

# A Rabbinic Perspective *By Rabbi Seymour Rosenbloom*

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## A New Year, A More Inclusive Liturgy



Earlier this year I began a discussion with the congregation, our Divine Service Committee, and finally, our Board of Directors on the inclusion of the Matriarchs — Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah — into the first paragraph of the *Amidah*.

After extensive discussions, and upon my recommendation, the Board of Directors endorsed the inclusion of the Matriarchal references in the *Avot* (Ancestors) paragraph of the *Amidah* as being the standard liturgy of Congregation Adath Jeshurun.

With our *Rosh HaShanah* service this year, we will formally begin this inclusion, and this formulation will be used at all of our *Shabbat* and *Yom Tov* services. In weekday services, I anticipate it will also be standard, but we will continue to allow some discretion on the part of various prayer leaders to use the traditional wording if they so prefer.

This change is another step in a process of inclusion that has been unfolding for well over forty years in the Conservative Movement. While starting points of historic social movements can rarely be identified with precision since the roots of change are already percolating by the time they achieve coherent community expression, I like to identify the beginning of this particular development with the appearance of a group of young women who identified themselves as *Ezrat Nashim* at the Rabbinical Assembly Convention in 1972. *Ezrat Nashim* was chosen as the group's name and was meant to be a kind of double entendre. It could mean, "Help for Women" but it also evoked the usage of the same term as it is used in Orthodox congregations, the "Women's Section." I like to think of it as meaning "Women's Lobby" which kind of maintains both meanings of the expression and its ironic twist.

I was still a student at the time. Some of my friends and I accepted the invitation of the Assembly to attend in advance of our ordination later that year. I will never forget the group's presentation.

The group had asked for a formal place on the program but were denied. Instead, it was able to assemble in a small room, and word spread by mouth that a group of women wanted to meet with the members of the all-male Assembly to talk about equal rights for women in Judaism.

Would anyone come? To everyone's surprise, I think especially to *Ezrat Nashim*, the room overflowed with attendees eager to hear its message.

It was simple. "The Conservative Movement has trained us to be knowledgeable Jews. The Conservative Movement advocates equal education for boys and girls. How can you continue to treat us unequally when we are equally knowledgeable and equally capable?"

The "demands" included being counted in a *minyan*, being ordained as rabbis and cantors, and being able to participate fully in the life of a congregation, equally with men.

During these forty years, one by one, each "demand" has been met and has led to the next. In most Conservative congregations, men and women now count equally for a *minyan*, women read from the *Torah* and lead services, wear *tallitot* and *tefillin*, serve as rabbis and *hazzanin*, and can be members of the congregation in their own right. It goes without saying that women have assumed full leadership positions within our congregations. And AJ has been a leader in each of these developments.

Which brings us to the liturgy. The most prominent prayer that is the centerpiece of each daily and holiday service is the *Amidah*. *Amidah* means "standing" and since this prayer is recited standing, it is typically referred to this way. But in our ancient rabbinic texts, the *Amidah* is simply called *Tefillah*, The Prayer, which is a demonstration of its liturgical centrality.

The first paragraph of the *Amidah* is known as *Avot*, Ancestors. It praises "Our God and God of our ancestors." The traditional liturgy then proceeds to be more explicit about our ancestors and identifies "our God" as "God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob." In an increasingly inclusive and egalitarian generation, the identification of our ancestors with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob alone, the Patriarchal Ancestors, is a glaring anachronism. Is our God only the God of the male ancestors? What about the female ancestors?

In 1990, in a paper written by Rabbi Joel Rembaum, the Committee on Law and Standards of the Conservative Movement approved the inclusion of the Matriarchal ancestors in the first paragraph of the *Amidah*, and modified other language in this prayer to reflect the change. As a result, *Siddur Sim Shalom*, the standard prayer book in the movement, now offers the option to identify "Our God" not only as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but also as "God of Sarah, God of Rebecca, God of Rachel, and God of Leah."

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."

That time is now. The widespread consensus among everyone who has expressed an opinion is that the time has come. So much so, that it causes barely a ripple of controversy. Some would argue that it is overdue.

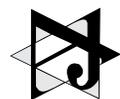
I agree. The time has definitely come. In explaining his rationale for including the Matriarchs, Rabbi Rembaum wrote: "In a generation when woman are assuming a more significant role in the religious life of the Conservative Jewish community, it is appropriate that the prayer that expresses the unity, 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 this change, our liturgy is a statement of the reality of inclusion, and affirms it, not only as a matter of practice, but as foundational theory.

This process is a brilliant example of how Judaism evolves to meet the challenges of changing times and ideals. It demonstrates our tradition's capacity to renew itself and remain relevant in every generation.

Our congregation has been in the forefront of every movement to be inclusive of those to whom Jewish life is precious, and to insure that no one is excluded on the basis of arbitrary decrees, even when they are grounded in antiquity. I am proud that we have now taken this next, obvious step, so that every man and woman in our congregation knows that each one has the right to embrace every aspect of our tradition with a whole heart, and to know that their loving embrace is a welcome expression of our people's evolving faith observance.

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