

# A woman's book of prayers becomes a bestseller

Dr. Aliza Lavie is as surprised as everyone else that her book, *Jewish Women's Prayers Throughout the Ages*, has become a bestseller in Israel. Its unexpected success, she assumes, probably stems from the fact that it reveals that women were far more active in Jewish religious life over the centuries than had previously been thought.

The standard prayer book is primarily for men, and even includes a passage whereby the male worshipper thanks God for not making him a woman. But as Dr. Lavie points out in her book, special prayers for women at peace with their sex have been written for hundreds of years. A recent one, composed by Ruth Lazar of Kvutzat Yavne, an Orthodox community, says: "Blessed are you God for making me a woman, for making my body wisely, so that every organ knows its season and you gather these organs together and bring maturity and fertility to ripeness in me."

While most of the prayers quoted in the book were written by women for women, also included are a great many prayers and supplications written by men for the use of women. Among them are *A Prayer for a New Mother Rising from her Bed after Childbirth* by Dr. M. Leteris (Prague 1845) and *The Cry of a Woman Suffering from a Failed Marriage Bond* by Rabbi Yoel Ben Nun, who heads a kibbutz yeshiva.

Though Dr. Lavie comes from an Orthodox home and is herself observant, she is not an expert on Judaism; indeed, she runs the communication program in the political science department of Bar Ilan University. It was her Uzbekistan-born grandmother, says Lavie, who kindled her interest in women's prayers. "The old woman," Lavie recalls, "could neither read nor write. But she had a broad knowledge of the Bible and had memorized innumerable prayers. Not only that, but she also attended synagogue services every morning, afternoon and evening.

"Who had taught her, and more generally, how was knowledge transmitted from generation to



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generation by women who typically had no formal education? As I delved into the subject," Lavie continues, "I discovered a rich oral tradition among Jewish women, who passed on their Jewish knowledge to their daughters. But this tradition is disappearing in modern Israel, and in some small way I am helping to preserve that reservoir of Jewish knowledge."

In her research, Dr. Lavie discovered that centuries ago there were Diaspora communities where women were very learned and played an active role in Jewish life. "In Renaissance Italy," she points out, "there were women who performed circumcisions, acted as ritual slaughterers and ruled on matters of purity. The rabbis then were more sensitive to the needs of women than their counterparts today. But this situation won't continue. Women are now well educated in all spheres, Judaic and others, and they won't agree to remain second-class citizens where religion is concerned."

Dr. Lavie does see some positive changes in this sphere. For example, women are now allowed to serve as lawyers in rabbinical courts, and in her view it won't be very long before there are also women judges in those courts.

Despite her liberal approach, Dr. Lavie did not include prayers written by Conservative or Reform women, a decision that evoked criticism from them though, at the same time, helped ward off criticism from the Orthodox establishment. She has since reconsidered the whole issue and the English-language version of her book will include prayers from non-Orthodox sources as well.