**NOTES ON THE DISCUSSION ON CHANGES TO THE SIDDUR**

Often, I comment jokingly to Richard that Kol Nefesh is not ‘egalitarian’, and he, in turn, points to all of the accomplishments of the synagogue, to refute my assertion. In the light of the conversation KN is having around the theme of egalitarian prayer language, I wanted to express a few thoughts. And I accept that, although I am a member and do attend as often as I can, I will never be more than marginal, a guest really and this will be my only input. Not a veto – perhaps not even a vote.

When I have taught the subject of feminism in Judaism, I cite two important works. One of these is by Cynthia Ozick, who maintained, in her article “Notes toward Finding the Right Question,” [p120,] that the status of Jewish woman needs to change on the principle of justice and thus, it is a sociological shift that is needed, increasing opportunities for women to participate fully in Jewish life. Judith Plaskow disagreed and, in her article, “The Right Question is Theological,” she feels that feminism as a matter of “civil rights” [p223] will not transform Judaism.[[1]](#endnote-1)

These two articles frame what I will argue here. It is absolutely clear that KN has made great strides in the sociological aspects of what is called variously ‘egalitarianism’ or ‘inclusivity.’ We have the first UK female *chazan* leading the shul alongside the rabbi. Many women have taken upon themselves the *mitzvah* of *tallit*. Women participate in all the honours of the service, including functioning as *sh’’tz, leyning*, and giving *divrei torah*. And, on the administrative side, women fill every role within the lay leadership.

And yet, it is so clear that the shul is not really egalitarian in the ‘theological’ sense that Plaskow presented. For instance, if women are, assumedly, accepting the obligation of public prayer and counting in the *minyan,* then perhaps they should all wear a *tallit*, or, at *the very least, be given one for honours at the shulchan and aron.* Regarding the function of *sh’liach tzibbur*, one notes that more men volunteer for this honour than women. On RH and YK, the only woman to lead a part of the service (aside, I think, from 1 Torah service) was Jacky.

Why is this? One can speculate. I was one of the very first female rabbis in the world, joint 3rd in Europe, only 38 years ago. I will rehearse the catalogue of insults, rudeness, difficulty, opposition, mockery, inappropriate verbal behaviour, sexual comments and advances, that I put up with, and sometimes, in some circles or situations, still do. The sheer power and force of 2000 years of patriarchy in Judaism, and the fact that it continues in every corner of Jewish life, means that it takes enormous commitment to breach these conventions (and not everyone has the energy – it can be exhausting and debilitating). And before you can do that, you would need to be aware that the patina of male pre-eminence rests upon everything in the Jewish world and that we are influenced by this in both major and subtle subterranean ways. Most people will not fight against the status quo – and many are not even aware of how the status quo influences their views. When a brother and sister arrive to say *kaddish*, to whom will we most likely give an *aliyah* if there is only one left?

But let’s look at the question of the liturgy. As I wrote above, I have no desire to become involved formally in these discussions. For one, I have been doing this for decades. There is a 50-year history of liturgical change with regards to women, and some interesting *siddurim* have been printed along the way. I was the first to compile such a liturgy here in the UK, when, at Radlett and Bushey Reform Synagogue, I composed a non-gender specific *machzor* for the *shalosh regalim*, using a variety of different sources. There was a bitter battle in the shul to allow it an experimental outing, but, in the end, when a couple of years later, the Reform movement published its own first ‘gender non-specific’ liturgy, everyone was proud that we have been the first.

In fact, I tried to intervene much earlier. I have in my possession a letter I wrote to the new editors of the upcoming revised Forms of Prayer, Rabbi Dr Jonathan Magonet and Rabbi Lionel Blue, *z’’l,* in which I list the various issues to do with women in prayer, in a kind of hierarchy of controversy. They were fairly dismissive in those days but corrected some of the more egregious examples of sexism. It took another couple of decades for some more of those kinds of changes to be incorporated. Some of these are not as important for a congregation which davens only in Hebrew, because they concern the English translations of various prayers, and the inclusion of writings by women. So, God is not ‘He’, *Adonai* is not ‘Lord’, *avoteinu* is translated ‘our ancestors’, and the matriarchs have been added to the *amidah* (albeit as a sidebar that can be ignored if desired, which is still better than before, when they were in a different colour) and in prayers for the community and *birkat hamazon*.

I have been pondering all of the arguments that have been brought to bear against changes to the liturgy. Well, for one, KN already makes changes. We do not do *bei ana*, nor *yakum purkan*; in fact, we omit a host of *piyyutim*. We alter the order in the Torah service. We do not do *mi shebeirachs* after each *aliyah*. We use some rather controversial contrafacta for davening. We have added a new prayer for healing. And the nature of the prayers is altered by the way we sit, participate and, of course, by the whom who leads them. It was ever so – the issue of women in Judaism always draws the most angst and opposition.

Is it *halachic* to make these changes? Well, if the Masorti movement is really a part of world-wide Conservative Judaism, then that question has already been asked and answered. There have been 2 iterations of *siddurim* which have made many liturgical changes in the direction of egalitarian language. So I wonder: Are there many at KN who feel that they want to belong to an Orthodox shul, albeit one that is more sociologically egalitarian, or a ‘Conservative’ shul, which belongs to a movement that strives for halachic creativity and responsiveness. Do we not accept that? I knew Louis Jacobs, *z’’l,* fairly well. He was open both about things *minchag,* and things *halachic,* and, as he explained, there is a discussion to be had over whether the word ‘*halachah’* implies movement or rigidity, *sitz-im-leben* decisions, or fixed strictures.

And that brings me to the next point. I asked Joel if decisions might sometimes be made of the basis of meta-*halachic* issues, such as justice and equality. And of course, he answered yes.

Why is this important? I am with those philosophers who believe that language not only reflects, but also creates reality. I can adduce examples, if anyone is interested. So, the ways we describe the transmission of our history (only the men played a memorable role), to the way we designate the praying community (them, their wives; Man) and the way we envision God all conspire to portray Judaism as a masculinist tradition in which women, not always confined to the true periphery in progressive Jewish circles, are, nonetheless, awkwardly, uncertainly, incompletely, sometimes even semi-unwelcomingly, straying into spaces not whole-heartedly open to them, and in which they cannot see themselves equally reflected. It affects us all, but that is not to say that every woman agrees with this. It is well-known that women can be extremely diligent in maintaining the borders of institutions that nevertheless deem them unequal or even oppress them– often I have found males to be better allies than some women. This is particularly so when women have made some inroads. One can comfort the uncomfortable if women themselves are seen to set limits, reassure people that there is nothing more to come, that they, ultimately, are not threats.

Furthermore, we also make space in our movements and synagogues even when the changes do not touch us personally. Wider involvement of children is one example – KN, like many other *shuls*, gives over to young people some part of their regular services, and, even if some would choose not to have regular services disrupted, we do it to indicate that families and children are welcome and valued.

How do I see the liturgical change hierarchy for KN?

The ‘facing page’ level is interesting, because, although we daven almost entirely in Hebrew and a good number of the members understand what they are praying, some have nevertheless confided to me that they do not entirely understand the prayers, and therefore, a male oriented translation continues to perpetuate views of both God and the praying congregation which are not ‘inclusive.’

The next level would be the one now being engaged in, about adding the *imahot* to the 1st paragraph of the *amidah.* I guess I cannot believe that we are still debating that, given that the Conservatives have already included the *imahot* in the prayers, the *halachic* debates KN is reading notwithstanding. If one looks to Torah, and to later rabbinical tradition, it is obvious that the matriarchs were crucial in the dissemination of our tradition, made decisions, had a relationship with God. The Biblical and historical involvement of the women are for me compelling supra-halachic reasons for making liturgical changes.

The final part of the hierarchy is the problematic of God in Hebrew. One can certainly cease referring to Gpd and Lord when leading study sessions and discussions, but we all know the problem in Hebrew. Some interesting work has been done on this – *Havaya* instead of *Adonai* for *YHVH* – but this is a deeper issue for another time.

Lastly, there is the issue of whether this will remain individual choice. I have a problem with choice, because it implies that the congregation qua congregation is not committed to the change, and, for all the reasons I outlined above, people, even more so women, will be diffident about making the change if they want to. Not making it the *minchag* of the congregation will be similar to the effect of telling women that they can choose whether or not to wear a *yarmulke*, or even more, a *tallit*, which subtly conveys disapproval or uncertainty about the equal inclusion of women and the equal obligations and privileges that being a Jew entails. Unequal choice reinforces inequality, and then, we are back where we started.

Rabbi Dr Barbara Borts

February, 2019

1. Articles from *On Being a Jewish Feminist: A Reader*, edited by Susannah Heschel. New York: 1983 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)