

Impact Of Women On Jewish History

By Prof. Livia Bitton Jackson



Dr. Aliza Lavie: Women's Prayers

Jewish Women's Prayers Throughout the Ages is the title of a remarkable volume written by Dr. Aliza Lavie, Professor of Communications at Bar-Ilan University in Israel.

From Biblical Hannah's touching plea for a son and Deborah's magnificent hymn of thanksgiving, to the lyric compositions of scholarly ladies in Renaissance Italy, the heartrending appeals in Ladino of the secret Jewesses in Portugal, the brilliant entreaty of Glueckel from Hammeln in 17th-century Germany, to modern-day women's petitions in Israel for Divine Intervention, Dr. Lavie's research has yielded a rich tradition of women's prayers.



This amazing collection of prayers written by women for women, some by men for women, spanning centuries and various countries of the Jewish Diaspora, was an eye-opener for me. I did not know that throughout the ages, women actually composed and recited prayers on many different occasions to fulfill a specific, personal need for which no expression can be found among the prayers in the *Siddur* (prayer book).

Instead of chronology, the author chose to arrange the prayers by topic. Every life-cycle event and personal yearning found expression in women's prayer. There is a prayer to be recited by the adolescent girl, and by the Bat Mitzvah, a prayer for the "basherte," and prayers for the bride. There are prayers for fertility, prayers recited during pregnancy, during labor and

after the birth - thanksgiving for the newborn and the miracle of the event. Among public prayers one can also find women's eloquent hymns and supplications for the People and the Land of Israel.

There is a series of prayers for mothers and for women in general when performing *mitzvot* like candle lighting, taking of *challah* and ablutions at the *mikveh*. There are special blessings for *Shabbat*, for holidays, for *Rosh Chodesh* and for Fast Days. Women composed heartrending prayers for times of crisis, like divorce, illness in the family and bereavement.

Among the prayers for mothers, I found "The Prayer of the Mother-In-Law," particularly appropriate and meaningful. Composed by Shulamit Eisenbach, a mother of two sons, on the eve of her elder son's wedding, "a significant moment in which [she] might gain a daughter or lose a son," the mother-to-become-a-mother-in-law confesses: "I felt a need to ask for a Divine Favor, for which I did not find expression among the prayers." The favor this mother-to-become-a-mother-in-law asks is that G-d place within her heart the spirit of goodness and help her, in her words, "find grace in the eyes of my sons-in-law and daughters, goodwill towards me from my sons and daughters-in-law, that I shall not see in them any faults, hear from them bad tidings; that my eye shall not be unkind towards them and my hand shall not be ungenerous..."

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Fanny Neuda, born in 1819 into a Moravian (Czech) rabbinical family, composed particularly poignant prayers for young girls and women for the significant times in their lives. Her prayer book, entitled *A Book of Prayer and Ethical Teaching for the Women of Israel and Her Daughters, For Public and Private Prayer On All Occasions in the Life of a Woman*, was published in Prague in 1855. This first women's prayer book in German, the language spoken by the majority of Jews in Central and Western Europe, became a "best-seller."

An attractive brunette, Dr. Lavie was born Aliza Mashiah, the daughter of a highly-cultured family of educators in Netanya, Israel. In 1985, in the midst of her studies for a B.A., M.A. and Ph. D. degrees from Bar-Ilan University in Political Science and Communications, she mar-

ried law student Tzuriel Lavie, who now is a prominent lawyer. The young couple made their home in Netanya where they have raised their four children.

Dr. Lavie's search for sources took her to distant parts and compelled her to devote unstinting toil to uncover material hitherto untouched. She lavishes credit on her paternal grandmother, Hannah Mashiah, for her devotion to the subject - her keen interest in prayer. She writes: "...my grandmother who made *aliyah* from Bukhara as a prosperous lady, experienced loss, bereavement and poverty in the Promised Land. She bore nine children, lost three of them and was widowed at the age of 36... her fervent faith, her going three times a day to shul, every day, all four seasons of the year, connected me to Judaism.

Dedicated to the memory of her grandmother, Dr. Aliza Lavie's volume is a fitting tribute to her righteous role model. ■