

Walk humbly with your God

■ Bat Sheva Marcus

Defending the *halakhic* basis for women's *tefillah* groups always strikes me as the equivalent of defending the *kashrut* of a glass of water. I'm never quite sure where to begin. The issues seem so overwhelmingly obvious. And yet, in the past few months I have found myself again and again in the position of trying my best to refute many issues that are baseless and incorrect as well as defend positions which seem to me self-evident.

Objectors to women's *tefillah* groups, by and large, fall into two distinct categories: those who object not to the group's existence *per se*, but rather to specific details involved in the *tefillah* (e.g., reading from a *sefer torah*, saying *brachot* before reading from a *sefer torah*), and those who object to the concept in its entirety.

Quite frankly, objections to any specific practice incorporated into the *tefillot* are much easier to understand. After all, it is difficult to make a case that women praying in and of itself is a bad thing. Girls are taught to do so in day schools, pious women everywhere are encouraged (at least on the face of it seem to be encouraged) to pray privately. So when someone approaches me with the position that they don't really object to the existence of the groups but rather have problems with the "how" of the groups, I am always delighted to enter into

BAT SHEVA MARCUS chairs the Women's Tefillah Network and was one of the coordinators of the recent International Conference on Orthodoxy and Feminism. In her professional capacity, she is the Executive Director of the Union for Traditional Judaism.

a dialogue. I will outline here the most common objections that are raised, and respond to them very briefly. Scholars have written a great deal on these issues and I would refer readers specifically to Rabbi Avi Weiss' thoughtful and thorough book, *On Women and Prayer*, for further background on any of these topics.

- It is *assur* (prohibited) for a woman to touch a *sefer torah*.

This is simply not true. Maimonides in his *Mishne Torah* states unequivocally that anyone, even a menstruating woman can touch and read from a *sefer torah* as a Torah cannot ever become ritually impure.

- It is *assur* (prohibited) to read from a *sefer torah* or take a *sefer torah* out from the *aron* (the ark) for purposes other than a public reading with a *minyan*.

There is really no precedent for either of these statements. It is true that a *sefer torah* cannot be moved indiscriminately or temporarily and that a Torah taken out of the *aron* must be treated with respect and handled appropriately. However, prior to the availability of printed texts, the scrolls themselves were always used for studying. Teachers in day schools regularly take out *sifrei torah* for the purpose of showing them to their students. Ultimately, what could be more respectful and a better use of a *sefer torah* than public study.

The women in the women's *tefillah* groups make clear to all that the Torah reading which is taking place is not the equivalent of the Torah reading in a quorum of ten men (for which *Borchu* is recited) but rather essentially a public study session.

- One should not make *brachot* (blessings) prior to or following the reading of the Torah or the *Haftorah*, if indeed it is not a public reading as defined by a quorum of ten men.

This question has merit and indeed there exist a number of opinions on the subject. The blessing prior to reading the Torah is, in reality, a blessing on the study of Torah, identical to the morning blessing said by both men and women. Following the opinion of a number of rabbis, some groups merely ask the women to leave out the *bracha* in the morning and say it instead when she is called to the Torah. Other groups follow different rabbinic rulings and, instead, choose an appropriate *pasuk* for the woman to recite as she is called for her *aliya*. Much the same difference of opinion exists regarding the blessing after the Torah reading and for the *Haftorah* and similar solutions are found.

- ▶ *Kaddish* and *Kedusha* need a quorum of ten men to be recited. Women can't make up that quorum.

You're right, and we don't say any of those prayers.

In a broad brush stroke way then, we've responded to most of the specific *halakhic* issues that are raised. Now, however, we are faced with the latter group of objections and objectors: Those who will not entertain discussion of how to handle the *halakhic* details which might arise because they object to the concept of women's *tefillah* groups in its entirety. The critical piece they are missing in their analysis is a thorough understanding of these groups and the women who take part in them. They do not understand what we find fulfilling or inspirational and what will be gained by their existence. If these groups are separate and unequal (and indeed every one of us who takes part in such groups acknowledge that truth), why are we drawn to these groups?

Why a women's tefillah group?

First and foremost in my mind is the educational component. As a group, the women who participate in these *tefillot*, and particularly those who take the risk of active roles, have a much better knowledge and understanding of the *tefillot*. How often have you been a passenger on the same route day after day and suddenly when you learn to drive you realize you have absolutely no idea of how to get where you are going?

I was reminded of this the other day when I received (a fairly typical) phone call from a new *tefillah* group in New Jersey. "Um..." said the women, falteringly... "um, I'm supposed to be putting together the women's *tefillah* this week and I just realized I have absolutely no idea what to do... You know, I do go to *shul* every Shabbat..." at this her voice trailed off.

For most women these *tefillot* are their first opportunity to effectively learn the order of the prayers. Suddenly they realize that you don't say *av harachamim* every week, and they may finally understand what a *mi sheberakh* is. And the more we women learn the more curious we become and the more connected we feel.

And this leads to the second (inextricably linked) reason for the groups' existence. The more educated you are about a topic, the more connected you feel and the more motivated to take on more. An obvious, but quiet crisis in the Modern Orthodox community is that the women have been fading out. Many of my peers from *yeshiva* high schools, don't *davven* daily, arrive in *shul* for socializing and most don't wash or *bentsch* over bread. Let's be honest here, most boys in the Modern

Orthodox community are expected to read Torah for their *bar mitzvah* although few go on to become Torah readers on a regular basis. Essentially, what we believe is that knowledge of this skill will make boys more literate in *shul*, more comfortable, more sophisticated in their listening, in other words, more active participants.

Similarly women who have learned to read Torah gain a better appreciation of the services. Although not always conscious of it, many Modern Orthodox women feel incompetent—incompetent that they can't quickly open to the right *parsha* for *Shabbat Shekalim* and don't remember what to do with the *lulav* and *etrog* on Sukkot. So they opt out.

Another powerful reason for rabbis to encourage *tefillah* groups in their *shuls* is that it instantly transforms women into active participants on those weeks when they pray with the whole *shul*. One of the most disturbing outcomes of the insensitive way *mehitzot* have been constructed is that women have been relegated to the role of spectators. The most obvious sign of this is that while the men's section of most Orthodox *shul* buzz with prayers, chanted, hum, sung, the women's section is eerily silent. Women have been taught to *davven* with their eyes. They have learned well from the *mehitzah* that they are to watch the *tefillah*, not participate. One of the struggles any new women's *tefillah* group faces is to develop from a silent space into the same alive, vocal and vibrant community which characterizes the men's section in an Orthodox *shul*.

It is true that the reorganization of the *shuls* and of the *mehitzah* and the re-education of the women would all serve the same purpose. But while those slow, almost tortuous changes evolve, the women's *tefillah* groups become a greenhouse where this learning and growing can take place in a safe environment.

And then there is the question of the spiritual connection many women feel by being part of a community of women. Men feel it. They have felt it through the ages. That is why a *shul* during the week has become such a male-centered place. The sense of camaraderie, understanding and ability to be with other women in the presence of our Creator is a powerful experience. I would think our critics would understand this.

Women are, in many ways, different from men. They relate to each other and to God often differently than their male counterparts. Many, many women will speak in hushed tones of the first time they *davvened* at a women's *tefillah*, how they felt moved and connected in a way they never felt in the main *shul*. For them, these groups provide an avenue to God which they might not have otherwise.

So why the opposition? Why is it, if in reality the *halakhic* issues can all be addressed and the gains seem so overwhelmingly positive, that we are hearing the voices of rabbis who insist that the *tefillah* groups are bad things? Why do they feel so strongly that they are willing to go out on a none-too-defensible limb and create a prohibition where none previously existed? Because, I believe, these rabbis fully understand, that these *tefillah* groups ultimately represent a much larger issue in the Jewish community. They understand that what is truly at issue here is not merely monthly prayer groups but a shifting reality. They and I would disagree only as to where these changes will lead.

Perhaps these rabbis are afraid that a growing group of well-educated, confident women will be too powerful a force. Suddenly women, with growing confidence from their prayer and growing knowledge from their study will feel confident enough in their Jewish knowledge to challenge misinformation, analyze the current rulings and best of all clarify the distinction between Jewish law and social policy. They are afraid, I believe, that such a society would blur gender distinctions, wreak havoc with our traditions and perhaps even negatively affect the family.

The reality, however, is that we women involved in the women's *tefillot* for these past 20 years have seen that these innovations lead to positive change, bringing women closer to God and the community. Not only do they lead to stronger voices at prayer, but stronger, more committed families, better educators and more sensitive leadership. We are firmly convinced that continuing down this path to a world which allows for more flexibility in defined roles will allow for more Jewishly connected lives for the women; perhaps for the men as well. Such changes may lead to a new, more complex and less predictable world; our bet is it will be a better world and we'll never really know until we try.

Strength In Diversity

The most important thing for all of us to remember is that never in Jewish history have there been meaningful innovations in the religious community without heated, passionate, sometimes violent disagreement. In an ironic sense this is what makes our community so strong. Women's *tefillah* groups are facts on the ground. To quote from the recent public statement made by the Women's *Tefillah* Network: At a time when the Modern Orthodox community is dramatically raising the level of learning and religious expression of its women, those who fear these developments should exercise restraint and allow others, equally committed, to develop vehicles of religious expression which bring Jews closer to the love and service of God. +

❖ ❖ ❖ Ta sh'ma ❖ ❖ ❖

We invite you to send us your favorite text and comment. Submissions should not exceed 200 words. Be sure to include proper citation of sources. Hebrew will appear in transliteration.

■ Jack H Bloom

We are grateful to *You*...

FROM THE DAILY PRAYERS

In Judaism, even private prayer is plural. The community Israel? Of course!

Another understanding with a different frame.

Who are the *grateful* "We"? "We" is "me", and includes all our diverse "selves." Some "selves" blessed and valued. Other "selves" cursed and rejected. Some "selves" displayed. Other "selves" hidden. Some "selves" cursed as worthless.

The cursed "selves" result when "violence" (some unintended) tears at the fragile, vulnerable "Divine image" in which we are cast. In childhood, the "image" being tender, this happens easily. For too many others trauma happens later on. A "self" is wounded even as other "selves" continue growing. Life being what it is, few escape whole, unscathed. We name these wounded "selves" anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, insecurity, fear and so on. We experience "them" as symptoms and label "them" problematical. At times when they show up, "they" are us. We struggle to rid ourselves of "them," hoping "they" stay hidden and unseen.

Where do these wounded "selves" reside? "They" languish in the rifts that mark our either/or dichotomies; me/not me; good/bad; rational/irrational; independent/dependent; sacred/profane; mind/body; conscious/unconscious; strong/weak; and on and on. We hold tightly to the notion that our true self is *either one or* the other side of these splits. We opt for what we "should" be and condemn the unblessed other. We have been painstakingly taught to overlook that *we are both/and* rather than *either/or*.

Self occurs in the relationship between "selves" when both "selves" are simultaneously blessed and valued. It is with gratefulness, voiced on behalf of all "selves," that we affirm that each "self" blessed and valued has a place. With that, an "I-thou" conversation between "selves" can commence. And it is in that conversation that self happens.

DR. JACK H BLOOM, PhD, of Fairfield CT, counts himself among the grateful "we."