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an occasional exchange of ideas on issues of  
contemporary concern.*



“...WHO HAS NOT MADE ME A WOMAN”

## A QUIET BERAKHA

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The purpose of this discussion is not to thrash out a specific halakhic issue—much less a halakhic policy—but rather to share and examine certain attitudes that I have encountered in discussing what was for me, at least, a modest proposed change in synagogue etiquette. I do not claim that the attitudes examined here are a scientific sampling, but I think they are widespread enough to warrant discussion. There are no final conclusions to be drawn from this or similar exchanges, but the issues raised extend beyond the question of this proposed change. Seeing things in print sometimes has a way of moving everyone forward a bit.

Some time ago, I began to feel uncomfortable when the *hazan* recited the *berakha*, “*she-lo asani isha*,” aloud at the beginning of the public prayer service. There is no specific halakha that this *berakha* (along with “*she-lo asani goy*” and “*she-lo asani aved*”) be recited aloud; it is said quietly along with other *berakhot* (like *birkhot haTorah*) in all Sephardic congregations and a great many Ashkenazic ones. Nevertheless, this is a well-established custom in many synagogues. I did not suggest that the *berakha* be omitted or changed to read “*she-asani ish*” or

the like; I simply suggested that it be said silently, like *birkhot haTorah*, basing myself on the rationale often used to justify the *berakha* itself.

The argument is familiar to anyone who reads the apologetics (in the classical sense of the word) for maintaining this *berakha* despite the protests of those who see it as a example of misogynist thinking. Judaism is not an egalitarian religion. Different people—*Kohanim*, *Leviyim*, *Yisraelim*, men, women, etc., all have differing halakhic obligations. There is no denying this and no possibility for changing it within the halakhic framework. Also basic to the halakhic approach is the fact that it is better to work under a sense of halakhic obligation than voluntarism. Hence, goes the argument in one of its many forms, a man is simply giving thanks for the fact that he was not exempted from the many mitsvot from which a woman is exempt, just as a woman gives thanks for not being exempted from the many mitsvot from which a slave or a gentile would be exempt. (That this declaration is phrased in negative rather than positive terms is a stylistic matter that also has its justifications.)

Well, I suggested, if that is the case, it seems inappropriate to give thanks for a privilege granted oneself in front of a person who does not have the same opportunity. When women did not frequent the synagogue, there may have been no reason to not say the *berakha* aloud. But now that women are there in numbers at the start of the *tefilla*, it should be said quietly, albeit appreciatively. To say it aloud under contemporary circumstances was akin to *lo'eg la-rash*—mocking the poor—and analogous to wearing one's *tsitsit* out at a gravesite.

It is true that *lo'eg la-rash* might well be a technical halakhic category that applies only to the dead, who were once obligated in mitsvot but no longer are.<sup>1</sup> But whatever its technical status, surely *lo'eg la-rash* is part of a more general *ethical* mandate: we should want to not embarrass people by making a point of noting in front of them that we have opportunities that they lack. This is a basic ethical demand. In any reading of the law, *lo'eg la-rash* extends this concept to dead people rather than *limits* it to them. If such talk *embarrasses* dead people, so to speak, it *hurts* live people to be reminded of their lack of opportunity. It is true that if we are halakhically required to do something, we generally should do it even if it upsets others. But that is not the case when we are doing something that is not demanded of us by the halakha, as is the case here.

I found it interesting that a good number of people responded by denying that there was any issue worth discussing. Orthodox women, I was informed, are not the least bit offended by this *berakha*. If a few are, it is only because they have absorbed anti-halakhic feminist atti-

tudes. Indeed, for centuries women have not been hurt by hearing this *berakha*. We should not be forced to accommodate in any way people who—perhaps innocently, perhaps deliberately—have been influenced by an anti-halakhic society.

This response is unsettling in so many ways. One cannot simply tell others when they should or should not be hurt. Language changes. If an old benign phrase now hurts—certain phrases in contemporary language come to mind—we should avoid it rather than use it and argue that others shouldn't be offended. Of course, we cannot extend this logic to changing a *berakha* itself, but that is because there are halakhic constraints on changing *any berakha*. We live with such constraints throughout our lives; it is the price we pay for halakhic commitment.

More important, though, we should not be so quick to assume that Orthodox women have not been and continue to not be offended by this *berakha*. Perhaps the best illustration of this is a recollection of Rabbi Barukh Epstein about his aunt:

How bitter was my aunt, as she would say from time to time, “that every empty-headed ignorant man, every lowlife who hardly knew the meaning of the words and who would not dare to cross her threshold without first obsequiously and humbly obtaining her permission, would not hesitate to boldly and arrogantly recite to her face the *berakha* ‘*she-lo asani isha.*’” Moreover, upon his recitation of the blessing, she is obliged to answer ‘*Amen.*’ “And who can muster enough strength,” she concluded with great anguish, “to hear this eternal symbol of shame and embarrassment to women.”<sup>2</sup>

This quotation is all the more poignant when we realize that R. Epstein was the author of *Torah Temima* and the aunt he described was the wife of the Netsiv, Rebbetzin Rayna Batya (daughter of R. Itzeleh Volozhiner and granddaughter of R. Hayyim)! A similar complaint, Rabbi Epstein goes on to inform us, was made by the Rabbanit Sara, wife of the Gaon Rabbi Yehoshua Leib Diskin. My own experience has been that many similarly committed Orthodox women have comparable feelings, to one degree or another.

It would indeed be a mistake to think that every such complaint is the product of contemporary feminism, though the latter might well be the stimulus for expressing long-felt feelings. For example, suppose a wife is very much bothered by her husband's “pet name” for her. For a variety of reasons, she never brings this to his attention. Finally, a friend convinces her to express her feelings. It is true that her original hesita-

tion might have been due to healthy or unhealthy reasons (or a combination of the two). And it is also true that her friend might have been nothing more than a troublemaker. But once the husband learns of her feelings, should he continue to use the name? The anti-halakhic stance of many “feminists” need not prevent us from conceding that they have brought to the surface many questions that need to be addressed openly and honestly. As Moshe Halevi Spero pointed out, “The inadequacy of . . . [various] rationale[s] for these three *berakhot shelilot* disturbed halakhic leaders long before feminist cavils popularized the problem.”<sup>3</sup>

Another response was that of the “slippery slope”: perhaps a good case can be made about this *berakha*, but where shall we stop? Shall we omit “*poke’ah ivrim*” if blind people are present in shul? Surely they are hurt by our giving thanks in front of them for a gift they have been denied?

The simplest rejoinder is to note David Shatz’s *bon mot* that one person’s *reductio ad absurdum* is another’s *in hakhi nami*.<sup>4</sup> If we find that blind people are offended by what they perceive as cavalier insensitivity to their disability, then, absent any halakhic constraint, we certainly should stop saying it aloud in front of them. Personally, I do not see the two *berakhot* as analogous. We all take blindness to be a disability, something we are glad does not apply to us and something blind people would rather not apply to them. Surely we are not prepared to say that about femininity. Thus, many *poskim* hold that a blind person too must say this *berakha*—it is praise for God’s gifts to mankind as a whole. But I am not prepared to tell people that they shouldn’t be offended just because I don’t see something as offensive.

In the end, the “slippery slope” fear is rendered irrelevant by our commitment to halakha. It is the halakha which decides if we may accommodate someone’s feelings. Sometimes we shall be able to and at other times we shall not. It is no different than any other accommodation we make. If a guest asks us to change our menu and serve or omit a particular food, we shall certainly do so—provided there is no halakhic prohibition transgressed or obligation neglected. It would never occur to us to say that accommodation is in and of itself improper. Why should it be any different in this area of life?

Yet another response was a more general argument, something that is heard from “the yeshiva world” in many (if not most) of the discussions on changing approaches in reaction to the discomfort felt by some women in our community. A most succinct articulation of this position was made not long ago in these pages:

Why not just tell the truth . . . [and] make a powerful statement that we refuse to tinker with our traditions, that we want our daughters, as far as possible, to be like our mothers and like their mothers before them.<sup>5</sup>

True, there is a Jewish community which wants its daughters to be like their great-grandmothers, but it is not the “yeshiva world” associated with Aguda, it is the world of Satmar hassidim. In the latter community, the Torah education of woman and their position in society hasn’t changed much over the generations. But few of the grandmothers of the observer’s contemporaries attended seminaries as do their great-granddaughters; few were fluent in *Humash* and its commentators; few had public professional lives, let alone headed Torah institutions.

Torah authorities in the “yeshiva world” could have insisted on an educational and social system for women similar to the one in effect for generations, just as Satmar did. But they did not, because they too realized that continuation of the old system was fraught with peril. Jewish women ignorant or even only semi-literate with respect to their heritage compromised not only their own observance but that of the Jewish people as a whole. Thus they too had to come to terms with a new perception of women and their place in society. But they are reluctant to approach this forthrightly and openly, probably out of a fear that even simple public discussion will accelerate a process with which they—quite understandably—are not at all in sympathy. This fear is neither irrational nor unethical. But in my opinion, such an approach is counterproductive. It can create an impression—and we can even concede it may well be a misimpression—that people are using their own personal perceptions instead of halakhic analyses. It also deligitimates others who are halakhically committed but who have reached different conclusions.

The last response was to argue that, while there might be nothing wrong with this particular proposal, if we give in here, we will be at a disadvantage when we confront really halakhically troubling demands that may come up in the future. This is perhaps the most disturbing of the reactions, as it prevents us from focusing honestly on the specific proposal at hand.

If we feel that our community’s approach to these sorts of matters has served us well, we should continue it in discussions on women’s issues. We have already seen revolutionary developments (like advanced Torah study for women) in virtually *all* segments of the Orthodox community, and it would be nonsense to suggest that this is not a reaction to the very forces against which it publicly protests. Indeed, when

Aguda recently justified the lack of Talmud study in its schools for women, it noted that even without such Talmud study, its 45 Beth Jacob High Schools and dozens of seminaries have succeeded in producing both “contented housewife-mothers and teachers, and upwardly-mobile chemists, lawyers and physicians.”<sup>6</sup> As if producing women who are upwardly-mobile chemists, lawyers and physicians was the goal of past generations of Orthodox schools.

As luck would have it, I came across a reference to a discussion on the topic in *Me’orei Or*, a halakhic work written by Rav Avraham Worms. He was a disciple of the *Sha’agat Arye* who served as *rosh yeshiva*, *dayan* and *rav* of Metz. Even a quick computer check will reveal how widely respected and quoted he is among modern *poskim*. To quote, for example, no less a Torah giant than R. Yitshak Weiss,<sup>7</sup> *Me’orei Or* was among the “*gedolei ha-aharonim*.”

In the world of academia, people are often upset when they find that their thesis has been anticipated decades earlier—the opportunity to publish an original paper suddenly disappears. But in the world of Torah, such a find elicits “*barukh she-kivanti*.” Clearly, I was encouraged by his argument:

It seems that we are forbidden to say “*she-lo asani goy*” publicly, because it will engender hatred [among the gentiles]. And as to saying “*she-lo asani isha*” [aloud]—how can we publicly insult someone [*malbin penei haveru be-rabim*]! It is enough to say [aloud] those *berakhot* mentioned in *haRo’e* [*Berakhot* 60b], but who compels us to recite these three blessings [which are not in *Perek haRo’e*, but] in [Tractate] *Menahot* [43b]? This can also be proven from the *Shulhan Arukh*, which organized the *berakhot* which are to be said publicly in the synagogue in one place [*Orah Hayyim* 46:1-2] and put these three *berakhot* in a separate paragraph [46:4]. While many *siddurim* placed them among the [other morning] blessings, these [three] need not be said publicly. Thus the *Shulhan Arukh* arranged [the paragraphs] as mentioned above.<sup>8</sup>

It was not surprising to hear some people dismiss this reference with the argument that the Torah community has had a century and a half to evaluate the position of *Me’orei Or* and found it lacking—witness the fact that his position has not been adopted. Surely, I was told, those who now do not favor changing the current practice are no less sensitive and ethical than he was.

But halakha makes a point of recording minority opinions and—as

every reader of halakha knows—they are often drawn upon in future years. More important, halakha responds to circumstances, and these often change. For example, in the late seventeenth century, R. Yair Bakhrakh (*Havvot Ya'ir*<sup>9</sup>) dealt with a case of a man in Amsterdam who died leaving only daughters and asked that a special *minyan* be set up to enable them to say *Kaddish*. The scholars and lay officials did not prevent them from doing so. R. Bakhrakh conceded that “there is no proof to contradict the matter,” agreeing that the daughter’s *Kaddish* brings *nahat ruah* (repose) to the deceased, that women participate in the mitsvah of *kiddush Hashem*, and that *Kaddish* could be said because a *minyan* of men was present. But in the final analysis he would not allow her to say *Kaddish*, as he feared that such an innovation might weaken allegiance to existing Jewish customs.

For centuries, this attitude informed many of the responses to the question of women saying *Kaddish*. But recently, for example, Rabbi Ahron Soloveichik articulated a counter-approach that reflected the halakhic position that had been adopted in the previous generation by *ge'onei Lita*.<sup>10</sup> Noting the opposition of *Havvot Ya'ir*, he maintained that

nowadays, when there are Jews fighting for equality for men and women in matters such as *aliyyot*, if Orthodox rabbis prevent women from saying *Kaddish* when there is a possibility for allowing it, it will strengthen the influence of Reform and Conservative rabbis. It is therefore forbidden to prevent women from saying *Kaddish*.<sup>11</sup>

From the time *Me'orei Or* was published to a decade or two ago, there were few women attending daily services, few women who personally experienced what they perceived as a daily public insult. A *posek* who hardly ever sees women in *shul* when these *berakhot* are read aloud would have little reason to hesitate maintaining the status quo. Such *poskim* were not rejecting the *Me'orei Or*'s position; they simply were not faced with the situation he confronted. Indeed, these very same *poskim* never registered any objection to this *pesak*, despite the fact that the *Me'orei Or*'s halakhic opinions were cited and discussed in general by *gedolei ha-poskim* over the years.

Of course, the final decision in these matters rests in the hands of the synagogue rabbi, who has to balance many different factors in deciding whether or not to change any aspect of his synagogue's etiquette. Indeed, a “journal of Jewish thought” may not be the ideal place to debate a specific detail of the synagogue service. But the issues

here in many ways extend past saying this *berakha* aloud or quietly, and we are the healthier for discussing them together.

NOTES

1. See Malbim's *Be'er haMilot* to Psalms 82:3.
2. R. Baruch Epsztejn [Epstein], *Mekor Barukh* (Vilna: Rom, 1928), part four, chapter 46, section 3, p. 981.  
This whole paragraph was left out in the ArtScroll English translation of R. Epstein's book, *My Uncle the Netziv*, Moshe Dombey, trans. (Jerusalem: ArtScroll/Mesorah, 1988). As Jacob J. Schacter has pointed out, in addition to omitting Rabbanit Sara's complaints that women play a secondary role in Judaism, the translator left out those words that were in the middle of a paragraph that showed that she studied the Oral Law. ("Halakhah, Secular Studies, and the Close of the Yeshiva in Volozhin in 1892," *The Torah u-Madda Journal*, vol. 2, 1990, p. 113, n. 5.) I fear these omissions are emblematic of the approach of many people who would rather not have to deal with these so-called feminist issues.
3. Moshe Halevi Spero, "The Didactic-Psychological Function of Three Rabbinic Blessings," *Proceedings of the Association of Orthodox Jewish Scientists*, vol. 8, 1987, p. 114.
4. David Shatz, "Practical Endeavor and the Torah u-Madda Debate," *The Torah u-Madda Journal*, vol. 3, 1991-1992, p. 101.
5. R. Moshe M. Eisemann, "Communications," *Tradition*, 27:2, Winter 1993, p. 91.
6. "Monitoring the Media," *Coalition*, X:3, March 1995, p. 8.
7. R. Yitshak Weiss, *Responsa Minhag Yitshak*, 3:67.
8. R. Avraham Worms, *Me'orei Or*, vol. 4 (= *Be'er Sheva*), (Metz, 1831), p. 20.
9. R. Yair Bakhrakh, *Responsa Havvot Ya'ir*, no. 222.
10. See my letter in *HaDarom*, no. 57, 5748 [1988], pp. 157-158.
11. R. Ahron Soloveichik, *Od Yisrael Yosef Beni Hai* (Yeshivas Brisk, 1993), no. 32, p. 100.



# AN ARTICULATE *BERAKHA*

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## INTRODUCTION

There is no question that a sensitivity to the feelings of others is one of the pillars of Torah and halakha. It follows that we must be particularly sensitive to spiritual yearnings and must do nothing that might stifle such yearnings.

Having said this, it is necessary to add the caveat that Jewish spirituality can be realized only within the parameters of halakhic practice. Amorphous spiritual hunger, unframed by halakha, can lead nowhere. Similarly, yearnings which are self-centered and inward looking, in which the standards of thought and behavior are personal needs, desires, hurts, and feelings, will by definition never be fulfilled. Such seeking confuses narcissism and self-indulgence with a yearning for spirituality: the one is primarily Me, while the other is primarily You.

## I

Dr. Joel Wolowelsky's statement consists of two parts. In the first section, the bulk of his statement, he cites various objections to his proposal and attempts to refute them. He follows this with the citation from *Me'orei Or* and suggests that, although Jewish practice does not follow *Me'orei Or* in this regard, contemporary Jews should take this view seriously because many more women are present in shul today than ever before.

The first section is interesting, but because it is anecdotal, it is in the end unpersuasive. This will be expanded on below. Let me first address the opinion of *Me'orei Or*.

Incidentally, before *Me'orei Or* is apotheosized into every Jewish feminist's favorite *posek*, it is well to note what he writes just seven lines earlier in this same paragraph:

. . . the woman will be subservient to the will of her husband, and will bring about the perfection of humanity through the sustaining of the species (*be-kiyyum ha-min* [bearing children]) and by her working in the

home, so that the man shall be free to serve his Creator and engage in his work (*she-yihye ha-ish panui la-avodat bor'o u-le-esek me-lakhto*). . . .

As for his views on the *berakha*, it is obvious that *Me'orei Or's* was an isolated opinion which was either unknown or ignored by halakhic decisors since his day. The overwhelming weight of halakhic practice apparently did not accept the premise on which he based his opinion; they continued to recite the *berakha* aloud. Clearly, there are other considerations that, in the opinion of the halakha, outweigh the concerns expressed by *Me'orei Or*.

We are told that "times have changed" and that inasmuch as women attend synagogue in greater numbers today, we should take more seriously *Me'orei Or's* position so as not to offend women who are in attendance. But I submit that the physical presence or absence of women in shul is irrelevant. If the *berakha* embarrasses women, it should not be recited even in their absence. If it does not embarrass them, it can be recited even in their presence. The fact is that, contra *Me'orei Or*, halakhic opinion has been that the *berakha* neither intends nor expresses a humiliation of anyone.

That *Me'orei Or* has a different opinion is, halakhically speaking, beside the point. Halakhic literature is so vast that individual opinions—particularly in this age of computer-database *teshuvot*—can at the press of a button be found to support almost any point of view. Entire volumes could be published of individual halakhic opinions which have been universally rejected.

There are even some opinions of major decisors that have been in effect rejected. For example, the *Ma'or* (R. Zerahya b. Isaac ha-Levi, 12th c.), one of the towering commentators on the *Alfasi*, holds that in our day there is no mitzvah to wear *tsitsit*. He reasons that the mitzvah of *tsitsit* requires the biblical cord of *tekhelet* (blue); as we no longer possess this cord, the mitzvah to wear *tsitsit* falls away. It follows from his reasoning that the wearing of *arba kanfot* on Shabbat in a public domain is a violation of the laws of carrying on Shabbat. Nevertheless, we do wear them on Shabbat because, in this instance, no one agrees with this major *rishon*. The key is not what an individual *rishon* or *posek* once wrote; the key is whether halakhic opinion and usage accepts what he wrote.

## II

In general, today we should be even more careful than earlier generations before tinkering with the way we recite prayers, precisely because "times have changed." Specifically, in the times of *Me'orei Or*, to

change a vocal *berakha* to a whispered one would not in any way have weakened the fidelity to prayer of the worshippers in *Me'orei Or's* shul.

He did not face massive pressures within his community to alter prayers. But in our day there is an all-out assault on the integrity of Jewish prayer in general, with unending efforts to amend prayers or to eliminate them entirely. At a time when "creative services" abound, and prayer-writing committees issue prayerbooks in loose-leaf form so that old prayers can be removed and more current ones substituted; when banjo playing, holding hands and chanting mantras, and "feel good" gimmicks are confused with facing our Maker in prayer, (and when even Orthodox Jews judge a synagogue service by whether it makes them comfortable or uncomfortable), one strongly suspects that, if *Me'orei Or* were alive today, he would be the first to recommend that we not change the volume or anything else about the *berakha*, precisely because he would not in any way want to give aid and comfort to those who today would merely lower the volume and tomorrow, for equally persuasive reasons, would eliminate it entirely. (An Orthodox feminist of the future might well write the following, even if the *berakha* were universally whispered: "Women know what is being whispered about them. This not only humiliates them but it is a form of *lashon ha-ra*; therefore, let us be sensitive to women and eliminate entirely this daily public insult.")

This, of course, is the fear of the slippery slope, which was rejected with the statement that "the slippery slope fear is rendered irrelevant by virtue of our commitment to halakha." One cannot, however, ignore the fact that slippery-slope legislation is an integral element of halakha. The fear of the slope is precisely what lies behind "*asu mishmeret le-mishmarti*." The concepts of "*asu seyag la-Torah*," of *geder*, of *gezera*, of creating "fence laws," is that the Sages erect such protective barriers to prevent us from slipping down that slope despite our "commitment to halakha."

For example, everyone knows that we do not play musical instruments on Shabbat. This, however, is not prohibited by the Torah. This is a slippery-slope law enacted by the Sages. If we play a musical instrument on Shabbat, we may find it necessary to repair that instrument on Shabbat, which itself is a rabbinic prohibition emanating from the biblical prohibition of *binyan* (building). Another example would be the prohibition of *stam yeynam*, which is not biblical in nature, but is rather a rabbinic enactment, a fence-law whose purpose is to impede fraternization and ultimately intermarriage.

In an age when we are rapidly slipping down many slopes, it is wise to pause before making changes in the way *berakhot* are recited.

In sum, *Me'orei Or* is a minority of one whose premises in this

regard have not been accepted by any halakhic decisors from his day to ours. He therefore cannot be cited as a halakhic basis for making the proposed change. Further, the “times have changed” argument is a two-edged sword.

III

Dr. Wolowelsky’s first section, as we noted, is unpersuasive because anecdotal evidence ultimately proves nothing. Reactions to his proposal are described in terms such as, “a good number of people responded by denying that there was any issue worth discussing.” But the number of these “good number of people” and who precisely they were—halakhic authorities, a cross-section of *poskim*, the heads of major yeshivot, or a few individuals randomly encountered—is not made clear. As to finding “this response unsettling”—I would not be unsettled by straw men. They cannot harm anyone.

The story of the aunt of Rabbi Barukh Epstein is a case study in the inadequacy of anecdotal proofs. One could apply her logic to the *berakha* which the *kohen* recites aloud prior to blessing the community: “*Asher kidshanu bi-kedushato shel Aharon . . .* [Who has sanctified us with the sanctity of Aaron and has commanded us to bless His people Israel in love].” Clearly, “us”—but not the rest of you out there.

Should it not be a “basic ethical demand” that “we should not want to embarrass people by making a point of noting in front of them that we have opportunities that they lack?” Is this not a constant “public insult” that non-*kohanim* experience at every priestly blessing? In the spirit of sensitivity to the feelings of those of us who cannot offer the priestly blessing, should not the *kohanim* recite that offending *berakha* in a whisper?

The aunt’s own learned husband, a non-*kohen*, might well have said: “By what right does this empty-headed, ignorant *kohen*, who knows nothing about Torah or mitsvot or sanctity, who never studies, who asks me all his religious questions—by what right does he mount the pulpit, and I have to descend from the pulpit, while he boldly and arrogantly boasts that God has invested him with the sanctity of Aharon ha-kohen and has commanded him to bless me! And, moreover, I am obliged to answer ‘Amen!’”

The citation of her story may be “poignant,” but it is also logically pointless. There were surely countless other learned aunts, wives and mothers of our greatest *poskim* and Sages who never merited to be included in biographies because they uttered no sound bites about their

fate as women, and who were perfectly happy to have their nephews, husbands, and sons recite “*she-lo asani isha.*” They felt no misgivings whatsoever; they understood that the *berakha* represented a distinction of roles between them and their menfolk, a distinction which they accepted not with resentment but with pride.

Dr. Wolowelsky tries to clinch his point by the unconvincing, “My own experience is that many similarly committed Orthodox women have the same reaction.” Is his “experience” sufficiently broad and deep to serve as a benchmark? This kind of fuzziness invites an equally fuzzy response: “I know many committed Orthodox women who feel differently. And the Orthodox women I know are more committed than yours any day.” All this illustrates that the good aunt’s remarks are fascinating but halakhically unconvincing. The absurdities to which anecdotes can reduce us are infinite.

#### IV

Several further considerations:

a) To suddenly revert to a whispered *berakha* in a series of *berakhot* that are said aloud calls special attention to that *berakha* and becomes a daily public confession to an accusation that is not true: that there is something intrinsically offensive to women in this *berakha*, and that *Hazal* have been insensitive to women all along, until we, who are truly sensitive, came along.

b) Should not one also be advocating a whispering of “*zokef kefu-fim*” if a hunchback is in shul—he might well be offended by the *berakha* (even though it has nothing to do with the human spine). And a blind man, despite the distinctions offered, might well feel hurt by “*poke’ah ivrim*”; the congregation is thanking God for sight, while he is deprived of sight! Just because we tell a person not to be hurt does not mean he will not be hurt. Shall we, then, whisper that as well?

c) Let us grant that some women, despite protestations to the contrary, are offended by “*she-lo asani isha.*” Instead of directing our energies towards silencing this *berakha*, our energies should be directed towards interpreting it properly. Someone who is told that a *berakha* is insulting could in fact find it insulting; someone who is told that it may seem insulting on the surface but is in fact not dealing with inferiority or superiority, could—if the mind is open and yearning for truth—find the *berakha* loving and sympathetic.

d) It is true that “one cannot simply tell others when they should and should not be hurt.” But it is also especially important not to tell

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others that they should be hurt. Yet in connection with this *berakha* we hear terms like “embarrassment,” “ethical demand,” “upsets others,” “offended,” “hurting live people who are reminded of their lack of opportunity,” and “daily public insult.” This is not only rhetorical and emotional overkill; it is a reminder to all women that if they are not hurt by this *berakha*, they should be.

Moreover, such language echoes the mantras of “oppression” and “victimization” which have become a staple of contemporary society. Feminism moves it one step further and expresses its grievances against what it calls patriarchal, male-dominated societies. It is tempting for Jewish women to transfer these slogans to halakha: the rabbis victimize women, oppress them, are insensitive to them. It is therefore crucial, especially in sensitive issues like women’s prayer—in which “*she-lo asani isha*” has been a favorite whipping boy—to encourage genuine spiritual seeking by the use of objective and deliberate reason, and by eschewing slogans.

e) Finally, as a synagogue rabbi of many years, I must disagree with the suggestion that “the final decision rests in the hands of the synagogue rabbi.” This is more than “etiquette”; it is a halakhic issue which should be submitted to a recognized *posek* for adjudication. A *posek* would take into account all factors and would make a decision. (And since we are all bound by halakha, it goes without saying that the discussion in these pages is merely a theoretical one, and that a final decision awaits the ruling of a *posek*.)

## CONCLUSION

There many areas within the parameters of contemporary halakhic life in which greater understanding and sensitivity towards women are in order. However, the *berakha* of “*she-lo asani isha*” is not one of them.

## EPILOGUE

Each individual Jew and Jewess and walks towards God in his or her own way, moving across a bridge that is clearly delineated and marked with guardrails and curbs. Not every bridge is identical. Parallel bridges may seem more inviting or may seem to offer faster or more secure passage, but this is an illusion. *Kohen, Levi, Yisrael*, male and female—each cross a unique bridge. The *Kohen* who jumps to the bridge of the *Yisrael* will only delay his passage, and vice versa. For every single bridge, as long as it is faithfully traversed, leads to God on the other side.