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Report on the Thesis of Paula Feldstein
Eighteenth-Century Italian Women's Prayer Books

Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman

The study of Jewish spirituality is still in its infancy; all the more so, is our knowledge of the inner life of Jewish women appallingly sparse. There is almost as much literature bemoaning what we do not know as there are pages detailing the knowledge of what we do. As nearly every author has emphasized, literary recension history has conspired to retain only works by and about men, while it has assumed that the only way in which women matter must be when they approximate the model behavior of men.

Major revolutions in our thinking have come from authors intent on drawing lessons from non-literary strata -- Ramsay MacMullen's studies of Greco-Roman inscriptions, for instance, or the Jewish parallel devoted especially to women in ancient synagogues, by Bernadette Broton. But from a literary perspective, the discovery of women's prayer books was the major breakthrough in an impasse that threatened to be determinative in denying us access to women's religious consciousness.

That such prayer books exist has long been known, but typically, these books have rated almost no attention. An isolated article here and there, such as the one by Solomon Freehof, was the minor exception to the rule. Generally, the great bibliographers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries bypassed such things altogether, as non-male, therefore non-rabbinic, and hence uninteresting and irrelevant.

More than anyone else, it is Chava Weissler who has overcome this prejudice, publishing one study after another of the tkhine spirituality of eastern European Jewish women. But eastern Europe was not the only locus for women's prayer books. Italy too spawned a number of them, many of which I chanced upon some twenty years ago. Since then others too must have read through this or that copy of such a book, in one rare book room or another. But only one full-scale work has treated this important phenomenon: a 1992 volume by Nina Beth Cardin. Cardin studies one single manuscript, which she reproduces in the original and in translation. What Cardin does not attempt is a cross-referenced treatment of many such volumes, and that lacuna in our knowledge is exactly what Paula Feldstein provides in this fascinating study of not just one but 29 parallel texts. Unable to do justice to the gamut of prayers in them all, she has isolated those that deal exclusively with birth. What, she inquires, did Jewish women in 18th-century Italy pray for and about in conjunction with the act of conceiving and bearing children?

Perhaps the most long-term useful part of this thesis is a scientific edition of the texts themselves. Some 55 pages of this thesis thus replicate the original language of each and every prayer on the theme, comparing language from text to text. In addition each text is provided with its own translation into

English.

Feldstein supplies us also with the historical background in which such a literary treasure could come into being. In her very first chapter, she sums up the evidence for Jewish literacy among Italian women, some of whom were fluent in Italian and Hebrew. Some prayer books here thus provide instructions in Hebrew alone, with the patent assumption that the women using them would be able to read and understand what they were supposed to do with the devotions that they held in their hands.

Feldstein knows that she may have a literature that reflects only a small Jewish elite, and she addresses that question, holding nonetheless that she has uncovered at least the religiosity of some Jewish women, and thus exploded the myth that spirituality is only what Jewish men have considered spiritual; and in any event, who is to say that her sample for women is any less representative than the similar sample of writings that we have for Jewish men? Social history that accounts for all strata of any given society is desirable, to be sure, but supplying the women's equivalent of the men's high literary tradition is no small thing at all.

In her final chapter, Feldstein turns to a consideration of what she has collected as seen against other research into the spirituality of Jewish women. Her main points of comparison are the analyses by Weissler, and Susan Starr Sered's treatment of traditional middle Eastern Jewish women now living in Israel. Is there anything distinctive to all three cases that we might label inherently female as opposed to male? The measured answer would have to be both yes and no. Insofar as women, not men, bear children, prayers for conception and safety through the arduous and dangerous process of giving birth must be seen as a distinctively female concern. On the other hand, culture is determinative here. Feldstein draws our attention to the theologies of women's prayers, many of which express the dominant view of male culture and may even contribute to the oppression of women, a state which she does not lightly gloss over, even as she applauds women's successful spiritualization of the limited domain of life granted to them. She knows that women's spiritual lives are both a mixture of dominant male religiosity and a domestication of religion as well, insofar as women were deemed to be keepers of their homes and of their families. As such, women's prayers come out more personal, more concerned with the well-being of the persons they know and love, than of people in general, even the Jewish People, which may be their worry as well, but which is personalized nonetheless in terms of their children and husbands.

Ms. Feldstein is to be congratulated on a painstaking task of collecting literature that is hard to get and rarely studied. Her replication of the texts, along with a helpful appendix which charts the textual differences, will aid future researchers; and her personal and committed style of scholarship is a model for us all.

EIGHTEENTH CENTURY ITALIAN WOMEN'S PRAYER BOOKS
PAULA FELDSTEIN

**Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Ordination**

**Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
Graduate Rabbinic Program
New York, New York**

1993

Referee: Dr. Lawrence Hoffman

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In November, 1991 while preparing stew for our soup kitchen Dr. Lawrence Hoffman and I had a conversation about possible ideas for my thesis. At that time, he told me that Rabbi Nina Cardin at the Jewish Theological Seminary had found several manuscripts of eighteenth century Italian Women's Prayer books in the Rare Book Room of the Seminary's library. Since I have a great interest in studying Jewish women's history and liturgy as well as feminist Judaism I was immediately intrigued. I was also very excited at the prospect of being able to work with Dr. Hoffman and Rabbi Cardin.

After an initial meeting with Rabbi Cardin it was clear that I had found my thesis topic and perhaps my life-long work. It was also clear that I had found a mentor and friend in Rabbi Cardin. After some digging in the Jewish Theological Seminary's Rare Book Room I uncovered a total of 17 manuscripts - more than we originally thought were there. Dr. Phil Miller, Director of the Klau Library at the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion's (HUC-JIR) New York campus then informed me that he knew that other manuscripts existed in the Dalsheimer Rare Book Building of the HUC-JIR Klau Library on the Cincinnati campus. As a result of this lead, I found 12 more manuscripts. The final step in my search was to look for more manuscripts in Jerusalem's Machon L'tatzlume Kitvei Yad. With the help of a classmate and dear friend, Cory Weiss I found another 23 manuscripts listed in the index. These manuscripts are in libraries all over the world.

Each prayer book is a treasure. The prayers are moving and the imagery is vivid. Regardless of where they originally came from or who originally wrote them they are

a gift to the Jewish people and a legacy of our matriarchs. Anyone who cares about reclaiming our mother's voices will fall in love with these books as I have.

As I mention throughout the paper and in my conclusion this thesis is only a start. There is still much research to be done, on other manuscripts, on other parts of the books, on further historical and contextual information. I hope that others will join those of us who have started doing this exciting work.

Many people have helped and supported me. First, Dr. Lawrence Hoffman has taught me more about Jewish liturgy, ritual and spirituality than I ever thought possible in four short years. I look forward to his teaching and friendship for many year to come. His editing, ideas and enthusiasm were always right on target. I would never have found this project in the first place, without his guidance. Next, I owe thanks to Rabbi Nina Cardin. This was her "baby" and she shared it with me generously. She gave me a lot of time and guidance and her love for these prayer books was very contagious. I hope that we will study these books together for many years to come.

There were many people along the way who shared their enthusiasm and support for this project from rabbis to classmates and friends. I am grateful to all of them. I would like to thank my parents for their on-going love and support which I take for granted too often. Last, but certainly not least, I am always thankful for my husband, Jordan Millstein. It is not often that couples get to share their life work with each other. For the last five years we have been truly blessed to be able to share our study of Torah and love of Judaish together. Jordan has never been short of support and love. This thesis is dedicated to all the women who came before me who made what I have possible.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Our knowledge of the history of Jewish life in Italy during the late 18th and early 19th centuries is sketchy at best. The majority of what is written on the Jewish community of Italy covers the Renaissance era, but not the periods beyond. In the past, a historical assumption was made that since the Jews of our period were living in ghettos there was little to no creativity and therefore, the ghetto period was not worthy of scholarly exploration. As we shall see this is a faulty assumption and hopefully it will be remedied over time.

As we seek historical information which might shed some light on the women's prayer books we face another problem, one that is inherent in writing women's history. The historical information which we do have about this period focuses mainly on the experience of the normative Jewish community, that is, the male Jewish community. We must dig deep to find information on women and what their lives were like. Further, the studies we do have are largely written by men, and not by women, a fact that leads us to question their bias.

Despite these setbacks, our goal is to uncover what we can about the Italian Jewish community in general, and its women in particular, so that we may better understand the context in which the prayer books were written. We will examine the general Jewish situation first. After their expulsion from southern Italy in 1542 the Jews resettled north

of Rome. During the ghetto period (early 17th century - late 19th century) the entire Jewish community was thus living in northern Italy. Jewish communities were found in Ancona, Senigallia, Pesaro, Urbino, Ferrara, Venice, Lugo, Cento, Padua, Friuli, Trieste, Gorizia, Rovigo, Verona, Mantua, Modena, Reggio, Sienna, Genoa, Florence, Pisa, Livorno, and of course Rome, as well as many other smaller towns.¹

It is impossible to speak of "the Jewish condition in Italy" during the ghetto period for several reasons. First, there was no united Italy as we know it. Italy was divided into city-states, each under different leadership. Which city Jews lived in affected how they were treated at any given time. It would be extremely useful to know which city(ies) the prayer books come from in order to study what Jewish life was like in those cities during the 18th and early 19th centuries. However, out of the 29 manuscripts studied, only three tell us where they are from, two from Modena, and one from Venice - hardly a sufficient sampling.

While trying to understand something about Italian Jewish life during the ghetto period, we face yet another problem, namely, the disagreement among historians. Cecil Roth paints a picture of Jewish Italian life riddled with persecution. According to Roth, during the ghetto period forced conversions

¹Cecil Roth, The History of the Jews of Italy (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1946), pp.330-353.

posed a serious threat to the community². Various Hebrew books were censored and confiscated, restraining Jewish creativity.³ Roth describes decreases in Jewish population in many communities and argues that during the 1700's the community hit bottom.⁴

More recently however, scholars such as Kenneth Stow, Robert Bonfil and Benjamin Ravid question the extent of the persecution and its effect on creativity. Stow says,

"To be sure, daily events in the ghetto usually do not bespeak tension or a sense of urgency. After all, whatever were its real goals, papal policy toward the Jews failed. The Jews lost relatively few of their numbers to conversion, and paradoxically, under pressure their society immensely solidified."⁵

Clearly, Stow disagrees with Roth's description of ghetto life. Whether or not the ghetto period was a time of rampant persecution, there was still creativity in the Jewish community. Bonfil believes that persecution was a significant part of ghetto life. Yet he argues that this persecution did not succeed in stifling Jewish creativity. "A superficial glance at the cultural activity within the ghetto reveals paradox. Historians have noted that there was a flowering of

²Ibid., pp. 378-81.

³Ibid., pp. 382-3 and 411.

⁴Ibid., pp. 406-420.

⁵Kenneth R. Stow, "The Consciousness of Closure" in Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy ed. David Ruderman (New York: New York University Press, 1992). p.394.

Jewish culture in such fields as theater, music and literature. One would have expected the opposite."⁶ Despite whatever persecution may have existed in the different parts of Italy at this time, the cultural life of the Jewish community continued to thrive.

Benjamin Ravid argues that by using the word "ghetto" we make unnecessary and misleading assumptions about the nature of Jewish life. Being forced to live in the ghetto was not in itself problematic, but rather, the environment and political developments from the outside led to the kind of persecution which threatened Jewish life.

"Thus the word ghetto has become a value concept with negative connotations, rather than a descriptive word indicating a particular legal, residential system under which Jews lived. The result has been to blur the historical reality of one of the basic aspects of Jewish survival, the Jewish quarter, and thus gives additional urgency to the need for its systematic examination."⁷

The Italian Jews living under different governments thus had different experiences. But in the view of contemporary historians, there was hardly a state of continuous persecution leading to a dearth of Jewish creativity. Additionally, since our real interest here is Jewish women it may be that external

⁶Robert Bonfil, "Change in the Cultural Patterns of a Jewish Society" in Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy, ed. David Ruderman (New York: New York University Press, 1992) p. 410.

⁷Benjamin C.I. Ravid "From Geographical Realia to Historiographical Symbol" in Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy. Ed. by David Ruderman (New York: New York University Press, 1992). p. 384

political events had little, if any, effect on Italian Jewish women and their lives.

"Indeed, gender studies have shown that historical transformations in many eras affected men and women quite differently and that when women were excluded from "sanctioned" male cultural activities or religious observances, they often created their own artifacts and rituals."⁸

We know little about the extent of Jewish persecution and its impact on the Jewish community as a whole, and yet, we know even less about the impact of persecution on Jewish women's lives. Therefore, we will conclude our discussion of external factors here and take a closer look inside the Jewish community itself.

The Italian Jewish community was composed of several kinds of Jews: Jews who were in Italy for many generations and who observed the "Roman" rite; Jews who came from Western Europe and brought the "German" or Ashkenazi rite; and Sephardim who fled to Italy and practiced the Sephardi rite. Also, in a few communities a French rite was practiced, brought to Italy by Jews who were expelled from France in the fourteenth century. In many towns the different rites were observed side-by-side.⁹

During the ghetto period, many of the Jewish men were literate. In some communities the men not only read Hebrew

⁸Judith R. Baskin "Introduction" in Jewish Women in Historical Perspective ed. Judith Baskin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991). p. 15.

⁹Roth, pp. 361-362.

but also understood it. In Mantua the men had such a good knowledge of Hebrew that the tax instructions were circulated in Hebrew.¹⁰ Some Jewish men were literate in both Hebrew and Italian. A Judeo-Italian dialect written in Hebrew characters developed.

"Moreover, from the later sixteenth century, bilingual literary competence ceased to be a mere curiosity and became a common vehicle for literary expression. Much of the poetry written in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, mostly for social occasions, contains variously interrelated Hebrew and Italian components."¹¹

While we do not know what percentage of the male Jewish population was bilingual there is evidence which indicates that in several cities a substantial percentage of the male Jewish population was literate in one language or the other.

What about the education level of Italian Jewish women? Each Jewish community was autonomous in the regulation of religious life and the provision of education for men and women. "It must be kept in mind that each Jewish community in Italy was autonomous. The charters of the Jews and their own internal communal regulations allowed for wealthy Jewish lay leaders to manage the affairs of their communities."¹² Again, it is difficult to generalize to all the Italian Jewish

¹⁰Ibid., p. 367.

¹¹Bonfil., pp. 410-11.

¹²Howard Adelman "Italian Jewish Women" in Jewish Women in Historical Perspective ed. Judith Baskin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991). p. 137.

communities about the education and treatment of Jewish women.

While we may not have a uniform or complete picture there is evidence which indicates that some Italian Jewish women read Hebrew and/or Italian and some were able to understand the Hebrew they read.

"The community of Mantua, for example, issued periodically from 1598 onwards Hebrew broadsides, which were affixed to the walls of synagogues and other public places, and gave the housewife detailed instructions as to what she might or might not wear or provide at table even on very special occasions during the forthcoming seven years. Other communities (Rome, Ancona, Reggio, Modena, etc.) published their regulations in Italian, in pamphlet form."¹³

It stands to reason that these regulations, which pertained only to women, would not have been published in Hebrew if women could not read and understand them in that language.

Jewish girls in Italy were educated by two means, private instruction in their homes and Talmud Torah schools for girls. A Talmud Torah for girls was opened in Rome in 1745. This school was taught by women and provided Jewish girls with an elementary level education. A document from this Talmud Torah, explaining why this school was opened says:

"'One who saves a single soul of Israel, it is as if one has saved an entire world' [Bava Batra IIa].. Praised are those individuals who recognized this fact and drew a good lesson from it..For when they saw the indigent people who bore daughters, who from the age of three should have been educated in religious rituals and practices... And yet their mothers were unable to educate them even in basics such as blessings, prayers, and at the least, knowledge of the obligation of prayer on girls as it

¹³Roth, p. 369.

is not a time-bound law...And their fathers have the great burden of eking out a meager existence, and do not have the opportunity [to educate them]... Consequently, the girls grow up unrefined and ignorant...[and the cycle continues]...Thus, those whom God has called banded together to rectify this state of affairs, to prepare the young girl in school, providing funding to men and women teachers, so that 'the daughter of the king' should not veer away [from the path of Torah]..."¹⁴

In Livorno, there was only one free school for the non-Jewish population while there were many Jewish schools. According to Roth, the Jewish community there ensured that "not a single child [emphasis mine] remained without education."¹⁵ There is further evidence that girls participated in Talmud Torah schools. In a manuscript from a Talmud Torah in Livorno, Rabbi Isaiah of Montaniena writes: "Today, on the 22nd of Elul, 5353 (1593) I began a program of study for the daughter of Emmanuel Lattes...Dulce, 'Above women in the tent shall she be blessed' [Judges 5:24]" and "Let this day be remembered for good, the 11th of February [the Hebrew year] 5356 (1596)...on which I made an agreement with Abraham Segre...that he will send his daughter, Ricca to study with me...'Above women in the tent shall she be blessed..."¹⁶ Thus, some Jewish girls were tutored

¹⁴Simcha Assaf, M'korot L'Toldot Ha'Hinuch B'Yisrael, p. 121 as quoted and translated in Shoshana Zolty Women and the Study of Torah in Jewish Law and History unpublished doctoral dissertation, Jewish Theological Seminary, 1992, p. 225 n. 165.

¹⁵Roth, p. 364.

¹⁶Assaf, p. 203-4, in Zolty p. 225, n. 162.

privately but some received Jewish educations at Talmud Torah schools.

One might easily suspect that once Jewish girls attained a certain minimal level of Jewish education they used this education solely to run Jewish homes. This is not the case. Rather, there is a great deal of primary evidence to suggest that some of the girls were well educated enough to become teachers themselves. According to Assaf, women played an important role as teachers. In several Jewish communities, women taught boys and girls from the ages of 3 to 7. These women taught basic Hebrew reading skills, from the first knowledge of the Hebrew alphabet until the children could read any verse of Tanach with the proper trope (t'amim). Some even taught Torah and "Halachot HaRambam".¹⁷ Evidence which we still have of women's participation in the education of children in Hebrew includes: "Tafkid Memunai Ha'Talmud Torah al Hamorot", the regulations of a Talmud Torah concerning female teachers;¹⁸ the regulations of a Talmud Torah in Modena which also contains a section on female teachers;¹⁹ and the regulations of the "Chevrat Gemilut Chasadin" in Bologna regarding female teachers.²⁰ In this last document we learn that this school in Bologna had 19 female teachers!

¹⁷Assaf, p.V.

¹⁸Assaf, pp. 209-210.

¹⁹Assaf, p. 174.

²⁰Ibid., pp. 197-99.

The existence of Talmud Torahs for girls may have been widespread. In his introduction to the regulations of the Talmud Torah of Bologna Assaf says,

"Their remarks are very important, because they show us how great the participation was of women in the teaching of Torah...to boys and girls. The community of Lugo was small, and yet they had women teachers who were well educated. This custom was spread out through Italy...."

In a letter written in 1784 to the Jewish Educational Society the noted Italian Jewish Hebraist, Elijah Morpurgo (1740-1830) discusses the employment of female teachers, the young children "Are taught by the learned women of the ways of our brothers the 'B'nai Sepharad' and the 'B'nai Italia'. Truthfully, women are more tender-hearted and teach with patience, educating each child according to his pace."²¹ Before modern times Italian Jewish women may have been the best educated among the Jewish women of the world.

Among the well educated there were Italian Jewish women who stood out.

"Learned women of Post-Renaissance (17th century) Italy include Miriam Luria, daughter of David Hayim Luria of Padua and member of a large and prominent family of scholars, and Benvenida Ghironi, wife of Mordekhai Ghironi, also of Padua. Benvenida conducted Talmudic disputations with distinguished scholars of her time....She was proficient in Talmud and Midrash and instructed her son in Bible, Hebrew grammar, Talmud with the commentary of Rashi, and

²¹Assaf, p. 228 in Zolty p. 227 n.175.

the writings of Maimonides."²²

There is also evidence to suggest that women served as ritual slaughterers;²³ and as scribes and printers.²⁴ It is clear that some Jewish women, in several Italian communities attained a high level of Jewish education, Hebrew fluency and participation in the public realm of Jewish life. We will see Italian Jewish women's high level of education in their use of Hebrew prayers and in some cases Hebrew instructions in our prayer books.

While our knowledge of the history of Italian Jewish women clearly leaves more questions than answers we can draw several conclusions. First, many Italian Jewish women had a high level of education and participation in the Jewish community. Many women were literate in Hebrew, some even knowledgeable enough to teach it. Some women were not only literate, but understood Hebrew. All of this information will have an impact on our discussion of how the prayer books were used and the pressing question of who wrote the prayers in them.

²²Shoshana Zolty "Women and the Study of Torah in Jewish Law and History" (Doctoral dissertation: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1992.) p. 214.

²³Adelman, p. 141.

²⁴Zolty, p. 216.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PRAYER BOOKS

During the late 18th century and early 19th century a newly developed genre of liturgical literature spread throughout the Jewish communities of northern Italy. This new kind of women's prayer books proved popular enough that at least 50 manuscripts are known to exist in libraries throughout the world. And yet, sadly, until very recently, this has been ignored, only because it was written for women. This almost lost genre of Jewish literature is the "Siddur Nashim", Italian women's prayer books from the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

What are these prayer books and how do they differ from the familiar siddurim in use today written for daily and holiday worship? These books contain prayers that are not determined by or reflective of the Jewish calendar. Rather, they connect directly to the biological and ritual experiences in a Jewish woman's life. The prayers are not said publically in a minyan. They are private prayers, said in the home, mikvah and (sometimes) synagogue, but they are not said communally.

The prayers express a woman's experience. On the cover page of a few of the books we are told that a woman is obligated to perform three mitzvot, taking the hallah, lighting the Shabbat and festival candles and going to the mikvah. These commandments can be found in Mishnah Shabbat, chapter 2. In this mishnah a woman is told that a woman dies

in childbirth for three sins: not observing the laws of menstruation (nidah), not separating the hallah, and not lighting Sabbath candles. Most of the books, in fact, contain the instructions for how to perform these rituals, as well as the necessary blessings, biblical passages and personal petitions to be read. The biblical passages (mostly from the Psalms) and the personal petitions are added to what was originally simply a ritual of performing a mitzvah along with saying the appropriate blessing. But the additional petitions for taking the hallah and blessing the candles are all-purpose prayers for health and well-being for the woman's family and, indeed, for all of Israel.²⁵ The prayers for going to the mikva as well as the prayers for various stages of pregnancy are focused mainly on the worshipper herself, the goal being to conceive and bear a male child who will grow up to be a Torah scholar and a righteous man.

Other prayers found in these books include a prayer that a woman should say before her son's circumcision; a prayer she should say upon returning to synagogue after childbirth; a prayer she should say after going to the mikvah and before having sexual relations with her husband; and a prayer for the midwife. The books contain prayers said at the various stages of pregnancy (these will be studied in more detail below.) A few books contain "Birkat Cohanim", "Tefillat Haderech", "Birkat

²⁵Nina Cardin. Out of the Depths I Call to You, (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc. 1992) p. ix.

Gomel" and blessings for parents to say over their children.

Some of the books also contain prayers for women to add to their daily prayer. Many of these prayers are entitled "Prayers a woman should say everyday." The woman is occasionally instructed to add these or other prayers to the Shemoneh Esrei (manuscript A, G). Manuscript G has separate sections entitled "Prayers to be said at night", "Prayers to be said in the morning," "Prayers to be said at midday," and "Prayers to be said at mincha." This of course, is evidence that Italian Jewish women prayed daily and, more significantly, they were expected to pray three times a day (at least), just like the men. It is important to note, however, that while the women may have prayed daily, like men, they did not seem to pray in a minyan. Each woman had her prayer book home with her and said her prayers, for the most part, at home in private.

In the backs of several books are sections, mostly in Italian, which are meant to instruct the user in several aspects of Jewish ritual. In the back of JTS 4625 there are two sections, entitled, "Hilchot nidah" and "Hilchot t'vilah." Also in the middle of this manuscript is a section called "T'fillat haderech" and "Seder b'rachot" where the user of the book is given explicit instructions about when to say various b'rachot over food. At the back of JTS 4773 are two sections called, "Segulot" and "Berakhot". In the front of JTS 4670 there is a page entitled "Dinei hadlakat ner shel Shabbat".

This full page of unvocalized Hebrew, delineates all the rules for lighting Shabbat candles. Lengthy study of these sections alone will undoubtedly shed more light upon the ritual lives of Italian Jewish women.

The books contain very little in the way of magic, incantations or Kabballah (which was very popular in Italian Jewish life during this time). One manuscript may shed some light on this lacuna. At the back of manuscript A, the writer, Dr. Coen, tells us something of his goals in writing this book, "When I first considered writing this book, I was desirous of including in it the many incantations, charms, protective phrases, and vows that ease the burden of labor and that I learned from our ancestors, and our books and writings."²⁶ However, Dr. Coen goes on to explain that "the improper use of these prayers often causes miscarriage or premature birth. And the one who causes such loss is culpable and must fast ninety days. Therefore, the editor refrained from passing on this powerful information."²⁷ Still, there is some evidence of the use of Kabbalah, at least of popular Kabbalistic practices, if not theory. For example, there are times when a woman is instructed to recite a verse a number of

²⁶JTS manuscript #4371, Rare Book Room, Jewish Theological Seminary, New York, translated by Rabbi Nina Cardin, Out of the Depths I Call to You, (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1992) p. xi.

²⁷Cardin, p. xi.

times, sometimes forward and backward.²⁸

In manuscript Q there is a section on remedies. This section gives prayers which one should say when suffering from various pains and ailments such as worms and maggots. The instructions are in Italian as are some of the incantations. But some of the incantations are in Hebrew. On the last page of JTS 4371 the editor includes the "Tefillah Nora'ah" which is said by one who is present during childbirth. Psalm 20 is to be read 12 times, "each time concentrating on one of the twelve letters of God's divine names...Kabbalistic powers are therefore invoked throughout."²⁹ The use of Kabbalah is thus present in the prayer books even though it does not predominate. Some books, of course, are more strongly influenced by Kabbalah than others.

It is important to note that in my exploration of some 29 manuscripts I have not found two to be identical. While most contain similar prayers, the order of these prayers differs from book to book.³⁰ Also, the content varies, with some books containing some prayers but not others. The scribe for each book, in most cases, must have known at least some of the other books and yet, each book is to some extent a unique creation. One explanation of this diversity is that these

²⁸Ibid., p. xi.

²⁹Ibid, p. xi.

³⁰For a complete description and Table of Contents for each book see Appendix I.

books were written for particular women rather than for a mass market; perhaps the scribe was personalizing his or her book for the woman for whom it was intended. At this stage of research, however, we cannot know for sure.

This brings us to the critical question of who wrote these liturgies and for whom were they intended. Because the prayers in the books are for the most part very similar, the scribes of these books must have known other books. For this reason we must separate the scribe from the original author of any given prayer. Only a handful of the books tell us exactly who penned them. In all cases, the scribe is a man and in some cases, he is the husband or relative of the woman for whom the book was intended. However, in many of the books we are given no information about the book's origin. In no case is a female scribe named or suggested. The scribes, therefore, must at this stage be presumed to have been men, probably hired by other men to create the prayer books for the latter's wives.

Who actually created these beautiful prayers, on the other hand, remains a complete mystery. Did they develop as an oral tradition among the women until someone wrote them down? Was there one book which was the original, the Urtext if you will, from which the others developed? When were the first prayer books written and why do they seem to stop by the middle of the 19th century? Closer study of many more manuscripts as well as literary traditions in Italy generally may provide

clues to these questions.

We have a little more information regarding the question of who these books were written for. Several of the books, (10 of 29) are personalized with a specific woman's name embedded in several prayers. Examples of this are manuscript D, for Rachel bat Bienvenuta, N, for Beilah bat Rachel, and S for Simcha bat Soli. A few of these books tell us in the front of the book who the book was written for. Examples of this are manuscript A written for Yehudit Kutscher Coen, by her husband Giuseppe Coen, and manuscript B for Tzirli Treiste by Yitzhak Hayim bar Mehallel. Some of the women have both Italian and Hebrew names. The books with no specific woman's name in them instruct the user to supply her name in the appropriate places.

"There is evidence that not only were these books use, but they were handed down from mother to daughter, one generation to the next. There is one prayer book in which a daughter apparently inherited her mother's book and wrote her own name (Olympia, daughter of) above her mother's name (Stella, daughter of Esther) in the body of the text."³¹

These books were probably handed down for many generations. It may be possible to ascertain more information about these books and their origins by tracing them back through the families from which they came.

Obviously, these prayer books were far more popular than perhaps we originally realized. Seventeen manuscripts can be found in the Jewish Theological Seminary's (JTS) Rare Book

³¹Ibid, xiii.

Room alone. Twelve manuscripts are also kept in the Dalsheimer Rare Book Building of the Klau Library, of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) in Cincinnati. Jerusalem's Machon L'tatzlume Kitvei Yad revealed another twenty-three manuscripts in libraries all over the world. It is clear that delving into private collections would reveal still more manuscripts. What the existence of these 52 manuscripts some 150 years later tells us is that the use of these prayer books must have been wide-spread.

Unfortunately, the books rarely tell us in which cities they were written or used. Only three give us this information - two are from Modena (manuscripts I and JTS 4387) and one is from Venice (manuscript R). Therefore it is impossible to determine how wide-spread their use was geographically. What is also striking is that despite the seeming popularity of these books, no printed copies of them have been found. While they may have been important to Italian Jewish women, no men found them important enough to print.³²

As discussed above, each book looks a little different because of the ordering of the prayers and actual contents of the books. They do however, share a common linguistic medium and structural format. All the prayers are written vocalized Hebrew. In most of the books, a prayer is preceded by Italian instructions for how and when to say the prayer. If one

³²Ibid., xii.

looks, for example, at the prayer for the seventh month of pregnancy in all the books, the Hebrew prayer, for the most part is the same. The content of the instructions is also the same. But the actual wording of the Italian instructions differs. The writing of the Italian instructions may thus have been more fluid than the actual wording of the prayers. What is clear is that the women who used these books were at least literate in Italian and even in Hebrew. That literacy of these women extended to Hebrew too is evident from the fact that while most of the books contain instructions in Italian, a few of them contain instructions in unvocalized Hebrew. Without an understanding of the instructions, the book would have been useless to the user. Therefore, the women who used these books must have been able to read Hebrew and to understand it. These women must therefore be assumed to have been very well educated. Still, even if the educational level of the prayer book users is not in doubt, what is in question is if the women who used these books were typical Italian Jewish women or if they were an educated and wealthy elite. Commissioning a manuscript was an expensive proposition and women who owned these books (as well as the husbands who ordered them) must have had material resources.

Regardless of whether these books were written for an elite class of Jewish women, or for all Jewish women they provide us with a unique opportunity to uncover some Italian Jewish women's ritual lives and to explore who these women,

our matriarchs were. What were their fears? Their desires? Their joys? There is much work to be done in studying these manuscripts, not only the ones that I have studied but also the many others that exist in other libraries around the world.

For the purposes of this paper, I chose to focus on the period of pregnancy and childbirth. The reason for this was several fold. First, the pregnancy and labor prayers are rich in imagery. Second, they are deeply personal and since, several of them are recited at the height of tension and danger - both real and imagined - during labor they express a depth of emotion.

I limited my study to the manuscripts found at JTS and HUC-JIR for the simple reason that they were accessible in the time that I had for this thesis. My work has only begun to scratch the surface. There are more manuscripts to search for, more manuscripts to be studied, more sections to be carefully examined, but this is a start.

The fact that in 1993 only a very few people seem to know of the existence of this genre of Jewish literature only confirms what we have known all along: that until recent times, the study of Jewish history and liturgy has been the study of men's history and liturgy usually done by men. Uncovering the lives and stories of our mothers is holy work, which we have only just begun.

Pregnancy and Childbirth

As mentioned earlier, I have focused on prayers to be said during the various stages of pregnancy and birth. The manuscripts for this study include 5 from the Rare Book Room of the Jewish Theological Seminary and 13 from the Dalsheimer Rare Book Building of the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion Klau Library in Cincinnati. This is obviously only a beginning and in the future a comparison of this and other sections across all of the known manuscripts would be very valuable.

Nine prayers or sections make up the liturgy covering pregnancy and delivery. Not all of the 18 books examined contain all of them. In fact, very few manuscripts contain all of the prayers in this section (see chart). These 9 prayers or sections are:

1. The first 40 days of pregnancy (found in 13 manuscripts)
2. The entire pregnancy (found in 13 manuscripts)
3. From the beginning of the seventh month of pregnancy until delivery. (11 manuscripts)
4. From the beginning of the ninth month of pregnancy until delivery. (13 manuscripts)
5. The onset of labor. In manuscript A this section contains Psalm 20, a prayer, Exodus 11:8 (said three times) and a string of biblical verses. All other manuscripts contain only Exodus 11:8.
6. Hour of childbirth. (4 manuscripts)
7. Beginning of delivery. (8 manuscripts)
8. After safely giving birth. (4 manuscripts)

9. When nursing for the first time. (3 manuscripts)

Some books contain a prayer for the midwife, a prayer for the mother before she takes her new son to be circumcised and a prayer for her to say upon returning to the synagogue after delivery.

One can clearly see, these prayers are for when everything goes right. None of the books studied contain prayers for miscarriage, still birth or infertility. The prayers that are included, thus, acknowledge the danger of childbirth but assume the safe passage of the mother and child through it. It is possible that this is the case because the tradition does not fully recognize a life until it has existed out of the womb for 30 days. It is also possible that women lost so many pregnancies that it was felt that a prayer for such an occasion would only emphasize her loss.

Before each prayer is a sentence or two (occasionally more) telling the woman when the appropriate time is to say the prayer which follows. In most books these instructions are in Italian. However, in a few books these instructions are in unvocalized Hebrew. As mentioned earlier, Italian women's abilities to use these books points to a high level of literacy and comprehension.

What is also noteworthy about these instructions is that while the content of the message is generally the same in all the manuscripts the words themselves differ. The scribe obviously knew what the content of the instructions should be but took the freedom to express them in his own words. From this preliminary study (clearly, other manuscripts need to be examined) it appears that while the scribe knew at least some of the other manuscripts (otherwise the manuscripts and prayers would have differed much

more) and what the content of the instructions needed to be, the scribe did not bother, or care to, copy the instructions directly from another manuscript.

The prayers themselves are almost entirely petitionary. There is some thanking and praising God in them but their purpose is clearly to convince God to do certain things for the woman, her child and in some cases her husband. Occasionally she prays for the well-being of all of Israel but this seems almost like a throw-in. Unlike typical Shabbat and holiday prayer books the prayers which concentrate on the flow of time, these books focus on particular events. One such event (my interest here) is pregnancy and childbirth. These prayers are not said every day of a woman's life, but rather during a specific time of need. Despite these differences, the prayers are still connected to the tradition in their use of typical prayer language (i.e. יהי רצון מלפניך, אמן סלה, יהיו לרצון). Phrases which can be found in the traditional siddur's petitionary prayers appear frequently.

There is one other issue of language worth noting and that is the use of the word אלהי versus the use of אלרי. Eight of the eighteen books studied use the word אלהי while the remaining 10 use אלרי or אלקי. We might of course just have different scribal habits of no consequences whatever. However, we may also wonder how seriously the scribes took the books to be. In the first case, where God's name is actually written out, one would think that the scribe considered the prayer sacred enough to actually put in God's name. In the second and third cases, where God's name is not actually written, perhaps the scribe did not consider the prayers holy enough to insert God's name. More optimistically, perhaps the

scribe was concerned that the book would be taken to a place where holy texts were forbidden.¹

The critical edition was constructed in the following way. A prayer was compared across the manuscripts which contained it and a composite version which reflects the majority of manuscripts was created. In other words, the critical edition text may not actually reflect, word for word, any one manuscript. Instead each word or phrase reflects what the majority of manuscripts contained.

Critical Edition

Manuscripts:

- A - Jewish Theological Seminary Rare Book Room (JTS) 4371
- B - JTS 4322
- C - JTS 4342
- D - JTS 4375
- F - JTS 4433b
- G - Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion Library (HUC) 262
- H - HUC 264
- I - HUC 290
- J - HUC 307
- K - HUC 350
- M - HUC 351
- N - HUC 352
- P - JTS 4336
- Q - HUC 248
- R - HUC 243
- S - HUC 245
- T - HUC 247
- U - HUC 234

Manuscript I has the word תפלות instead of תפלה	=	תפלה I תפלות
Manuscript I adds הוואח after התפלה	=	התפלה I + הוואח
Manuscripts A and I omit the word התפלה	=	om. A, I [התפלה]

¹Cardin, p. xiv.

The First 40 days of pregnancy:

The first prayer is the prayer which a woman says during the first forty days of her pregnancy. Of the 18 manuscripts studied, 13 contain some form of this prayer (A, B, F, G, H, I, J, K, P, Q, S, T, U). Manuscripts F and S contain a different version of this prayer. The content of F and S does not vary from the rest of the manuscripts, however, the length and wording do. Manuscripts F and S almost seem to be fuller versions of the prayer contained in the other manuscripts. In F and S the prayer's requests are spelled out in more detail.

The rest of the manuscripts contain 1 version and only differ from each other slightly. One frequent variation is whether or not the word "tamim" is used to describe the son which she is asking for. Manuscripts B, G, I, K, P, Q and U omit the word while A, H and T leave it in. Otherwise, these 11 manuscripts vary little.

The Talmud tells us that the gender of a child is not determined until the 41st day of pregnancy. Therefore, for the first 40 days a woman can pray for a son and her prayer will not be in vain. After the 40th day however, the gender of the child is set and she cannot pray for a son or her prayer will be a tefillat shay, a prayer said in vain.

As mentioned above, this is a purely petitionary prayer. She tells God what she desires, namely, that the baby should not only be a son, but that he should be pious, righteous and a blessing. She wants a son who is a Torah scholar. While the prayer is unlike those of traditional siddurim, in that it addresses a specific occasion in a woman's life, it does use common prayer language. This prayer, like many of the others begins, אמן, כן יהי רצון and ends יהי רצון מלפניך ...

Manuscript S further personalizes its version of this prayer by inserting a woman's name. It is probably safe to assume that this book was written for Simcha bat Soli. Manuscript F, on the other hand, which contains a very similar prayer to manuscript S, simply instructs the user to insert her own name.

Upon examination of the instructions for this prayer, one can see that the content for most of the manuscripts is the same while the wording varies. Further, F, H, and U have their instructions in Hebrew without nikkud. In some of the manuscripts (B, G, and K) the instructions spell out the fact that she is praying for the baby to be male. Perhaps this was to emphasize the importance of having boys.

1. Prayer for the first 40 days of pregnancy.

Manuscripts A, B, G, H, I, J, K, P, Q, and U

- 1 יהי רצון מלפניך יי אלקי ואלקי אבותי שתזכני ברחמיך הרבים שהולר שבמעני יהיה
- 2 בן זכר ויהיה צדיק חסיד וקדוש לברכה ויהיה מאיר עיני ישראל בתורתך אמן
- 3 כן יהי רצון

1 שתזכני P+ שהיה הרבים I+ שהיה שהולר I הולר P שולר יהיה I om.
 2 בן om. P+ זכר A,H,J+ תמים ויהיה A,H,I,J,P,U+ ושהיה G+ בן חסיד J וחסיד
 וקדוש Q,I+ קדוש P ויהיה עיני G om. G+ כל
 צדיק...בתורתך H מאיר עיני ישראל בתורתך ויהיה צדיק חסיד וקדוש לברכה

May it be Your will, my God, and God of my ancestors to make me meritorious by bestowing upon me Your greatest mercies, so that the child that I carry within me may be a son. May he be good and kind and sacred, to serve as a blessing. Let him light up the eyes of Israel and Your Torah. Amen. So may it be Your will.²

²Cardin, p. 70. Translation adapted.

Prayer 1A: Prayer for the first 40 days of pregnancy.
Manuscripts S and F

Manuscript S:

- 1 אֲנִי יי צבֹאוֹת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל יוֹשֵׁב הַכְּרוּבִים תְּהִינָה אוֹזְנֶךָ קְשׁוּבוֹת לְקוֹל תַּחֲנוּנִי
- 2 הַשְׁקִיפָה מִמַּעַן קִרְשְׁךָ עָלַי וְזַכְּרִנִי וְלֹא תִשְׁכַּח אֶת אֲמַתְךָ [שִׁמְחָה בַּת סוּלִי] אֲמַתְךָ וְנָתַתְּ
- 3 לְאֲמַתְךָ זֶרַע אֲנָשִׁים וִיְהִי הַיֶּלֶד הַנוֹצֵר בְּךָ זָכָר וְלֹא נִקְבָּה וְתִשְׁפִּיעַ עָלָיו נִשְׁמָה קְרוֹשָׁה מֵעֲלָמָא
- 4 דְּרוּכְרָא וּמִסְפָּרָא דִּימִינָא וִיְהִי עוֹסֵק בַּתּוֹרָה לְשִׁמָּה וּמִקִּיִּים מִצְוֹת בִּישְׂרָאֵל וִיְהִי רוּרְךָ
- 5 צִרְקָה וְחֹסֶר מִבְּרֻכּוֹתֶיךָ תִּבְרַכְנִי וִיבֹרֶךְ בֵּית אֲמַתְךָ עִם כָּל עַמְּךָ בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל
- 6 אֲמֵן נִצַּח סְלֵא וְעַד: יְהִיו לְרִצּוֹן אֲמִרִי פִי וְהִנּוּן לְבִי לְפָנֶיךָ יי צוּרִי וְנוֹאֲלִי.
- 7 עֲשֵׂה לִמְעַן שִׁמְךָ עֲשֵׂה לִמְעַן יִמִּינְךָ עֲשֵׂה לִמְעַן תּוֹרַתְךָ עֲשֵׂה לִמְעַן קְרוֹשְׁתְּךָ הוֹשִׁיעָה
- 8 יִמִּינְךָ וְעַנְנִי יְהִיו לְרִצּוֹן אֲמִרִי פִי וְהִנּוּן לְבִי לְפָנֶיךָ יי צוּרִי וְנוֹאֲלִי.

All variations are from manuscript F:

- 1 יי+אלהי הצבאות אלהי ישראל] om.
- 2 קרשך] + מן השמים, No name given
- 3 הילד] הולד
- 5 בית] om. כל] + בית
- 6 והניון לבי לפניך יי צורי ונואלי] om. + וכ'

Translation of S:

Pray, God of Hosts, God of Israel who sits among the cherubs that Your ears will hear and be attentive to the voice of my supplications. Look down upon me from Your holy dwelling upon me and remember me and do not forget Your handmaid, Simchah bat Soli, Your maidservant and make Your maidservant pregnant. May the child to be created be a son and not a daughter. Imbue him with a holy soul.³ May he engage in the study of Torah for its own sake and do mitzvot in Israel. And may he pursue righteousness and goodness. May You bless him and may he bless Your handmaid's house with every house of Your people. Amen. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to You, my God, my rock and my redeemer. Do this for the sake of Your name, do it for the sake of Your Torah, do it for the sake of Your holiness.

³Lines 3 and 4 of text: technically, from the "world of the masculine and the right side," a reference to the Sefiratic realm whence male as opposed to female endowment emerges.

Redeem me with Your hand. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to You, God, my rock and my redeemer.

Prayer 2: Prayer to be said during the entire pregnancy.

This prayer begins by establishing the reason behind it. "All creatures look hopefully to You. In their time of trouble they look to you for salvation." The woman has entered a time of potential trouble, namely pregnancy. She and the fetus she carries are in danger throughout the nine months and especially during delivery. Her goal in this prayer, as well as the others, is to convince God to save her and her child from all harm that might befall them in the course of nine months. Her techniques for convincing God to respond to her are ones which we see throughout our traditional liturgy. As in the **אברהם** she reminds God that she belongs to the line of our Jewish ancestors. In this case, however, she calls up the matriarchs, rather than the patriarchs. She reminds God that the matriarchs suffered barrenness and that God responded to their cries.

She then asks God to do the same for her and to send the redeeming angel to protect her.

We will see angels referred to frequently throughout these prayers.

There are also references in many of the prayers to astrology. She asks God to make the time of this birth propitious **בעת לרתי הזמן לי שעה טובה**. The word **זמן** means time but here it is a verbal form in the hiphil, asking God to align the stars propitiously. She wants to deliver at a time when the stars are in a good position, boding well for her child's future.

It is worthwhile to examine the fears and desires expressed by the woman here as it may shed some light on her life and her experience. She expresses her fear of certain dangers which face her, her child and her husband. She fears for herself: harm,

sickness, hurt, disability, pain, miscarriage, the punishment of Eve (pain in child birth) and not enough milk. The fear of pain is present throughout these prayers and its presence intensifies as she nears delivery (as one might expect). The punishment of Eve is of course, pain in childbirth (she spells this out in another prayer). However, the woman calls upon a Midrash which says that the righteous women of the Exodus were spared the punishment of Eve.⁴ Thus, God has the power -and the precedent - to spare women this punishment. She asks God to consider her as part of the righteous women and spare her too.

For her child the woman fears that he will be malformed (mentioned twice), unlearned in Torah, dependent on others financially, and experience hunger. After the first 40 days she is not allowed to pray for a boy but it is clear that throughout the prayers she assumes (hopes?) that the child within her is a boy.

For her husband she fears disgrace, indignity, poverty and loss. Her fears regarding her husband are for the most part financial. She prays that he will not need charity or even a loan from anyone and that he will prosper. She also wishes this for her child (son). It is interesting that she does not fear that her husband will be sick or suffer pain. Rather he should live a long life and prosper. It seems that she sees herself and her child as mainly physically vulnerable and her husband (and son later in life) as mainly economically vulnerable.

As for her desires, the woman wants little for herself. She asks God for enough milk to feed her baby and for the patience to raise him well. She obviously feels a great

⁴Sotah 12a.

deal of responsibility for how this child turns out (a Torah scholar, not an ignoramus) in several prayers as she asks God for the ability to raise her child well.

She has quite a long list of desires for her unborn child. Above all the child should be good, righteous, proper and learned in Torah (mentioned twice). The child should do God's work (mentioned twice) and fear God (mentioned twice). Additionally, this child should have strength, dignity and know only prosperity. In lines 14 and 15 of the text she emphasizes that God should give her the child for God's sake so that the child can serve God. Again this seems like another technique to convince God to fill all of her requests. This, of course, harks back to the story of Hannah in Samuel I. Hannah, and her bargain with God (if God ends her barrenness she will give God her child) are specifically mentioned in a later prayer.

For her husband she requests a good and long life, peace, wealth, honor, decency, and abundance. Again the economics are emphasized. In this prayer Israel is not mentioned. She prays only for her immediate family, herself, her unborn child and her husband. Her focus is on those most closely connected to her and her world.

Linguistically, there is an interesting play on words in line 13. The word **חַפְּלָטִי**, "deliver me," is used. There are several Hebrew words for deliver but this one is used because the root **פִּלַּט**, also means to deliver in the sense of childbirth.⁵ It also conjures up **שְׁאֵרִית פְּלִיטָה**, "the saving remnant." Others may lose their babies but she will not.

In manuscript J the last section differs. Her fears and desires are expressed more

⁵Cardin, p. 73.

vividly and in more detail. She not only asks that she be able to nurse but she says specifically, "May it be Your will to be gracious to me so that I will be able to nurse him without any obstacle and limitations to keep me from satisfying him, so he will not be hungry." She is also vividly concerned with his knowing hunger; she even fears his death. All of Israel is also mentioned in this prayer, but again it seems almost thrown-in incidentally.

Prayer 2: Prayer to be said during entire pregnancy.

Manuscripts: A, B, D, G, H, I, J, K, M, P, Q, R, T and U.

- 1 רבון העלמים ארון הצבאות עיני כל אליך ישברו ובעת צרה לך ישועו ועם כי איני
- 2 כראית לבוא לפניך בתפילתי שמתי פני כחלמיש ובאתי להפיל תחנוני לפניך.
- 3 שכשם ספקרת לשרה ועתרת לרבקה וראית בעני לאה וזכרת לרחל אמותינו
- 4 ושמעת לקול הצרקות אשר היו מעולם כן ברחמיך הרבים תראה בעוני אמתך
- 5 ותזכרני תאזין ותקשיב לקול שועי ותשלח מלאך הנואל לסמכני ולעזורני בעת
- 6 הריוני זה.

- 1 רבון Q ריבונות של עולם +D,M כל ארון B + כל ישועו B [ישברו כי I + אנכי
- 2 לפניך Q + עם בתפילתי B,H,K,P om. K,P לפניך... שמתי פני... om.
- 3 לשרה A את שרה ועתרת D,I,M,Q ועמרת A ונעתרת לרחל A את רחל
- אמותינו A,B,G,K,U om. K,U אמו B אמותנו הקדושות.
- 4 לקול B,G,J,K,P,U + תפלות הצרקות A + בשועם אליך כן חסמע
- אשר... מקשיב A om.
- מעולם H,I,Q,R,T + בעת שבקשו פנך ותתפללו לפניך כסא כבודך D + בעת שבקשו
- פנך.
- 5 ותזכרני H,Q,T + ולא תשכח את אמתך R + ולא תשכח ותאזין G,M,P om.
- מלאך P om.

Master of the Universe, Ruler of the Hosts, all creatures look hopefully to You. In their time of trouble they look to You for salvation. And even though I am not worthy to come before You with my prayer, I harden my resolve and approach to humbly place my

request before You. Just as You remembered Sarah, heeded Rebecca, saw Leah's sorrow, and did not forget Rachel, our mothers, just as You listened to the voice of all the righteous women, that have been, thus in Your great mercy see the suffering of Your maidservant. Remember me and hear and pay attention to the sound of my plea and send the redeeming angel to protect me and to help me throughout my pregnancy.

- 6 ולמען חסרך תושיעני וחצילני מכל פגע רע ומכל מחלה ומכאוב ומרוה ועצב
 7 וחנני שלא יהיה הולד שבמעי סגל וחנני מאוצר השוב של מחנת חנם
 8 ושמע תפלתי זאת הבאה מקירות לבי להתחנן לפניך שיהיה הולד שבמעי צדיק
 9 ישר הגון לעמוד לפניך בחכמתו ובתורתו ובמעשיו הטובים ויהיה מוכן
 10 כל ימיו לעבודתך וליראתך ויהיה אהוב ונחמד בעיני הכל בין למעלה
 11 בין למטה ותחזקני ותאמצני לבל אפילנו ממעי ובעת לרתי הזמן לי שעה טובה.
 12 שאוציאנו לאור העולם ושיהיה שלם בנופי ואבריו.

- 6 ומכל om. A[ומחלה] + B[ומכל], D ומרוה ומכאוב ועצב + H,R,T ממני
 7 יהיה J,M[יעשה] וחנני...למטה om. B,G,J,K,M,P,U (line 6)
 וחנני + R[שלא] של om. T[של]
 8 שיהיה...לפניך om. H[הולד] + D,Q,R,T הזה
 10 כל ימיו H,I,Q,R,T ליראתך ולעבודתך
 11 ותחזקני J,Q[חזקני] + I וגם ותאמצני J,U[אמצני] אפילנו B,G,J,K,M,P,U אפיל
 + M אחי ממעי J ממני פרי בטני טובה om. D,I[טובה]
 12 שאוציאנו...ואבריו om. B,G,J,K,M,P,U

In accordance with Your graciousness, save me from all harm, sickness, hurt, disability, and pain. Be gracious to me so that the child I carry not be malformed, and grant me an unconditional gift from your finest treasure trove. Listen to the prayer that springs from the deepest recesses of my heart, and let the child I bear within me be righteous and good and proper. May he stand before you with his wisdom, his knowledge of Torah, and the legacy of his kindness. May he forever be prepared to do your work and to fear You. May he be loved and cherished by all in the world above and in this world below. Strengthen me and gird me so I shall not miscarry. Make the time of this birth be propitious so that I shall bring forth into the light of the world a child of perfect body and limb.

- 13 ושלח עזרך מקרש להשניח עלי ברב רחמיך ותחלצני ותפלטני כמשפט
 14 הצרקניות אשר לא היו בפתקה של חוה ואם אין בי זכות עשה למען שמך
 15 הנרול תגבור והנרדא והולד שאלד הכינתו לעבור אותך וליראה את שמך
 16 ועשה לו שחי כליותיו נובעות תודה כמו שעשית לאברהם יחידך והזמן לו שעה
 17 ראיה ונכונה וכת וחיל לעבור אותך שעת פרנסה שלא יצטרך לבריות משום רב
 18 לא ממחנתם ולא מהלואתם * ולי אני אמתך הזמן בשרי חלב מספיק להניק אותו
 19 כל צרכי ולא יחסר מאכלו.

- 13 ושלח B,G,U[מקרש T[לציון להשניח U[ותשניח רחמיך A[חסדיך
 +J,M רבים +A למען שמך הנרול ותחלצני J[ורצילני D,H,I,M,Q,R,T + ותמלטני
 ותפלטני M[om. כמשפט A[כל
 14 ואם... יחידך B,G,J,K,M,P,U[om. אין H,I,R,T[לא יש עשה D,I,T[+ נא
 15 ותולד T[ולולד שאלד I,R,T[שהוליד D שאליד
 16 לו Q[om. והזמן B,G,P,U[ולולד שאלד הכן K והולד שתלד הכן M ולולד שאלד
 הכן J ותולד שאלד יהיה ולד של קיימא והכן לי שעה טובה שעה M[+ טובה שעה
 +R טובה
 17 וכח וחיל B,D,G,J,K,M,P,U[om. וחיל D,I,Q,R,T[+ לאהוב H + לאכול
 לעבור A,Q,T[ועבור אותך J[om. +J,M שעה שלא ידעו בו הבריות לא בשום
 כי שוף ולא בשום בלי זין ולא בשום עין הרע ולא בשום דוד שיוכל להזין
 פרנסת J[+ טובה משום רב... הזמן B,G,J,K,M,P,U[om. (line 6)
 18 מהלואתם A* ולי אני אמתך הזמן בשרי חלב מספיק להניק אותו
 B,U[ולי הכן חלב ברדי לינק אותו
 D הזמן חלב ברדי שתהא מספיק להניק אותו
 G והכן לי חלב ברדי לינק אותו
 H ולי אמתך הזמן בשרי חלב שיהיה מספיק להניק אותו
 I ולי אנכי אמתך הזמן חלב בשרי שתהא מספיק להניק אותו
 J ולי הכן ברדי חלב מספיק להניק אותו
 K ולי הכן חלב ברדי להניק אותו
 M ולי הכן חלב ברדי מספיק להניק אותו
 P ולי הכן ברדי חלב לינק אותו
 Q, R, T ולי אני אמתך הזמן חלב בשרי שתהא מספיק להניק אותו
 19 כל... מאכלו B,G,K,P,U[om.

Send me Your help from the holy place so that I may be protected by Your abundant mercy. Save me, deliver me, let me share the fate of righteous women who did not suffer the punishment of Eve. But if I do not merit this goodness, please do this for Your own sake. May the child that I bear be dedicated to your work and to fearing Your great name. Make his entire being flow with Torah, as You did with Abraham, Your cherished one. May the hour of his birth be one which endows propriety, strength, and dignity so that he may serve You well. May the hour of his birth assure him prosperity so that he shall not be in need of any other living creature, not of their gifts and not of their loans. As for me, Your maidservant, prepare my breasts full of milk so that I may nurse the child as much as he needs, so that he may not suffer hunger.

- 20 וחנני שאוכל לגרל אחו לאהבתך וליראתך ולתלמוד תורתך
 21 ולקיום מצותיך ועבורתך ולבעלי תן חיים טובים וארכים* חיים של שלום
 22 חיים של עשר וכבוד חיים של יראת חטא חיים שלא יהיה בהם בושה וכלימה
 23 חיים שתמלא כל משאלות לבנו לטובה ותזמין לנו פרנסתנו מדרך הרחבה
 24 והמלאה בלי טרח ועמל בכבוד ולא בכזיז בנחת ולא בצער ברוח והצלחה
 25 ולא בהפסד ותצליחנו** בכל מעשה ירינו וחנני ושמע תפילתי כי אתה שמע
 26 תפילת כל פה. ברוך שמע תפלה.

- 20 שאוכל לגרל אתו B,K,P,U שאנרלהו G לגרלהו
 שאוכל I+ לקיימו לאהבתך om. G,K,P,U לאהבתך D,I ליראתך
 ולאהבת וליראתך G,K,P,U+ ולעבורך B,G,U+ ולי ולתלמוד...ועבורתך
 om. B,G,K,P,U(line 2)
 21 מצותיך I+ ואת ואבורתך D om. M+ ואלי B,K,P+ ולי ובעלי M+ ולכל ישראל
 R,Q,I,D+ ואלי תן K+ לנו טובים וארכים M,J ארכים וטובים חיים של שלום
 om. T חיים...לשובה B,G,K,M,P,U(line 4)
 T*: חיים שלא יהיה בהם בושה וכלימה חיים של שלום חיים של עשר וכבוד חיים
 של יראת...
 22 חיים של עשר D,H,I,Q,R,T+ חיים של יראת חטא חיים של אשר וכבוד
 23 כל I om. I לבנו om. I ותזמין B,G,K,M,P,U ותזמין לנו A,D,J,Q+ כל
 B,G+ את מדרך הרחבה והמלאה B,G,K,M,P,U om.
 24 ועמל G,K,M,P,U om. בכבוד B,G,K,M,P,U ויגיעה ולא...בהפסד B,G,K,M,P,U om.
 25 בהפסד I+ ונוק
 **ותצליחנו A ותצליחנו בכל מעשה ירינו וחנני ושמע
 B והצליחנו בכל מעשה ירינו שמע
 D,H,R,T ותצליחם בכל מעשה יריהם מהלכם ומחשבותיהם וחנני ושמע
 G,K,P,U ותצליחם בכל מעשינו שמע
 I ותצליחם בכל מעשי יריהם מהלכם ומחשבותיהם ושמע
 M ותצליחם בכל מעשי יריהם שמע
 Q ותצליחם בכל מעשה יריהם מהלכם ומחשבותיהם וחנני ותשמע
 om. P אתה om. Q
 26 פה P,U+ יהיו לרצון ברוך שמע תפלה B,G,K,P,U om.

Be gracious to me so that I will be able to raise my child with love for You and with dedication to Your holy work. Give my husband a good life, and a long life, a life of peace, a life of wealth and honor, a life of decency, a life free of disgrace and indignity, a life in which You have fulfilled all our noble requests. Let us gain our livelihood directly from Your expansive, generous hand, without travail or undue exertion, with honor and without shame, with inner peace spared of trouble, with abundance and achievement, safe from poverty and loss. May all our efforts succeed. Be gracious unto me and listen to my prayer, for You listen to the prayer of all who call upon You. Blessed be the One who listens to prayer.⁶

The last page of manuscript J reads:

ועשה עמי חסד שיהיה תחלב של רפואה וברכה והצלחה ושל חיים טובים חן וחסד
ורחמים ורצון מלפניך וחנני שאוכל להניק אתו בלי שום עכוב בריות ולא בצמצום
לשובע ולא לרעב לרצון ולא לרזון לברכה ולא לקללה לחיים ולא למות וחנני
שאגדלהו ליראתך ולעבודתך ולי ולבעלי ולכל ישראל חן חיים טובים וארוכים והזמן
להם פרנסתם בלי שורח ותצליחם בכל מעשי יריתם שומע תפילתי כי אתה שומע תפלה
כל פה. ברוך שומע תפלה.

Show me kindness that this be milk of healing, blessing and saving and life that is good, gentle and kind. May it be Your will to be gracious to me so that I will be able to nurse him without any obstacle and with no shrinkage of milk, so he will not be hungry -- for satisfaction not hunger, for good not for evil, for blessing not curse, for life not death. Be gracious to me so that I will be able to raise my child to fear and serve You. Give myself, my husband and to all Israel a good and long life. Let them gain their livelihood without travail and may all their efforts succeed. Hear my prayer, for You listen to the prayer of all who call upon You. Blessed be the One who listens to prayer.

⁶Cardin, pp. 72-76. Translation adapted.

3. Prayer to be said beginning in the seventh month of pregnancy

The prayer which the woman is instructed to say from the seventh month until she delivers is personalized. In the books written for specific women (manuscripts A, D, Q, R, and S) the user's name is inserted into the text of this prayer (line 1). Otherwise, the woman is instructed to fill in her own name.

As she nears labor, her fear of pain and suffering in labor become more vivid. She asks God that her strength not fail during labor. One could easily guess that the result of her strength failing would be death although she does not say so directly. She fears the same fate for her child.

The imagery is powerful here. She asks that she may deliver like a hen, easily, with no pain (lines 4-5). One can imagine that a hen laying an egg seems to give birth with ease. There is also the beautiful image of God having the key which unlocks her womb. This image appears frequently as she enters labor and pleads with God to unlock her womb. Like the hen, this is an image of a quick and painless birth.

In this prayer time is also an issue. She requests again that her child be born at a good זמן, a time when the stars are in a good alignment for his future. She is also concerned that she not go into labor on Shabbat (line 7). She does not want to cause someone to desecrate Shabbat on her behalf.

There is also an interesting reference to her child coming from a "holy source" followed by a quote from David, who is of course, the source of the messianic line. It seems that she could be making a veiled reference (would she have the nerve to say it directly?) to the fact that she could be carrying the messiah. This may play into her

trying to convince God to give her the child for God's sake (to serve God). She then follows the verse from Psalms 118, attributed to David by again including herself in the line of the matriarchs, this time including Hannah and all the righteous women.

The verse from Psalms 118 is in itself worthy of examination. The verse uses the word **המצר**, troubles. However the root **מצר** also means narrow places, as in the birth canal.⁷ There are other word plays on this root in later prayers.

Psalm 20 is brought in by some of the manuscripts (A,F,I,Q,S,T).

This psalm seems very appropriate to her circumstances. "May the Lord answer you in time of trouble,/the name of Jacob's God keep you safe./May He send you help from the sanctuary/and sustain you from Zion." On a purely literal level this prayer gives hope to the woman who is entering a dangerous and frightening period that God will protect her as God protected her ancestors. The psalm further says, "May He grant you your desire,/ and fulfill your every plan." Her desires and plans are clearly spelled out throughout these prayers. Here is hope that God will fulfill them. The last verse of this Psalm, "O Lord, grant victory! May the King answer us when we call." appears in several prayers.

Following Psalm 20 we have an example of **סגולות**, incantations. The woman is given two verses. The first is Psalm 102:21 in which she is a groaning prisoner in need of release. Without God's help she is condemned to death. Only God can free her. Perhaps the baby can also be seen as a prisoner awaiting release from his prison, the womb. Again, only God can provide freedom for God has the key. In keeping with

⁷Cardin, p. 81.

kabbalistic influence, she is given the verse forward and backward and instructed to say it three times. The second verse which she is to say forward and backward three times is Exodus 11:8. This verse is important because it uses the verb יֵצֵא, "go out", three times. "Go out" is what the woman wants her baby to do at the appropriate time. This incantation appears again later on during labor. This verse is appropriate to the occasion because of a word play between יֵצֵא, "leaving [Egypt]" and thus leaving the mother too, and מִצְרַיִם, Egypt and the birth canal. Israel here is the child, Egypt is the birth canal and the action of getting out is that of being born. This verse which normally signifies Israel getting out of Egypt also signifies the child getting out of the birth canal.⁸ Both Israel and the child attain freedom with God's help.

Within the instructions one notices the variety of wording. While the content is always the same the wording differs. There are two sets of instructions which are worth noting. Manuscript A instructs the woman to give tzedakah and fast before saying this prayer, an instruction not found in other manuscripts. Manuscript S uses the word עֲמִידָה. While manuscript A often uses the phrase Shemoneh Esrei this is the only occurrence seen so far of the word Amidah.

⁸Cardin, pp. 84-85.

3. Prayer to be said beginning in the seventh month of pregnancy
 Manuscripts: A, D, F, H, I, J, P, Q, R, S, T

- 1 יהי רצון מלפניך יי אלהי ואלהי אבותינו שחקל מעלי (פלונית בת פלונית)
- 2 את צער עבורי לי כח כל ימי עבורי שלא יותש כחי ולא כח העבר בשום דבר
- 3 שבעולם ותציל אותי מפתקה של חזה. ויהא בעת לרתי כי ימלאו ימי ללדת לא
- 4 יהפכו עלי צירי הלידה ויצא הולד לאויר העולם ברנע קטן ואלד בנקל כתרנגולת
- 5 בקלות בלי שום חזק לא לי ולא לולד ויהיה נולד בשעה טובה ומזל טוב
- 6 לחיים ולשלום *ולבריאות לחן ולחסד לעשר ולכבוד.

- 2 את om. P[עבורי] +A,D,F,S[ותוסיף] +D,F,I,Q,R,S[ותתן לי...עבורי] om. H,J,P,T[
 כחי ולא כח העבר] A,D,F,S[כח העבר ולא כח
 3 ויהא] om. A[לרתי...צירי] (line 4) om. A,J,T[
 4 הולד] om. J,T[ואלד בנקל] om. P[בנקל] +Q,I[כמו
 5 לא] om. D,F,S[נולד] om. H,J,P,T[ומזל] D,F,I,J[ובמזל
 6 לחיים] +J,T[טובים] +D[ושלום] ולברכה om. H[ולבריאות] +D,H,Q[ולחסד] ולרחמים
 *Q: לחן ולחסד ולרחמים ולעושר וכבוד.

Lord our God and God of our ancestors, may it be Your will that I (name inserted) easily suffer the strains of my pregnancy. Grant me stamina throughout the pregnancy so that my strength may not fail, nor the baby's strength, in any way. Save me from the judgment visited upon Eve, and at the time of birth when the days of my pregnancy are complete, let me not be racked by the pains of labor. Let the child be born speedily, and may I give birth easily, as naturally as a hen and quickly, without any harm either to me or to the child. Let the child be born when the time is right, at a propitious moment, so he may enjoy a full life of peace, health, and pleasantness, of goodness, prosperity, and honor.

7 ושל לא אלד בשבת כרי שלא ויצטרכו לחלל שבת חס ושלום בשבילי. ותמלא כל

8 משאלותי במרה טובה ישועה ורחמים בקרב כל ישראל הצריכים רחמים ואל

9 תשיבני ריקם מלפניך אמן סלה ועד.*

Only A,D,F,I,Q,and S continue:

10 ובדרך יי אלהינו המפתח של חיה והלידה שלא נמסרה לשום מלאך לכן זכור

11 רחמיך יי וחסידיך החפץ לחיים ופקרני בישועה ורחמים ואלד ברוח זרע של קימא

12 מסטרא דקרשא כמו שזמר דוד בתהלים "מן המצר קראתי יה ענני במרחב יה:

13 יי לי לא אירא מה יעשה לי אדם:" מי ששמע תפלת דוד בעת צרותיו

14 הוא ישמע את תפלתי זאת וכמו שענה לאמותינו הקדושות שרה רבקה רחל ולאה

15 וחנה ולכל הצדיקות והחסידות וההננות הוא יענני. אמן:

16 יהיו לרצון אמרי פי והגיון לבי לפניך יי צורי ונאלי.

7 כרי שלא om. A,F,R] ויצטרכו Q יהיו צריכים +D חס ושלום חס ושלום om. A,D,F,P]

8 הצריכים רחמים H הצריכים משאלותי H+ לשובה

9 אמן סלה ועד H,J,P,R,T,Q יהיו לרצון אמרי פי וכי *D+ Insert for fast day

10 אלהינו F,I,S+ ואלהי אבותינו חיה om. D,F,I,S]

11 רחמיך יי S רחמיך החפץ A,Q וזכרני ופקרני D+ בפקרת קימא D+ וכשר

12 שזמר D שאמר מן om. D קראתי יה ענני D ענני יה קראתי

14 את om. D וכמו D ומי

15 וההננות om. D]

May I not give birth on Shabbat, causing others to transgress the laws of Shabbat, God forbid, for my sake. Fulfill all my requests graciously, generously, and mercifully, along with the requests of all Israel who bid Your mercy. Do not send me away from You empty. Amen. Selah.

In Your hand, Lord our God, is the key to life and to birth. This day is not given over into the hands of any angel. Therefore, remember Your graciousness and goodness, and remember me for life. Deal graciously and kindly with me, that I may give birth easily to a thriving child selected from the holy source, just as David sang in his psalms: "In distress I called on the Lord. The Lord answered me by setting me free. The Lord is with me, I have no fear. What can anyone do to me?" (Psalm 118:5-6) May the One who heard David's prayer at the time of his troubles, listen also to my prayer. Just as

God answered our holy mothers Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, Hannah and all the righteous and pious women of Israel, so may God answer me. Amen. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, God, my Rock and my Redeemer.

Manuscripts A,F,I,Q,S,T:

Psalm 20:

A Psalm of David

May the Lord answer you in time of trouble,
may the God of Jacob be your strength.

May He send you help from His sanctuary,
sustaining you from Zion.

May He remember all your offerings
and accept your sacrifices,
granting your heart's desires,
fulfilling all your hopes.

We shall sing of your victory,
we shall acclaim the glory of our God.

May the Lord fulfill all that you ask.

Now I know that the Lord delivers His anointed.

He will answer from his heavenly abode,
bringing victory with mighty deeds.

Some trust in chariots, others in horses,
but we honor the name of the Lord our God.

They stumble and fall, but we rise and stand firm.

O Lord, deliver us! Answer us, O King, when we call.⁹

Manuscript A instructs the woman to say the following 3 times:

לשמע אנקת אסיר לפתח בני תמותה: תמותה בני לפתח אסיר אנקת לשמוע:

To hear the groans of the prisoner, to release those condemned to death. To death those condemned to release, of the prisoner the groans to hear. (Psalm 1-2:21)

Manuscript A instructs her to say then say the following 3 times:

וירדו כל עבדיך אלה אלי והשתחו לי לאמר צא אתה וכל העם אשר ברנליך ואחרי
כן אצא ויצא: ויצא אצא כן ואחרי ברנליך אשר העם וכל אתה צא לאמר לי
והשתחו אלי אלה עבדיך כל וירדו:

⁹Psalm 20 (New Jewish Publication Society translation).

Then all these courtiers of yours shall come down to me and bow low to me, saying, "Depart, you and all the people who follow you! And after that I will depart," and he left (Exodus 11:8) And he left. I will depart and after that who follow you, people all the and you depart saying to me low bow and down to me come shall these courtiers of yours, then all.¹⁰

¹⁰Cardin, pp. 78-84. Translation adapted.

4. Prayer for the 9th month of pregnancy.

I did not create a critical edition of this prayer since it is so similar across all the manuscripts studied. Only words and the conjugations of verbs vary. There are no whole phrases added or deleted as in the case of some of the other prayers. Since I did not create a critical edition I simply chose one manuscript, namely A, to print here.

At the beginning of this prayer the woman expresses thanks for having brought her this far in her pregnancy safely. Again, there are no prayers which she would have said if she miscarried or did not make it this far. She then cleverly tells God that since God brought her this far, God should, of course, finish the job.

All the fears and desires expressed earlier are repeated here again with a few more thrown in, namely, the Evil Eye, demons and devilish spirits. Her desires for herself are for milk for her child and the wisdom to raise him properly. Her desires for her child are that he will be healthy, whole (physically) and a righteous Torah scholar. Her wishes for her husband are that his estate will prosper, for his sake and for the child's sake. She also has some petitions for the community here. She asks that "the wisdom of Torah abound in the community." When she continues and asks to be spared the Evil Eye, demons, etc. it is not clear who the "us" is in her words - the community, or simply her family.

4. Prayer for the 9th month of pregnancy. (Manuscript A only).

Instructions: תפלה Che dee dirsi dalla Donna quando entra nel Nono mese della sua Gravidanza dopo il שמונה עשרה prima di fare שלום עושה.

A prayer to be said by a woman when she enters the ninth month of her pregnancy. It is to be inserted after the Shemoneh Esrai and before "May the One Who Makes Peace."

אודה יי בכל לבב כי באתי בכלל תשעה ירחים וער כה הצילני מפגעים רעים
שיכולים לפגוע באשה הרה ובולרה הנשוי כי לא כלו רחמיו אשר על כן אבקש
רחמים ממנו שישעריני ויתמכני בבוא תולד ערי משבר ויחן בי כח ללדת אתו
אנא יי סעריני ואושעה ומצרות תצריני באופן שיצא תולד ממני לחיים ולרוחה
ולא יהיה בו ולא באחר מאבריו לא נזק ולא חסרון ולא פגע ולא מקרה ולא כאב
ולא ציר ולא נע ולא מחלה והכן לי חלב בדדי מספיק להניק אתו וחני שאוכל
וגדלו ליראתך ולעבודתך ותשלח ברכה רוחה והצלחה עמו שיהיה לאיש מצליח
ויתברכו בעבורו גם נכסי בעלי והרבה נבולט בתלמוד תורה ויחן לו אריכות
ימים ושנות חיים באהבה ובאחווה ובשלום לאהבה את שם קרשך ותשמרני מעין הרע
ומשרין וממזיקין ומכל צרה וצוקה כי אל שומרני ומצילני אתה מעתה ועד עולם
שמע יי קולי אקרא חני ועני שמע יי וחני יי היה עוזר לי שמע יי תחנתי
יי תפילתי יקח עשה למען שמך עשה למען ימינך עשה למען תורתך עשה למען
קרשתיך יהיו לרצון אמרי פי והגיון לבי לפניך יי צורי ונואלי.

I thank the Lord with all my heart that I have carried the full nine months and that up to now He has spared me from all afflictions that could harm a pregnant woman and her child. Surely God's tenderness is unending. Again, I seek His kindness so He will be with me and support me when my child is pressing to be born, and so that He will give me strength to bring forth my child. Please, God, sustain me and I will be saved. Keep me from distress, allowing my child to emerge from me full of life and vigor. May neither he nor any part of his body suffer harm or disfigurement or loss or accident or pain or harm, disease or illness. Fill my breasts with milk enough to nurse him, and be gracious unto me so that I may be able to raise him to fear you and to do your holy work. Send with him blessings, abundance, and success so that he may grow to be a prosperous man. For him, may my husband's estate also prosper. May the wisdom of Torah abound in our community. Give us length of days, years of life that are full of love, peace, and happiness, so we may be able to love You. Spare us from the Evil Eye, from demons and from devilish spirits, from all sorrow and sadness. For you, God, are our protector and savior, now and forevermore. Listen, O Lord, I am calling to you. Be gracious unto me and answer me. Hear me, be gracious unto me, be my protector. God, listen to my plea. God, accept my prayer. Do this for Your name's sake, for the sake of Your Torah, for the sake of Your holiness. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, God, my Rock and my Redeemer.¹¹

¹¹Cardin, pp. 86-88. Translation adapted.

5. Prayers to be said at the onset of labor

Aside from the verse from Exodus, this prayer appeared in manuscript A alone. Since it fits with the section as a whole, I am including it as it appears there. This section starts with Psalm 20 which was discussed above. Following Psalm 20 the woman recites a prayer in which she calls upon God with the personal, familial and ancestral names of God (Genesis 31:42 and 49:24).¹² Over and over, in almost a litany-like way she says to God, "answer me." It is also significant that in this prayer she calls upon the God who "reclaims life from the grave" and "revives the dead." As she enters labor she is at the edge of her grave. Because she is in a liminal state between pregnancy and child birth she is in a sense considered dead during labor. In fact, the instructions to this prayer tell her to say a **וְיָ** the confession before death while in labor. The instructions say that this makes labor easier, however, it seems more logical that she would recite **וְיָ** because she will be entering a liminal state (death-like) and perhaps dying in reality, as many women did.

During this prayer she calls upon the God who "remembers the pain of barren women". Obviously, if she has gotten to this point she is not barren. However, if she loses the child at this point the result will be the same as if she had been barren to begin with. Ultimately, it is all in God's hands.

During the following prayer we have an image of God as the midwife. She says as she sits on her birthing stool, "For my eyes are fixed on Him alone, even as a

¹²Cardin, p. 92.

handmaid attends closely to her mistress, until He delivers me into ease and comfort." One can almost imagine her looking to God as her coach through the waves of pain.¹³

The end of the prayer contains a verse from Numbers (12:13) in which Moses pleads with God to cure his sister Miriam. A poignant reading indeed, in light of her pleading with God to relieve her suffering. The expression of pain is vivid throughout the labor prayers. Could a man, who certainly would not have had such an experience could possibly have written these prayers? This of course, only adds to the confusion over who actually created these prayers.

The incantation of Exodus 11:8 is repeated in the hope of encouraging the baby to leave the "narrow place", the birth canal. A final string of biblical verses applauds God's ultimate victory, offering the woman hope of redemption from her pain. This may have been considered a סטולה, an incantation. Light is explored as an image of deliverance, victory, redemption while darkness defines labor, pain and God's harmful decrees. She asks God to "open the gates of light", or rather, to open the gates of her womb.

¹³Cardin, p. 94.

5. Prayers to be said at the onset of labor. (Manuscript A only).

Instructions: Giunta che sia la Donna all'ora del Partorire, sara cosa ben fatta che si disponga volontariamente a dire il וידוי, che cio le facilitera il Parto, giusta il תלואיכי e si fare fare פסוק: הסולח לכל עונכי הרפא לכל e poi dira - con כונה il seguente מומר tre volte.

When a woman arrives at the hour of childbirth, she should voluntarily recite the confessional prayer, for this will make the labor easier, as it says, "You forgive all my transgressions; You heal my every disability." She should then have someone release her from her vows and then say with fervor the following psalm three times:¹⁴

Psalm 20 (for text of Psalm, see prayer #3 above).

עניי אלקי אברהם עניי: עניי ופחד יצחק עניי: עניי אביר יעקב עניי:
עניי ארון הרחמים והסליחות עניי: עניי העונה עלי משבר לחלות עניי:
עניי הפורה משחת ומחיה מתים עניי: עניי פוקד עקרות ופופר רחמים עניי:

Answer me, God of Abraham, answer me. Answer me, Pahad Yitzhak, answer me. Answer me, Almighty One of Jacob, answer me. Answer me Master of pardon and mercy, answer me. Answer me, You who answer those gripped in the throes of labor, answer me. Answer me, You who reclaim life from the grave and who revive the dead, answer me. Answer me You who remember the pain of the barren woman and who open the womb, answer me.

האל הנרול הנבור והנורא העונה לענות בצרה את יראיו הוא יקבל תפלתי ותפלות
כל עמי בית ישראל ובכללם יזכור ויפקד לשובה ולרחמים לאשה עצורה וצרה
כמבכירה ולבה מצרה תחיל תזעק בחבליה וצרייה כאנכי היום היושבת על המשבר
שברי על יי אלקי הוא יראה בצרתי ורמעי ויעתר לעתירתי ויעלה לרצון תפלתי
הוא ברחמי הרבים יפלטני הוא בחסדיו הרבים יחלצני על כן הבראות והחיים
והשלום יושיבני ולאחני הראשון ישיבני רפאות תחיה לשירי ושקרי לעצמותי
מלך מלכי מהלכים ששמע וענה תפלות האמהות הקדושות והטהורות שהיו בטבען
עקרות והפך ושנה מערכתן לשובה והשגית עליהן במדת הרחמים מני ים ארכה ורחבה
והיו מאתו נפקדות ונזכרות בזרע אנשים הוא יפקד ויזכור לשובה לחן ולחסד
ולרחמים אותי בעת ובעונה הזאת אשר אנכי מתפללת לפניו והוא יניחני ממחלי
ועצבי ולא יוסיף לראבני כי עיני תלויות אליו לברו כשפתה אל יד נברתה
עד שיוציא אותי לרוחה אמן קומי אורי כי בא אורך וכבוד יי עליך זרח
ונאמר ויצעק משה אל יי לאמר אל נא רפא נא לה.

¹⁴Cardin, p. 90-91.

May the exalted, mighty and awesome God, who in times of trouble answers those who fear him, accept my prayer and the pleas of His entire people, the house of Israel. And amidst their company, may He remember and tenderly care for a woman, bound up and struggling as if bearing her first child. From within this struggle, through her pains and labor, her heart trembles and calls out. So it is with me today as I sit upon the birthing stool. My gaze is fixed upon the Lord, my God. May He see my pain and my tears, and grant my petition. May my prayer be welcome. God in His mercy will deliver me. God in His compassion will release me. He will return my health and vigor and well-being. He will restore my former strength. My body will once again be refreshed.

The most Majestic One, the one who heard and answered the prayers of our holy and pure matriarchs, who by nature were barren, He undid their barrenness and reversed their condition. He cared for them with graciousness as deep and as wide as the sea. God remembered them and blessed them with children.

So may He remember and tend to me now, at this moment, with goodness and mercy and kindness and tenderness, as I pray before Him. He will relieve my pain and my distress. He will not intensify my suffering.

For my eyes are fixed on Him alone, even as a handmaid attends closely to her mistress, until He delivers me into ease and comfort.

"Arise, shine for Your light has dawned; the glory of the Lord has shone upon you." (Isaiah 60:1). And it is written, "Moses cried to the Lord, saying 'Please, God, please, heal her.'" (Numbers 12:13).¹⁵

E poi dira tre volte che segue

Then say the following verse three times:

וירדו כל עבדיך אלה אלי והשתחו לי לאמר צא אתה וכל העם אשר ברגליך ואחרי כן
אצא ויצא: ויצא אצא כן ואחרי ברגליך אשר העם וכל אתה צא לאמר לי והשתחו
אלי אלה עבדיך כל וירדו:

Then all these courtiers of yours shall come down to me and bow low to me, saying, "Depart, you and all the people who follow you! And after that I will depart," and he left. And he left. I will depart and after that who follow you, people all the and you depart saying to me low bow and down to me come shall these courtiers of yours, then all (Exodus 11:8).

¹⁵Cardin, pp. 94-96.

E poi dira
And then she says:

לא תהיה משכלה ועקרה בארצך את מספר ימיך אמלא: מלך מלכי המלכים ברחמי
יאיר בחמלתו עלי ככתוב קומי אורי כי בא אורך וכבוד יי עליך זרח: ותגזר
אמר ויקם לך ועל דרכיך נה אור: מלך מלכי המלכים יבשל ממני כל נזרות
קשות ורעות ורפאני מכל מכאובי ומכותי וכפר את חטאתי ויחרש כגשר נעורי
ככתוב בשצף קצף הסתרתי פני רנע ממך ובחסר עולם רחמתיך אמר גאלך יי מלך
מלכי המלכים ברחמי יפתח לי שערי אורה אמן: יי צבאות עמנו משגב לנו אלקי
יעקב סלה: יי צבאות אשרי אדם בשח בך: יי הושיעה המלך יענו ביום קראנו:
יהיו לרצון אמרי פי והגיון לבי לפניך יי צורי ונואלי.

"No woman in your land shall miscarry or be barren. I will let You enjoy the full count of your days" (Exodus 23:26). Most Majestic One, let the light of your tenderness shine upon me, as it is written, "Arise and shine, for Your light has dawned. The presence of the Lord has shone upon you" (Isaiah 60:1).

"You decree and it will be fulfilled. And light will shine upon your affairs." (Job 22:28).

May the Most Majestic One annul all harsh and harmful decrees, and may He relieve me of all my agony and all my afflictions. May He forgive all my sins and renew my youth like the eagle's, as it is written, "In fleeting anger, for a moment, I hid my face from You, but with kindness everlasting I will take you back in love, said the Lord your Redeemer" (Isaiah 54:8).

May the Most Majestic One in his abundant graciousness open the gates of light for me. Amen.

The Lord of Hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our haven.

Lord of Hosts, happy is one who relies upon You.

Lord grant victory. May the King answer us when we call. (Psalm 20). May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to You, my Rock and my Redeemer.¹⁶

¹⁶Cardin, p. 98. (translation adapted).

6. Prayer for the hour of childbirth

What is perhaps most striking about this prayer is that in the four manuscripts which have it, four different versions appear. All four versions begin the same, and in some cases phrases or chunks of text are shared, but the variety was too great to do a critical edition. As a result, all four versions appear here with their translations. The version in manuscript C seems to be a shortened version of what is in manuscript A. K, on the other hand, adds an additional prayer of its own.

All four versions have deer imagery near the beginning of them. In this image the woman compares herself and her yearning for God to the deer who yearns for water. In K this image gets a bit scrambled and we are not sure who is in labor the deer or the woman.

In A we have the image of God being the holder of the keys to the womb. This is such an important job that God does not trust any angel with this key. The other manuscripts do not contain this image. Manuscript A is also alone in quoting Genesis 30:22 to remind God that God remembered Rachel and opened her womb: a precedent for God to do the same for her. In manuscripts A, C and K we have the references to astrology which we had in earlier texts. In all three versions the woman asks that the baby be born at a good זמן.

What is perhaps most striking about these prayers are the courtroom scenes which appear in A and Q. As mentioned before, the woman is in a liminal period. It is almost as if she is dead while in labor. And this court room scene is her יום הדין, her day of judgment. There are angels called, yetadot who attend to women in labor and who

gather the cries of these women and bring them to God. The "Other Side" (the sitra achra) makes charges against the woman and her child in their most vulnerable moment, hoping to convince God that she and the child should not be granted life. Her cries which are placed before God counteract the arguments of the Other Side and help to gain her God's favor.

Manuscript K further emphasizes the liminality expressed here by including a section in the prayer in which the woman confesses over and over how sinful she has been. She asks God to forgive her for all of her sins from the day she was born until now. Clearly, as in the text which instructs her to recite a confessional before death, the woman is purifying herself, cleansing her sins in case she does in fact die. This purification may have also have been seen as another way to come before God as a righteous woman deserving of being spared some pain.

Manuscripts A and Q assert that God has "commanded us to be fruitful and multiply." Traditionally, only men are commanded to be fruitful and multiply. However, she again is using this commandment as leverage to bargain for her life. After all, how could God take her life while she is fulfilling a commandment.¹⁷

Finally, manuscript K invokes three ancestors as the woman asks that her child be given a long life like Isaac, Jonah and Habakuk. Why these three are brought in this combination is not clear.

¹⁷Cardin, p. 102-103.

6. Prayer for the hour of childbirth

Manuscripts: A, C, K, Q

Manuscript A:

Instructions: Altra תפלה da celebrarsi nell'ora del Parto.

Here is another prayer to be recited at the hour of childbirth.

אנא יי צבאות ראה תראה בעני אמתך וזכרתי ולא תשכח את אמתך ונתת לאמתך זרע
אנשים ואלקי ישראל יתן את שלתי וכאיל תערוג על אפיקי מים בשעה שמבקשת ללדת
ומתקשין עליה ציריה עורגת לך בקרניה וצועקת בקול מר על רחמך כי בדרך מפתח
של חיה ואתה מרחם ופותח את רחמה בחסד וברחמים כן נפשי תערוג אליך אלקים
ומבקשת רחמך וחסריך לפתוח פתח צירי רחמי ללדת הולד אשר בקרבי בשעה ראויה
ללדת בעת ברכה וישועה בולד של קימא שלא אינע עצמי לדיק ולא אלד לבהלה חס
ושלום כי בדרך לבר מפתח של חיה כרצונך ויזכור אלקים את רחל וישמע אליה אלקים
ויפתח את רחמה על כן יכמרו רחמך אל תחנני וממעמקי הלב קראתיך יי קולי אליך
אקרא ותענני מהר קרשך סלה. האזינה יי תפילתי וישועתי אליך חבא אשר אני צועקת
לפניך בלב שלם ברעות ובאהבה רבה ומלאכי מעלה הממנים על המשבר הנקראים
יחרות חילין ממנן על המשבר ראקרון בשמייהו יחרות רגשלי אטון קלי רגשין ומנחן
להון קמיה תהוא הכלא וכר תהוא ספרא אחרא אחי לקטרנא בתאי שעתא ראיהי שעתא
רסכנה קיימי עלין ומעלין הני קלי לממנא רעל פתחא ולא יכיל תהוא ספרא אחרא
לקטרנא כן תפילתי אליך חבא אשר ציית אלינו לפרות ולרבות ולנרל בנים לתורה
ומצות לעמוד לפניך ולשרתך ולברך בשמך ואל תחן מקום לספרא אחרא לקטרנא עלי
או על פרי בטני וזכרתי לשובה ולא תשכח את אמתך ונתתה לאמתך זרע קרש של
קימא: יי צבאות פמנו משנב לנו אלקי יעקב סלה: יי צבאות אשרי ארם בטח
בך: יי הושיעה המלך יעננו ביום קראנו:

Lord of Hosts, please attend to the pain of your maidservant. Remember me. Do not forget Your humble servant. Give Your devoted one a child. God of Israel, grant me my desire. Like a deer yearns for the flowing waters in the hour that she comes to give birth; as her labor gets harder, she reaches for You with her antlers. Bitterly she invokes your mercy, for in Your hands You hold the keys to life. You are merciful and open her womb, tenderly and warmly. So does my soul cry for You, God, and request Your mercy and goodness.

Open the wall of my womb so that I may at the proper time bear this child who is within me-at a time of blessing and salvation. May the child be vital and healthy. May I not struggle only to achieve emptiness, may I not labor in vain, God forbid. Because You alone hold the key to life, as it is written, "And God remembered Rachel and listened to her and opened her womb" (Genesis 30:22).

Therefore, take pity on my entreaty. From the very depths of my heart I call to you. I raise my voice to You, God. Answer me from the heights of Your holiness. Selah. Listen, God, to my prayer. Let my plea come before You, for I call to You with a full heart, with enduring love and total devotion. May the angels called yetadot who are

assigned to attend to the labor of women, those angels appointed to tend to the labor of the womb, who are called yetadot, gather up the cries of women and place them before the Holy Throne. And when the Other Side comes to make charges, cleverly choosing this moment of vulnerability, let the angels come forward and bring the cries to the guardian of the heavenly portal. Then the Other Side will not be able to speak against me. So may my prayer come before You, for You have commanded us to be fruitful and multiply, and to raise our children in the ways of Torah and mitzvot, to stand before you and serve you and to bless Your holy name. Do not allow the Other Side any opportunities to argue against me or against the child within me. Remember me for good. Do not forget Your maidservant. Give your devoted one a holy, healthy child. The Lord of Hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah. Lord of Hosts, happy is the one who trusts in You. Help us, Lord. Answer us, O king, when we call. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to You, my Rock and my Redeemer.

Manuscript C:

Instructions: Quando li comincia le doglie del parto dira
When the pains of labor begin she says:

אנא יי צבאות אלהי ישראל הנה נא אחזוני חבלי יולדה וכאיל תערונו על אפיקי מים
כן נפשי תערונו אליך אלהים שתפתח רלתי בשני והוצאת תולד ממעי בעת הברכה
וישועה וזכני שיהיה תולד בן קיימא ותן לי ולבעלי כח לנרלהו ליראתך ויחרו
כלנו נקדש את שמך הקדוש הלמד תורתך לשמח עשה למען שמך עשה למען ימנך
עשה למען תורתך עשה למען קדושתך יהיו לרצון אמרי פי והניון לבי לפניך
יי צורי ונואלי.

Lord of Hosts, God of Israel, behold, birth pains have taken hold of me. Like a deer yearns for water, so does my soul cry for You, God, that You will open my womb and bring out the child in me at a time of blessing and salvation. Make me worthy that the child will not die at birth and give to me and my husband the strength to raise him to fear You. Together we will all sanctify Your holy name in their [my sons] study of Your Torah for its own sake. Do this for the sake of Your name, do this for the sake of Your hand, do this for the sake of Your Torah, do this for the sake of Your holiness. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to You, God, my Rock and my Redeemer.

Manuscript K:

Instructions: E quando viene le doglie de partorire dira la seguente
תפלה.

And when the labor pains come she says the following prayer:

אנא יי צבאות ארי ישראל ראה תראה בעני אמתך וזכרתי ולא תשכח את אמתך ונתת
לאמתך זרע אנשים חכמים נבונים וירועים הנה נא אחוזני חבלי יולדה וכאיל תערוג
על אפיקי מים ובשעה שהיא כורעת לילר ונהפכו עליה צידיה עורגת לך בקרניה
וצועקת בקול מר ונאנחת ומבקשת רחמים מלפני כסא כבודך ואתה תשמע השמים ופותח
את רחמיה בתסור וברחמים כן נפשי נערוג אליך אלדים שתפתח רלתי בפני ותוציא תולד
אשר בקרבי בשעה הראויה להוליד בעת ברכה וישועה בעת מחילה וסליחה וכפרה על
כל עונותי ופשעי וחטאתי שעויתי ושפשעתי ושחטאתי לפניך מיום היוותי על האדמה
ועד היום הזה ותן חלקי עם הצדקניות שלא היו בפתקה של חוה וזכני שיהיה תולד
בן קיימא ואם חס ושלום נזרקה בו נשמה מסטרא דטקבא מסטרא דמוחא חבוא נא
תפלתי לפניך יי אלדי בעת ובעונה הזאת ותן בו נשמה קדושה מסטרא דרכורא מסטרא
דחיי ואף כי ירעתי גם אני כי עונותי ובו מלמנות וחטאתי עצמו מספר ולא יאות
לי לסדר רברים כאלו לפני כסא כבודך העזתי פני ככלב שמתי פני כחלמיש
ואדע כי לא אבוש ובטחתי ברוב רחמיך כי יי חנון ורחום אתה:

Lord of Hosts, God of Israel, please attend to the pain of Your maidservant for you have remembered me. You have not forget Your maidservant in that you have given me the seed of wise, discerning and knowledgable men. Now behold, birth pangs have taken hold of me. Like a deer yearns for flowing water, and in this hour, in which she writhes in the pain of childbirth and she is seized with birth pangs she reaches for you with her antlers. Bitterly, she calls out and she moans and she pleads for mercy before the throne of glory. And You hear in the heavens and You open her womb in kindness and mercy. So does my soul cry for you, God, that You will open my womb and remove the child in me at a fitting time, a time of blessing and salvation at a time of forgiveness and atonement for all of my sins and transgression, my sins and my transgressions that I have committed before You from the time I was born and until today. Give me a portion with the righteous women who are not included in the judgement of Eve. Make me worthy that the child not die in birth. And if, God forbid, a soul be cast into him from the feminine side, let my prayer arise before You, O Adonai My God at this time and now, so tht You give him a holy soul from the masculine side. Although I know that my sin is too great to measure and my transgressions are too numerous to count and it is not fitting for me to arrange these things before Your holy throne I dare like a dog to harden my heart knowing that I will not be embarrassed for I trust in Your great mercy for You are the God of kindness and mercy.

K continues with:

אנא יי אלדי ואלדי אבותי בעל הסליחות והרחמים תפול נא תחנוני לפניך כאשר נתת
חיים טובים ליצחק אבינו עליו השלום וליונה ולחבקק נביאיך עליהם השלום כן

תתן חיים ארוכים לולד הזה אשר במעי וחתן בבעלי ובי כח לנרלתו יחר עם יתר בנינו
לעבודתך המהורה ויחריו כלנו נקדש את שמך הנרול הנבור והנורא בלמרם תורתך
לשמה ובהדריכם בנתיב מצותיך עשה למען שמך עשה למען ימנך עשה למען תורתך
עשה למען קרושתך יהיו לרצון אמרי פי והגיון לבי לפניך יי צורי ונאלי.

Lord of Hosts, our God and God of our ancestors, Master of forgiveness and Mercy let my supplication fall before You. As You gave a good life to Isaac, our father, may he rest in peace, and to Jonah and to Habakuk Your prophets, may they rest in peace, thus give long life to this child that is in me and give to my husband and me strength to raise him together with our other children to serve You in purity and together, all of us will sanctify Your great, glorious and awesome name, in that they [my sons] will study Torah for its own sake. Lead them in the path of your commandments. Do this for the sake of Your name, do it for the sake of Your hand, do it for the sake of Your Torah, do it for the sake of Your holiness. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable, to You, God, my Rock and my Redeemer.

Manuscript Q:

Instructions: Illegible.

אנא יי צבאות ראה תראה בעני אמתך וזכרתי ולא תשכח את אמתך ונתת לאמתך
זרע אנשים ואלקי ישראל יתן את שאלתי וכאיל תערונו על אפיקי [מים] בשעה
שהיא מרה ומבקשת רחמך כי בדרך מפתח של חיה על כן אתה יי הקדש קולי
לצעקתי אשר אני צועקת בלב שלם ובנפש חפצה ואהבה רבה לפני המלאכים
מלאכי רחמים הממונים על המשבר מתברא ואתתא הנקראים יתרות לארבע סטרי
רעלמא רנטלין לאיטון קלין רנשין בעייה היכלא וכר אתא סטרא אחרא לקטרגא
בתתא שעתא רהיא שעתא רסכנתא חס ושלום קיימין אלין קלין לממונא רעל פתקא
רחוה ולא יכיל ההיא סטרא אחרא לקטרגא כן תפילתי ליי חי להקדים להתוא קלא
בקול יי בתור והרר לבא לפני מי שאמר והיה העולם אשר צוה עלינו לפרות ולרבות
לילד ולנרל בנים לתורה ולמצות ולמעשים טובים לעבודתו יתברא ויי יניח
לכנוס קלא רסטרא אחרא לקטרגא חס ושלום עלי ועל פרי בטני ותזכור אמתך
בזכרון טוב ונתת לאמתך זרע אנשים זרע כשר וישר יהיו לרצון אמרי פי ונ'.

Lord of Hosts, please attend to the pain of Your maidservant. Remember me, do not forget Your humble servant. Give Your devoted one a child. God of Israel, grant me my desire. Like a deer years for flowing [water] in the time that is bitter she pleads for Your mercy for in Your hand is the key of life. You, O God, pay heed now to my cry which I shout out with a full heart, with a desirous soul and with complete devotion before the angels, the angels of mercy who are appointed to tend to the labor. [There follows the technical delineation of these angles in terms of the Seferatic realm whence they spring and a description of the adversarial relationship between the Sitra Achra, that is the accusing "Other Side" and the defending voice of the angels who protect mother and child.] Remember Your handmaid for good. And give to Your maidservant a proper and fitting male child. May the words of my mouth....

7. Prayer to be said at the beginning of delivery

The theme of this prayer is mercy. As she begins to deliver her child she pleads with God for mercy. The verse from Genesis (3:16) which decrees Eve's punishment is cited. Eve's punishment is the punishment of all women and yet, the prayer reminds God of God's mercy. She adds herself to all the righteous women whom God has had mercy upon in the past. The word mercy רחם appears no less than seven times in the first 8 lines and the words חן and חסד (kindness) also appear several times. The addition in manuscript I only further reinforces this theme, where the word רחם appears 7 times in only three and a half lines. It is also noteworthy that the root רחם also means womb.

In lines 12 and 13 we are brought back to the court room scene in the last prayer as she pleads with God to not listen to the Other Side. Rather, she argues that God should listen to the righteous angels who will protect her and all of Israel. In line 18 we are also brought the image of God's key unlocking her womb again.

At this point she asks that the child be protected, "Whatever it might be, male or female." It is interesting that it is not until this point, as she is actually delivering that she recognizes that the baby might be a girl. Despite the fact that tradition holds that the gender of the fetus was determined in the first 40 days it is almost as if she does not truly believe that the gender is fully determined until the moment of birth. She refers to the baby as if it is a boy, in every prayer, until that moment.

There is a beautiful image in lines 22-23 where she asks God to place her tears in God's special pouch, within God's treasure house. In this image her tears are of value to God, something which God will keep and treasure. She then ties her tears to the tears

of Hannah. It was because of the sincerity and intensity of Hannah's prayers (and her tears) that God heard her and ended her barrenness. Again she reminds God to give her this child for God's own sake, to serve God as Hannah's son served God.

7. Prayer to be said at the beginning of delivery

Manuscripts: A,H,I,J,P,Q,R,T

1 יי אלהי הצבאות ישב הכרבים שפט צרק באמונה אתה הוכחת ויסרת אתנו

2 מבריא את עולם שאנו נשים נלר את בנינו בצער כמו שכתוב בתורתך*

3 "בעצב תלרי בנים" והכל ברשותך ובירך הכל את אשר תחון יוחן

4 ואת אשר תרחם ירחם באין מותה ומי יאמר לך מה תעשה

5 יי למען רחמיך הרבים רחם עלי למען זכות כל הצדיקים

6 ובזכות כל הנשים הצרקניות שאתה מרחם עליהן ושמעת והאזנת לקול

7 צעקתן בעת שוען אליך שתפתח את רחמן ופתחת אותן בחסד וברחמים

8 וילדו בחסד וצירי רלתי בטנן נפתחו לאוזן הראויה לה

1 ישב הכרבים] H om. +H,R,Q שופטי צרק] T כצרק באמונה] H וישב הכרובים

2 עולם] H,R,Q om. +A,H,Q,R עולם] H,R,Q ואדם

3 ברשותך] J: באין מותה ומי יאמר לך מה תעשה כי בירך הכל את אשר תחון יוחם
ואת אשר תרחם ירחם

6 ובזכות כל הנשים הצרקניות] H om.

8 בחסד] H + וברחמים וילדו בחסד נפתחו] J om. לאוזן הראויה לה] A,I om.

Perhaps should read אוזן

Lord, God of Hosts who sits amid the cherubs and who judges the righteous with integrity, You have tried us and punished us since the creation of the world, stipulating that we women shall give birth to our children in pain, as it is written in Your Torah, "In pain shall you bear children" (Genesis 3:16). But everything is within Your power, everything within Your hands. Those to whom you show kindness are relieved. Those to whom you are compassionate are comforted. Who will tell you what to do, God? For the sake of your abundant kindness, have mercy upon me. For the sake of all the righteous men and all the righteous women upon whom you have showered Your mercy,

be gracious unto me. You heard the petition of women in labor and heeded their cry when they called upon you to open their wombs. And You opened them, in kindness and in mercy, and they bore children, as the walls of their wombs opened in a way that is fitting for her.

*manuscript I:

י' למען רחמיך הרבים רחם עלי כמו שאמרת למשה עבדך "ורחמתי את אשר אתון ורחמתי את אשר ארחם" ואין מוזה בדרך ומי יאמר לך מה תעשה וכשם שרחמתי לנשים הצדקניות ושמעת והאזנת לקולן בעת שועתן אליך ופתחת את רחמם בחסד וברחמים כן עשה עמי אות לטובה.

For the sake of Your great mercy, have mercy on me, as You said to Moses, Your servant: "And the grace that I grant and the compassion that I show". (Exodus 33:19) and none can stand in Your way. Who will tell You what to do God? Just as you had mercy on the righteous women and You heard and paid attention to their voices when they cry out to You and you opened their wombs in kindness and mercy, so make me a sign for good.

- 9 יי אלהינו אתה היית קדם בריאת עולם ואתה נשאת את העולם ערי ער.
 10 בחסדך הגדול עוני הסר ממני ואל תבא במשפט את אמתך
 11 ואל תאזין לקול המלאכים המקטרגים לפניך
 12 סתום לפניהם כל חתירה במעון קרשך שלא העלה שועתם לפניך ואל תתן
 13 מקום לעלות קטנוריא
 14 כנגרי לפני כסא כבודך ולמלאכי צדק ומליצי יושר אשר הם מרברים
 15 מלמרים ומליצים סגנוריא וזכות על כל עמך בית ישראל ועלי אליהם תטה
 16 אזנך ותשמע ותקבל את רבניהם וסגנוריא שלהם וענה את עתירתם
 17 ועשה מיד בקשתם והעמידם תמיד לפניך להיות לטו למליצי יושר צדק וזכות

- 9 אלהינו om. A,P[עולם] H[om. ער] +I בכח
 10 עוני הסר] A[הסר עוני I הסר ממני עוני
 11 לקול המלאכים] I[om.
 12 סתום...קטנוריא] om. A,H[שלא העלה שועתם] om. I,T[לפניך] om. I,J,
 13 קטנוריא] +J,T[לפניך
 14 +H ואל תתן מקום לעלות קטנוריא לפני כסא כבודך] om. J,T[מרברים
 15 מלמרים] +H[מרברים כל] om. A,J,T[בית] om. I[
 16 ותשמע] om. P[את] om. A,J,T[וסגנוריא שלהם] om. I,P[וענה...עתירתם] om. P[
 17 לטו] om. I[יושר] om. I[צדק] om. A,I[

Lord, our God, You were before the creation of the world. You sustained the world until now. In Your abundant goodness, remove my suffering You can remove from me. Do not approach Your maidservant in judgment. Do not listen to the voices of the adversarial angels before You. Close up the mouths of all who break into Your holy dwelling so that their outcry will not rise up before You. give them no place before Your throne to raise up their accusations against me. Rather heed the voices of the righteous angles and those who speak the truth, who will speak for and defend your people Israel and me. To them, listen; receive their words and their advocacy. Answer their pleas; do their bidding promptly. Keep them forever before You to serve as our advocates of truth, righteousness and merit.

- 18 וקח את המפתח של הריון ביד ימינך ופתח הריוני בלי עצב וצער בלי
 19 נזק ובלי חסרון וחלש מהולר או הילדה שיצא ממעי את היצר הרע וחזק
 20 בו את היצר הטוב ושמור אותי ואת הולד יהיה מה שיהיה אם זכר או
 21 נקבה מכל רוחות רעות ומכל מרעין בישין ואל ישלוט בנו עין הרע
 22 יי אלהי הצבאות תשמע ותאזין לקול שועתי ושימה רמעתי בנארך
 23 באוצרותך ותקבלני כמו שקבלת התפלה והרמעה של חנה שהשרת רוח קרשך
 24 על עלי הכהן ובשרת אותה על ירו.
 25 שכך אמר לה "לכי לשלום ואלהי ישראל יתן את שלתך אשר שאלת מעמו"
 26 כי אתה למען רחמיך מוכן לקבל תפלת הקוראים אליך בכל לבכם
 27 יהיו לרצון אמרי פי והניון לבי לפניך יי צורי ונואלי.

- 18 ביר[P] om. ימינך ופתח[J] om. ופתח[I,P,R,Q] + לי הריוני[J,Q] om.
 וצער[Q] + את הריוני בלי[Q] om.
 19 נזק[Q] om. ובלי[H] om. שיצא[A] אשר ממעי[A,H] במאי
 20 הולד[I] + הזה יהיה...ראות[21] om. I[אין] J אם
 21 ואל[I,Q] ושלא
 22 ותאזין[I] והסכת
 23 באוצרותך[I,J,T] om. כמו[I] כשם שהשרת[A] + נבואה רוח פרשך[A] om.
 25 שכך[I] וכה[לה] om. I
 26 +Q ואלהינו ואלהי ישראל יתן את שלתך אשר שאלת מעמו. I omits line 26.
 רחמיך[Q] + כי אתה אליך[J] om.

Take the key of pregnancy in Your right hand and unlock my womb without pain or suffering, without harm or deformity. Weaken the grip of the Evil Impulse upon the son or daughter who is within me, and strengthen the impulse for good. Protect me and my child, whatever it might be, male or female, from all evil spirits, from all dread disease, and may the Evil Eye have no dominion over us. God, Lord of Hosts, listen and heed my cries of need. Place my tears within Your special pouch, within Your treasure house. Accept me the way You accept the prayers and tears of Hannah, for whom You had the holy spirit descend on Eli the priest, by whome You brought the good news to her. For this is what he said to her, "Go in peace. The God of Israel will give you that which you asked of Him. (Samuel I. 1:17). For You, God, for Your own sake, are

prepared to welcome the prayer of those who call to You, with all their heart. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to You, Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.¹⁸

¹⁸Cardin, pp. 104-106. (translation adapted).

8. Prayer for after safely giving birth.

This short and simple prayer thanks God for saving the mother from all the dangers of childbirth. Again, God's compassion is emphasized, perhaps playing on the root רחם, mercy or womb. This prayer asks God to help all Jewish women in labor and to help again next time this woman, in particular, gives birth. It is amazing to think that having just been through such an experience, she can actually talk about doing it again!

In the instructions, manuscript C adds a ritual handwashing to this prayer. In the instructions to S, she is told to thank God for a son or a daughter.

8. Prayer for after safely giving birth.

Manuscripts: A, C, D, S

- 1 יהי רצון מלפניך יי אלהינו ואלהי אבותינו מלך רחמן ומרחם כשם שהצלתני
- 2 מצרה הנרולה הזאת ומן הסכנה העצומה זאת כך יכמרו רחמך להציל מן
- 3 הסכנה זאת לכל בנות אברהם יצחק ויעקב זרע אהובך וכשם שהצלתני עתה
- 4 כך עשה עמי אות לשובה בכל פעם שאלר*
- 5 יהיו לרצון אמרי פי והגיון לבי לפניך יי צורי ונאלי.

- 1 אלהינו ואלהי A[אלקי ומרחם C[om. כשם A[שכשם שהצלתני D[שהצלתני
- 2 מצרה C[om. A[מהצרה הנרולה הזאת C[om. ומן C[מן
- 3 זאת C[זו D[הזאת S[om. כך C[כן מן C[מן
- 3 הסכנה זאת C[om. זאת S[זו אברהם יצחק C[om. ויעקב C[ישראל זרע D[om.
- 4 כך C[+ תצילני עשה...לשובה C[om.

* D and S end here.

* C+: כי אתה הוא מלך פורה ומציל מכל צרה וצוקה אמן
כן יהי רצון

May it be Your will, Lord my God and God of my ancestors, King of mercy, who acts with grace and compassion, that just as You saved me from the profound strains of childbirth and from its awesome dangers, so may Your compassion be stirred to save all women from such dangers, all daughters of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Your beloved seed. And just as You have saved me this time, so may You show me the same sign of your favor each time I give birth. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to You, my Rock and my Redeemer.¹⁹

*C For You are the King who redeems and saves from all sorrow and distress. Amen. May this be Your will.

¹⁹Cardin, p. 108 (translation adapted).

9. Prayer for nursing for the first time.

This is a beautiful prayer which expresses a woman's fears for her newborn child. Her first fear is that she will not produce milk, or enough milk to satisfy her hungry child. This fear has been expressed throughout pregnancy and childbirth prayers. Two new fears that she adds in this prayer are that she will sleep too heavily and not hear him cry during the night, and that she might smother him when he is sleeping next to her. This last, horrible fear may have been something which actually happened or it may have been an explanation if a child simply died during the night (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, etc.)²⁰

9. Prayer for nursing for the first time.

Manuscripts: A, D, S

- 1 יהי רצון מלפניך יי אלהינו ואלהי אבותינו שתזמין מזון עברך החיטק הזה ברבוי
- 2 חלב די מחסורו אשר יחסר לו ושים בלבבי העת שצריך להניק כרי לתת לו
- 3 והקל מעלי השנה ובעת שיבכה פתח אזני כרי לשמעו מיד והצילני שלא תפול
- 4 ידי עליו בעת השנה וימות חס ושלום.*
- 5 יהיו לרצון אמרי פי והניון לבי לפניך יי צורי ונאלי

- 1 מלפניך... אבותי] om. S אלהינו ואלהי A אלקינו ואלקי עברך] om. D החיטק S תטק
 - 2 די S ורי שצריך] om. D להניק A להניקו + D אח בני כרי] om. D
 - 3 מעלי השנה S השינה מעיני ובעת] D, S שבעת פתח] S יפתח והצילני S והצילו תפול] D אפיל
- S ends here. D adds Psalm 128 here. *

²⁰Cardin, p. 110.

May it be Your will, Lord my God and God of my ancestors, that You provide nourishment for Your humble creation, this tiny child, plenty of milk, as much as he needs. Give me the disposition and inclination at the time when he needs nursing to give him as much as he needs. Cause me to sleep lightly so that the moment he cries I will hear him immediately. Spare me from smothering my child while I sleep, God forbid. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, my Rock and my Redeemer.²¹

²¹Cardin, p. 110 (translation adapted).

CONCLUSION

In this concluding chapter, I would like to compare the Italian women's spirituality as seen through the prayer books with women's spirituality in two other communities. The first is the community of elderly Middle Eastern women living in Jerusalem as studied by Susan Starr Sered in her book, Women as Ritual Experts. The second is Eastern European communities who wrote the tkhines as described in the work of Chava Weissler in several articles (see bibliography). While each community is unique in some ways, the three communities share many similarities in their spirituality.

Before I begin, however, I would like to note that it is my belief that these women developed a different spirituality from the men not because of something inherent in women, but rather, because they were largely segregated and excluded from the male Jewish experience. As both Susan Starr Sered and Chava Weissler note, women's spiritual lives were not in conflict or totally different from men's. Rather, they were a merging of their experiences of men's Judaism and their own experiences as Jewish women. Weissler says,

On the one hand, then, the tkhine literature exhibits both the themes of general Jewish life and the more particular interests of women. On the other hand, however, the fact that women were situated in certain social roles influenced all of their religious life, even those observances shared with men. The two worlds were forged into one,

rooted in women's social reality.¹

Susan Starr Sered, in her book, Women as Ritual Experts describes the spiritual lives of elderly Jewish women from Middle Eastern areas such as Kurdistan, Yemen and Turkey. These women have rich spiritual lives despite their exclusion from the normative male Jewish community. It is largely because they are religiously segregated from the men that they are forced to create their own rituals and their own variations on the male rituals. These women form their own community in which particular rituals, theology and practices become normative.

Traditional Middle Eastern Jewish women believe that women and men have very different spiritual concerns because they have very different lifestyles, priorities and inclinations. Within what the women themselves consider to be the female domain, women have a great deal of power and autonomy.... First it is clear that even within male-dominated Jewish culture, women can be ritual experts. And second, despite the fact that normative literate Judaism is male-oriented, women have developed ways for religion to sacralize female experience. In these respects, the women of this study are not atypical of the generations upon generations of Jewish (and non-Jewish) women who have lived their lives in traditional, sexually segregated societies.²

In the community which Sered describes, the women become experts in kashrut (it is their role to kasher the house and provide all ritual meals). They consider themselves the

¹Chava Weissler, "The Traditional Piety of Ashkenazic Women" in Jewish Spirituality, Vol. 2, Ed. Arthur Green, (New York: Crossroad, 1987), p. 252.

²Susan Starr Sered, Women as Ritual Experts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 4.

protectors of all generations, past, present and future. They pray to God to take care of their dead ancestors, their children and their unborn grandchildren. They regularly visit holy sites asking for God's intervention on behalf of those they love. They kiss holy objects, or they kiss their hands and then point their palms upwards (towards God). Despite their own poverty, they give tzeddakah regularly. And they spend many hours in the holy work of cleaning their homes and cooking elaborate holiday meals. Work which we might consider everyday takes on a holy meaning and purpose for them. Sered says,

Perhaps the most significant idea to grow out of this study is what I call the domestication of religion....I define domestication as a process in which people who process their allegiance to a wider religious tradition personalize the rituals, institutions, symbols, and theology of that wider system in order to safeguard the health, happiness and security of particular people with whom they are linked in relationships of caring and interdependence.³

The domestication of religion allows these women to personalize their spiritual lives, to take what is mundane and make it holy. This spirituality is not only marked by the personalization of ritual but also by the personalization of prayer. These women pray for God to protect the specific people with whom they are in intimate relationships: their dead relatives, their children and their unborn and yet to be conceived grandchildren.

³Sered, p. 10.

As stated above, this women's expression of Judaism does not operate in a vacuum, ignorant of what men are doing. On the contrary, the women know more about men's practice than the men know about theirs (the women's). The women's practice does not challenge or oppose the men's. Rather, it reshapes elements of the men's model to reflect the women's experience.

When the women discuss complex concepts such as faith, the nature of God, and the relationship between God and humans they use the language of female experience. However, neither I nor the women claim that their beliefs are uniquely feminine. The women's religion is not independent of normative Judaism; the little tradition does not exist in a vacuum; and the women's beliefs do not radically differ from those of their fathers, husbands and brothers. Rather, the Day Center women, seeing themselves as good and pious Jews, subtly alter, elaborate, reinterpret, reshape, and domesticate selected aspects of Jewish belief and law into a form that is meaningful to and consistent with their perceptions, roles, identities, needs, and experiences as old, Middle Eastern women.⁴

The women express their personal needs and wishes to God in their supplications. The women give tzeddakah and make pilgrimages to holy sites and in return, they pray, God will protect their relatives from harm and do miracles for them. Further, this spirituality allows the women to make what is ordinarily mundane, such as cooking, into a task with a holy purpose. God is present in every moment and act in their lives.

Despite women's access to this spirituality, it cannot be stressed enough that this is still an oppressive and sexist

⁴Ibid., pp. 49 - 50.

system.

Sexual segregation and communal religious activity do not cancel out women's lack of access to formal positions of authority, their status as "other", or their limited freedom within the family; women's spiritual expertise rarely (if ever) leads to social power or economic rewards. Sexual segregation and communal religious activity do, however, allow some women some opportunities to sacralize their own concerns.⁵

The tkhines literature of late 17th, 18th and early 19th century Europe also gives us a picture of women's spirituality and how it differs from men's. Some of the tkhines were written by men and others by women. They seem at times to be written for a female audience and at others for an audience of women and uneducated men. The tkhines are written for a variety of liturgical occasions. Some are connected with the liturgy of the daily, Shabbat or holiday synagogue service, augmenting the prayers that the men say. Some are to be said while performing the three "women's mitzvot," the taking of hallah, lighting candles and observing nidah. And some are not connected to rituals at all, like tkhines for pregnancy and childbirth, families and children, recovery from illness and visiting the cemetery.⁶ The tkhines indicate that women participated, to some degree, in the public, synagogue life of the men. However, there is another spiritual dimension expressed through the tkhines, a dimension that reflects their

⁵Ibid., p. 17.

⁶Chava Weissler, "The Traditional Piety of Ashkenazic Women," in Jewish Spirituality, Vol.2, ed. Arthur Green (New York: Crossroad, 1987), p. 248.

experience in the private, domestic realm.

The siddur, the Hebrew prayer book, is organized by clock and calendar. Men prayed three times a day, reciting a fixed liturgy, which was expanded on Sabbaths and holidays...In addition, prayer was essentially a communal event. Men prayed, preferably, with a congregation, and most prayers of the siddur are phrased in the plural...Yet, to the extent that they also recited tkhines, they defined for themselves an alternative rhythm as well. An inventory of the occasions for which tkhines exist shows us a world organized very differently from that of the siddur, a world structured by the private events of the woman's domestic life as much as by the communal events of the Jewish calendar.⁷

Not only did the tkhines allow women to hallow their private, biological, experiences like childbirth, but they also hallowed the mundane, domestic tasks in their lives, like baking hallah, and preparing for Shabbat.⁸

The tkhines reflect the personal piety of women. The majority of these prayers were voluntary, to be said when the women wished and they were to be said in a private setting like the home, rather than in the synagogue, Beit Midrash, or Beit Din where the men prayed. They were also personalized. They were phrased in the singular and often room was left for the woman to insert her own name into the supplication.⁹ The distinctive character of these prayers becomes clear when one

⁷Ibid., p. 247.

⁸Ibid., p. 249.

⁹Chava Weissler, "The Religion of Traditional Ashkenazic Women: Some Methodological Issues," AJS Review, Spring, 1987, p. 88.

compares the language of the Amidah to a popular tkhine. The prayer which asks God to listen in the Amidah says:

Hear our voice, Lord our God, spare us and have pity on us, accept our prayer in mercy and favor, for You are God who hears prayers and supplications; from Your presence, our King, dismiss us not empty-handed, for You hear in mercy the prayer of Your people Israel. Blessed are You, O Lord, who hears prayer.

Now compare this to the language of a tkhine for a woman to raise her children well.

O great almighty God, who besides You knows the worry of bringing up children which the poor mother must endure. How many illnesses and dangers the poor children are subjected to! And how the poor mother must drain the cup of sorrow and trouble! Merciful Father, hear the prayer of Your handmaid, who comes to pour out her heavy heart before You."¹⁰

This prayer not only addresses the personal concerns and experiences of women but it does it in vivid, heart-felt language. The traditional siddur contains a balance between prayers which praise God, request of God and thank God (praise, petition and thanks.) However, the tkhines, as well as the prayers of the women in Sered's study are predominantly supplication. These women call on God to protect their families. While at times they pray for the community, in general their prayers are very personal, and reflect their deepest fears and dreams for those they love.

¹⁰Chava Weissler, "Voices of the Heart: Women's Devotional Prayers," in The Jewish Almanac, eds. Richard Siegel and Carl Rheins, (New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1980), p. 541.

Finally, if we now compare the Italian women's prayer books studied in this thesis to the tkhines and the rituals of the Middle Eastern women we can see several parallels. Like the other two genres, the Italian women's rituals revolve around life-cycle events and women's experiences rather than the Jewish calendar. While calendar events, such as Shabbat do prompt women's ritual response, the women experience these rituals personally, not simply as general calendrical celebrations. In the Italian prayer books, for example, women light Shabbat candles, but they also add personal supplications for the health and well-being of their families. In the case of all three communities the women's ritual lives are thus event-bound more than they are time-bound.

We also see in all three communities that women's ritual lives are not necessarily synagogue-based. While the women in Sered's study do attend the synagogue it is the elderly women who no longer need to care for children who attend on Shabbat. There is no evidence that the women attend synagogue during the week. Further, the women who do attend synagogue on Shabbat cannot read and do not follow the service other than to blow kisses at God and at the Torah at appropriate times. They are segregated from and do not understand or participate in the men's synagogue ritual. Instead, the women in Sered's study base their spirituality in their homes and at holy sites. They make pilgrimages to offer prayers on behalf of their loved ones of all generations (from dead ancestors to

those yet to be conceived or born.) But, largely, the focus of their spirituality is in the home - what Sered refers to as the "domestication" of religious life. What we might consider mundane, cleaning the house for Shabbat, preparing a holiday meal take on holy significance for these women.

In the case of the Eastern European women we have also seen that the focus of their rituals are in the home or private realm. As mentioned above, these women, too, probably did attend synagogue to some extent but they too, were excluded from the male synagogue ritual. Some may have been able to read prayers and follow along but there is no indication that they attended synagogue regularly. Instead, the tkhines were voluntary prayers which focused around women's experiences such as lighting Shabbat candles and bearing children, which with the exception perhaps of nidah, largely took place in the home. The tkhines thus sanctified the mundane, or domesticated religion if you will.

We have seen quite clearly how the Italian prayer books fit in with this pattern. There is no indication that the prayers in these books were said in the synagogue, in a women's minyan or in the presence of any other women for that matter. Except for the prayers that would have been said at the mikvah, all of the prayers would have been said in the home, privately.

There are many indications that Italian women prayed daily. Several of the books contain prayers to be added to

the Amidah. Some books include prayers to be said in the morning, afternoon and evening indicating that women may have even prayed three times a day. However, there is no reason to believe that this prayer took place in a synagogue or in the presence of other women. Rather, in all likelihood women prayed at home, privately.

As in the other two communities the Italian women's prayers also make their activities at home holy. The prayers place heavy emphasis on the importance of bearing sons and raising them to be Torah scholars. The role of mother is a holy task. From the supplications over baking hallah to the incantations for curing worms, the spiritual center of an Italian woman's life is the home and her family. Thus, we can see in all three communities, women's spirituality is private, rather than communal, (like the men's) and it is based in the home - the focus of a woman's experiences before emancipation.

The third similarity is in the issue of the types of prayers these women offer. The women in Sered's study pray to various dead ancestors, matriarchs and of course, God to protect and help their family members. While the women praise and thank God at times, their primary stance is supplicatory. They bargain by looking for various types of supplicant leverage - ways of convincing God to grant their requests. Further, the requests that these women make are for their family members of all generations and rarely for the community at large. The women feel responsible for protecting their

dead relatives as well as the unborn. They do not feel responsible for protecting the Jewish community as a whole or even their neighbors. The exception to this is that the Middle Eastern women are enamored of the State of Israel, which they see as a miracle and they do pray for the State's and the soldiers continued safety and well-being.

The tkhines are also, for the most part, supplications and very personal in nature. The women pray for the well-being of their families. They do praise God and thank God but their focus is to convince God to grant their requests. Like the Eastern European women who prayed the tkhines, the Italian women pray almost exclusively for their families. In these prayers, like the tkhines, the women rarely pray for the return to Zion, or the peace of Israel, or the other more communal themes of the Shemoneh Esrei. These women pray for the safety of their families; that their sons be Torah scholars, never in want; that their husbands earn enough to provide for their families; that their breasts yield ample milk to feed their new babies and more.

Occasionally, they ask God to protect all of Israel, but in many cases these lines seem almost like they are thrown in incidentally. As we have seen in the pregnancy and birth prayers the focus of the Italian prayers is petition. The women praise God and after various stages of pregnancy thank God, but the goal of their prayers is to convince God, for a variety of different reasons, that God should grant their

requests.

For all three groups of women, everything is in the hands of God, a God who can be convinced to take care of their families and grant their personal pleas. The women clearly believe that God hears their individual prayers and can be bargained with. Because of their personal and petitionary nature, these prayers give us unique insights into what the women most value, desire and fear. It would be very interesting to compare the petitionary language used by the three communities of women and see if they use the same techniques to negotiate with God.

As models of spirituality for men and women today, these three communities have positives and negatives. First, one cannot ignore the sexism which exists in all three communities. While the Italian women probably experienced the highest level of education and freedom, they were still segregated from the men's Jewish world. Italian women prayed for sons instead of daughters and saw their husbands mainly as material providers. Besides the sexism and oppression of women in all three communities there is another problem. For some of us, the theology of these prayers may be somewhat problematic. It is clear that these women believed, as most traditional Jews did in divine intervention in the fullest sense. Everything was in God's hands. For those of us who have problems with this level of divine intervention, these prayers are problematic.

Despite these two significant drawbacks, the prayers offer many positives. The prayers are very personal and offer us a wonderful model of how personal prayer can be. The prayers sanctify the mundane and make women's experiences holy. Whatever we might consider the mundane experiences of our lives, our Italian, Middle Eastern and Eastern European mothers have taught us that even the most insignificant can be holy, for God is present in all the experiences, large and small of our lives. Chava Weissler explains,

Although the tehinnot are too limited a model for women today, addressing themselves to only part of women's lives, they are a way of approaching God that can reverberate for both men and women. The realm of feeling - of love between mother and child, friend and friend, wife and husband - can be offered up for blessing. Once Jewish women called on God to be present in their most intimate daily lives, and that is still the possibility of prayer.¹¹

Finally, and perhaps most importantly of all, the tkhines and the Italian prayer books reclaim women's events and make them Jewish. They teach us that it is not just the events of the calendar, or the events which men experience which are holy, but women's experiences, most notably childbirth which we can sanctify in a Jewish way. These books reclaim our mothers' voices and their experiences. Whether or not we find ourselves moved to pray their words, their prayers offer us insight into who they were and who we, as Jewish women and men, can be. I do not believe that this women's spirituality was the result of anything inherent in women, rather it was

¹¹Ibid., p.542.

the result of women's social situations. Despite the fact that this spirituality arises out of the oppression and segregation of women it offers us a wonderful model of personal piety.

It is clear from the number of Italian women's prayer books found in just the last year that many Italian women prayed these prayers. Whether or not they wrote them, the prayers must have been meaningful to them or they would not have been as popular as they were. Our Italian Jewish mothers lived in a different time than ours; we cannot apply our modern standards and sensibilities to their words. We can however, appreciate their prayers for their beauty and deep spirituality and the insight they give us into who our ancestors were. For Jewish women, this is no small matter.

Where We Go From Here

Obviously, this thesis is only a beginning. There is much work to be done, both on the Italian women's prayer books and in the issue of Jewish women's spirituality. Besides further examination of other manuscripts and close analysis of other sections of the prayer books there are other directions which need to be taken. It is important to study the Christian context in which these books were written. I began some preliminary work in this area but was not able to find enough material in the time allowed to draw any conclusions. What were Italian Catholic women doing before and after this

time? Did Italian Catholic women's spirituality have an effect on Italian Jewish women's spirituality? These are just a few of the questions which need to be explored.

The second major area which is beginning to be explored by Dr. Tikvah Freymer-Kensky at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College is the question of where the Italian women's prayers fit in the larger Jewish context. Are these prayers indigenous to Italy or can parts (or whole prayers) be found in other parts of Europe? This study may help us find some clues as to the origins of these prayers. The work that Dr. Freymer-Kensky has begun is very exciting and promises to be quite fruitful.

Finally, it will be an important task just to "get the word out" about the existence of these prayer books. Until Rabbi Nina Cardin published her book, Out of The Depths I Call to You, a translation of one of the manuscripts, most scholars did not know that these books even existed. Jewish women's voices have been ignored for too long. It is my sincere prayer that the work I have done, and will continue to do, will help others to be as enriched by these treasures of our mothers as I have been.

Appendix I

Description of Books and Their Contents

Manuscript A (JTS 4371): Written in 1786 for Yehudit Kutscher Coen, Baila Yudita bat Rachel, by her husband Giuseppe Coen. 112 pages, 7 1/8" X 4 7/8"

Prayers for:

1. taking Hallah
2. lighting Candles
3. going to the mikvah
4. before sexual relations with husband
5. when Tachanun is said/when it is not
6. pregnancy, labor and childbirth
7. before son's circumcision
8. when she returns to synagogue after childbirth
9. midwife

Manuscript B (JTS 4322): Written in 1806 for Tzirli Treiste by Yitzhak Hayim bar M'hal'lel. 20 pages.

Prayers for:

1. pregnancy (no labor prayers)
2. taking hallah
3. going to mikvah
4. lighting candles

Manuscript C (JTS 4342): 22 pages.

Prayers for:

1. lighting candles
2. taking hallah
3. going to the mikvah
4. pregnancy and labor
5. before son's circumcision

Manuscript D (JTS 4375): Written for Rachel bat Bienvenuta, 24 pages, instructions in Hebrew with no nikud.

Prayers for:

1. lighting candles
2. pregnancy (no labor)
3. nursing for first time
4. before son's circumcision

Manuscript F (JTS 4433b): 30 pages, instructions in Hebrew with no nikud. Books ends with 7th month of pregnancy, perhaps part was lost.

Prayers for:

1. lighting candles
2. going to the mikvah
3. pregnancy (until 7th month, no labor)

Manuscript G (HUC 262): 27 pages, 13.5 X 10 cm.

Prayers for:

1. saying at night
2. saying in the morning
3. saying at midday
4. saying at mincha
5. lighting candles
6. going to mikvah
7. pregnancy (no labor)
8. taking hallah

Manuscript H (HUC 264): 30 pages, 10.5 X 7.5 cm.

Prayers for:

1. going to the mikvah
2. pregnancy
3. midwife
4. returning to synagogue after giving birth
5. verses to add to sh'moneh esray.

Manuscript I (HUC 290): From Modena, 41 pages.

Prayers for:

- (beginning illegible)
2. going to mikvah
 3. before sexual relations with husband
 4. taking hallah
 5. lighting candles
 6. pregnancy and childbirth
 7. returning to synagogue after childbirth

Manuscript J (HUC 307): 99 pages, 13.8 x 10.2 cm.

Prayers for:

1. general petition
2. going to mikvah
3. pregnancy and childbirth

4. returning to synagogue after childbirth
5. one's children
6. taking hallah
7. lighting candles

Manuscript K (HUC 350): 44 pages, 15.9 x 11.4 cm. Some instructions in Hebrew with no nikud.

Prayers for:

1. going to mikvah
2. pregnancy and childbirth
3. taking hallah
4. lighting candles

Manuscript M (HUC 351): 11 pages, 16.6 x 11.7 cm. The prayers have no nikud.

Prayers for:

1. taking hallah
2. lighting candles
3. going to the mikvah
4. pregnancy (no childbirth)

Manuscript N (HUC 352): For Beilah bat Rachel, 18 pages, 17 x 11.2 cm. *No instructions, and prayers themselves differ drastically from prayers in other books.

Prayers for:

1. taking hallah
2. before sexual relations with husband
3. pregnancy (1 prayer)

Manuscript P (JTS 4336) approx. 200 pages.

Prayers for:

1. Birkat gomel
2. lighting candles
3. going to the mikvah
4. before sexual relations with husband
5. pregnancy and labor
6. returning to synagogue after childbirth
7. midwife
8. before son's circumcision
9. saying during Mincha

Manuscript Q (HUC 248): 127 pages, 10 x 7.2 cm.

Prayers for:

1. going to mikvah
 2. pregnancy
 3. lighting candles
 4. marriage
 5. getting rid of pains
 6. remedies for ailments
- Section explaining b'rachot and when they are said.
7. saying during mincha

Manuscript R (HUC 243): Written in 1740 in Venice for Bathsheba the wife of Sh'lomo Ashkenazi by Nissim David Hacoen. 128 pages, 13.6 x 9.5 cm. Some instructions in Italian and some in Hebrew with no nikud.

Prayers for:

1. every day
2. going to the mikvah
3. pregnancy and labor
4. returning to synagogue after childbirth
5. one's children
6. lighting candles
7. t'filat haderech

Manuscript S (HUC 245): Written for Simcha bat Suli, 48 pages 12.4 x 8.3 cm.

Prayers for:

1. lighting candles
2. going to the mikvah
3. before sexual relations with husband
4. pregnancy and childbirth
5. before son's circumcision
6. nursing

Manuscript T (HUC 247): 178 pages, 10 x 7.6 cm.

Prayers for:

1. every day
2. going to mikvah
3. pregnancy and childbirth

Manuscript U (HUC 234): 170 pages, 11.4 x 8.4 cm. The prayers are in Hebrew with no nikud. The headings are Hebrew with no nikud.

Prayers for:

1. Birkat cohanim
2. about dreams and dreaming
3. one's children

4. pregnancy and childbirth
5. every day
6. lighting candles
7. taking challah
8. going to the mikvah

	JTS 4371 (A) (1786) For: Yehudit Kutscher Coen. 112 pp	JTS 4322 (B) (1806) For: Tzirli Treisti 20 pp.	JTS 4342 (C) First part of manuscript seems to be missing. 24 pp.
1. 1st 40 days of pregnancy.	Yes.	1 word missing (tamim)	No.
2. Entire pregnancy.	Yes.	2A shorter phrases/words differ.	No.
3. 7th month of pregnancy.	prayer-2 parts Psalm 20 Psalm 102:21 (said 3X) Ex. 11:8(3X)	No.	No.
4. 9th month of pregnancy.	Yes.	A few words/ p h r a s e s differ. 1 line omitted.	4a. Some sections differ.
5. Onset of labor.	Psalm 20 "Answer me" Prayer Ex. 11:8(3X) String of B i b l i c a l verses	*page torn out. No.	No.
6. Hour of childbirth.	Yes.	No.	6a. Some sentences differ. Ends differently.
7. Beginning of delivery.	Yes.	No.	No.
8. After safely giving birth.	Yes.	No.	Very similar, only a few words differ.
9. Nursing for 1st time.	Yes.	No.	No.

JTS 4375 (D)
For: Rachel bat
Beinvenuta
24 pp.

JTS 4433b (F)
Book ends at
#3. Rest lost?
30 pp.

HUC 262 (G)
27 pp.

HUC 264 (H)
30 pp.

1.	No.	1A completely different.	Very similar. A few words different.	Word for word but 2 phrases reversed.
2.	Mostly like 2 with a part of 2A inserted.	No.	Missing 1 word (tamim). Very similar.	Similar.
3.	3a prayer, insert for fast day, prayer. No psalms, etc.	prayer - very similar, Psalm 20, Book ends.	No.	Has only 1st part of prayer.
4.	No.	No.	Very similar, seems more complete.	Almost the same, like HUC 262.
5.	No.	No.	No.	Only Ex. 11:8 (said 1X). Appears after #7.
6.	No.	No.	No.	No.
7.	No.	No.	No.	Very similar, a few words/phrases added.
8.	Exactly same, only missing last line.	No.	No.	No.
9.	Very similar. Psalm added.	No.	No.	No.

HUC 290 (I)
Modena
41 pp.

HUC 307 (J)
99 pp.

HUC 350 (K)
44 pp.

HUC 351 (M)
11 pp.

1.	Very similar. Missing 1 word, (tamim).	Same.	Very similar. Missing 1 word (tamim).	No.
2.	Very similar. A different p r a y e r inserted.	2B differs some from 2 and 2A.	2A - very similar.	2 A , with section like 2C.
3.	Both parts of prayer, Psalm 20.	1st part of prayer only.	No.	No.
4.	Very similar, a few words added. Adds another prayer.	Very similar.	Very similar.	No.
5.	Only Ex. 11:8 (said 1X).	Only Ex. 11:8 (1X) - after #7.	No.	No.
6.	No.	No.	6B. Different version and different prayer added.	No.
7.	7 - similar, a few sentences added.	7 similar, s e n t e n c e added.	No.	No.
8.	No.	No.	No.	No.
9.	No.	No.	No.	No.

	HUC 352 (N) For: Beileh bat Rachel. 18pp.	JTS 4336 (P) 190 pp.	HUC 248 (Q) For: Yodita 126 pp.	HUC 243 (R) (1740) Venice For: Bath Sheba 128 pp.
1.	Very different.	Similar, missing tamim.	Same, missing 1 word (tamim).	No.
2.	No.	2A similar.	After #2. 2 - very similar.	2 - similar.
3.	Completely different prayer, and category.	Very similar, appears after #4.	Only 1st part of prayer.	Very similar
4.	No.	Very similar.	Very similar. Last few sentences missing.	Very similar.
5.	No.	Only Ex. 11:8 (1X)	No.	No.
6.	No.	No.	6C Different version. After #7.	No.
7.	No.	Similar, Extra sentence added.	Similar, extra sentence added.	Similar, extra sentence added.
8.	No.	No.	No.	No.
9.	No.	No.	No.	No.

	HUC 245 (S) For: Simcha bat Suli. 48 pp.	HUC 247 (T) 178 pp.	HUC 234 (U) 170 pp.	JTS 4223 For: Stella bat Esther 48 pp.
1.	1A different prayer.	Same.	Same w/out 1 word (tamim)	1 A V e r y similar.
2.	No.	2-similar.	2A with insert in first part.	No.
3.	Both parts of prayer-similar, Psalm.	Very similar.	No.	Both parts of p r a y e r - similar, D i f f e r e n t Psalm.
4.	No.	Very similar.	Very similar.	No.
5.	No.	Only Ex. 11:8 (1X) After #7.	No.	No.
6.	No.	No.	No.	No.
7.	No.	similar, extra s e n t e n c e added.	No.	No.
8.	Same.	No.	No.	No.
9.	Same.	No.	No.	No.

	JTS 4240 139 pp.	JTS 4244 16 pp.	JTS 4283 17 pp.	JTS 4335 40 pp.
1.	Only one word missing (tamim)	No.	Same, but without 1 word (tamim).	No.
2.	2A - very similar.	2A with some differences.	2A - end varies greatly.	2A similar.
3.	No.	No.	No.	No.
4.	Very similar, 2 phrases reversed.	No.	4A Combines #3 and #4. Short.	No.
5.	No.	No.	No.	No.
6.	6B A few words/phrases differ.	No.	No.	6C Some words/phrases differ.
7.	No.	No.	No.	No.
8.	No.	No.	No.	No.
9.	No.	No.	No.	No.

	JTS 4387 (1791) Modena For: Consola Norza 33 pp.	JTS 4625 60 pp.	JTS 4670 (1787) 45 pp.	JTS 4590 For: Rachel bat Beinka, 8 pp.
1.	Same, missing 1 word (tamim).	Exactly. After #2.	Same, missing 1 word (tamim).	Same, missing 1 word (tamim).
2.	2A	Long insertion in 1st part.	2A ends like P.	2 - v e r y similar.
3.	No.	Whole prayer, with line inserted & Psalm.	Combined with #4. Psalm 20.	Whole prayer with a line added. Book ends here.
4.	Very similar.	Very similar.	See above.	No.
5.	No.	No.	No.	No.
6.	No.	No.	6B A few words/ p h r a s e s differ.	No.
7.	No.	Similar, extra s e n t e n c e added.	No.	No.
8.	No.	No.	Very similar, last line differs.	No.
9.	No.	No.	Same, 2X-for male or female	No.

JTS 4773
96 pp.

JTS 4790
62 pp.

No.

Same, missing
1 word
(tamim).

2 and 2A (one
after the
other).

2 A very
similar.

Both very
similar.
1st part of
prayer only,
has insert.

No.

Very similar.

A few words/
phrases
differ.

Only Ex. 11:8
(1X)

No.

No.

No.

Similar, extra
sentence added.

No.

No.

No.

No.

No.

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