

Subject: REV: Sarason on Lavie, ed., "A Jewish Woman's Prayer Book"

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Aliza Lavie, ed. A Jewish Woman's Prayer Book. New York Spiegel

& Grau, 2008. xxvi + 408 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-385-52274-8.

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Anthology of Private Prayers by and for Traditional Jewish Women

This is an English-language version of the Hebrew original *T'fillat nashim: Pesifas nashi shel tefillot vesippurim* (2005). The editor, Aliza Lavie, is a lecturer in the Department of Political Science at Bar-Ilan University, as well as a presenter and editor of television programs on Jewish culture. In the book's preface, she relates the genesis of this project in her response to a newspaper interview with a young Israeli woman whose mother and baby daughter had both been killed in a terrorist incident. The woman and her husband had decided, in anguish, to leave the country. Lavie wished to share with this woman, and others, examples of the piety and fortitude of generations of Jewish women (including Lavie's own grandmother) whose faith had borne them up under difficult and challenging circumstances. (There is here an implicit critique of modern Jewish secularism.) The resulting anthology of traditional Jewish women's personal prayers, from the sixteenth century to the present and from diverse geographical regions, provides a wide-ranging ethnography of women's concerns, anxieties, and aspirations in traditional Jewish culture, often in their own voices. (While many of the prayers are written by women, some are written by men--usually rabbinical authorities--for women, and voice what the male-dominated culture viewed as appropriate prayers and expressions of piety for women). The modern prayers included are by traditionally observant Israeli women; explicitly excluded are those prayers published elsewhere "which have a humanist, universalist appeal and convey a manifestly politically correct message" (p. xxii).

Most impressive about this collection is its range and variety. Lavie conducted extensive research on both the written and the oral registers, examining medieval and modern texts (published and in manuscript, both public and transmitted within families) and interviewing religious women in Israel from a multitude of geographical and cultural backgrounds. The variety of life-cycle events and occasions represented here is noteworthy. The materials are arranged under seven headings: moments in a woman's life (everyday prayers, bat mitzvah, finding a spouse, and the wedding day); barrenness and fertility (fertility prayers, pregnancy and childbirth, and thanksgiving after birth); prayers for mothers; women's *mitzvot* (lighting candles, separating hallah, and immersion and purification); festivals and holy days (Shabbat, the New Moon, Pesach, Tish'ah b'Av, the month of Elul, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret and Simhat Torah, Hanukkah, Tu biShevat, and Purim); times of crisis (illness, loss, and bereavement); and prayers for peace and redemption.

Particularly fascinating are the prayers composed by women themselves: for example, a Yiddish prayer for fertility that is quite daring from a theological perspective, prayers for an easy childbirth and thanksgiving after delivery, celebrations for the birth of a daughter, and prayers for healing written by premodern and early modern women. There are also modern prayers written by observant Israeli women to mark such life-cycle events as menarche, bat mitzvah, menopause, and a daughter's first period. Since the modern ritualization of these passages in women's lives began in the West among nontraditional Jewish women (and some among non-Jewish women), it is fascinating to see them taken up by observant Israeli women and given a more traditional coloring. Modern prayers in this volume include as well a *_yizkor_* (memorial) prayer for the loss of a son in the Israeli army, and a prayer to mark the *_yahrzeit_* (anniversary) of the death of one's parents.

Of interest as well is the inclusion of a modern personal adaptation of the Moroccan *_tahdid_* ceremony, in which a new mother's relatives gather in her home, reciting liturgical poems and songs to ward off the evil eye. The authors of the adaptation (called *_zeved ha'eim_*, "gift of motherhood") explain, "We chose to hold this ceremony, in honor of the mother, specifically after the birth--a sensitive time for many women. We wanted to be partners at a time when mothers need strength and fortitude. This tradition, too, has a mother: in holding this ceremony, we relied upon ancient ceremonies that we had discovered" (p. 113). Also included are ten prayers from Fanny Neuda's *_Stunden der Andacht_*, the influential volume of personal devotions for women in German (not in Yiddish, as the bibliography states on page 408) originally published in 1854, and here translated into English from the Hebrew renderings for Lavie's original volume.

There are, additionally, recently composed feminine versions (by Leah Shakdiel and Yael Levine) of the liturgical poems, *_Z'khor av_* ("Remember the Patriarch!"); here *_Z'khor eim_*, "Remember the Matriarch!"), which is part of the prayer for rain on Shemini Atzeret; and *_Vay'hi b'hatzi halailah_* ("It came to pass at midnight"), which is found in the Passover Haggadah. Both versions are intended by their authors to supplement, not to replace, the traditional versions--adding the voices and the remembrance of meritorious women to those of men.

The volume concludes, poetically, with the prayer from the memoirs of Gluckel of Hameln (1645-1724), who singlehandedly ran her husband's business after his untimely death in order to support her twelve children. Her closing words clearly are meant to bear on Lavie's preface: "Therefore, my beloved children, be comforted and bear your suffering with fortitude.... Even when it seems to us that the suffering is unbearable, we must know that the blessed God does not burden His servants with more than they are able to bear. Happy is the man who bears his own suffering, or that of his children, accepting it all with love" (p. 390).

All of the prayers appear in both Hebrew and English, which is particularly useful since the vast bulk were composed in the former. Prayers originally composed in Ladino are given additionally in that language. Regrettably, however, when the original language is Yiddish or German (eleven prayers each), it is not reproduced. The English renderings by Kaeren Fish are graceful, literate, and accurate. Included as well are introductory comments on each

prayer, dealing with its origin and context, and introductions to each section. Source notes and a bibliography are given at the back of the book. (A very few items, such as the first prayer in the collection, unfortunately are not sourced here, but the source may be gleaned by consulting the original Hebrew edition.) The publishers have given the volume an artistically attractive presentation, with pleasing (and legible) English and Hebrew typefaces, two-toned inking (black for the prayers themselves; green for the commentaries, parenthetical remarks on the page, and background graphics), and cream-colored paper stock with rough edges on the side.

The English version corresponds to the original Hebrew publication in most respects, although in the Hebrew original the commentaries are more extensive and the anthology of prayers is a third larger (88 versus 150 items). Readers interested in a fuller treatment, therefore, should consult the original publication.

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