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## Made According to His Desire: The Prayers of Woman and the Fears of Man

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**J**EWISH PRAYER AND BIBLICAL TRADITION ARE REplete WITH IMAGES OF WOMEN AS PRIMARILY SEXUAL BEINGS. AS LONG AS THIS CONCEPTUALIZATION OF WOMEN REMAINS SUBCONSCIOUS, ATTEMPTS to “modernize” our tradition will continue to perpetuate the very myths that disturb us in the first place.

One of the liturgy’s most notorious examples of the sexualization of women is the moment in the classical morning prayers when man thanks God “for not having made me a woman” (*she-lo asani ishah*), while woman thanks God “for having made me according to His desire” (*she-asani kirtsono*).

Much has been said about this distinction and possible solutions to the inequity. Against the custom that we make few deletions from the siddur, many contemporary prayerbooks have omitted the man’s blessing entirely. The Conservative Movement siddur (ed. Silverman) offers instead a new blessing that both men and women can say: each thanks God for having been made *bitsalmo*, in God’s image.

Why, I wonder, did the Conservative Movement not choose instead that both men and women thank God for having been made *kirtsono* (according to His desire)? Two answers suggest themselves: First,

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even if we regard “according to His desire” as a neutral phrase, men may be unwilling to say a prayer that has historically been a woman’s prayer. Because *kirtsono* has for generations been said as an alternative to the expression of gratitude for being a man, *kirtsono* has come to imply something less than maleness.

And second, a male’s *ratson* (which may be translated as will, desire, or pleasure) carries sexual connotations. A contemporary Orthodox prayerbook, the *Art Scroll Siddur*, explains: Women thank God for having been created *kirtsono* because “though women were not given the privilege and challenge assigned to men, they are created closer to God’s ideal of satisfaction” (p. 19). This suggests that the editors unconsciously posit a sexualized relationship between God and woman. Man, who has made God in his image, imagines that God is more “satisfied” by woman than by man. The creation story to which the prayer alludes associates God with Adam and images woman as Other.

In the first creation story in Genesis, God creates all life; “male and female He created them” (GEN. 1:27). There is no significant difference between the sexes. The following chapter of Genesis begins the process both of making woman significantly different from man and of defining her in terms of her sexuality. Eve functions as both first mother and first temptress. In a striking instance of counterfactual representation, the first woman is born out of the belly of a man. This woman is tempted to knowledge (to become like God) by an erect snake. While the story blames woman for tempting man, in an act of symbolic displacement, clearly it is the symbol of male sexuality that tempts the female.

Finally, in this story of endless sexual reversals, the punishment is appropriately backwards. Woman is cursed with excessive desire of man, while man will rule over her. Part of man’s likeness to the divine is his position of relative dominance (ultimately including sexual dominance) in relation to the very woman whom the story imagines as possessing an especially powerful sexuality. The story betrays anxiety with respect to female creative powers (as it is from the mother’s belly that all life really stems) and fear of feminine seductive powers. For these extraordinary powers, woman is commanded to be submissive.

Biblical women after Eve play many roles and may wield great power. Woman may be chaste wife, special mother, adulteress, alluring ally of Israel, or enemy harlot threatening Israel. But no matter whether her role is heroine or villainess, her power to create or destroy is sexual.

### *The Barren Mother*

The barren mother is a case in point. When heroes have birth stories, the mother of the hero is barren: the matriarchs, Hannah, and the mother of Samson obey this narrative convention. In all of the cases of a loved barren wife, God intervenes to remove the curse of barrenness, and a miraculous birth follows. The special child will be a hero and will hold a special place in the history of Israel’s redemption. Usually, the child favored by God and the narrative is the mother’s and not the father’s favorite son. The text asserts the prerogative of the Divine to create whenever heroes have birth stories, implicitly underlining that man alone is insufficient to impregnate the mother of a hero.

The ordeal of bitter waters described in the Bible (NUM. 5) offers a different interpretation of barrenness. If a jealous husband suspects his wife of infidelity, she swallows a muddy mixture and submits to the priest’s curses. If guilty, she will either die or be barren thereafter. If innocent, she will bear children.

We thus discover two antithetical interpretations of the barren wife: her barrenness may be read by all who know her as proof that she is either the ultimate wicked woman guilty of sexual crimes, or conversely, the ultimate good woman destined to someday bear heroes.

Whether supremely evil or supremely virtuous, a barren wife carries frightening implications: she emasculates her husband. In the one case, she is public proof that her husband is a cuckold. In the other, she becomes a principal party in an arrangement with God that erases the human father.

### *The Seductress*

Even when the Bible portrays a woman’s loss of sexual power in the form of rape, ironically the victim is also invested with sexual power. In midrash, Dinah, the victim of rape, becomes the most wicked of women. From her story we learn “why man must master his wife, that she go not into the

marketplace, for every woman who goes into the marketplace will eventually come to grief." A woman who is said to "go out"—Dinah, Leah, Jael—is immoral, a seductress.

In the Bible Dinah's brothers are said to remove her from Shechem's house, but according to one midrashic account, the men must drag her by force because "when a woman is intimate with an uncircumcised man, she finds it hard to tear herself away" (GENESIS RABBAH 80). The Jewish male thus expresses his anxious fears about control in the larger world, and he expresses those fears in terms of his relative sexual potency. Here the myth of female sexual insatiability has functioned as a subconscious excuse for keeping her segregated and oppressed.

An overview of biblical representations of its heroines reveals that the tradition has assigned to women a particular kind of power: female potency is associated with male impotency. Jael chops off Sisera's head. Judith does the same to Holofernes. Delilah blinds Samson and cuts off his hair. Blindness (as exemplified in the Oedipus story) and haircuts are literary symbols of castration. The men who recorded these central narratives display a shocking fear of "losing their heads" because they lust after woman.

In granting women these extraordinary powers, the texts betray an underlying terror of female sexuality. To reassure itself, our masculine textual tradition ever reiterates that in spite of the curse in Genesis, woman is created according to His desire. Beginning with the first stories in Genesis, biblical narratives convey men's fear that the consequence of their desire for woman is a loss of control and the loss of Paradise. The flip side of desire is fear. And it is this terror of powers that no real woman possesses that has long justified the oppression of real women.

Liturgical change that responds to feminist concerns typically adds the matriarchs to the list of patriarchs, or adds Deborah and Miriam in places where heroines are absent. But such changes miss the fact that heroines are not parallel to heroes. Sarah is not a female Abraham, and Rachel and Leah do not add up to Jacob. In liturgy as in Bible, the feminine presence is a threatening sexual presence; woman exists in relation to man as mother, sister, or lover. She is rarely characterized independently in non-sexualized

terms. In the continuing effort to enfranchise women, we must be sensitive to these characterizations. The female worshipper needs the opportunity to worship outside the mythology that pervasively imagines her relationally and sexually with respect to man. Woman must not only be included in prayer; in a sense, she must be reinvented.

