

The Torah of our mothers

By **Judy Bolton- Fasman**
The Jewish Advocate



Aliza Lavie and I sat over lattes in a coffee shop in Brookline. I was exhausted, having been up late the night before helping Anna prepare for an English test. Lavie, the editor of "A Jewish Woman's Prayer Book," found a prayer appropriate for a mother who has been quizzing, editing and counseling her children late into the evening.

The prayer, in part, asks for the courage "to soften my expression/ So that each of my children may/See his face within my face/As in a mirror polished for a holiday/ And the darkness that is ingrained within/My face - cover it with light/That my patience not run out, nor my throat grow hoarse/From shouting - despite myself - that thickens."

We read the prayer together. My shortcomings as a mother bubbled up, but Lavie reassured me.

"Thank God for children," she said. "They give us many opportunities to pray as mothers."

"A Jewish Woman's Prayer Book" is a quiet, intimate book with a very public profile. It was a surprise bestseller in Israel and its editor hosts a popular current events program on Israeli television.

Lavie has been on sabbatical in the U.S. for the past six months and speaking to receptive audiences across the country about the richness of Jewish women's prayers. She is also a scholar-in-residence at the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute, researching a companion volume on women's rituals.

Random House published the English translation of "A Jewish Woman's Prayer Book" last fall, and Lavie's groundbreaking scholarship earned her this year's Jewish Book Council Award in Women's Studies.

She is passionate about communicating the powerful world of prayer and ritual that women have forged throughout the centuries. Her perspective is informed by both the Modern Orthodox world in which she lives, as well as the Jewish feminist world that she is illuminating with women's prayers that go back to the 13th century.

"We don't need to co-opt men's rituals or prayers," she said. "We have so much ritual and wisdom. The Ramban [a 13th century commentator on the Torah] said not to forget the values of your father or the Torah of your mother. That was inspiration for me to bring back women's Torah. We've had enough of men's values. Now it's our turn to bring back the vitality of our religion."

Lavie's research took her from the musty basements of libraries, where volumes of women's literature and history languished in boxes, to private collections where prayers were published in folios dating back to the Italian Renaissance. During the course of her research, she came to realize that she was discovering the soul that

animated Jewish texts.

"'The Jewish Women Prayer's Book' is more than just a project to present text," said Lavie. "The prayers tell the story of women and their spiritual journeys. That's why it's so important to give these prayers back to people."

As she and I read through prayers for midwives, infertile women and mothers marking lifecycle moments, I was grateful that my daughter and her peers have these prayers to bond with one another. I was also grateful that Lavie discovered that women in 14th-century Provence were as offended as I am by the traditional morning blessing in which men thank God "for not making me a woman."

But these brave and ingenious women found a deceptively simple solution to their dilemma by directly blessing God for making them women. In 15th-century France, a forward-thinking husband wrote a siddur for his wife with an alternative blessing that enables her to thank God for having made her a woman and not a man. A modern rendering of the blessing blends tradition and feminism by praising God for "making me according to His will and [not making] me a man."

Among my favorite prayers in the book is a contemporary and resonant blessing that a mother recites when her daughter first menstruates:

"Blessed are You for having granted me my beloved daughter/ Whose body You created in wisdom and perfection/And within whom You implanted the power of fertility and childbirth./You have joined her to our mothers and matriarchs/ In timeless merging of/Pain and knowledge."

Bearing in mind mothers in Israel, Lavie also included a mother's prayer by Fanny Neuda for a child serving in the army. Born in 1819 in what is now the Czech Republic, Neuda was from a prominent family of rabbis and was educated by her father. She married a rabbi who was among the first generation of modern rabbis in Moravia.

"Prayers like Fanny Neuda's speak to secular Israelis," Lavie said. "These same Israelis made Jewish women's prayers popular. I traveled to kibbutzim, where prayers hadn't been heard in 60 years, and the kibbutzniks completely related to my book. People want to learn about other people, and the prayers in this book allow for that."

Before I left Lavie, she asked me if my mother or grandmothers had their own special prayers. I told her that my mother prayed that I would marry a good Jewish man and fortified her prayers by fasting half-days on Mondays and Thursdays - the weekdays when the Torah is read. The Sephardic women in my family believe that the gates of heaven are open on those days and it's easier to slip prayers to God.

"Did it work?" Lavie asked me.

"Better than my mother and I dared to dream," I said.

And with that, Aliza Lavie proved to me the power of our mother's Torah.

Judy Bolton-Fasman is on the Board of Solomon Schechter Day School and writing a memoir about the year she said Kaddish.