

AN ARTICULATE BERAKHA

Emanuel Feldman

Dr. Feldman, Rabbi Emeritus of Atlanta's Congregation Beth Jacob, is Editor of *Tradition*.

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-kiryum 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 mitsvah to wear *tsitsit*. He reasons that the mitsvah of *tsitsit* requires the biblical cord of *tekhel* (blue); as we no longer possess this cord, the mitsvah 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 mismeret 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 sacrificed 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 mitzvot 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

l 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 kefufim*” 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

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.

Book Review

Religious Objects as Psychological Structures: A Critical Integrative Object Relations Theory, Psychotherapy, and Judaism, by MOSE HALEVI SPERO (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974) 242 pp.

Reviewed by
Pesach Lichtenberg

Once upon an era, prophets roamed the world, and even ordinary people apprehended God, at least in the distorted form of gods.¹

Time passed, and God came to be less immediately present. tried to stay in touch nevertheless, be it by philosophical contemplation or mystic gnosis.²

But where does that leave us today? Philosophical demonstrations of the Deity’s existence have fallen out of favor, though we might console ourselves that they never did contribute much to piety anyway. Mysticism has meanwhile been pushed by our rational pretensions the fringes of society, if not to the psychiatric ward itself.

Yet one should never count God out. Being omnipresent, I turns up in even the most unlikely of places. Take, for example, that of atheistic reductionist iniquity known as psychoanalysis. Ever since Freud dismissed religion as just another neurosis ultimately derived from a very earthly father figure, God has been relegated by practitioners of the art to purely intrapsychic existence. The occasional religious figure who wandered into the fold³ did little to alter this state of affairs.

Moshe Halevi Spero is not deterred. His substantial and growing corpus already contains many original insights into the possibility of reconciling psychology with Judaism. The work here reviewed goes even further. Assuming the truth of a God who exists outside of our minds, Spero brings to bear the full weight of psychological knowledge to analyze how God can be perceived by us. At the same time, Spero searches the sources of halakha—our objectified relationship with God—for hints to understanding human psychology. As Spero declares in the introductory section, according to his hypothesis, “religious concepts would be conceived of as having a unique, specifiable psychological identity, and psychological concepts, structures, and mechanisms having an intrinsic religious identity” (p. xvi).