

A Prayer for Pregnant Women

The Matriarch's Prayer

Master of the entire world,
Lord of Hosts:
the eyes of all turn to you,
for in time of trouble our salvation is with you.

Even though I am not worthy to come before you in prayer,
I have strengthened myself like steel
and come to cast my plea before you:

Just as you took note of Sarah
and you listened to entreaties for Rebecca
and you looked upon Leah's suffering
and you remembered our holy mother Rachel
and you have listened to the prayers of righteous women forever,
so in your manifold mercy look upon my distress
and remember me,
and harken to the sound of my supplication,
and send the redeeming angel to support me
and help me during this pregnancy of mine.
And for the sake of your mercy,
save me and rescue me from all evil.

Study Questions

1. Who do you suppose is the writer of this prayer?
2. What is her the principal concern?
3. Why does she mention the Matriarchs? To what, specifically, does she allude to in her reference to the Matriarchs?

Bat Yiftah: Jephthah's Daughter
Finding Voice Among the Nameless

Paraphrase of Judges 11:29-40

Jephthah, the Gileadite leader, leads Israel in war against the Ammonites. When the war was being lost, Jephthah vowed to the Lord that if Israel prevailed in battle he would sacrifice the first thing to emerge from his house upon his return home. The battle was won and when Jephthah returned home, his only child – his beloved daughter – came running out to meet him “with timbrel and dance.”

Jephthah told her of his vow – that could not be cancelled – she said, “Do to me as you have vowed, seeing that the Lord has vindicated you against your enemies, the Ammonites. But let this be done for me: let me be for two months, and I will go with my companions and lament upon the hills and there bewail my maidenhood.”

After two months she returned to her father and he did as he vowed.

Verse 40

So it became a custom in Israel for the maidens of Israel to go every year, for four days in the year, and ‘tell stories’ or ‘speak about’ the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.

Discussion Question: What kinds of activities might we as Jewish women envision these women performing on a yearly basis, in memory/honor of their friend?

Golda Meir (1898-1978)
Thinking with her heart...

It's no accident many accuse me of conducting public affairs with my heart instead of my head. Well, what if I do? ... Those who don't know how to weep with their whole heart don't know how to laugh either. (1973)

Discussion Questions:

1. What issue is Golda addressing in this statement?
2. How does she respond to this characterization?
3. If Golda were alive today, do you think she would respond in the same way?

Henrietta Szold
“Thank you for your gracious offer, but...”

Letter to Haym Peretz on saying *Kaddish* for her mother (New York, September 16, 1916)

It is impossible for me to find words in which to tell you how deeply I was touched by your offer to act as “*Kaddish*” for my dear mother. I cannot even thank you — it is something that goes beyond thanks. It is beautiful, what you have offered to do — I shall never forget it.

You will wonder, then, that I cannot accept your offer. Perhaps it would be best for me not to try to explain to you in writing, but to wait until I see you to tell you why it is so. I know well, and appreciate what you say about, the Jewish custom; and Jewish custom is very dear and sacred to me. And yet I cannot ask you to say *Kaddish* after my mother. The *Kaddish* means to me that the survivor publicly and markedly manifests his wish and intention to assume the relation to the Jewish community which his parent had, and that so the chain of tradition remains unbroken from generation to generation, each adding its own link. You can do that for the generations of your family, I must do that for the generations of my family.

I believe that the elimination of women from such duties was never intended by our law and custom — women were freed from positive duties when they could not perform them, but not when they could. It was never intended that, if they could perform them, their performance of them should not be considered as valuable and valid as when one of the male sex performed them. And of the *Kaddish* I feel sure this is particularly true.

My mother had eight daughters and no son; and yet never did I hear a word of regret pass the lips of either my mother or my father that one of us was not a son. When my father died, my mother would not permit others to take her daughters’ place in saying the *Kaddish*, and so I am sure I am acting in her spirit when I am moved to decline your offer. But beautiful your offer remains nevertheless, and, I repeat, I know full well that it is much more in consonance with the generally accepted Jewish tradition than is my or my family’s conception. You understand me, don’t you?

Study Questions:

1. What is the subject of this communication?
2. What is her argument?

Discussion Question: Why is this such an extraordinary document in women’s history?

Judith Hauptman
Through the Looking Glass: A Woman in a Man's World

From the Introduction, *Rereading the Rabbis: A Woman's Voice* (1998)

My answer, stated succinctly, is that the Rabbis upheld patriarchy as the preordained mode of social organization, as dictated by the Torah. They thus perpetuated women's second-class, subordinate status. They neither achieved equality for women nor even sought it. But of critical importance, they began to introduce numerous, significant, and occasionally bold corrective measures to improve the lot of women. In some cases, they eliminated abusive behaviors that had developed over time. In others, they broke new ground, granting women benefits that they never had before, even at men's expense. From their own perspective, the Rabbis were seeking to close the gap that had developed over time between more enlightened social thinking and women's more subordinate status as defined by the received texts, biblical and rabbinic, without openly opposing such texts.

Discussion Questions

1. What does Hauptman say about the position of women in ancient Judaism?
2. Did the Rabbis acknowledge this second-class status?
3. Although the Rabbis accepted this status, what did they do to redress some of the inequalities of the patriarchal system?
4. Does Hauptman see the Rabbis as agents of social change?
5. Do you think that Hauptman's reading is sympathetic to the Rabbis? Is it helpful to Jewish feminism?

Emma Lazarus
The Voice of Lady Liberty

The New Colossus (New York City, 1883)

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame,
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
with silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Brief background: Sculptor Frederic Auguste Bartholdi was commissioned to design a sculpture with the year 1876 in mind for completion, to commemorate the centennial of the American Declaration of Independence. It was his intention to create an ideological symbol, a magnificent statue facing France, a haven of enlightenment that still battled the forces of tyranny and oppression in Europe. The placement of Lazarus' poem at its base, however, dramatically changed the symbolism: the Statue of Liberty and the United States became a beacon of welcome for those immigrants *leaving the old world*, coming to the new.

Discussion Questions

1. How does Lazarus view the old world?
2. What does Lady Liberty, i.e. the United States offer instead?
3. What does Lazarus imply with the term the *New Colossus*, and what images does she conjure with the term *Mother of Exiles*?

Optional: Lazarus compares Lady Liberty to the Colossus of Rhodes? How do they differ?

Gluckel of Hameln (1646-1724)
Super Mom

The Memoirs of Gluckel of Hameln

The best thing for you, my children, is to serve God from your heart, without falsehood or sham, not giving out to people that you are one thing while, God forbid, in your heart you are another. Say your prayers with awe and devotion. During the time for prayers, do not stand about and talk of other things. While prayers are being offered to the Creator of the world, hold it a great sin to engage another man in talk about an entirely different matter—shall God almighty be kept waiting until you have finished your business?

Moreover, put aside a fixed time for the study of the Torah, as best you know how. Then diligently go about your business, for providing your wife and children a decent livelihood is likewise a mitzvah—the command of God and the duty of man. We should, I say, put ourselves to great pains for our children, for on this the world is built, yet we must understand that if children did as much for their parents, the children would quickly tire of it. (p. 2)

Discussion Questions:

1. What kinds of advice does Gluckel dispense to her children?
2. How much of her advice is applicable today?
3. What is the best piece of advice your mother gave to you?

Ray Frank
On Women's Spirituality (1893)

Excerpt from address to first Jewish Women's Congress, 1893

Duality manifests itself in all things, but in nothing is this two-foldness more plainly seen than in woman's nature.

The weaker sex physically, it is the stronger spiritually, it having been said that religion were impossible without woman. And yet the freedom of the human soul has been apparently effected by man. I say apparently effected, for experience has demonstrated, and history records, that one element possessed by woman had made her the great moral, the great motif force of the world, though she be, as all great forces are, a silent force.

It may be true that sin came into the world because of the disobedience of the first woman, but woman has long since atoned for it by her loving faith, her blind trust in the Unknown. Down through the ages, traditional and historical, she has come to us the symbol of faith and freedom, of loyalty and love.

Discussion questions

1. What does Ray Frank say about women's spirituality?
2. Is this a woman's voice, or is she restating men's perception of women?

Rosalyn S. Yalow
Nobel Prize Winner (Physiology, Medicine)
“I have decided not to accept the 1978 Woman of the Year Award...”

Yalow’s response to Lenore Hershey, editor-in-chief of Ladies Home Journal:

I have decided not to accept the 1978 Woman of the Year Award in the category of New Scientific Community from the Ladies Home Journal although it would perhaps have been more diplomatic to accept it. I think it more appropriate for me to take a positive stand by rejecting what Susan Jacoby would have called a ‘ghetto’ award.

She stated, very wisely I believe, that ‘A ghetto job is a ghetto job as long as it is perceived by male executives—and by the woman they hire—as a job with a ‘for women only’ sign. It doesn’t matter whether the salary is \$50,000 or \$7,5000 a year...the situation can only be changed by women who regard themselves and are regarded by others as being plain excellent—not excellent only in comparison to other women... Women who have ‘made it’ are no longer pleased to be told that their achievements are remarkable for a woman.’

Discussion Questions:

1. What is Yalow’s response to Ladies Home Journal?
2. What is her reason for declining?
3. Do you think that Yalow, as a Jew, has a responsibility to promote the accomplishments of other Jews, and particularly Jewish women?

Miriam Not Part of the Club

The Women's Haggadah, by E.M. Bronner with Naomi Nimrod, 1994

The Lament of the Prophet Miriam
Once she danced at the banks of the
sea.

Once the women leapt after her.
Then she praised the One on High
And her tambourine rose in the air.

And the rain in the wilderness
tasted like coriander,
like almond and honey,
but the taste in her mouth was maror,
bitter as her name.

“You shall be a Kingdom of Priests.”
She was not appointed.
“And a land of prophets.”
She was not heeded.
“Come up unto the Lord,”
Moses, Aaron and the Seventy Elders.
“Come up unto the Lord,”
Joshua.

“Come up to me into the Mount,
and the Lord spoke unto Moses”
“and the Lord spoke unto Moses”
“and the Lord said unto Moses...”
“And He gave unto Moses...”
“Moreover, the Lord spoke unto Moses
and He gave unto Moses
two tablets of stone.”
“Come up unto the Lord”
“Come up to me unto the Mount
And take Aaron and his sons.”

“And the Lord spoke
and Moses ... the skin of his face
shone.”

“And the Lord spoke with Moses and
Aaron
and the Lord spoke with Moses
in Mount Sinai.”

“And the Lord spoke with Moses
in the wilderness of the Sinai.”

And Miriam and Aaron spoke against
Moses.

Miriam's face did not shine.
“Behold: Miriam became leprous,
white as snow.”

Pale in the wilderness
for the counting of seven days,
shut out from the camp,
tented in dishonor.

Soon, she lay herself down,
the sister of Moses,
the prophet of her people
she lay down
in a place of no seed, no fig,
no wine, no pomegranate,
no water,
and, parched, Miriam died.

Discussion questions:

1. What does Miriam convey to us in this poem?
2. Do you think this is a fair reading of the biblical text?

