**Kol Nefesh Masorti**

*Summary of discussions on egalitarian prayer*

**Introduction to the topic**

In his Dvar Torah on 6/1/18, Marc Shoffren discussed egalitarian language. Mike Fenster’s notes of the Tefilla Pelach meeting on 30/1/18 stated: “[Marc’s] …. idea was to start an exploration of practice and meaning, maybe with some experimentation in practice, rather than to change ‘policy’ directly at KNM.” Marc was particularly keen to explore adding the Imahot – Sarah, Rebeccah, Leah and Rachel – to the first bracha of the Amidah (known as the Avot – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob). It was agreed that KNM would study the topic with Rabbi Joel.

In the Pesach 2018 edition of Kol HaKehilah, Jacky observed: “[The] addition [of Imahot] appears in many non-Orthodox siddurim and so far we have left it to whoever is sh’liach or sh’lichat tzibur (community prayer leader) to have the freedom to use this text if they wish ….. For many people, this has begged the question of feminist language in the liturgy. Our problem is that Hebrew is a gender-based language and there is no neutral, non-gendered way of expressing it…. Jewish prayer has its essence in the language of Hebrew and the structure of its flow. With regard to the prayer text, once we mess with that, we are then making choices for other people. This is why I take issue with movements that have chosen to shorten the texts, change the words to match modern sensibilities (I don’t like that word!). What is happening? If I daven from one of these, someone has told me that our traditions, by omission or change, don’t apply to me. They have made the choice, not I!”

**First two study sessions with Rabbi Joel – Sundays, 14/10/18 and 24/11/18**

We read the five-page teshuva (responsum) approved by the CJLS (Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly) on 3/3/90. **Rabbi Joel Rembaum**, from Temple Beth Am, Los Angeles, had been asked by the Library Minyan, an egalitarian kehillah affiliated to his shul, to consider including the Imahot in the Avot blessing.

R. Rembaum concluded that i) “Jewish liturgy had retained a flexibility that allowed it to be adjusted and adapted to the spiritual needs of different generations of Jews”; ii) the **Rambam’s (Maimonides)** thinking on the fixed language of brachot was “inconsistent”; one should neither add to nor delete from them, but it was possible to deviate as long as the essential intention was not altered; iii) the American Masorti movement had already approved more radical changes in the Silverman siddur such as its attitude to sacrifices in the Musaf Amidah; and iv) the inclusion of the Imahot acknowledged the significant participation of Masorti women in Jewish life and in their communities.

**Third study session with Rabbi Joel – Sunday, 13/1/19**

* Marc explained that he wanted the issue aired for personal reasons when his daughters come to shul and because KNM claimed it was egalitarian. He thought that there were three elements to the discussion: i) our emotional reaction to inclusive language; ii) our intellectual reaction; and iii) the implications of making or not making changes.
* R. Joel thought we had a range of options from flexibility and laissez-faire to imposition and polarisation. There was no consensus in the kehillah and we must hold the diverse opinions on this topic.
* We began to study **R. David Golinkin**’s updated 10-page teshuva (19/2/07) on adding the Imahot to the Avot bracha. R. Golinkin is President of the Schechter Institute in Jerusalem and Masorti’s principal halakhist in Israel.
* R. Golinkin established his egalitarian credentials – women can be counted in a minyan, serve as shelichot tzibbur, receive aliyot, serve as poskim (halachic decisors), put on tefillin, etc. All these changes were introduced **after consulting halachic sources and historical precedents**.
* The same approach had to be adopted for proposed changes in tefillah – “it is not enough to want to change the wording, but it is essential to prove that this is permissible halachically and appropriate liturgically and theologically.”
* Was any change authentic? Did it follow in the footsteps of historical tradition? Where was the precedent?
* The core of this issue was “Is it permissible to change the opening and closing formulae of the Avot bracha?” Each change in the siddur must be examined on its particular merits. So, historical reactions to sacrifices were irrelevant.
* The first three brachot and the last three brachot of the Amidah were special; they were fixed, **communal** norms. The Rambam was quite clear on this. The middle 13 brachot of the weekday Amidah were bakashot (**personal** requests).
* R. Rembaum felt he was not changing the intent of the Avot bracha. R. Golinkin disagreed. God had made a covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and reminded Moses at the Burning Bush ***(Shemot 3:15)***. We recite God’s words in the Amidah. God did not make a covenant with the Imahot (a rabbinic creation). They are never mentioned as such in the Tenach. So, R. Rembaum had made a radical change to Torah theology. But was it authentic and warranted?
* The 1998 Masorti Sim Shalom Siddur for Shabbat and Festivals said: “In offering the **option** of including the Matriarchs in the opening passage of the Amidah, this siddur has **not** added “*Imoteynu* – Our Matriarchs”, understanding the word “*Avoteynu*” as “Our Patriarchs” – as have some siddurim. In assessing the numerous places *Avoteynu* is used in a variety of contexts in the siddur, it is our conviction that its correct meaning is “Our **Ancestors**” – inclusively, male as well as female – and this siddur uses the term that way.”

**Fourth study session with Rabbi Joel – Sunday, 24/2/19**

‘’The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob’’ was a direct quote from the Burning Bush story. Medieval rabbi **David Abrudraham** loved to find all the Biblical texts quoted in the Amidah. He did not address the issue of changing the first three or last three brachot of the Amidah. However, re the eighth (healing), he said that one cannot change words of Torah but used in tefillah change was permissible because davening was different from Kriat HaTorah. Praying is not quoting; you are talking to God. Section IV of R. Golinkin’s teshuva presents historical arguments for not changing the end of the Avot bracha.

Philippa asked if feminising the text of the Birkat Cohanim by some parents for their daughters on Friday night was not another example of messing with a direct Biblical quote ***(Bamidbar 6: 24-26).*** Nahum suggested that he had replaced a generic blessing for all the people with a gender-specific blessing that hopefully made Miri feel loved and cared for.

R. Joel’s primary agenda was to create a davening community. He acknowledged there was a risk when changing tefillah that you could lose meaning, but the Avot prayer could be interpreted differently; there was plurality of meaning. R. Abraham Joshua Heschel said that prayer was a manifestation of how we feel; an expression of empathy; trying to regain moments of proximity. Its primary goal was to articulate our needs.

R. Joel said we should not allow the past to dominate the future, e.g. our attitude to homosexuality. So, how should we deal with non-feminist texts such as the Tenach? We should apply the midrashic approach and re-work conceptually. We are beholden to the religious meaning of the Tenach as interpreted through rabbinic tradition, not the historical meaning. Rabbi Golinkin was addressing halachic issues but was he confronting social, psychological and personal needs?

For R. Joel, part of our difficulty is that we are culturally illiterate. Are we prepared to invest the time? To be patient? Yalda advised that she encourages people to find their own personal meaning behind the words of prayer. Jay asked why some people cannot feel that the mention of the Avot also includes the Imahot?

**Fifth study session with Rabbi Joel – Sunday, 17/3/19**

Following a conversation about politicians’ recent unacceptable language in the public arena, we considered whether the absence of women in much of our tefillah was also unacceptable and needed redress.

**Using quotes from Tenach**

Was changing a text that was a quote from Tenach “doing violence to biblical precedence and biblical theology”? We had looked previously at Abudraham’s commentary on the Siddur; biblical quotes can be altered to fit the needs of a prayer and can become prayer. The US Declaration of Independence states ‘All men are created equal’. In 1789, was the word ‘men’ meant to be gender-specific or all-encompassing? If the former, was re-interpreting it as the latter acceptable? The quote in the Avot prayer was from ***Shemot 3: 6, 15 and 16***, which we looked at in some detail. Is the reality that God only had a relationship with men or is it just a reflection of the language used by men when they wrote the story centuries later? If we change that quote in the Avot prayer, does that diminish the power of the original Torah text?

What ‘power’ does R. Golinkin think we should draw from Shemot Chapter 3? We discussed Section V of his teshuva. He argues that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are specified because of the covenants God made with each of them. R. Joel understood their inclusion to be due to lineage, not covenant, and that R. Golinkin’s emphasis on covenant is a post-hoc interpretation not supported by the biblical narrative. Moses had been brought up in an Egyptian palace and was living with the Midianites. Through the burning bush, God needed to bring Moses back to a knowledge of his true Hebrew lineage, who he was, and who God was. It was to do with family, not covenant. This is also the phenomenology of the start of the Amidah – we start with the Avot prayer so that we can make a powerful connection to our historical, familial past – we start the Amidah by ‘knocking on the door of our sense of belonging’. To get into the right mindset for the Amidah, we need to be reminded of who our God is, and who we really are in the world. For some, adding the Imahot would strengthen that connection, add to that sense of lineage, and would not destroy the intention of the author of Avot.

Brenda observed that the quote from Shemot 3 was also reminding Moses that he would never be an Egyptian. Mark suggested that mentioning the Patriarchs was like a secret code that Moses and Aaron would be passing on to the Hebrews when they first spoke to them – quoting the names of their ancestors would prove their authenticity. Adding the Imahot would further verify their credentials.

**Other points and questions raised:**

**Intentionality - would including the Imahot prevent people from fulfilling the mitzvah of reciting the Avot?** R. Joel used R. Golinkin’s argument to critique R. Rembaum’s teshuva, namely Rambam’s ruling in Hilchot B’racha 1.6 - if someone changes the wording, but keeps the name of God, his sovereignty and the conclusion, the mitzvah of reciting the Avot prayer had been maintained. R. Golinkin agreed with this point. So, adding the Imahot would not prevent people from fulfilling their mitzvah. The halachah was very lenient on accepting post hoc (i.e. after the Shaliach Tzibbur has made a change) what has been recited by the Shaliach Tzibbur, even if the halachah would not support making that change for other reasons.

**Would including the Imahot prevent Shlichei Tzibbur from relating to the Amidah with the necessary intensity if they disagreed with their inclusion?** This should be discussed with Shlichei Tzibbur but including the Imahot was not compulsory.

**Can we make the change without a full in-depth understanding of the Avot prayer**? R. Joel felt that this would risk inertia and suggested that we should probably end the study here and look to the next stage in this topic.

**Next Steps and Options:**

Does KNM have a preference to include the Imahot or not? If the former, how would that choice be expressed? How does this impact on what new Shlichei Tzibbur are taught? Meira noted that Chazan Jacky had taught the Avot prayer with and without Imahot. Should we have a ‘trigger warning’ statement before the Amidah to let people, especially visitors, know that we have a policy of allowing the Shlichei Tzibbur to decide if they wish to include the Imahot?

**Sixth and final session study session with Rabbi Joel – 15/5/19**

There are four major codifications of halacha: i) **The Rif – R. Yitzchak Alfasi** [Sephardi, North Africa] (1013-1103); ii) **The Mishneh Torah by the Rambam – R. Moses ben Maimon** [Sephardi, Southern Spain and North Africa] (1135-1204); iii) **The Tur by R. Yaakov ben Asher** [Germany and Spain] (c.1269-1343); and iv) **The Shulchan Aruch by R. Yosef Karo** [Sephardi, Spain, Turkey and Israel] (1488-1575).

On tefilla, Jews refer to the Rambam’s hilchot. On our topic, R. Golinkin believed that R. Rembaum misunderstood the Rambam’s Hilchot Bracha 1.6 – you will have fulfilled your obligation, but should you do it? R. Golinkin does not want us to mess with the original text and recommends inserting a piyyut (liturgical poem). For R. Abraham Joshua Heschel, the problem is **NOT** the siddur but tefilla – how to learn to pray intensely.

In 2010, **R. Daniel Sperber**, an orthodox talmudist and main posek (halachic decisor) for the Modern Orthodox Partnership Minyanim, published On Changes in Jewish Liturgy – Options and Limitations, which shows that there have always been changes in our liturgy, across history, countries and communities. As long as the basic content and meaning were not altered, then our liturgy was fluid. Page 111: “Can we mention the Imahot in addition to the Avot? I see the answer is very simple: It is … completely permissible.” Page 124: “….more and more kehillot …are developing and adopting in varying degrees certain elements of egalitarian prayer….” Page 129: “Let there be yet another nusach of tefillah, one that will be acceptable within the context of modern-day Orthodox feminist thinking, and which hopefully will gain ever wider legitimacy.”

For R. Joel, God was telling Moshe in Shemot 3 of the **FAMILY** relationship that He had with the Avot, **NOT** the **COVENANTAL**. The Imahot did have a divine link to God, but it had not been recorded. The Torah was androcentric. We have not been discussing God-language but our relationship to **ALL** our ancestral family.

**Reflecting on the study sessions and possible ways forward:**

We have not been engaged in a halachic decision-making process but how we should address the issue. What are our communal norms? For R. Joel, KNM’s practice has been fluid and accepting. Like the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem, our atmosphere is non-coercive. There should be no policy decision at the moment. The conversation should continue and be open to all. Things may change organically. He would like us to adopt a psycho-spiritual approach - try reciting the Imahot for a month and then reflect on the spiritual experience over lunch. Do we think about the women not mentioned in Shemot 3?

Listening to Chazan Bex Blumenfeld daven in Liverpool, Rena Pearl had found the insertion of the Imahot disruptive. For Chazan Jacky, we were not discussing halacha but were thinking about our individual, spiritual connection to God. Changing the language of the siddur would change the feel of our tefilla. Introducing the Imahot was a sop; they were not relevant. It made more sense to introduce Hannah, the mother of Samuel, who had prayed intensely to God. Nahum asked the advocates for change to think about how they recited the list of Imahot - placing Rachel before Leah was very problematic, as was the omission of Bilhah and Zilpah who had been responsible for producing four of the 13 tribes of Israel.

R. Barbara Borts requested that an alternative text be made available. Mark Shoffren asked for a mini-booklet, comparable to our Yizkor document. He also wanted us to think how we engage our teenagers and young adults. Mike Fenster suggested that we prepare a rota of shlichai tzibbur who were willing to include the Imahot. R. Joel and Brenda recommended that all these proposals be referred to the Tefilla Pelach.