

## Women's Participation in Ritual: Time for a Paradigm Shift

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Today, the baseline in any Orthodox community is that women do not participate in public ritual at all. In the average Orthodox synagogue, there is not one thing that women do which is part of synagogue performance. Their presence is not felt and their voices are not heard. The paradigm for women's ritual participation in the Modern Orthodox world must change.

Although what I described above is standard, in some Orthodox shuls women have complained that they feel excluded and marginalized. In the best of shuls there has been an attempt to accommodate their feelings and various solutions have been offered. Some synagogues are unwilling to accommodate the women in the actual prayer space, but allow them to have a separate women's prayer group, often based around a Torah reading ceremony of some kind. Others have passively recognized women in the synagogue, e.g., *mehitza* down the middle, carrying the *Sefer Torah* into the women's section, etc. or allowed some active participation, e.g., opening the ark, saying a *mi-she-beirakh*, reciting *qaddish*, etc.

Instead of focusing on specific solutions, I wish to describe what I see as the overall problem with the process of coming to solutions. As described above, we

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<sup>1</sup> Morethodoxy shut down, so I am posting my previously published articles as PDFs here. They have not been revised.

begin with the assumption that women currently lead no prayers and play no public role in the synagogue service. If a group of women in a given synagogue feel that this is insufficient for them, they can come to the rabbi with a complaint and he will think about what he may be willing to do to accommodate them. In my opinion this process is seriously flawed, even if in a given case the outcome is satisfactory for the women. Why is it that we have no expectation that the rabbi will work actively to expand opportunities for women? Why is it that the synagogue automatically assumes that the baseline should be no participation and that women need to put themselves out there, at a real risk of humiliation and disappointment, before even the smallest action will be taken on her/their behalf?

I would argue that the reason the impetus for change has fallen so squarely on the shoulders of women stems from the fact that we are still living under an antiquated and obsolete paradigm. Although there are a number of Talmudic pericopae (*sugyot*) that discuss technical questions surrounding differences between men's and women's obligations in prayer and related halakhot, this does not really explain the stark difference between the place of men and women in the synagogue. The larger issue, I believe, is sociological in nature.

In the Rabbinic period, as well as throughout the Middle Ages, the place of women in the social hierarchy was very different than it is now. Women were rarely public figures and were discouraged from receiving too much education, taking visible public roles, participating in the power structure, and generally from being around men. If any woman were to express superior learning or knowledge than a man in front of a group it would have been a serious breach in etiquette. This is why,

according to Tosafot (b. *Sukkah* 38a, s.v. “*be-emet*”), women do not lead the Grace after Meals for men or read the *Megillah* for men, since it would be insulting to them (*zila milta*). For the same reason, R. Israel Meir Kagan, in his *Mishna B'rurah* (281:4) argues that women should not say *Qiddush* for men, at least in public. The Talmud offers a similar reason why women do not read from the Torah in synagogue (b. *Megillah* 23a), although they are apparently eligible to do so, as it would offend the honor of the congregation (*kavod ha-tzibbur*). This sociological stance, typical of the classical and medieval periods, goes a long way in explaining why the common practice is not only that women do not lead the repetition of the *amidah* (which requires a man who is obligated in this prayer service) but they do not even participate in *p'tihah* (taking out the Torah) or lead *p'supei de-zimrah* (the pre-prayer psalms), neither of which has any halakhic requirements for who should lead it at all.

The sociological realities nowadays are entirely different. In our world, women hold every position of respect and power in the public sphere as men do. Women serve in Congress and the cabinet, women are judges, doctors, lawyers and police officers. The idea that a group of modern Western men would feel offended if a woman were to perform a public function in a synagogue should be laughable, except for the fact that they may think it a religious violation. But it is only a religious violation since the rabbis believed that the men would be offended. It is a vicious cycle that continues nowadays only due to the unfortunate combination of inertia, obliviousness to halakhic sources, and paternalism.

This is where I believe the paradigm shift must occur. To break out of this vicious cycle, we need to shift the paradigm 180 degrees. Instead of saying that since women have never historically participated in public ritual, so each shul and each rabbi will—upon request—think about creative ways to allow women to participate ritually in things that are permitted, we should be saying that all Jews, *men and women*, can do or participate in any meaningful ritual unless it is clear that halakha expressly forbids this. How to define what halakha forbids will be a question every shul and rabbi will need to answer, but the inertia factor and the women-don't-do-these-kinds-of-things factor will have to be taken off the table.

In discussing this issue with others, I have sometimes heard the accusation that women are just trying to copy men. For example, in discussing women's Torah reading ceremonies, which occur in a number of Modern Orthodox shuls around the world, including the shul where I daven, (thanks to the initiative of [a number of women](#) and the sensitivity of the rabbi), I have heard people—not from my community—ask “why would women want to read from the Torah anyway? Is it just because men do it?” I have also heard the related claim: “They are just doing this to make a statement. Women should be more *tzanua* (modest) about such things.”

These dismissive statements are out of touch with the spiritual and sociological reality of the synagogue service. Women do not want to read from the Torah because men do; women and men both want to be called to the Torah because participating in the reading of the Torah is considered an honor (*kavod*) due to the great respect all Jews have for the Torah and the Torah scroll. Every man who

gets an *aliyah* receives a myriad of hand-shakes and *yeyashar koḥakha's*—and this is true on a regular Shabbat. On *Simḥat Torah* the average shul breaks out all the Torahs so that every single congregant—male congregant—can be called to the Torah. Afterwards, the real *kibbudim* (honors) begin.

A year or so ago, I received the *Hatan Torah* honor (the *aliyah* where the last section of the Torah is read). It was quite an honor. There was a speech about the work I do for the shul, there was a very long and overly flattering Hebrew prayer/song sung by the *gabbai*, and while he was doing so four men held a *tallit* over my head as if I were getting married. Needless to say, only men get this honor. One can use many adjectives to describe this *kavod*, but *tzanua* (modest) is not one of them. It seems rather disingenuous for men who receive these honors and take their access to the Torah for granted to then ask what possible reason could women want to be a part of this. It is totally unfair to create a society in which access to the Torah is considered the greatest honor, bar women from it, and then turn around and ask what their problem is.

Another critique that I have heard of women who want more ritual participation is that “most of these women hardly do what they're supposed to already; they come late to shul on Shabbat, they aren't punctilious in their own mitzvah observance, they don't do any extras like shaking the *lulav* and *etrog* or praying three times a day. Why should they get to do extras when they haven't even covered the basics?” I see two basic problems with this critique.

First, they should be granted access to ritual possibilities because it is their right. Since when is the shaking of a *lulav* the prerequisite to opening the ark, reciting a

*mi-she-beirakh* or dancing with a Torah scroll on *Simḥat Torah*? Second, even if a rabbi were to say that in his fantasy world he would only give *kibbudim* to people who were religiously “up-to-scratch,” I do not believe that he would feel that he could implement such a policy with men. For the life of me I cannot imagine a rabbi taking a Torah scroll away from a man on *Simḥat Torah* on the grounds that he comes late to shul on Shabbat, or announcing a policy that *aliyot* in his shul would only be given to men who show up consistently for weekday *minyan*. However, this is essentially what is being done to women who are told that since they do not *daven* enough, come to shul enough, do enough mitzvot—what have you—their desire to participate ritually in some way in the synagogue will be denied.

This leads to my final point, which is the issue of power structure. Women are finding it very difficult to make changes in their synagogues because they do not really participate in the power structure. In general, women in the Orthodox world are less learned than the men (due to the structure of yeshiva education), and there are virtually no female clergy in the Orthodox world. Happily, both of the above are changing, but the change is slow, and, therefore, it is critical to have men in our synagogues who understand the significance of changing the paradigm of women's ritual participation. However, the real work will only begin once women are an integral part of the power structure in the Modern Orthodox world. Only then will the important and difficult conversations about the role of men and women in Orthodox Judaism today take place in a fruitful way. Until then I can only call out with my male voice to my colleagues in the Modern Orthodox world: change the paradigm now and let's feel the presence of the women in our synagogues and hear their voices—the time is way past due.