

Books

A Prayer Book for All Seasons

By **Barbara Trainin Blank**

Who would have thought a book of prayers would become a best seller? Yet *A Jewish Woman's Prayer Book*, edited by Aliza Lavie (Spiegel & Grau/Random House, 408 pp. \$35) and first published in Israel in Hebrew as *Tefilat Nashim* in 2005, has sold more than

100,000 copies—reaching traditionalists and secularists, Muslims, Christians and Jews, men and women. Lavie's book offers collections of prayers written for, and mostly by, Jewish women throughout the ages in various countries. Included are special prayers for Shabbat and the holidays; prayers for milestones; prayers for love, fertility and companionship; and prayers for comfort and thanksgiving.

"I believe Muslim and Christian women are interested in the book both out of curiosity and their interest in the topic," speculates Lavie (top right), a lecturer in the Department of Political Studies at Bar-Ilan University in Ramat Gan and presenter and editor of television programs on Jewish culture. "The book provides an answer for their difficulties and wishes. A woman is a woman. Prayer is prayer, and there is one God."

Examples are contemporary Israeli prayers such as "A Mother's Early Morning Prayer" by Hava Pinhas-Cohen and "Yizkor for a Son" by Dalia Wertheim-Yohanan. Then there are prayers by Fanny Neuda of Moravia, who published her own *siddur* in 1855, and a Ladino bedtime prayer.

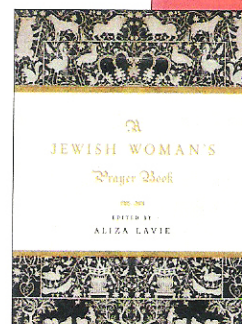
The response to the collection stunned Lavie, who was inspired to

embark on the project after reading, on the eve of Yom Kippur 2002, an interview with an Israeli woman who had lost both her mother and baby daughter in a terrorist attack. In synagogue that night, Lavie sought to find comfort for the bereaved woman in the traditional *siddur*—and could not.

But Lavie, who is modern Orthodox, admits her own search predated this event. The 44-year-old mother of four grew up in a religious Zionist home and always asked questions.

"I tried to find my place, but didn't always get answers," she recalls. "But I also took responsibility; at 30, I felt handicapped, realized I didn't know how to open the *Gemara*. Something was missing in my life, and I had to find out what it was. My husband encouraged me to look."

AS A SPECIAL GIFT FOR HER eldest daughter's bat mitzva, Lavie enrolled with her daughter in a mother-daughter educational program about lesser-known historical Jewish women. She was also influenced by Orthodox feminist Blu Greenberg's 1981 groundbreaking book, *On Women and Judaism*



(Jewish Publication Society). "I realized that knowledge is power, within halakhic borders," she says. "I wanted to do something."

Considering her diverse background, it is only fitting that Lavie's collection appeals to different communities. Her Kurdistan-born grandmother raised six children on her own after being widowed. "She was a Zionist who went to synagogue three times a day and prayed in Hebrew," Lavie says. "People asked halakhic questions of her." Her other grandmother ran a boutique in her native Romania before coming to Israel, settling with her husband in a tent camp and speaking Hebrew reluctantly.

Part of the appeal of Lavie's book is that it is attractively laid out

(TOP) AVSHALOM LEVI

in Hebrew alongside English translations, with commentary on the origins of the prayers and authors' background. Lavie culled the *tefilot* from libraries, archives and private collections or tucked in family *sid-durim*. In addition to original compositions, she has also included the biblical prayers of Miriam at the sea, the supplication of Hannah and the Song of Deborah.

"In the *Tanakh*, mothers and fathers had dialogue with God—they prayed personal prayers," she comments. "Through the generations we forgot to have this personal contact. The prayers I've included aren't new—but maybe for that reason, they feel familiar."

In Israel, *Tefilat Nashim* has inspired workshops for women who want to write their own prayers. The English edition garnered a 2008 National Jewish Book Award and

generated an interdenominational conference on women's prayer held in New York, at which Lavie—a research associate this past year at the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute in Waltham, Massachusetts—was keynote speaker.

Lavie has been invited to speak in ultra-Orthodox communities, secular kibbutzim and everywhere in-between. "I often have to wonder what to wear," she says with a laugh.

But interest in her work has also been fueled by a general search for meaning in "ancient texts and half-forgotten customs," Lavie says. And her research underscored that Jewish life was "more than texts."

"Many women in the past practiced Judaism with a spiritual approach, a sense of God everywhere," she notes. "I grew up with women who knew how to speak with God."

Lavie, who is completing a second book about women and ritual, is still trying to grasp the "*ga'agu'im*," yearning, of women—and of men—for *Tefilat Nashim*. One secular man who had lost his son in Lebanon told her he hadn't prayed all his life, but when he found her book, something changed for him.

In addition to reclaiming Jewish women's history and making prayer more relevant, Lavie hopes her book will help bridge the gaps between the secular and the religious, Jews and non-Jews.

One reviewer has pointed out that Lavie's work would be stronger if prayers were included in their original Yiddish, Ladino or other languages. Even so, *A Jewish Woman's Prayer Book* evokes a Hebrew proverb: "Words that come from the heart, enter the heart." The prayers, says Lavie, "are coming home."