמרינן בנימי רעיא כרך ריפתא אמר בריך מריה דהאי פיתא אמר רב יצא. והא בעינן שלש ברכות. מאי יצא נמי דקאמר ידי ברכה ראשונה. והאמר רב כל ברכה שאין בה הזכרת השם אינה ברכה. סט דקאמר בריך רחמנא מריה דהאי פיתא. גופא אמר רב כל ברכה שאין בה הזכרת השם אינה ברכה. ור' יוחנן אמר כל ברכה שאין בה מלכות שמים אינה ברכה. אמר אביי כוותיה דרב מסתברא. דתנן לא עברתי ממצותיך ולא שכחתי לא עברתי מלברכך ולא שכחתי מלהזכיר שמך עליו. ורבי יוחנן אמר תני מלברכך ומלהזכיר שמך ומלכותך עליו. (צ) רב האי פסק הלכה כרבי יוחנן. (ק) ולעיל גבי בנימי רעיא מיירי שהזכיר גם מלכות. וי"ס דגרסינן בהו בפירוש ולרבי יוחנן דאמר כל ברכה שאין בה מלכות אינה ברכה דאמר בריך רחמנא מלכא מריה דהאי פיתא. ע ור"י היה מסופק אם הלכה כרב(ר) מדקאמר אביי מסתבר כוותיה(ש) וגם ר' יוחנן צריך להגיה מתניתין דמעשר שני. ונ"מ שאם דילג מלכות שמים [שלא] יחזור ויברך דשמא הויה ברכה לבטלה. ואם תאמר ברכה מעין שבע שאומר ש"ץ בערב שבת אין בה מלכות. וי"ל דהאל הקדוש שאין כמוהו חשוב מלכות כדאמרינן בפרק בתרא דראש השנה (דף לב א) דשמע ישראל ה' אלהינו(ת) ה' אחד זה מלכות וברכה ראשונה של שמונה עשרה(א) כיון דאית בה האל הגדול הוא חשוב כמו מלכות. ויש אומרים לפי שאמר אלהי אברהם הוה כמו מלכות לפי שעדיין לא המליכוהו עליהם העולם עד שבא אברהם אבינו והודיע טיבו בעולם והיינו דכתיב (בראשית כד) ה' אלהי השמים אשר לקחני מבית אבי

See also מברכין פרק ו — כיצד מברכין הר"א, which cites the ruling of the Yerushalmi.

See also :

ב"ח או"ח סימן קפז

וכל מי שמשנה המטבע וכו' בפרק כיצד מברכין (דף מ') ונראה דרצונו לומר דמשנה עיקר ענין המטבע שעליה נתקנה הברכה כגון ברכת הון משנה אותה לענין הארץ וכן ברכת הארץ וברכת ירושלים משנה אותה לעניינים אחרים או שאומר עיקר הברכה אלא שלא הזכיר מה שחייבו חכמים להזכיר בה כגון שלא אמר ארץ חמדה טובה ורחבה או שלא אמר ברית ותורה בברכת הארץ ומלכות בית דוד בבונה ירושלים. אבל כשהזכיר מה שחייבו חכמים להזכיר בה וגם אינו משנה עיקר ענין הברכה לענין אחר אלא שאומר בה לשון אחר פשיטא דיצא וראיה ברורה מבנימין רעיא דכריך ריפתא ואמר בריך רחמנא מרא דהאי פיתא דקאמר רב התם דיצא וק"ל:

change in the blessing formula based on the interdiction against **שינוי המטבע**. The repetition of the words **אינו רשאי** and **אין ראוי** underscores this opposition:

בְּרִכּוֹת אֱלוֹ עִם שְׁאֵר כָּל הַבְּרִכּוֹת הָעֲרוּכּוֹת בְּפִי כָל יִשְׂרָאֵל עֶזְרָא הַסּוֹפֵר וּבֵית דִּינּוֹ תִקְנִינּוּ וְאִין אָדָם רִשְׁאִי לְפַחַת מֵהֶם וְלֹא לְהוֹסִיף עֲלֵיהֶם. מְקוֹם שֶׁהִתְקִינוּ לְהַתֵּם בְּכִרּוּךְ אֵינוֹ רִשְׁאִי שְׁלֹא לְהַתֵּם. וּמְקוֹם שֶׁהִתְקִינוּ שְׁלֹא לְהַתֵּם אֵינוֹ רִשְׁאִי לְהַתֵּם. מְקוֹם שֶׁהִתְקִינוּ שְׁלֹא לְפַתַח בְּכִרּוּךְ אֵינוֹ רִשְׁאִי לְפַתַח. מְקוֹם שֶׁהִתְקִינוּ לְפַתַח אֵינוֹ רִשְׁאִי שְׁלֹא לְפַתַח. כִּלְלוּ שֶׁל דְּבַר כָּל הַמְשָׁנָה מִמִּטְבַּע שֶׁטִּבְעוּ חֻקִּים בְּבִרְכּוֹת הַרִי זֶה טוּעָה וְחֹזֵר וּמְכַרֵּךְ כַּמְטַבֵּעַ.

These blessings and all the rest of the blessings familiar to the Jewish people were instituted by Ezra, the scribe, and his court. One may not detract from them or add to them. In every instance that they decreed to conclude with “Blessed...,” one may not omit this conclusion. Where they decreed not to conclude [with “Blessed...”], one may not conclude with it. Where they decreed not to begin with “Blessed,” one may not begin with it. Where they decreed to begin [with “Blessed...”], one may not omit it. The general principle is that anyone who deviates from the set form of blessings established by the Sages is mistaken and must recite the blessing again in its proper form.

Rambam *Hilkhot Berakhot* 1:5 reiterates this principle, but uses the somewhat softer language of **לשנותם אין ראוי** rather than **אינו רשאי**, adding the additional qualifier that, in order to be considered a proper blessing, one has to mention God’s name and kingship:

וְנִסַּח כָּל הַבְּרִכּוֹת עֶזְרָא וּבֵית דִּינּוֹ תִקְנִינּוּם. וְאִין רִאִי לְשַׁנּוֹתָם וְלֹא לְהוֹסִיף עַל אַחַת מֵהֶם וְלֹא לְגַרֵעַ מִמֶּנּוּ. וְכָל הַמְשָׁנָה מִמִּטְבַּע שֶׁטִּבְעוּ חֻקִּים בְּבִרְכּוֹת אֵינוֹ אֱלֹא טוּעָה. וְכָל בְּרָכָה שֶׁאֵין בָּהּ הַזְכָּרַת הַשֵּׁם וּמַלְכוּת אֵינָה בְּרָכָה אֱלֹא אִם בִּן הַיְתָה סְמוּכָה לַחֲבֵרְתָּהּ:

The text of all the blessings was ordained by Ezra and his court. It is not fit to alter it, to add to it, or to detract from it. Whoever alters the text of a blessing from that ordained by the Sages is making an error. A blessing that does not include the mention of God’s name and His sovereignty is not considered a blessing unless it is recited in proximity to another blessing.

After the two statements, one that outright prohibits any changes to the blessing, and the other that considers additions and subtractions unsuitable but then qualifies the prohibition even further, Rambam *Hilkhot Berakhot* 1:6

demonstrates a post-facto acceptance of changes, even of recitation in another language:

וְכָל הַבְּרָכוֹת בְּלִשׁוֹן אֲמֵרִין בְּכָל לְשׁוֹן וְהוּא שְׂיֵאמֵר קָעִין שְׂתַקְנֵנוּ חֲכָמִים. וְאִם שָׁנָה אֶת הַמַּטְבֵּעַ הוּאֵיל וְהוֹזִיר אֲזַנְרָה וּמְלֻכּוֹת וְעִנְיֵן הַבְּרָכָה אֶפְלוּ בְּלִשׁוֹן הַל יֵצֵא:

All the blessings may be recited in any language, provided one recites the text ordained by the Sages. One who changes that text fulfills his obligation nonetheless — since he mentioned God’s name, His sovereignty, and the subject of the blessing — although he did so in an ordinary language.

R. Sperber, like Rabbi Rembaum above, and following the Kesef Mishneh,³² resolves the seeming contradiction between these sources by arguing that the prohibition against changing the *matbe’a* means that one may not change the opening and closing structure of the blessing that was determined by the rabbis.

The question, of course, is whether adding the *imahot* to the description of God qualifies as a structural change. Given that God refers to the *imahot* and speaks to them, and insists on their role in generational transmission, and in the case of Sarah, takes their side against that of Abraham (see Genesis 21:12, where God commands Abraham to listen to Sarah), it would seem that the addition of the *imahot* simply fleshes out the biblical historical record.

The one strange omission on the part of Rabbi Sperber is that of Rambam, *Hilkhot Tefilah*:1:9, which stipulates that one may add extra elements to the middle *brachot* of the Amidah to show that prayer is voluntary, not obligatory, but in the first three and last three *brachot*, says the Rambam, no addition, diminution, or other changes are allowed.

32. The Kesef Mishnah on *Hilkhot Berakhot* 1:5 resolves this contradiction by saying that each of these *halakhot* are talking about different things and that here the permission is in an instance when the person makes no change to the *petihah* or the *hatimah*. (The question, of course, is whether adding the *imahot* constitutes a substantive change of this sort):

על מ"ש רבינו ואם שינה את המטבע וכו' יצא. כתב הרמ"ך תימה דבהלכות ק"ש כתב לא יצא וכו' וצ"ע עכ"ל. ויש לתמוה על תמימתו דברישי הלכות ק"ש מיירי ששינה שחתם בברוך או פתח במקום שהתקינו שלא לחתום או שלא לפתוח או ששינה ולא חתם או לא פתח בברוך במקום שהתקינו לחתום או לפתוח והכא מיירי ששינה בנוסח הברכה ולא אמר אותו לשון ממש אלא שאמר ענין הברכה בנוסח אחר ולא שינה לא בפתיחה ולא בחתימה וזה מבואר בדברי רבינו:

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וְשֵׁשׁ רֵאשׁוֹנוֹת וְשֵׁשׁ אַחֲרוֹנוֹת לְעוֹלָם אֵין מוֹסִיפִין בָּהֶן וְלֹא פוֹחֲתִין מֵהֶן וְאֵין מְשַׁנִּין בָּהֶן דְּבַר:

One may never add or subtract from the first three and the last three, nor may one change anything.

This would seem to impact the question being addressed here, insofar as adding the *imahot* is an addition to the first three *brachot*, unless one considers the Rambam's prohibition only to pertain to additions that change the basic meaning, theme, or structure of the blessing.

Another omission on R. Sperber's part is Shulkhan Arukh Orah Hayyim 113:9, which prohibits adding any extra epithets to the description of God:

אֵין לְהוֹסִיף עַל תַּאֲרִיּוֹ שֶׁל הַקַּב"ה יוֹתֵר מֵהַאֵל הַגָּדוֹל הַגִּבּוֹר וְהַנּוֹרָא וְדוֹקָא בְּתַפְלָה מִפְּנֵי שֶׁאֵין לְשׁוֹנוֹת מִמֵּטְבַע שְׂטָבְעוֹ חֲכָמִים אֲבָל בְּתַחֲנוּנִים אוֹ בְּקִשּׁוֹת וְשִׁבְחוֹת שֶׁאָדָם אוֹמֵר מִעֲצֻמוֹ לֵית לֵן בֵּה וּמ"מ נִכּוֹן לְמִי שִׁירְצָה לְהַאֲרִיךְ בְּשִׁבְחֵי הַמְּקוֹם שִׁיאֲמַר אוֹתוֹ בְּפִסּוּקִים:

One may not add to the descriptions of the Holy One Who Is Blessed more than "The Great and the Mighty and the Awesome God." And this is specifically in the Amidah, since one may not change the formulation that the Sages formulated. But in the supplications, pleas and praises that a person says oneself, there is no [problem] with it. Nevertheless, it is proper that one who wants to lengthen the praises of the Omnipresent should say it using [biblical] verses.

This source from the Shulkhan Arukh seems to reflect a concern about not assigning too many epithets to God so as not to say something affirmative when God is unknowable. There are indeed Talmudic sources that inveigh against heaping too many adjectives or elements of praise on God.³³ But can we not add a reference to something we know, which is that the matriarchs worshiped and were protected by this God, too? The end of the *se'if* somewhat contradicts the first part, seeming to create some allowance for elongated praise of God if it can be expressed in the form of *pesukim* (biblical verses). But isn't the fact that God rewarded and protected the merit of the matriarchs amply attested to in the Bible?

Ultimately Rabbi Sperber rules (not all that differently from Rembaum)

33. See for example, BT Shabbat: 118, where R. Yose says that if one were to recite Hallel daily it would be tantamount to blasphemy. And BT Megillah 18a, where Rava bar Hana says in the name of R. Yohanan, that he who offers too much praise of God is uprooted from the world.

that small liturgical changes that do not affect the basic theme or structure of the blessings, and even the compositions of original poems, do not constitute a prohibited שינוי המטבע and therefore ought to be permitted:

Therefore, when I am asked questions such as “To what extent may we add elements in our prayers?” “What method can be used for incorporating additional prayers?” “Can we add new elements to existing prayers?” “Can we mention the *Imahot* (foremothers) in addition to the *Avot* (forefathers)?” I see the answer as very simple: It is all completely permissible. Adding completely new prayers where one is not changing *matbea shetavu hakhamim* — because that would amount to a new creation, a new composition — is certainly permitted. Adding words or phrases to an established *berachah* is less acceptable, according to Maimonides, but if the basic content is not changed, one who recites such a *berachah* does not have to repeat it in its previous form. (p. 111)

Rabbi Sperber also rejects the notion that such change ought to be prohibited because it will split Jews into separate groups or communities:

Therefore we should not, and need not, seek unanimity in our liturgy. Let there be yet another *nusah* of *tefillah* one that will be acceptable within the context of modern-day Orthodox feminist thinking, and which hopefully will gain ever wider legitimacy.

At the same time, we must exercise great care to retain the traditional elements of our prayer book, to preserve its character and structure, to ensure that any additions, deletions or alterations do not contradict or conflict with normative halakhah [i.e., complete alternation of the former *berachah* structure]. (p. 129)

Dissenting Opinions

R. Aryeh A. Frimer mounts a clear dissent against R. Sperber’s openness to the addition of the *imahot* in a review essay entitled “The Wrong Changes in Liturgy.”³⁴ Regarding the adding of the *imahot* to the opening paragraph

34. R. Aryeh Frimer, “The Wrong Changes in Liturgy” *Torah Musings* (October 11, 2011) <https://www.torahmusings.com/2011/10/wrong-changes-in-jewish-liturgy/>

of the Amidah, Rabbi Frimer introduces his rejection of the idea by saying “this is a practice that has found its way into Conservative Jewish practice and prayer books despite the objection of some of their own leading scholars.” The appearance of the *imahot* in Conservative prayer books seems to serve as a disqualifier (with the addition that some of the leaders of the movement have already prudently rejected it). It is my view, however, that the origin of a change within another movement should not bar the Orthodox community from adopting a change if there is a *halakhic* rationale and a communal value to permitting it.

Rabbi Frimer goes on to state that “over the past millennium, no changes or additions whatsoever have been made in the first three *berakhot* of the Shemoneh Esrei.” I would counter by saying that I am not sure this is entirely relevant. Over the past millennium we have also not seen the numbers of learned and religiously active women that we have today. And a progressive view of history would dictate that certain practices, even if they had a long-standing history — say, slavery or a prejudice against Gentiles — ought to be abrogated. Moreover, as my teacher R. Ysoscher Katz notes, Rabbi Frimer’s reference to the absence of any changes over the past millennium bypasses Geonic changes for the High Holidays that were made to the first three *berakhot*, including זכרנו לחיים and מי כמוך.

Like Rabbi Golinkin, Rabbi Frimer argues that the basis for referring to God as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob has its source in Exodus 3:15. But the choice of this identifier rather than other epithets was conditioned by a patriarchal mindset, the implications of which have far-reaching consequences. The task of Orthodox religious feminism has been to work within that tradition to provide a sorely needed missing perspective.

Again, like Rabbi Golinkin, Rabbi Frimer rejects the idea of the God of the *imahot* because it doesn’t appear anywhere in the Torah. No matter that rabbinic statutory prayer is a composition of the rabbis and includes many formulations that do not appear in the Torah. “Our covenantal relationship to G-d,” Frimer asserts, “is through the Avot, not the Imahot. To be sure, the Imahot were very important supporting players in the formative years of our people, but they were not the spiritual leads by any means.” Rabbi Golinken made the same objectionable point, which in my view, itself constitutes an argument for liturgical change so as to inculcate a theology of *ahavah*, *shivyon*, and *shleimut*, as outlined in my opening principles. Admittedly, the ritual of *brit milah* is male in focus; but the Torah insists on Sarah’s role as mother to

Abraham's successor, indeed, on her crucial role in shaping that next generation, as indicated by Isaac's bringing Rebecca into his mother's tent and loving her when he marries her. Isaac doesn't walk together with his father at the end of the *Akedah* exercise in Genesis 22. They don't live together, either. But Sarah's loving memory lives on and shapes that next generation. To speak of the God of the *imahot* is to acknowledge that crucial, formative, maternal role. If an exclusively patriarchal notion of covenant has any basis in history or in the way the text has been transmitted, the very function of *Torah shebe' al peh*, of a living breathing *halakha*, would be to find a theological and liturgical means to counter that notion.

Rabbi Frimer suggests that to add the *imahot* would be to deny the role, as suggested by *chazal*, of the patriarchs establishing the three daily prayers. Methodologically, using for *halakhic* purposes a *midrashic* homiletic explanation for the origin of the three daily prayers, one that is based on a selective reading of instances of prayer in the Bible, seems suspect. And what about Rebecca's going *lidrosh eh Hashem*? Miriam's song at the sea? And Hannah's prayer in Shilo serving as the basis for the recitation mode of the Amidah?

Rabbi Frimer mounts a further objection to the idea of adding the *imahot* in that we don't mention Moses or David or Joseph. "Why mention the Imahot?" he asks. "Just because they were women? Just because of feminist sensibilities? This is not only a theological misrepresentation as discussed above, it is intellectually dishonest. I don't think that women should be excluded, where relevant, because of their gender; nor should they be included, where irrelevant, just because of their gender." In my view, this statement constitutes what-about-ism and deflection. I wish to add liturgical mention of the *imahot* precisely because we believe that women were part of the covenant and crucial to the earliest historical stratum of the people and therefore wish to rectify a theological and liturgical wrong. The idea that this is "irrelevant" to prayer is absurd. Prayer is a theological exercise in confirming one's core values. A *tefillah* liturgy that repudiates the place of women in our earliest history and, by extension, denies my place as a covenantal member of the Jewish people is a potentially counter-productive, destructive exercise. Reading these words by Rabbi Frimer in a review of Rabbi Sperber's brilliant and compassionate *halakhic* exegesis is similarly caustic and distasteful.

Rabbi Frimer concludes by contending that Judaism is not egalitarian. "Halakhic Judaism maintains that **God Himself ordained and commanded non-identical roles for men and women.**" I confess that I am unwilling to

accept this ossified definition of *halakha* as that which happened in the past or his right to decide what God did or did not ordain. His use of the term “radical feminism” throughout his review also serves as a means of dismissing feminist claims as ultimately incompatible with Orthodoxy.

In sum, what Rabbi Frimer’s article reveals is a basic unwillingness to accept the worth and legitimacy of feminist change. More than the blessings themselves, his patriarchal theology emerges as an immovable *matbe’a*, one he is unwilling to change for any purpose, however worthy. He shows no willingness to listen to the experiences and concerns of women, couching this resistance in spurious or tendentious readings of the Bible.

Rabbi Ethan Tucker, on the other hand, suffers from no such unwillingness to listen. A committed egalitarian, he nevertheless raises certain *halakhic* concerns about changing the Avot blessings in his essay “Liturgical Change and Its Limits.”³⁵ Like Rabbi Sperber, Rabbi Tucker adduces the history of Jewish liturgical flexibility, contending that “one searches the Rabbinic canon in vain for a perfectly fixed text of the various statutory prayers.”³⁶ To support this notion of flexibility, he quotes an important passage from ShaDaL’s (Shmuel David Luzzatto, 1880–1865, Trieste) introduction to the Rome Mahzor:

קדמונינו זכרונום לברכה קבעו לנו מטבע הברכות להודות לה' ולהתפלל לפניו, אך לא נתכוונו בתקנתם שיהיה נוסח תפילותינו קבוע כיתד בל תמוט, עליו אין להוסיף וממנו אין לגרוע, אבל היתה כוונתם לקבוע בקרב כל ישראל העניינים אשר עליהם נודה לאלהינו ונתפלל אליו, ולקבוע לנו סדר הברכות והתפלות... וכל זה כדי שיהיה עיקר התפלה וענין כל ברכה וברכה, וסדר הברכות ופתיחתן וחתמתן שווה בקרב כל ישראל בכל מקומות מושבותיהם.³⁷

Our predecessors of blessed memory established a formula for the blessings to thank and pray before God, but they did not intend in their decree to establish a formula for all time like a permanent fixed peg, to which one is prohibited from adding or subtracting. Rather their intention was to establish for all of Israel the matters for which we should thank and pray to God, and to establish the order of the blessings and the prayers... and all of this is so that there will be a general principle for the prayers and a principle for each and every

35. Ethan Tucker, “Liturgical Changes and Its Limits.” Center for Jewish Law and Values. <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/liturgical-change-and-its-limits>

36. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

37. Rabbi Sperber quotes the same source in English translation. See Daniel Sperber, *On Changes in Jewish Liturgy* (Jerusalem: Urim, 2010), p. 71.

blessing, and so that the order of the blessings, their opening and their closing will be the same for all of Israel in all of their places of habitation.

Having studied and written about the poetry of ShaDaL's cousin, Rachel Luzzatto Morpurgo (1790–1871), I find this quotation particularly moving. The religiously devout and learned Morpurgo was the first modern Hebrew poet and the composer of several liturgical poems that specifically invoke the *imahot*, particularly Rachel.

Rabbi Tucker surveys many of the sources quoted thus far, in addition to Tosefta Berakhot 4: 4–5, which is quoted by both the Bavli and the Yerushalmi cited above, and Berakhot 34a, too. He cites a range of Gaonic opinions about the insertion of *piyyutim* from pro (Natronai Gaon) to con (Nachson Gaon), and extensively examines the various positions of the Rishonim, most notably Rabbeinu Tam, who “sought to defend the rich culture of *piyyut* that had established itself in Europe.”³⁸ He also cites the following other Rishonim who seem, within limited parameters, to be open to some changes to the blessings:

- The Ra'ah on Berakhot 11a, who suggests דווקא אריכות או קיצור הניכר [כ]שנוי מטבע — We are specifically concerned about expansion or abridgement that will be recognized as a change in the formula.
- Ritva Hilkhot Brachot 6:14, who might be open to some liturgical change depending on its scope and permanence.
- Rashba, who offers a very liberal definition of the *matbe'a* based on the structural principle that blessings should begin and end with *barukh*. Other than that, not only may one add to the words, but one can even add *piyyutim* and so without any concern for the length or even the topic.
- Meiri on Rashi: that Rashi understood מטבע to be themes and ideas. Thus, additions need to stay on topic.

Rabbi Tucker notes, however, that these positions embrace liturgical creativity only on the basis of existing practice and in that sense are grounded in deep distrust of liturgical change. Thus it is not clear that these are precedents for actively and consciously encouraging new liturgical forms.³⁹ With respect to the Rambam, R. Tucker goes beyond the sources from Mishneh Torah cited

38. Tucker, p. 14.

39. Tucker, p. 22.

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thus far and reads several of the Rambam's responsa, including the following, which opens with a strong objection to any change from the *matbe'a*:

שו"ת הרמב"ם סימן רנד :

התשובה אסור לשנות ממשבוע שטבעו חכמים בכרכות בשום פנים, וכל המשנה טעה. ומה שהבאת ראייה מן אלו נאמרין בכל לשון, אינו ראייה, לפי שהוא אינו מוסיף על העניינים ואינו גורע מהם, אלא משנה הלשון לבד. ואין זה כמו הפיוטים אשר הם תוספת עניינים והבאת דברים הרבה שאינם מעניין התפלה, ונוספים לזה משקלם וניגונם, ויוצאת התפלה מגדר תפלה (ונעשית) לשחוק. וזו הסיבה היותר גדולה לחסרון הכוונה ושהמוון מקילים ראש לשוחח (באמצע התפלה), לפי שהם מרגישים, שאלו הדברים הנאמרים אינם מחויבים. ונוסף לזה, שאלו הפיוטים הם לפעמים דברי משוררים, לא תלמידי חכמים....

The Responsum: One may never deviate from the set form of blessings established by the Sages and anyone who does so mistaken. And that which you bring from the idea that the blessings are said in any language is not proof, insofar as in that case one is not adding to the substance nor is one subtracting, rather simply changing the language. And this is not analogous to the piyyutim, which add in terms of substance and many other things which are irrelevant to the prayer, and also add weight and melody, causing the prayer to depart from its proper limits and to become a matter of frivolity. And this is the greatest reason why people depart from their intention and become so light-headed as to speak during the prayers, for their feel that all these things that are being said are not required. Additionally, these piyyutim are often written not by sages but by poets...

A close inspection of this teshuva reveals the Rambam's strong antipathy to *piyyut* as a source of distraction and indecorousness. As Rabbi Tucker explains, the Rambam objects to adding long passages and new themes, altering structure, rhythm, and cadence, but not necessarily to adding specific words. According to Rabbi Tucker, "it is fairly clear that, in terms of scope and structure, the addition of the Matriarchs as described above presents no problems" for any of these five medieval models.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, Rabbi Tucker voices a reluctance to adding the *imahot* to the *hatimah* of the Avot blessing based on a prohibition against a *bshתיים*, that is the ending of a *berakha* that includes two aspects (See Berakhot 49a).

40. Tucker, p. 23.

Tucker admits that this is a principle that is not adhered to in any number of canonized blessings. I would argue further that adding the name “Sarah” to the Magen Avraham blessing is not so much a doubling of the *hatimah* but an attempt to “put her back” where she belongs, offering an elaboration of what we mean by Avraham.⁴¹

Rabbi Tucker also asserts the importance of Avraham as a stand-out, founding figure (a point similar to that made by Golinkin and Frimer). This argument is based on a desire to avoid essentialist gendering and a concern that women identify with Abraham and the patriarchs.⁴² “I am concerned,” he writes,

that part of the drive to add Sarah specifically to the end of the blessing is the aim not to have Avraham, the man, stand alone without a female companion. I worry that this in part reflects a kind of essentialist sorting of men into a space of male role models and women into a space of female role models.

I will admit my discomfort with this position, not just because it denies Sarah’s founding role but because it ignores the essentializing effect of the traditional liturgy, where godliness, covenant, and primacy are consistently presented in masculine terms. For millennia, women have been acknowledging the *zekhut* of the Avot. That practice is not under threat. Opening the Amidah with reference to the *imahot* merely completes the record and offers a place for the feminine too.

All of this, together with the four principles that I laid out at the beginning, leads me to argue for the acceptability of adding the four mothers to the opening part of Avot (אלוקי שרה, אלוקי רבקה, אלוקי רחל ואלוקי לאה) certainly in one’s private prayer and in the repetition as well, if the community is open to this change.⁴³ I am inclined to amend the *hatimah* as well to מִגַּן אֲבֵרָהּ וְשָׂרָה, especially since the source for this concept (Gen 15:1) doesn’t use the verbatim expression

41. Thanks go out to R. Ysoscher Katz for this formulation.

42. This might be one way of understanding the teachings of R. Akiva Schlesinger in the Torat Yehiel Behukotai 88, as cited above.

43. I have suggested this formula because it is already in use in some liberal congregations and because mention of these four matriarchs has strong traditional precedent. I recognize that the idea of the “four *imahot*” omits Bilhah and Zilpah, which itself is regrettable and merits further consideration. I would urge a community interested in undertaking to include the *imahot* to engage in a process of

“*magen Avraham*.” Rather, God issues to Abraham, in second-person address, a covenantal promise of protective reward — אָנְכִי מְגֹן לְךָ — שְׂכָרְךָ, הַרְבֵּה מְאֹד — in the form of descendants, a promise that is later adumbrated and expanded in Gen. 17 explicitly to include Sarah as the mother of these descendants.

The Argument on the Insufficiency of Tradition

While I do believe that the traditional sources make a *halakhic* case for the addition of the *imahot*, it feels important to close with an awareness of the fundamentally masculine nature of the tradition as it has been elaborated and practiced until now. A crucial change has come about as a result of contemporary Jewish women’s learning, ordination, and greater participation in public prayer and its leadership — a change, if you will, to the social/spiritual/communal *matbe’a*. I do not believe that this paradigm shift, which I address in my opening, can be entirely accounted for by referencing prior *halakhic* writing and practice. The very idea of a *matbe’a shetav’u hakhamim*, a stable, unchanging liturgical coinage established by male sages alone, is a historically inequitable construct that needs to be addressed through loving consideration of the felt reality and theological understanding of women in general and *hakhamot* in particular, those women now invested with the power of spiritual leadership in our communities. In the face of naysayers, like Rabbis Golinkin and Frimer, who suggest that even if one can provide a *halakhic* rationale for making these additions, the first three *berakhot* of the Amidah ought never change because they never have, the argument from the insufficiency of tradition — or from the change in contemporary reality — needs to be adduced. If one pits an utterly fixed *nusah* — itself gainsaid by rabbinic sources concerned with cultivating a spirit of *tahanunim* in prayer — against the opposing social and theological values of *ahavah*, *shivyon*, and *shleimut*, the latter ought to win out. Certainly the relatively minor, considered changes to the *matbe’a*, which are amply grounded in traditional sources, ought to be unreservedly endorsed. Indeed, they should be seen as helpful correctives and affirmative means to enlist and represent women — half of our Jewish community — in our *tefillah*. Given the general societal disposition toward egalitarianism, inclusiveness, and

learning as well as community discussion to see what formulation would best be accepted and appreciated by the community.

loving acceptance of difference, the embrace of these changes might also fend off disillusionment on the part of some young feminists (male and female alike) for whom these values are sacrosanct. As R. Shimon Ben Menasiya teaches in BT Yoma 85b with regard to the notion of “*pikuah nefesh*” overriding Shabbat:

ר' שמעון בן מנסיא אומר ושמרו בני ישראל את השבת אמרה תורה חלל עליו שבת אחת כדי שישמור שבתות הרבה.

Rabbi Shimon ben Menasya said: It is stated: “And the children of Israel shall keep Shabbat, to observe Shabbat” (Exodus 31:16). The Torah said: Desecrate one Shabbat on his behalf so he will observe many *Shabbatot*.

If the rabbis were willing to conscience the desecration of the Shabbat for the sake of saving a life, we, the male and female rabbis of today, ought to be willing to consider minor changes to the blessings’ formula for the sake of maintaining fidelity to our tradition.⁴⁴

Lastly, it behooves us to consider, as part of this, the meaning and implications of the metaphor of the *matbe’a*: a coin, or coinage. Coins have value as part of an economy, a system of exchange and of relative and fluctuating values. In my view, an approach to our liturgical coinages that is careful and considered, but also dynamic and holistic, has a better chance to maintain its longterm value and currency for the community as a whole.

44. The Rambam uses this principle beyond the context of violating Shabbat to refer to the need for a court to uproot prior rulings should they prove too onerous or to make necessary changes to return the people to observance. See — רמב"ם הלכות ב ממרים פרק ב.

כן אם ראו לפי שעה לבטל מצות עשה או לעבור על מצות לא תעשה כדי להחזיר רבים לדת או להציל רבים מישראל מלהכשל בדברים אחרים עושין לפי מה שצריכה השעה