

On Changes in Jewish Liturgy--a book review

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Dr. Israel Drazin is the author of fifteen books, including a series of five volumes on the Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Bible, which he co-authors with Dr. Stanley M. Wagner, and a series of four books on the twelfth century philosopher Moses Maimonides, the latest being *Maimonides: Reason Above All*, published by Gefen Publishing House, www.gefenpublishing.com. The Orthodox Union (OU) publishes daily samples of the Targum books on www.ourradio.org.

On Changes in Jewish Liturgy

Options and Limitations

By Daniel Sperber

Urim Publications, 2010, 221 pages

This is the second recent volume where Daniel Sperber, professor, rabbi, author of thirty books and more than four hundred articles, a leading expert on Jewish laws and customs, addresses what many consider deplorable treatments of women in Judaism.

The earlier book, *Women and Men in Communal Prayer*, treated the exclusion of women from being called to the reading of the Torah, called *aliyot*, in Orthodox Jewish synagogues. It offered the opinions of four prominent, well-respected, and articulate men, rabbis and scholars. Two, including Sperber advocated changing the current practice to allow women to participate more than presently. Two opposed the change. All four approached the issue from “halakhic perspectives,” meaning that the authors articulated opinions based on the precedents of past rabbinic rulings.

Sperber, as is his custom, presented a host of examples to support his view that the concept of “human dignity” should trump all arguments that disallow full participation of women in the Torah reading service. He did not contradict Jewish halakhah (law), but argued that the concept of “human dignity” is a vital part of halakhah. He uses the same historical halakhic approach in this volume. He shows that the law is not what people think.

This volume asks: can changes be made in Jewish prayers? Sperber examines many prayers, including the three blessings that are part of the introduction to the morning service, prayers that set the daily mood.

The origin of these “blessings offensive to women” is a statement by a second century CE rabbi in the Babylonian Talmud, *Menakhot* 43b:

It was taught: R. Meir says: A person (read, man) must say three benedictions every day, and these are they: “who has made me an Israelite (meaning, a Jew); who has not made me a woman; who has not made me an ignoramus.” Rav Aha bar Yaakov heard his son reciting the blessing, “Who has not made me an ignoramus.” He said to him: Why do you recite this blessing? Surely the ignoramus is also obligated in mitzvot.

Rav Aha advises his son to substitute “Who has not made me a slave.”

Should these prayers be recited as they are written because they are a Jewish tradition? Are they sacred because they were unchanged for two millennia and were repeated in this format by generations of Jews? Are Jewish prayers never changed? Sperber shows with dozens of persuasive examples, and with footnotes as long as the text itself, for those readers desiring further proof, in a dispassionate, scholarly, and easy-to-read manner that the answer to all of these questions is “no.”

He cites early talmudic sources showing that rabbis were sensitive to the feelings of women and disliked Rabbi Meir’s blessings. Remarkably, he discloses that the source of the blessings is not Jewish at all. Parallel Greek benedictions “are found in Greek classical sources, specifically in the writings of Plato and Aristotle, and in other Greek sources from the fifth century BCE,” some seven hundred years before Rabbi Meir.

Blessed are You Who made me an Athenian and not a barbarian.

Blessed are You Who has made me a man and not a woman.

Blessed are You Who has made me a free man and not a slave.

Sperber quotes many alternative versions of the Jewish wording written by rabbis who saw that “the Jewish prayers were deemed offensive to women.” He quotes also a host of examples of the changes made in other prayers. For example, he sites “nineteen (!) different versions of R. Meir’s first blessing, ‘Who made me an Israelite.’” He notes that our current prayer book changed Rabbi Meir’s blessing from a positive to a negative statement, “who has not made me a heathen” and that the prayer book has a new alternative version to “who has not made me a woman” that women can say, “who has made me according to his will.” So changes do occur.

In fact he sites many examples of changes, such as many different versions of the very important daily *amidah* prayers. He notes that different groups of Jews, Ashkenazim, Sephardim, Oriental, Chasidim, Mystics, and others have different wordings of prayers and even made substitutions. He cites the first Lubavitch Rebbe rewriting many of the prayers. He mentions the new prayers such as the prayer for Israel, America, Israeli soldiers, Israel’s Independence Day, and others. He tells about the insertions by poets of *piyutim* and *tehinot*, poems and supplications, into the prayer book and the changes made by printers. He reminds us that half of the Friday evening service, called *Kabbalat Shabbat*, is a sixteenth century invention of the mystics to Safed in Israel. He tells tales of mystics changing prayers so that the number of letters and words would suggest their notions of mystical lessons. He recalls that many prayers are different today because of Christian censors. These are just some of the multitude of alterations that he relates.

Thus, Sperber makes it crystal clear that past changes made in the prayer book show that changes are allowed. As an Orthodox rabbi, he concludes that a person should not “alter the text of the prayers in accordance with his current state of mind. Of course, this is not feasible, nor is it our intended message. We are speaking only of changes mandated by communal needs, major historical events or broad sociological changes.”

Is it enough, is it sufficiently sensitive and humane to allow women to say “who has made me according to his will” while encouraging men to thank God for not making them a woman?