

Communications

“. . . WHO HAS NOT MADE ME A WOMAN”

TO THE EDITOR:

I am writing in response to the “Quiet *Berakha*/Articulate *Berakha*” (*Tradition*, 29:4, Summer 1995). It is ironic that in an effort to be respectful of women, two men have discussed whether or not the recitation of “*she-lo asani isha*” out loud is offensive to women without involving any women in the discussion. Had they done so, they would have discovered that Orthodox women today have far greater concerns.

“Slippery slope” argument notwithstanding, Orthodox feminists choose to stay on the halakhic side of the line, despite the many pressures and difficulties involved. Orthodox feminists are busy working, teaching, raising children, caring for aging parents, serving their communities, loving their husbands and striving to deepen their relationship with God. Orthodox feminists are busy studying both Torah and secular material to nourish themselves spiritually and intellectually so that they can achieve these many goals, all with very little support from their communities. They are not standing by the *mehitsa* waiting to hear exactly what the men are *davening*. They are lost in their own *kavana*.

The fact is that the way the *berakha* is phrased is perceived as insulting and always was, and we would be better off admitting this and struggling with it. It seems to me that this presents a greater challenge for men than for women. It must make a sensitive man vastly uncomfortable to loudly proclaim that he thanks Hashem for not making him a woman. I agree that it is incumbent upon us to be sensitive to the needs of others, and for that reason, men should be permitted to say “*she-lo asani isha*” quietly—if this makes them feel better.

But if the true intent is to support and respect women of the Orthodox community, the effort would be better expended in providing community support to allow all women, whether they call themselves feminist or not, to juggle all of the roles with which the Torah honors them.

MARCY SERKIN
Brooklyn, NY

TRADITION

TO THE EDITOR:

At the heart of the debate between Feldman and Wolowelsky is the response to Orthodox women who are seeking additional modes of religious expression within the halakhic framework. Should they really be dismissed as “confusing narcissism and self-indulgence with a yearning for spirituality”?

Women who are firmly committed to halakhic Judaism find themselves being criticized for what in truth is a desire to become closer to God. For example, a prominent *rosh yeshiva* in the modern Orthodox world was quoted criticizing a “*kalla’s tisch*” as “just another example of women wanting to be men.” For me, choosing to have a “*kalla’s tisch*” at my wedding was based on my preference for joining with my friends and family in *divrei Torah* and religious song rather than sitting as a center-piece during the smorgasbord awaiting my *hatan’s* entrance, with each guest approaching me to admire my appearance.

An open dialogue around these issues such as *Tradition* has forged can hopefully lead to a deeper appreciation of the religious concerns of a segment of the Orthodox community, as well as an opportunity for religious leaders involved in the contemporary shaping of religious attitudes towards women to reconsider their assumptions.

RACHEL ACKERMAN EPSTEIN
Jerusalem

TO THE EDITOR:

I think it unfair to dismiss the complaints of religious women as mere anecdotes, even though some of the anecdotes came from the families of our great Torah sages and were recorded by such *gedolei Torah* as the author of *Torah Temima*.

A public statement of thanks for not having been made a woman is qualitatively different from a blessing giving thanks for the privilege of conveying the Priestly blessing. I think I am not alone in my daily confrontation with the large-type “*she-lo asani isha*” which overpowers the adjacent small-type “*she-asani kirtsono* [who made me according to His will]” said by women. When one of my high school teachers finally agreed to address the issue, she lovingly explained that the latter was a way of showing that women, more emotionally disposed, are intrinsically more spiritual than men—the men needed to work harder at it. My reaction was to swallow hard and stash away additional resentment at my question’s not being taken seriously.

I do not think that saying this *berakha* should be the major issue

in the Orthodox community, but I fear that the attitudes the discussion exposed are.

CHAYE KOHL
Brooklyn, NY

EMANUEL FELDMAN RESPONDS:

This issue is apparently so emotion-laden that the discussion was not read carefully. Ms. Kohn finds that I “dismiss the complaints of religious women as mere anecdotes.” A careful re-reading of my article will show that what I characterize as anecdotal is Dr. Wolowelsky’s argument, not the complaints of women. One does not change synagogue practice based on touching stories told about great rebbetzins.

Similarly, Ms. Epstein claims that I “dismiss Orthodox women who seek religious expression within halakhic parameters.” But I wrote that religious yearnings that are self-centered and inward looking, and in which the standards of behavior are personal needs, desires, or hurts, or feelings—that such things “confuse narcissism and self-indulgence with a yearning for spirituality: the one is primarily Me, while the other is primarily You.” I was pointing to the common phenomenon of confusing the self with God, of mistaking the Me for the You. Obviously, I do not include all Orthodox feminists under this rubric. But that some do confuse the Me and the You can hardly be denied. Halakhic Judaism has room for feeling and affect, yes, but it should not be reduced to sentimentalism. When an objective system of behavior is reduced to subjectivity, danger lurks.

Epstein further charges, preposterously, that halakhic women are criticized for “a desire to become closer to God.” Her support for this amazing catch-all statement is, inexorably, an anecdote: the Modern Orthodox *rosh yeshiva* who “was quoted” (my italics: this is obviously a remark that Ms. Epstein did not witness but heard second or third hand with the inevitable embellishments) as referring to a “*kallah’s tisch*” as just another example of women wanting to be men. To extrapolate from this apocryphal comment that women are put down for wanting to become closer to God is quite a stretch. The anecdote only indicates that women are criticized when their behavior is perceived as imitative of men.

(The story in any case makes an interesting point. Surely there are ways for brides to create an ambience which will maintain the *tсенит* and the spirituality of the occasion without aping precisely the *hatan’s* activities. Because he has a *tisch*, must she also? This calls to mind Clara’s song in Goethe’s *Egmont*. “What matchless luck, to be a man!”

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Secure and confident women do not need to affirm their selfhood by doing whatever men do. And surely Epstein does not mean to imply that today's women are the first Orthodox women in history to seek to come closer to God.)

Let us not be hypersensitive to "large type." My *siddur* prints both *berakhot* in the same size. The reduction of the women's *berakha* to a smaller size in some *siddurim* was simply a printers' space-saving device, since women rarely appeared at the early morning service. Surely it is over-reaction to perceive anything sinister in that. Similarly hypersensitive is Ms. Serkin's complaint that two men discussed "whether or not the [*berakha*] out loud is offensive to women without involving women." But the nature of the *berakha* was not under discussion. We were discussing whether a *berakha* which is construed as offensive (erroneously construed, in my view) could theoretically be recited silently. The issue was a halakhic one: can a synagogue practice be changed?

One wonders: If indeed "Orthodox feminists choose to stay on the halakhic side of the line" (Serkin), why not follow classic halakhic practice? I wrote that changing the manner in which a *berakha* is recited is a "halakhic issue which should be submitted to a recognized *posek* for a adjudication." This is how halakha works, and is one of the keystones of the halakhic side of the line. But my correspondents, busily looking for signs of insensitivity to women, are apparently unwilling to engage in this halakhic procedure. Is it consistent to claim fealty to the halakha and at the same time ignore one of the fundamentals of the halakhic process? If decisors are relied upon for *kashrut* questions and even more intimate matters, why are they shut out of debates such as this?

A further note about the halakhic side of the line: In halakhic discourse one frequently encounters this phrase: *aval ein nohagin ken*, "but this is not the accepted practice." The halakhic decisor, after reviewing all the sources, may himself be convinced that a certain observance should be performed in a different way, but since the halakhic community does not practice it that way, he defers to established halakhic behavior: *aval ein nohagin ken*. That is, accepted halakhic practice takes precedence over theory. This suggestive phrase could well be applied to all discussions concerning feminism and halakha. Yes, technically, perhaps a woman may wear a *tallit*, or *tefillin*, or be a *mohel* or a *shohet*—*aval ein nohagin ken*. The accepted practice of the halakhic community contains such a power and force—that which in general law is termed "praxis"—that it even overrides and supersedes solid legal sources. How much more so with personal feelings and emotions.

I remain firm in the conviction that *she-lo asani isha* is not designed to denigrate women. Those who would approach it with an open yearning for truth—particularly the women’s parallel *she-asani kirtsono*—will find the *berakha* loving and sympathetic. Instead of expending energies towards silencing it, our energies should be invested in interpreting it objectively, accurately, and unemotionally—and in looking at our magnificent prayerbook not as yet another battleground between male oppressors and female victims, but as an area which makes it possible both for men and women to engage in genuine spiritual seeking.

JOEL B. WOLOWELSKY RESPONDS:

While I am in basic sympathy with the three correspondents, I would rather not react to their more general statements. I had written in the original article that I wanted to limit the discussion to the specific question of saying the *berakha* aloud in *shul*, and the Letters column is not the appropriate place to thrash out the more general concerns. I have, however, recently addressed these broader issues in my *Women, Jewish Law, and Modernity: New Opportunities in a Post-feminist Age* (Ktav Publishing Co., 1997), to which I refer the interested reader.

MAIMONIDES SCHOOL AND THE RAV

TO THE EDITOR:

The recent Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik Memorial Issue (*Tradition*, 30:4, Summer 1996) offers a masterful composite of the multi-dimensional nature of a man we revered and loved. May I add an additional facet? Maimonides School was a major part of the Rav’s life since its founding in 1937. For nearly five decades, he guided and nurtured the school from its first home in Dorchester to its current campus in Brookline.

I had the privilege to serve as associate principal of Maimonides School from August 1967 through July 1971. During those years I enjoyed weekly contact with the Rav, who, while clearly revered, also enjoyed the the profound affection of all who knew him. In Boston, the Rav related to people in the Maimonides School community with warmth that they reciprocated exponentially.

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Maimonides School was co-educational in all subjects, *kodesh* and *hol*, from primary school through the twelfth grade. The Rav visited the school frequently, saw his children and grandchildren study and develop there, and took an active role in defining and promoting the mission of the school. Never did he suggest that boys and girls be separated in any classes. Such a suggestion from the Rav would undoubtedly have been honored as he was revered by the officers and Board of Maimonides School who considered it a privilege to serve on the Board of the Rav's school.

The co-educational nature of Maimonides School leaves many, even avowed disciples of the Rav, uncomfortable. Contrary to reasons offered in certain quarters, I understood that the Rav viewed co-education not as a halakhic issue but rather as an educational question, one to be examined through the prism of sound educational philosophy and tested in the laboratory of life. My own observations lead me to conclude that both models (single gender and co-ed) have succeeded in our Torah communities. Neither model should claim exclusivity and each should approach the task of *binukh* with awe, because education is about young people, their minds and *neshamot*, their struggles and inner turmoil.

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