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## WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN SHEVA BERAKHOT

### INTRODUCTION

During this past decade or two, the Jewish community has seen a dramatic increase in the interest taken by women in participating in religious rituals. Some of the interest stems from the general consciousness raising generated by the feminist movement, while other flows from the unprecedented high level of Jewish education made available to this generation of Jewish women.<sup>1</sup> Whatever the motivation, however, an analysis undertaken within the halakhic community must proceed on a case-by-case basis. Technical considerations—not to mention questions of public policy—differ from issue to issue. Halakhah (Jewish law) is a legal structure which precedes according to its own rules of logic and methodology, and it is its processes which must be followed in each case. In this essay, we focus on the possibility of women's participation in *Sheva Berakhot*, the series of seven blessings recited after each meal in honor of a new bride and groom during the first week of their marriage.<sup>2</sup>

An indication of the need for exploring the issue in depth is to be found in *Sava Semahot*,<sup>3</sup> a well-researched book on all of the laws of *Sheva Berakhot*. The author records every available source on every related issue, noting also opinions that conflict with his own decisions. There is only one ruling which he records without citing any source whatsoever. "It is *pashut* (simply obvious)," he writes, "that the law is that a woman may not recite these blessings."<sup>4</sup> However, an examination of the sources reveals that it is not *pashut* at all.

### THE GENERAL OBLIGATION

The Mishnah<sup>5</sup> records the basic limitation on the saying of these blessings: "One does not say *Bikhat Avrilim* (Mourners' Blessing) . . . or *Bikhat Hatanim*" (Grooms' Blessing) . . . with fewer than ten [adult free men present]." This, of course, is not the only paral-

lelim between the religious laws associated with the life-cycle events of marriage and death. The marriage celebration lasts seven days, as does the period of mourning. Both *Birkhat Aveilim* and *Birkhat Hatanim* are repeated throughout the week in the presence of a minyan, provided someone who has not previously heard them recited (*panim hadashot*) is present along with, respectively, the mourner and the bride and groom. But *Birkhat Aveilim* has fallen into disuse, while the laws of *Birkhat Hatanim* has evolved considerably, as we shall see.

That Talmud records the dictum of R. Halbo in the name of Rav Huna that "Anyone who takes pleasure from a marriage feast (*sevidet hatan*) and does not cheer him has a five-fold violation."<sup>18</sup> Maharsha<sup>19</sup> notes that the Sages enacted the seven *Birkhat Hatanim* in this regard; that is, although there are many ways of cheering the bride and groom, the Sages decreed that it be done by reciting the *Sheva Berakhot*. As anyone who takes pleasure from the feast is thereby obligated in *Sheva Berakhot*, at this stage there seems to be no reason for excluding women from this obligation.

Radbaz<sup>20</sup> ties this obligation of those who participated in the wedding feast to the more general ruling of Rambam (Maimonides) concerning everyone's responsibility to the new couple. Rambam rules:

It is a positive commandment of the Sages . . . to cheer the bride and groom and provide for all their needs. And these are acts of kindness done himself which have no set quantities. Even though all these *mitsvot* were promulgated by the Sages, they all fall under the rubric of "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."<sup>21</sup>

Here too there seems to be no reason to exclude women from this obligation.

Nonetheless, R. Shaul Yisraeli<sup>22</sup> maintains that women are not obligated in this *mitsvah* to cheer the bride and groom. And since he sees the recitation of the *Sheva Berakhot* as but one of the specific ways one can fulfill the *mitsvah*, they share no obligation in their recitation.

This position has serious consequences. In halakhah in general—and matters of prayers and *berakhot* in particular—obligation is an important consideration. If a number of people are obligated to say a *berakha*, they can all fulfill their duty by listening to one person recite the blessing. (This is done, for example, on a regular basis on Friday night, where everyone who is obligated to say *kiddush* fulfills their obligation through the one person who recites it.) However, the requirement for using this procedure is that the person reciting the blessing have the maximum obligation of all those present. (Thus the Shulhan Arukh rules that because men and women have the same obligation in *kiddush*, a man can fulfill his obligation by listening to a

women recite the prayer.) If all the men at the meal are obligated to say *Sheva Berakhot* and women are not, a woman could not recite the blessings on behalf of everyone. And since a *minyan* of adult free men is required for reciting all seven blessings, there would be no possibility of an all-female audience who would all share the same level of obligation.

Moreover, there is an additional difficulty regarding blessings. *Berakhot* are, in a sense, copyrighted liturgical forms which may be recited only for the purposes for which they were created. Thus, for example, one can compose an original prayer of appreciation at the sight of, say, an orchid. But if one recites the blessing "*horei pri ha-etz*" without actually eating one of the apples, the prayer becomes a serious violation instead of a positive religious expression. Thus if women are really excluded from saying *Sheva Berakhot*, one cannot cavalierly allow them to do so.

R. Yisraeli's reasoning is as follows: *Sheva Berakhot* constitute but one way of fulfilling the obligation to cheer the groom—and it is only the groom who must be cheered, not the bride and groom. One of the main ways of cheering him is to dance before him, and it would violate all laws of modesty for the women to do so publicly. They therefore are exempted from the general obligation to cheer him and from any specifics of this obligation (such as *Sheva Berakhot*). Of course, men could dance before the groom and women before the bride. But, says R. Yisraeli, there is no obligation on the audience to cheer the bride; that is an obligation that falls only on the groom himself. True, the Talmud<sup>23</sup> asks "How does one dance before the bride?" That, he explains, is because when people dance before the bride it cheers the groom.

Yet, with all due respect, the argument seems a bit forced. The obligation to dance seems to be built on the obligation to say *Sheva Berakhot*, not conversely. Exempting one from a duty to dance should not carry an exclusion from saying the *berakhot*. And even if we were to concede that there is no obligation to cheer the bride, R. Yisraeli recognizes that dancing before her cheers the groom. Thus women have a sufficiently modest opportunity to fulfill an obligation to cheer the groom. Indeed, the Midrash notes that the dogs did not eat the soles of Jezebel's feet because she had used them to fulfill the *mitsvah* of dancing before the bride and groom, and the *Tur* records this in its codification.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, we saw that Rambam clearly says that the *mitsvah* is to cheer the bride and groom. He sees this as part of the *mitsvah* of "loving your neighbor as yourself," and there is no reason to exempt women from this general obligation or any of the other specifics mentioned by Rambam there (to visit the sick, console the mourners, bury the dead, marry off brides, etc.).

## THE LINK TO THE MEAL

Even though *Sheva Berakhot* seems to grow out of the response required of participants in the festive meal, if it is seen as a specific example of how to cheer the bride and groom, one could conceivably recite them out of the context of a meal. Indeed, several early authorities sever the tight connection to the meal, based primarily on "Massekhet Sofrim's comment"<sup>15</sup> that "It was the custom to say *Birkhat Hatanim* over a cup of wine in the morning and at night *before* the meal in the presence of ten [adult free men] and *panim hadashot*." However, as a practical halakhic matter, they are now said only after a meal, and the Gaon of Vilna emended the text to read "after" instead of "before," thereby eliminating the primary basis for those earlier rulings.

Rambam, in fact, records the obligation to say *Birkhat Hatanim* in his discussion of the laws of *Birkhat HaMazon* (the "Grace" said after meals).<sup>16</sup> After recording the general laws of *Birkhat HaMazon*, he notes: (in halakhah 5) that the "retzer" paragraph is added on Shabbat; (in halakhah 6) that "*Al HaNissim*" is added on Hanukka and Purim, and "*Ya-ale veYavo*" on its appropriate days; (in halakhah 7) that a guest adds his or her appropriate blessing; (in halakhah 8) that in the home of a mourner the appropriate blessing of consolation is added; (in halakhah 9) that *Birkhat Hatanim*, which he later defines as "*Asher bara*" (the last of the *Sheva Berakhot*), is added in the home of a newly married groom; and (in halakhah 10) that if a minyan of ten (adult free men) is present and some did not yet hear the recitation of all *Sheva Berakhot*, then all seven blessings are recited for them.

Most significantly, in halakhah 9, after noting that *Birkhat Hatanim* is added by the individual in *Birkhat HaMazon*, Rambam adds; "Neither slaves nor minors recite this blessing." This is a meaningful departure from his usual triad of "women, slaves and minors."

Sefer HaMenuha offers two explanations for the exclusion of these groups. The first is that these are excluded from uniting to form the group necessary for reciting *Birkhat HaZimmin*<sup>17</sup>—the preliminary blessing to *Birkhat HaMazon* to which we will soon turn. This, he notes, would also exclude women. The second is that while women are (obviously) active participants in matters of marriage, slaves are excluded from matters of marriage and divorce!<sup>18</sup> (as are the minors) and therefore should not recite the extra blessing associated with a new marriage.

Clearly, the first explanation is deficient for a number of reasons. First, it ignores the clear change in Rambam's language. Second, it introduces a concept clearly absent in Rambam's formulation. The discussion here is about a paragraph to be added to an individual's

personal *Birkhat HaMazon* and in no way involves the issue of *Birkhat HaZimmin*. Unquestionably, the simple meaning of Rambam's ruling is that a woman may say "*Asher bara*" as part of her individual *Birkhat HaMazon*.<sup>19</sup>

## THE SHIFT TO BIRKHAṬ HAZIMMIN

We shall see momentarily that, on a practical level, the Halakhah moved away from tying *Sheva Berakhot* to *Birkhat HaMazon* and associated it instead with *Birkhat HaZimmin*. We therefore take a short digression to summarize the laws of *zimmin* (invitation) as they relate to women.<sup>20</sup>

"Three who ate [a meal together] as one" are required to invite one another to say *Birkhat HaMazon*. There is a call for the blessing from the leader and a response from the others present. If a minyan of ten adult men is present, God's name is added to the *zimmin* blessing (which is then called *zimmin baShem*). Two people who ate together cannot say the *zimmin*.

Three men who ate together have an obligation to say *Birkhat HaZimmin*. Some authorities (like the Gaon of Vilna) maintain that three women have a similar obligation; however, the final halakhic decision is that three women have the option to say the *zimmin* if they so desire, but are not obligated to do so. Because coed situations are potentially (though hardly necessarily) promiscuous, a group of two men and one woman (or two women and one man) is not recognized as a quorum that will allow for the *zimmin*, as the saying *Birkhat HaZimmin* would call public attention to the coed nature of the meal.

Despite this, if three or more men already create the obligation to say the *zimmin*, the presence of a woman among them has no impact in generating the quorum, and the Halakhah therefore obligates the women eating with the men to participate in *Birkhat HaZimmin*. Yet even here there is an argument to be made against one of the women being the leader. Originally, all participants fulfilled their obligation to say *Birkhat HaMazon* by listening to the leader's recital rather than by saying it individually (as is usually done today). The person acting as the leader must therefore have maximum obligation. Men have a Torah obligation to say *Birkhat HaMazon*, but the *Shulhan Arukh* leaves undecided the question of whether women's obligation in *Birkhat HaMazon* is a Torah rabbinic one.

Returning to the issue of *Sheva Berakhot*, we see the important shift made by the *Shulhan Arukh*<sup>21</sup> in summarizing its halakhot. Ten adult males must be present to say *Birkhat Hatanim*, whether said at

the marriage ceremony or after *Birkhat HaMazon*. "If only the *Asher bara* blessing is said after *Birkhat HaMazon*, the presence of ten is not necessary." Ramo's gloss there is that "but three are necessary"; as Beirurei HaGra explains: "so that there be a *zimmin*." *Birkhat Hatanim* is no longer simply part of an individual's *Birkhat HaMazon*; it is now dependent on the existence of a *zimmin*.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, in responding to the question of whether one may leave a wedding meal before *Sheva Berakhot* are said, R. Moshe Feinstein rules<sup>23</sup> that those obligated to hear *Birkhat HaZimmin* must hear the *Sheva Berakhot*, and the way to free oneself from the obligation of the latter is to exempt oneself from the obligation of the former.

Most significantly, the Shulhan Arukh notes after this formulation that *Birkhat Hatanim* is not to be recited by slaves and minors, again not excluding women. Helkat Mechokek explains there that the slaves and minors are excluded because they cannot be included in the three required for the *zimmin*. But, of course, women are obligated in *Birkhat HaZimmin* if they eat with the men, and have the option of doing so if they eat alone.<sup>24</sup> They therefore are not excluded from saying *Birkhat Hatanim*.

#### PROPRIETY AND PUBLIC POLICY

There are two additional issues to be considered. The first is the issue of modesty. In general, the tradition takes the view that a woman should not project herself publicly. In many circles, it would be considered immodest for a woman to deliver a Torah lecture to a group of men, let alone lead them in a blessing.<sup>25</sup> Of course, many groups within the Halakhic community are quite comfortable with women teaching men, assuming professional leadership in yeshivot (even though that entails working with male teachers and parents), working as doctors, lawyers, and the like. But this in and of itself is hardly sufficient to settle the issue.

But a halakhic ruling by R. Ovadia Yosef in a related issue is relevant to our concern. After emerging from a potentially dangerous situation, such as a serious illness, both men and women are required to recite *Birkhat HaGommel* publicly, preferably at the time of the Torah reading. Because childbirth can have serious complications, a woman must recite this blessing when she recovers; it is most common, however, for her husband to say it on her behalf when he receives an *aliya* to the Torah. Yet R. Yosef rules that she should say the *berakha* from the ladies section when the Torah is read, or enter a gathering

of men after services and say it publicly in their presence. Some might feel that this is indecent behavior, he notes, "but I say that the evil inclination is not to be found for such a short matter . . . especially nowadays when women regularly go out to public places among men. . . . [Similarly, under these circumstances] one need not be concerned about the issue of *kol zemer shel isha erva* (a woman's singing voice is sexually arousing)."<sup>26</sup> One cannot apply this ruling indiscriminately, but it certainly seems to apply to our situation.

A more difficult question is the issue of public policy. Rabbinic authorities have an obligation to protect the integrity of the halakhah, not simply decide technical issues of "permitted or forbidden." Currently, "egalitarianism" encourages women to participate in areas of tradition even when it cannot be justified by a halakhic argument. To allow women to participate in areas which they have avoided (whether or not it was technically permitted to them), the argument would go, is to confuse those unlettered in halakhic sources and encourage a non-halakhic egalitarian approach. On the other hand, one might maintain that when authorities forbid what is actually permitted, they strengthen the hands of those who say that rabbinic prohibitions in this area flow from personal biases rather than halakhic commitment and thus in the end encourage the proponents of egalitarianism. This is a most legitimate debate. The problem is that proponents of each side are convinced that the correctness of their respective positions is *pashtut*.

YESHIVAH OF FLATBUSH

#### NOTES

1. I have discussed the general issue (and some specific questions like women saying Mourner's Kaddish) in "Modern Orthodoxy and Women's Changing Self-Perception," *Tradition*, 22:1, (Spring 1986), pp. 65–81; and the major issues of *Sheva Berakhot* in "Al hishatfutam shel nashim besimhat batan vekalla," *Amudim*, 31:3 (No. 444), Kislev 5743 [1883], pp. 86–88, and "Hiyuv nashim bebirchat hatanim," *Tehumin* (Alon Shvut, Israel, 5745 [1985]), Vol. 6, pp. 118–120.

2. *Sheva Berakhot* are also recited during the marriage ceremony. This set of blessings require a separate analysis, and the conclusions reached here do not necessarily apply to these *berakhot*. See R. Azaria Berzon, "Birchat Hatanim," *Tehumin* (Alon Shvut, Israel, 5745 [1985]), Vol. 6, pp. 101–117; and David-Weiss Halivni, "On Ordination of Women," an unpublished paper prepared for the faculty of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

3. R. Sheraya Deblinsky, *Sava Semahot* (Jerusalem-New York, 5731 [1971]).

4. *Ibid.*, p. 78, n. 70. In turn, of course, *Sava Semahot* becomes the cited source for the ruling in Aaron Felder, *Oholei Yeshurun* (New York, 1980), Vol. 1, p. 30, that "a woman may not recite any of the *Sheva Berachot*."
5. Mishnah Megilla 3:2 (TB Megilla 23a).
6. In various sources, *Birkhat Hatanim* refers to all *Sheva Berakhot* (the blessing for wine plus the six specific blessings in honor of the bride and groom) or only the last and longest of them ("Asher bara").
7. At least with regard to the wedding feast, the *panim hadashot* must be "important" people. *Hiddushai HaRitva* (Ketubot 7b) postulates that part of the definition of "important" is the ability to make up the quorum required for the recitation of the *Sheva Berakhot*. Thus he rules that a woman cannot qualify for *panim hadashot* even though she is otherwise important. On the other hand, *Hiddushai Hatanim Safer* (Ketubot 7a, s.v., *bemakhelet*) allows women to be *panim hadashot* (but R. Menashe Klein (*Responsa Mishneh Halakhot* II 47--48 and VII 246) feels that this was only a theoretical approval).
8. TB Berakhot 6a.
9. To TB Berakhot 6a, s.v., *over*.
10. *Ibid.*, s.v., *Mitsvat Aseh*.
11. Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, Hilkhot Avel 14:1.
12. R. Shaul Yisraeli, "Be-minyan Birkhat Hatanim veShituf Isha Bahen," *Barka-i*, Summer 5743 [1983], No. 1, pp. 163--166.
13. TB Ketubot 17a.
14. Even HaEzer 65.
15. 19:11.
16. Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, Hilkhot Berakhot 2:1--11.
17. TB Berakhot 7b.
18. TB Kiddushin 41b.
19. A puzzling reference to this exclusionary phrase is found in Kessef Mishneh's commentary at the end of halakhah 10. Printed in brackets (and missing from the first printed edition), it says that "It seems to be obvious [that slaves and minors cannot say this blessing, as they may not join to make up the quorum of ten adult free men] and *a fortiori* cannot say the blessing." This would, of course, also exclude women. But aside from the fact that it ignores Rambam's deliberate change of language, he made this ruling in halakhah 9, which refers to an individual's additional blessing which does not require the presence of any quorum. Moreover, the *a fortiori* argument is invalid. There is no principle that individuals who cannot make up a necessary minyan are excluded from saying the prayers which require that minyan. The Mishnah which sets out the requirement of ten adult free men to say *Birkhat Hatanim* requires the same minyan for the public reading of the Torah and Haftarah. But women were originally allowed aliyot to the Torah and minors regularly read from the Torah and say the Haftarah today. (Similarly, women and minors say Mourner's Kaddish, which also requires the presence of a male minyan.)
20. I have explored this in detail in "The Eating Fellowship: An Exploration," *Tradition*, 16:3, (Spring, 1977), pp. 75--82.
21. Even HaEzer 62:4--7.
22. Thus, for example, R. Shelomo Kluger (*Responsa HaElef Lekha Shelomo*,

Orah Hayyim, No. 93) rules that if three men (including the groom) ate at the meal and seven other men did not eat are present, *Sheva Berakhot* may be said (if *panim hadashot* and the bride and groom are present) even though there is no *zimmun haShem*. The minyan required for *Sheva Berakhot* is present, and the obligation for *zimmun* exists.

23. R. Moshe Feinstein, *Iggrot Moshe*, Orah Hayyim, Vol. 1, No. 56.

24. R. Shelomo Zalman Auerbach [quoted in R. David Auerbach, *Halikhot Beita* (Jerusalem, 5743 [1983]), p. 94, n. 14] notes that if one or two men eat with three or more women, the women may recite *Birkhat HaZimmun* and the men should respond. (Neither of the men should lead the *zimmun* because they alone do not constitute a quorum and one of them saying *Birkhat HaZimmun* would give the impression that a woman was allowed to join them to complete the required quorum.) It therefore follows that if two women eat with the bride and groom, they may form a *zimmun* and add the *Asher bara* blessing, which does not require a minyan. In agreeing with this conclusion, D. Auerbach suggests that *Asher bara* should be said only if the women actually exercised their option of *zimmun*. (Personal communication, 18 Heshvan 5747 [20 November 1987]).

25. The question of a woman being a cantor relates more to the fact that a woman has only a rabbinic obligation in the liturgical prayer and a man has a Torah obligation. Thus, for example, in searching for a halakhic justification for a woman cantor, Joel Roth proposes a paradigm in which women would undertake an obligation that surpasses that of men. ("On the Ordination of Women as Rabbis," in Simon Greenberg (ed.), in *The Ordination of Women as Rabbis: Studies and Responsa* (New York, 1988), pp. 127--187). In general, his proposal has not been well received. (See Gidon Rothstein, "The Roth Responsum on the Ordination of Women," *Tradition*, 24:1, (Fall 1988), pp. 104--115; and the exchange between Roth and Rothstein, "Communications," *Tradition*, 24:4, (Summer 1989), pp. 112--114.)

26. R. Ovadia Yosef, *Responsa Yehaveh Da-at* (Jerusalem, 5741 [1981]), Vol. 4, responsim 15, pp. 77f.