

Women Leading *Kabbalat Shabbat* with Men Present

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Introduction

The custom of *Kabbalat Shabbat* was initiated in the middle of the sixteenth century by the kabbalists in Safad. Unlike many of our other prayers, it is a relatively modern development. Therefore, the question of whether women can lead the *Kabbalat Shabbat* service for both men and women requires analysis quite different from that of other *t'fillot*. Thus it was disquieting to see a recent statement issued by the Orthodox Union as to the impropriety of a woman leading *Kabbalat Shabbat* when men are present, and interesting to note that the statement did not include any halakhic discussion or analysis. What are the possible reasons that it would be considered improper for a woman to lead *Kabbalat Shabbat* services with men present, and for such a practice (in the words of the Orthodox Union) to “constitute an unacceptable breach of Jewish tradition”? We address a number of possible concerns below.

Custom

There is a certain irony in claiming, as the OU did, that a lack of precedent for women leading *Kabbalat Shabbat* is precisely what makes it improper. If precedent were required for every innovation in Jewish practice, even more specifically, innovation in the synagogue, then this discussion would be moot. Even *Kabbalat Shabbat* itself had no precedent as a part of synagogue liturgy, and yet has become part of weekly *t'filla*. Our rabbinic literature is replete with cases of customs that **have** changed over the centuries, whether new prohibitions and stringencies have been introduced – or whether old customs have been abandoned or adapted to new circumstances. Space limitations permit presentation of just one excellent example – that of mourner's *kaddish*. (See [JOFA Journal, Spring 2008, "If They are Not Prophets, Then They are the Children of Prophets"](#)) Like *Kabbalat Shabbat*, mourner's *kaddish* was not always part of our liturgical service, and it is merely a custom. The only possible Talmudic precedent that could be suggested for it – applying a lot of creativity - is the statement that a son can bring credit to his father (*Kiddushin* 104a). The customs surrounding the *kaddish* have changed radically over time (how many times it is said, who says it, whether it is said in unison). The most recent development in the custom of mourner's *kaddish*, is the growing number of women who choose to say it and the growing number of Modern Orthodox communities in which this has become acceptable.

Concerns of Fulfilling the Obligation of Individuals on Their Behalf

It is a well-known principle of Jewish law that certain (but not all) personal obligations can be fulfilled on behalf of someone else, but only if the one performing the obligation has at least the same level of obligation as the one on whose behalf it is being performed. (Mishna *Rosh HaShana* 3:8) Therefore, given the fact that we know that women's obligations are sometimes not identical to men's obligations, one might ask if any such issue arises in the case of a woman leading *Kabbalat Shabbat* services. However, because there is no personal obligation in *Kabbalat Shabbat*, there is no issue of a leader fulfilling an obligation on behalf of others.

As stated in the opening paragraph, *Kabbalat Shabbat* is a custom that originated in Safad and then spread to Jewish communities all over the world. However, it is not obligatory, and, in fact, because of the non-obligatory nature of *Kabbalat Shabbat*, there are some congregations that make distinctions between *Kabbalat Shabbat* and

all other *tefillot*, such as having the leader stand at the *bima* (where the Torah is read) rather than at the *amud* (from where prayers are led). And, most tellingly for our analysis, in many congregations, it is common to have a minor lead *Kabbalat Shabbat*.

Thus, there need be no examination of a woman's obligation in *Kabbalat Shabbat* and whether it is the same as a man's obligation. It is the same -- because there is none. Furthermore, we know that a woman's obligations relating to *Shabbat* are identical to a man's, which is why she is obligated in *kiddush*. (*B'rakhot* 20b)

Kol B'Isha Erva

Needless to say, *Kabbalat Shabbat* can technically be led without singing or chanting. However, given the almost universal custom to sing parts of the *t'filla*, we briefly address the issue of *kol isha* below. In *Masekhet B'rakhot* we read Sh'muel's declaration that the voice of a woman is *erva* (perhaps nakedness, lewdness, sexual impropriety). Various interpretations are offered by the *rishonim*, resulting in a dispute among them, some of whom maintain that there is a general prohibition for a man to hear a woman's voice and some of whom maintain that the prohibition applies specifically to recitation of *sh'ma* (and perhaps *t'filla*, the silent prayer).

Opinions also vary as to whether the prohibition refers to any voice, or particularly a singing voice, whether the prohibition applies to any type of song, or only to sexually suggestive songs, and so forth. This brief statement cannot possibly cover the various interpretations and halakhic conclusions that resulted from Sh'muel's statement. However, we can state that the practical result is that within the Orthodox world there is a spectrum of attitudes and practices regarding the concern of *kol isha*.

Therefore, it becomes clear that whether *kol isha* would be a concern, in particular regarding *Kabbalat Shabbat*, depends upon the community in which such a service would be held. A community that has accepted Rabbi Yehi'el Weinberg's approach (*S'ridei Esh* 1:77), and many Modern Orthodox communities fall into this category, whereby religious hymns do not inspire licentious thoughts, should not be uncomfortable with women leading *Kabbalat Shabbat*. The *S'ridei Esh* stated that "whatever one does not do in a manner of affection but is only done for the cause of Heaven is permitted." The *S'ridei Esh* cited the *S'de Hemed* (*Ma'arekhet HaKuf* 42 IV:485), who cited in the name of R. Aharon De Toledo (*Divrei Hefetz*, Salonika 1798 p. 113b), that it is permitted for men and women to sing *z'mirot* together, "because there is no suspicion of sinful thoughts with hymns." One might argue that this reasoning only applies to men and women singing together, but in fact R. Aharon De Toledo wrote is that as long as a woman is not singing sensual love songs, and as long as a man does not intend to derive pleasure from her voice, there is no prohibition, such as if she is singing praises to God for a miracle, or is singing a lullaby to a baby, or is wailing at a funeral.

To augment this approach, let us also consider R. Ovadia Yosef's explanation as to why it is permissible for a woman to recite *birkat ha-gomel* in a *minyan* of men (*Y'hava Da'at* 4:15). R. Yosef brings several proofs that *kol isha* is not of concern where there is trepidation before the *Sh'khina*. Lest one think that his statement only applies to a speaking voice and not to a singing voice, it should be pointed out that among his proofs regarding *birkat ha-gomel* are the reading of the *m'gilla* or the

Torah with trope, the former being permitted, in his opinion, for women to fulfill the obligation for men; the latter being permitted, in his opinion, under extenuating circumstances, and only forbidden because of the dignity of the congregation, but not because of singing of the trope.

This, of course, is not to imply that we can conclude that R. Yosef would be in favor of women leading *Kabbalat Shabbat* (or that it would be his preference for women to read *m'gilla* for men), but rather that he would need to have another reason to disapprove of such activities.

Modesty: *Kol K'vuda Bat Melekh P'nima* [All the princess's belongings should be led within]

Though the above fragment of a verse from Psalms (45:14) is frequently used to anchor the position that Jewish women are to avoid appearing in public or to take public positions, that is certainly not the literal translation of the verse, which is that the princess enters (her palace) accompanied by all of her possessions. In Psalm 45 it is likely that the princess referred to was Gentile, who was taken as a wife by an Israelite king. Literal or not, this model of modest behavior for Jewish women has been held as an ideal, though examination of our sources and history makes it clear that Jewish women were out and about in the market place, by the river, in the *beit midrash*, in court, etc.

A Jewish woman's place in public roles is subject to community norms. In Maimonides' community, where women rarely ventured out, it might have been acceptable to limit their appearance in public. Today, in Modern Orthodox communities, people are accustomed to seeing women, including observant Jewish women, in all sorts of professions in public. We have become accustomed to women giving *divrei Torah* in synagogues, serving as principals of schools, teaching groups of men and women, and more. We cannot pretend that the concept of women's public roles has remained constant throughout the centuries. Leading *Kabbalat Shabbat* would not make a woman any more "public".

Looking Reform/Conservative

A common argument that is used when there is no specific halakhic justification for forbidding an innovation is that it is similar to a Reform (or Conservative) practice. Inherent in this argument is the fear that if we do something like they do, then the level of observance of actual *halakha* in our communities will deteriorate. To ascertain whether there is any truth to this fear, there needs to be a serious analysis, beyond the scope of this piece, of cause and effect in religious observance, particularly during the historical period of the enlightenment and the emancipation of Jews.

In this brief discourse, it is worth pointing out that some of the innovations of the Reform and Conservative communities that were prohibited, often with extreme vehemence, in the Orthodox community have become, over time, the norm. Among these are sermons in the vernacular, celebration of the *bat mitzvah*, and in the case of mourner's *kaddish*, reciting *kaddish* in unison (in Ashkenazic communities; it was always the norm in Sephardic communities).

Slippery slope

Another commonly used public policy concern is that of the “slippery slope”. Though, technically, something may not be halakhically forbidden, the argument is put forward that if it were permitted it might lead to other actually forbidden acts. This type of argument actually is sometimes used in the Talmud, using the term *atu*, meaning “on account of.” To protect against a transgression, sometimes the Sages would decree a rule as a matter of public policy. One example is the prohibition to drink Gentiles’ beer (*Avoda Zara* 31b), which was expanded by the Rabbis to encompass even those types of Gentile beer that technically need not be forbidden.

A recently learned page in the *daf yomi* cycle (*Avoda Zara* 64a) provides an example of the Sages being concerned with a slippery slope in another direction. In spite of the serious prohibition of deriving any benefit from objects of pagan worship or from *yeyn nesekh* (wine that could have been tainted with pagan libation), the *g’mara* cites a *mishna* (*D’mai* 6:10) which states that if a convert to Judaism and his Gentile brother inherit property from their Gentile father, the convert can say to his brother: “You take the pagan objects, and I’ll take the money” or “You take the *yeyn nesekh* and I’ll take the crops.” Though the convert derives benefit from forbidden objects in this manner (space does not permit elaboration of how, but see the discussion surrounding *Avoda Zara* 64a), Rav Papa explains that a convert’s inheritance is different; the Sages were lenient and decreed that a convert is permitted to make such an arrangement, lest he return to his Gentile ways in order to acquire the inheritance.

A lesson can be learned from this latter example. Slippery slopes can slide in many directions, and at times certain halakhic stands must be taken to keep Jews engaged and committed. In considering the situation of women leading *Kabbalat Shabbat* in a mixed communal setting, would prohibiting it drive some women out? Would permitting it bring more women into the synagogue? Clearly, in some communities, these are valid concerns, and we hope this article will be a springboard for fruitful dialogue regarding the issue, a dialogue informed by *halakha* and a desire to ensure that all of *K’lal Yisrael*, men and women alike, is welcome within our community.