

Alternative *Berakhot* for Women's Torah Reading

Originally Published on Morethodoxy (2013)¹

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Many Orthodox synagogues have women's prayer groups, with one of the main features being the reading of the Torah. The halakhic issues with regard to this practice have been discussed and debated at length and I do not wish to rehash them here.² However, since Simḥat Torah is coming up, I wanted to offer a suggested solution to one sticky point that remains.

Since a group of ten or more women is generally not considered a *minyan* (halakhically recognized prayer quorum) in Orthodox communities, what is to be done with the blessings over the Torah reading? These blessings are considered *devarim she-be-qedushah*, prayers that are only to be recited in a *minyan*.³

Although some have suggested that the women skip their own recitation of the blessing over the Torah in the morning, and recite it when called up to the Torah, I am not personally comfortable with that solution. There is a hint of something

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

² For more on the topic, see: Avraham Weiss, *Women at Prayer: A Halakhic Analysis of Women's Prayer Groups*, rev. ed. (Ktav, 2001).

³ This is not the place to discuss Rav Shlomo Goren's responsum, which claims that women can make their own quorum, nor is this the place to discuss the possibility that a quorum for Torah reading may be something different than a quorum for other prayers—both worthy topics but beyond the scope of this short post.

almost misleading about affecting to do one thing (recite the public Torah blessing) while actually doing something else (reciting the personal Torah blessing).⁴

Years ago, when my oldest daughter was being bat-mitzvahed, and we decided to do a *minḥah* bat mitzvah with Torah reading at our home, we were faced with this problem. Although a number of women's prayer groups simply skip the *berakhah* entirely, we did not want to do this. Instead, I wrote an alternative set of blessings. (Others, like Rachel Levmore, have done this as well.) These were designed to approximate the form of the *berakhot* as they appear in the standard Torah reading service, but without actually being technical *berakhot* in the narrow halakhic sense.

None of the words in the *berakhot* are mine; they were all taken from biblical verses. I tried to find verses that were relevant to the theme of blessing God or thanking God for the Torah. Furthermore, I made use of some verses that were recited by women in the biblical texts, in this case Deborah and Hannah. The main part of the opening *berakhah* was taken from an alternative form of *birkat ha-Torah* found in a *genizah* fragment and no longer in use.

Finally, the “*ḥatimot*” (endings) of each blessing make use of the two verses in Tanakh which begin with *barukh atta a-donai*, which allows for the form of the *berakhah* to approximate standard *berakhot*, but without bringing up any halakhic

⁴ Some have gone so far as to call this “*ziyuf ha-Torah*” (falsifying the Torah) but I think that is going too far.

problems of *berakha she-einu tzerikha* (unnecessary blessings) or *berakhah le-vatala* (blessings recited in vain).⁵

Over the years, people have written me on occasion asking for a copy, so I decided that this year I would post them and make them publicly available. They are posted below with a translation and some annotation.

Opening *Berakhah* over the Torah

Leader:

לְבִי לְחֹקְקֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הַמְתַנַּדְּבִים בְּעַם בְּרָכוֹ יְיָ הַהוּא.⁶

My heart is with the leaders of Israel, with the dedicated of the people – Bless the
LORD!

Congregation responds:

בָּרוּךְ יְיָ הַהוּא לְעוֹלָם אָמֵן וְאָמֵן.⁷

Barukh A-donai le-olam amen ve-amen.

Blessed be the LORD eternally, amen and amen!

⁵ In fact, the Rabbis suggest that if one has begun a blessing and realizes that it will be in vain, he or she should switch the blessing into a recitation of one of these verses to avoid inadvertently sinning.

⁶ From the Song of Deborah; Judges 5:9

⁷ Psalms 89:53

Leader continues:

גָּפֶן מִמִּצְרַיִם הֵעֵלָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ, וַיִּטְעֶיהָ.⁸ מִיָּם מִסִּינַי הִשְׁקָה אוֹתָהּ, וְנוֹזְלִים מִחוּרְבַּי.⁹ בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה אֱדוֹנָי,
לְמַדְנֵי חֻקֶּיךָ.¹⁰

Our God brought a vine up from Egypt, and planted it. He nourished it with water from Sinai and liquids from Horeb. Blessed are you LORD, teach me your laws.

Closing *Berakhah*

Leader:

אֵין קְדוֹשׁ כְּהוֹה כִּי אֵין בְּלִתְדָּה, וְאֵין צוּר כְּאֱלֹהֵינוּ.¹¹ בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ הוֹה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲבִינוּ מֵעוֹלָם
וְעַד עוֹלָם.¹²

There is no one holy like the LORD, for there is none like You, and there is no rock like our God. Blessed are you LORD, God of our father Israel, from eternity to eternity.

⁸ Adapted from Psalms 80:9

⁹ This was originally an alternative version of the *Ahava Rabbah/Ahavat Olam* prayer mentioned in a *genizah* fragment. It ended with the standard “*Ohev (amo) Yisrael*”.

¹⁰ Psalms 119:12

¹¹ From the song of Channah; 1 Samuel 2:2

¹² 1 Chronicles 29:10