Abraham’s Heir: Maimonides’ Letter to a Man Named Ovadyah
(Translated by Alyssa Gray from the Hebrew text in Y. Shailat, איגרות הרמב, vol. 1; Jerusalem: 1995)

I received the questions of our master Ovadyah, the enlightened one, the understanding one, the righteous proselyte. May God reward his efforts (cf. Ruth 2:12—AG) and may his reward from the Lord, the God of Israel—under Whose wings he has come to take refuge—be complete (cf. Ruth 2:12—AG).

(A) First question—As to the issue of blessings and prayers, whether private or while praying in public: Should you recite “Our God and God of our fathers,” “Who has sanctified us with His commandments,” “Who has separated us,” “Who has chosen us,” and “Who caused our fathers to inherit,” “Who brought us out of the land of Egypt,” and “Who did miracles for our fathers,” and the like.

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Response—You should recite all [of these] as instituted, and do not change a word. Rather, just as every citizen of Israel [cf. Leviticus 23:42] prays and blesses, so is it appropriate for you to bless and pray—whether you are praying privately or are the prayer leader.

And the essence of the matter is that Abraham our father was the one who taught and enlightened the people, informing them of the way of truth and the unity of the Holy Blessed One. He rejected idolatry and nullified its worship, and brought many under the wings of the Divine Presence and taught and guided them. And he commanded his children and the people of his household to keep the way of God, as it is written in the Torah [Genesis 18:19]: For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they will keep the way of the Lord, etc. Therefore everyone who converts until the end of all the generations—and everyone who unifies the name of the Holy Blessed One as it is written in the Torah—are students of, and members of the household of, our father Abraham; all of whom he turned back to the good [way]. Just as he caused the people of his [own] generation to turn back [to the good] through his mouth and his teaching, so did he cause everyone who would convert in the future to turn back [to the good way] through his command to his sons and the members of his household. Consequently our father Abraham is the father of his worthy seed, those that follow in his ways; and father of his students, who are all those that convert.

Therefore you should say “Our God and God of our fathers,” for Abraham was your father. And you should say “Who caused our fathers to inherit,” for the land [of Israel] was given to Abraham, as it is said [Genesis 13:17]: Rise, walk about the length and breadth of the land, for I have given it to you. But “Who brought us out of Egypt,” or “Who did miracles for our fathers”—if you wish to change [the wording] and recite “Who brought Israel out of Egypt” and “Who did miracles for Israel”—say that. But if you don’t change a word, there is no loss in that. Since you have entered under the wings of the Divine Presence and have become attached to God, there is no difference between
us and you, and it is as if all the miracles that were performed were performed both for us and you. Behold it says in Isaiah [Isaiah 56:3]: *And let not the alien who has attached himself to God say ‘the Lord has surely separated me from His people’—there is no difference at all between us and you in any respect.*

And certainly you should bless “Who has chosen us,” “Who has given us,” and “Who has separated us,” for the Holy Blessed One has already chosen you, separated you from the nations, and given you the Torah. For the Torah was given to us and the converts, as it is said [Numbers 15:15]: *The congregation: there shall be one law for you and for the stranger that dwells [with you]; one law eternally for all your generations, you and the stranger shall be the same before the Lord.* . . .

And know that most of our ancestors who left Egypt were idolaters there; they blended with the nations and learned their ways. That was until the Holy Blessed One sent Moses our rabbi (master of all the prophets) and separated us from the nations and brought us under the wings of the Divine Presence—we and all the converts—and placed one law upon all of us.

And don’t see your [ethnic] lineage as an insignificant thing. If we are part of the lineage of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, you are part of the lineage of the One Who spoke and the world came to be. And thus is this made clear in Isaiah [Isaiah 44:5]: *This one will say: “I am God’s,” and this one will call by the name “Jacob”—the convert will say “I am God’s” and the born Israelite will call by the name “Jacob.”*

And everything we have said to you about the issue of not changing a word of the blessings—there is a proof for this from tractate Bikkurim. . . .

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Behold it is made clear to you that you should say “Which God had sworn to our fathers,” and that Abraham is our father and the father of all the righteous ones who are attached to God and walk in His ways. And this is the ruling as to other blessings and prayers, that you should change nothing.