

NORMAN LAMM

THIS COPY WAS SUBMITTED TO KTAV ON SEPT 5, 2008  
BUT WAS REVISED ON JANUARY 11, 2009 AND SENT TO CKJ

## **“ARE WOMEN LIGHT-HEADED?”**

### **Three Troublesome Passages in Halakhic Literature\***

#### **Introduction**

The role of women in Jewish religious life has become more problematic since the Emancipation. Heretofore, observant Jewish women, like their male counterparts, accepted the whole of the Rabbinic tradition without much complaint. Piety demanded of them to practice the Halakha without question. To this day, large numbers of Orthodox women, many of them beneficiaries of higher education and participants in the whole array of professional and business opportunities available to women in our society, regularly recite certain passages from our sacred literature without experiencing any major conflict or discomfort that other women might consider offensive.

But as the status of women in our society has continued to improve, many women's traditional social position and their functioning in religious life have become embroiled in controversy. With the opening of the Jewish community to the new movements in the larger society, there were occasional grumbles by individuals. One such case was the famous sparring, in the early part of the last century, between the second wife of R. Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, the famous “Netziv,” and her nephew, R. Barukh Epstein, author of *Torah Temimah*. The aunt was a highly intelligent autodidact who was bitter at being locked out of an intensive Torah education, and the nephew defended the status quo.<sup>1</sup> But this was an exception, not the rule. Eventually, however, this was followed by widespread questioning and even organized challenge by Jewish feminists, including some of their more vocal Orthodox members.

The subject as a whole has been written about extensively, sometimes superficially, but often with genuine sensitivity and halakhic justification. In this essay we shall narrow our scope and deal only with three specific and nettlesome problems relating to role of women in Halakha, and some of the controversial issues emanating from them.

First, we will discuss the different obligatory recitations prescribed for men and women among the Morning Blessings-- the *Birkhot ha-shachar*. The *berakha* for men blesses God *she'lo asani ishah*, “who has not made me a woman.” The parallel *berakha* for women reads, *she'asani ki'retzono*, “who has made me according to His will.”

The second theme will be the legal dictum, *nashim daatan kallot*, “women are light-headed” or flighty, i.e., women's character is fragile.

\* *This essay is offered in honor of Rabbi Haskel Lookstein whom I have known and cherished for the last 57 years, since I served as assistant Rabbi to his late and much lamented father, Rabbi Joseph H.*

---

<sup>1</sup> See his *Mekor Barukh* (1928). The reliability of the dialogue between the two has been challenged, but that refers only to the details of the conversation. It is hard to believe that it was made of whole cloth – there were too many contemporaries who would have objected strenuously had this been a total fraud. See Marc Shapiro, (“Clarification of Previous Posts” in <http://seforim.traditiononline.org/index.cfm/2008/1/16/Marc-B-Shapiro--Clarifications-of-Previous-Posts>)

Finally, we will treat the prohibition of teaching Torah to women, because they are incapable of serious, responsible study of Torah.

### The Morning Blessings

We begin with the Morning Blessings, described above. The Talmud (*Men.* 43b) quotes R. Meir who required of Jews to recite a minimum of one hundred blessings a day, and among them the three of concern to us because traditionally they are phrased in the negative: “who has not made me a pagan... a slave...a woman.” Many women—and men too—find them discriminatory against women -- and humiliating as well. This holds true for the male’s blessing, and the woman’s blessing as well – the latter sounds condescending, implying resignation by women to their inferior status.<sup>2</sup> Is there any reason for this?

There can be little doubt that those – and this includes a sizeable number of observant Jews – who live in the here and now in our open society have accepted as unassailable that, in general, women are the intellectual equals of men, even though each gender may have greater or lesser competence in certain disciplines. Even granting that there is a degree of overstatement in what has become a virtual dogma in our contemporary society, it is clear that many women and men find these three passages nettlesome, troubling, and discriminatory. Yet, if we are to remain true to our halakhic commitment, we must be reluctant to play fast and loose with our sacred heritage by changing the form and language established by the Sages for our prayer-book. Hence, in this essay I will not rely on suggestions that, on the basis of minority authorities and stray opinions, we may rephrase the liturgical passages that have been sanctified by untold generations of deeply pious women as well as men. True, there apparently was early on a degree of flexibility which later became fixed together with most of the rest of the prayer book. Even into modern times there were some communities--such as in Italy and the Provence —that used different versions of the same three blessings, preferring the positive over the negative, thus, for instance, “who has made me an Israelite” instead of “not made me a pagan,” etc. Some of the variants may also reflect the hands of Christian censors. Nevertheless, I prefer to search for a solution that respects the tradition most of us have as normative. My reluctance to take advantage of minority opinions or traditions is not in conflict with my belief that what the Sages had to say on this subject was meant not in an ontological or essentialist sense, but as sociological fact: Jewish women for most of Jewish history were generally untutored and possessed little intellectual achievement albeit they were genuinely pious.

R. David Abudraham, the 14<sup>th</sup> century sage and father of the Sephardic ritual, provides us with probably the first attempt to see these blessings in context-- we bless God “who has not made me a pagan...a slave...a woman,” and women substitute for the last one the blessing, “who

---

<sup>2</sup> In *Tradition* (29:4, 1995), Dr. Joel Wolowelsky suggested that to avoid embarrassment to women who may be present in the synagogue for *Shacharit* services, the *Sheliach Tzibbur* recite the blessings *sotto voce*. But this avoids the fundamental problem of the blessing itself. In a rejoinder to Wolowelsky in a later issue of the same journal (*Tradition*, 29:4, 1995, pp. 69-74), Rabbi Emanuel Feldman dismisses the whole discussion by declaring that all truly pious women are not troubled by it. But what if they are? Denying a real issue does not solve it. The view here presented obviates the need for Wolowelsky’s stratagems and does not treat the Feldman response as a serious contribution to the issue,



has created me according to His will.” What binds these three to each other? Abudraham answers: the number of *mitzvot* incumbent on each of the three groups. Gentiles are required to observe the “seven *mitzvot* of the Sons of Noah”—for these define the minimum of a civilized society. A slave is obligated to observe more: all negative commandments, the “thou shalt not” *mitzvot*, and is relieved of the positive commandments that are time-bound. A woman has the same amount of *mitzvot* as a slave, but she has innate dignity which a slave does not possess. Hence the progression: pagan, slave, woman. This view was cited by the leading decisors in the halakhic tradition, such as R. Joseph Karo, author of the *Shulchan Arukh* and his major commentator, R. Moshe Isserles, “the Rama.”<sup>3</sup>

This approach seems structurally reasonable, because all three blessings, which follow each other *seriatim*, can be explained by the same rationale. Each of the three consecutive *berakhot* refers to the number of *mitzvot* required of each category.

Moreover, it provides an answer to another question, namely, why single out these three for expressing gratitude to God? Why not, for instance, thank Him for not creating me an alcoholic, a schizophrenic, a leper, etc.? The answer is, that these have nothing to do with observing commandments; only the three mentioned share that criterion. Hence, none of the three – gentiles, slaves, or women -- are the intended victims of disparagement. (Parenthetically, the very first of the morning blessings, the one that precedes the aforementioned *berakhot*, reads, “Blessed art Thou...who has given the cock the understanding to distinguish between day and night.” The import of these words is that the rooster is empowered by nature – i.e., God – to rouse the *kohanim* in the Temple to cleanse the Ark and proceed with the daily divine service. Hence, the cock performs a devout act – without intending it, of course – and thus the creation of the animals, who have no formal obligations or *mitzvot*, segue into humans who have higher “understanding” and are consciously charged with commandments, in ascending order: non-Jews, slaves, women, all according to the number of *mitzvot* they must observe.)

Although Abudraham’s classical interpretation may not be completely satisfying to all the most sensitive members of these three groups – and we are here concerned mostly with women -- at least it addresses the issue in a consistent manner: that a woman has less positive commandments than a man does. However, for the more demanding and critical individuals, we should attempt another approach to satisfy their objections<sup>4</sup> if at all possible; and, far more important, we ought to reexamine the issue for its own sake, namely, to understand the underlying views of the Tannaim who dealt with these (with the possible exception of רשב"א) and who formulated these *berakhot* and voiced general judgments about women..So, new or alternative explanations may be in place.

### Commandment and Will

What follows is one such alternate view based on the work of a brilliant Hasidic master, Rabbi Zadok, the “*Kohen* of Lublin” (d. 1900.) The latter, in his “צדקת הצדיק,” refers to a passage in the Talmud (*Ber.* 35b) that attempts to reconcile two apparently conflicting verses – one, in Isaiah 61:5 that maintains that וְעַמְדוֹ זָרִים וְרַעְיוֹ צִאֲנָכֶם, “Strangers will arise and tend to your

<sup>3</sup> *Shulchan Arukh*, Orach Chaim 46:4. See too *Arokh ha-Shulchan*, Orach Chaim 46:10. Actually, the earliest source for this view of Abudraham is in Tosefta *Ber.* 6:18, S. Lieberman ed. 1955.

<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Daniel Sperber, in his 2000 article “Our Dialogue with God: Tradition and Innovation,” cites a number of authorities who offered different formulations which soften and even eliminate much of the offensiveness of the standard texts. And see Joel B. Wolowelsky, n.2, above

sheep,” and the other in Deuteronomy 11:14 which says that ואספת דגן ותירושך ויצהריך “You shall gather your corn and oil and wine.”

The first verse implies that you will not have to expend any effort to provide for your self-sustenance. Thus, the need to earn a livelihood will not interfere with a life fully dedicated to spiritual and intellectual pursuits. Whereas the second implies that you will be blessed with plentiful fruit, but you will have to work for a living. The Talmud’s solution is to say that the former applies to a situation when Israel performs עושין רצונו של מקום, Jews do the will of the Almighty, and the latter refers to a situation when אין עושין רצונו של מקום, Jews will not perform His will.

On the face of it, this involves a real textual problem: the verse about “You shall gather your wine and oil and corn” appears in the passage in Deuteronomy which begins, והיה אם שמוע, תשמעו אל מצותי, “It shall be *if you observe the commandments* of your God.” How then can one say that this refers to a time when Jews אין עושין רצונו של מקום, do *not* obey the will of the Almighty?

The explanation of the Talmud’s resolution proffered by R. Zadok is that there is a fundamental difference between מצוה (*mitzvah*) and רצון (*ratzon*), “commandment” and “will.” The former focuses on the minimum requirements of the *law*, what God demands of each of us; law, Halakha, performing the commandments – this is the least He expects of us. Whereas the latter entails the fulfillment of the transcendent divine *will* which goes far beyond mere legality. *Ratzon* transcends *mitzvah*. It represents the Almighty’s *wish* for us. Hence, once we perform the *ratzon* of the Almighty – we will merit the greater good fortune: others will take care of our business. If we observe only His *mitzvot*, then we shall have to work diligently in order to prosper.

Hence we understand the difference between the two blessings. True, שלא עשני אשה is recited by males because males have more numerous *mitzvot* than do women. However, this is only *mitzvah*—commandment, *Halakha*, law. Women, however, have a different kind and perhaps more elevated responsibility, for they go beyond *mitzvah* and perform the Almighty’s *ratzon*: hence, שעשני כרצוני, *She’asani ki’retzono*. This blessing is not to be recited in a spirit of *resignation*, of *tzidduk ha-din*, but of *celebration* of the opportunity to do what the Creator wishes for us. Thus, the alternative blessing women recite offers women abundant reason for esteem in their life’s mission.

In sum, the male’s blessing is essentially for his halakhic obligations, fulfilling the niceties of the law in all its minutia. The female blessing is essentially spiritual-- less cerebral, less discursive, but more an exercise of the imagination, faith, devotion, spirituality. The male thanks God for being assigned the role of *din*, law, in its proliferation of commandments, while the woman revels in the gift of *lifnim mi’shurat ha-din*, the privilege of rising beyond the limitations of “must” to the almost limitless sphere of the “ought.” The supererogatory, the *lifnim mi-shurat ha-din*. Thus too, a man as a halakhic person loves because the law commands it. A woman, a more spiritual being, performs the commandments -- out of love. Her disposition is primarily the orientation of *agada* and its emphasis on the more challenging assignment of the quality of *avodat Hashem*, the service of the Almighty, rather than the quantitative role of *halakha*.

Of course, this is not to imply that individuals of either gender are irretrievably deficient in either cerebration or inspiration, but that effectively each of the genders betrays different orientations or types.



## Lightheadedness

We now turn to the vexatious phrase נשים דעתן קלות, which may be translated as, “women are lightheaded” or flighty, an assumption that is not beyond challenge in our culture of egalitarianism. Certainly, it does not and should not be understood as implying that women are of inferior intelligence. That simply flies in the face of facts – certainly in this century, and even the preceding one. Indeed, it was not true of previous generations as well.

Let us begin with the Talmudic maxim. The Mishna (*Kid.* 80b) discusses the prohibition of chaperonage, i.e., the precaution a man must take to avoid illicit sexual temptation, or the appearance thereof, by never allowing himself to remain in an enclosed or any private area with a woman who is not his wife or very close relative. This mishna states that a man may not be alone under such circumstances even with two women; however, it is permissible for two men to be sequestered with one woman. The Mishna does not record a reason for this law; that is provided by the Gemara, citing an earlier source stating that *nashim daatan kallot*, “women are lightheaded.” The exact meaning of this halakhic asseveration is unclear and is variously explained by the traditional commentators on the Talmud. The most famous of them, Rashi, offers the reason that women are more easily seduced than men (hence even two women could be allured by one man, but when two men are with one woman, the men would prevent each other from sinfully cohabiting with the one woman.) R. Joseph Karo (1488-1575) offers this reason: women are more prone to faint under pressure than are men. It is important to note that neither of these two rationales speaks of the supposedly limited intellectual capacities of women.

More important for our discussion is a story of a tragic incident recorded by Rashi in his commentary to *A.Z.* 18b. The legend concerns two of the most eminent and beloved figures in Talmudic history, R. Meir and his wife Beruriah. He was the star disciple of R. Akiva and one of the most distinguished Tannaim of the entire period. She was the most celebrated woman in Talmudic history. Daughter of the martyred Tanna R. Yochanan b. Tradion, she was a woman whose actions showed signs of nobility, much like a contemporary Roman *matrona*, and she was a Talmudic scholar as well. It was said that she authored 300 halakhic rulings (*Pes.* 62b). She could be a compassionate mother and wife, and she could be acerbic and sarcastic too.

With this background, we come to the remarkable, possibly legendary, incident concerning the end of the lives of these two giants. On the Mishna we cited above concerning the laws of chaperonage, Rashi quotes a source for the maxim, *nashim daatan kallot*, “women are flighty,” and applies it to a nearly incredible tale:

Once, Beruriah was mocking the maxim of the Sages that women are flighty. Whereupon her husband, R. Meir, said to her, “by your life [an oath], in the end you will come to agree with them [the Sages]!” He then prevailed upon one of his students to seduce her to sin. He [the student] beseeched her for a long time until she succumbed. When she became aware [of the scheme devised by R. Meir,] she strangled herself [to death]. And [as a result] R. Meir fled to Babylon out of deep remorse (where he presumably died, as nothing was ever from him again).

Surely an enormous price to pay for a husband-wife debate on ancient misogyny and budding feminism! Whatever the heartrending aspects of the story, and regardless of its provenance and literal credibility, it is important to emphasize that there is no hint of the cognitive inferiority of women in this narrative. It supports the view that the intent of the Sages in propounding the aphorism *nashim daatan kallot*, “women are flighty,” is based on the lack of adequate resistance

by women to seduction. But it has nothing to do with intellectual limitations. And even if this report is a legend, we are sophisticated enough to appreciate the value of legends as revealing underlying insights that for some reason are inexpressible or not as powerful in ordinary speech.

What I here propose, in keeping with our earlier discussion of the rival blessings to be recited by males and females, is that a balance is necessary between structured law and the flight of the unfettered spirit. The former can lead to mechanical action, outward gestures without any spiritual dimension. The latter is in danger – and it is the greater danger --of the psychic cutting loose from its moorings in the fundamental basis of the law; the over-emphasis on the spiritual leading to antinomianism. Ossified recitation is not to be recommended for a vital spiritual life, but it does promise the possibility of later change for the better, whereas the abandonment of the halakhic regimen of sacred quotidian performances by reason of “greater” spiritual usually forecloses the probability of return to halakhic norms. This has happened more than once in Jewish history; note the false Messiahs who, unsatisfied by the visionary role to which they pretended, sought as well to change the law, to violate Halakha. The consequences of this inversion of roles and the hubris of overreaching have resulted in historic disasters. The pneumatic, with excessive emphasis on the spiritual, is indeed in danger of proving him or her self a קל – *kal* or light-- and we may generalize from this (and surely the reader should not suspect me of doing more than that) and conclude that the practice of religion in a mechanical manner is less threatening than the blurring of the lines by the pneumatic. By the same token, men are more comfortable with the formal structures of law in religion, and often shrug off the spiritual as insufficiently defined or lacking in coherence, whereas women, whatever their intellectual endowments, are more inspired by the soaring imagination, cherishing the “reasons of the heart” over than the inventiveness of the mind, *agada* over *halakha*. From this perspective, the aphorism “that women are flighty” or light-headed is not intended as a derogatory “put-down” on the female sex, but as a necessary judgment on the implicit perils of both attitudes when overdone and thus misused.

There is significant historical support for this thesis: The Sages of the Talmud (*Shab.* 104b and passim) declared as law that אין הנביא רשאי להדש דבר מעתה—a prophet is not permitted to legislate.<sup>5</sup> The prophet is a pneumatic; his mission is to inspire, to encourage and, as well, depending on circumstances, to scold and threaten and relay “the word of God” to his reprobate people. He (with the exception of Moses) is a visionary, a seer – not a legislator or magistrate. Judging what is and what is not law is the exclusive province of the Talmudist, trained in the niceties of halakhic give-and-take and subject to rational criticism.

“The Rav” – Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik o.b.m.— put it this way in his classic, *Halakhic Man*:

The mystics cleave asunder the barriers of the objectivity and the concreteness of the commandment. On a wondrous craft they navigate the waves of mysterious subjectivity that surges and flows, that is constantly changing its shape and form, that is always metamorphosing, assuming new images, different guises; as the waves come and sweep the craft and carry them unto paradisiacal realms. Not so halakhic man!<sup>6</sup>

Indeed so! Judaism, life itself, needs both – law *and* beyond the law; the obligatory *and* the supererogatory; Halakha *and* Agada; the realist *and* the visionary; people of *mitzvah* *and* people of *ratzon*.—the divine qualities that inhere in and characterize men and those that inhere in and characterize women. The former in this list of binaries partakes of the precision of the prosaic,

<sup>5</sup> *Yoma* 80a and elsewhere, and see Rambam, Introduction to his Commentary on the Mishna, I.

<sup>6</sup> *Halakhic Man* (Philadelphia, JPS:1983) pp. 62-63.



even if it is limited in the rapture of the soul. The latter in these binaries elicits genuine admiration for the nobility, the beauty, and the moving poetry of the religious quest, but it is in danger of spinning out of control.

Hence, both -- *shelo asani ishah* and *she'asani ki'retzono*, the male fixation on hard facts and ratiocination, what we might call the *chamurot*, and the female penchant for the beyond, the transcendent, the *kallot*—these correspond to the entities of *mitzvah* and *ratzon*.<sup>7</sup>

## Women and the Study of Torah

We may now turn to the putative halakhic prohibition to teach Torah to women. There is a growing genre of literature on this subject, and it is not our intent to summarize it here. We will briefly record and comment on the first source for this halakhic view and see if all that has been said above is relevant to the educational issue of women studying Torah.

The reader should know that in our days—for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup>—the spectrum in the Orthodox world goes from the most radical of the Hasidic groups, such as Satmar, where girls are limited to the study of *Chumash* (the Pentateuch) without any of the classical exegetes; to the more moderate Haredi groups where Rashi is taught, but no instruction in Mishnah and Gemara is permitted; to those who will venture to teach at least part of Mishnah and maybe a page of Gemara (but even then only on xeroxed pages, not in the Talmudic text proper); and finally to the Modern Orthodox who, following the policy of Rabbi Soloveitchik, give free rein to women to study Talmud and commentaries. The only difference between the genders in the *mitzvah* to learn Torah is that for men it is obligatory and the act of studying is regarded as the fulfillment of a Biblical commandment, whereas women are permitted, even urged, to learn Torah as an honorable and worthy option but not as the technical fulfillment of a Biblical *mitzvah*.

The primary source is a mishna (*Sot. 3:4*) citing R. Eliezer who prohibits a man to teach Torah to his daughter for it is akin to teaching her *tiflut*—an indeterminate term which, whatever it really means, is certainly not a compliment. In essence, R. Eliezer holds that women are incapable of serious, responsible study of Torah. But before recording this harsh view, the Mishna quotes Ben Azai who declares it *obligatory* to teach one's daughter Torah." Of course, the Mishna does not limit the dispute to daughters, but extends it to teaching Torah to women in general.

For many generations, the halakhic authorities followed the decision of R. Eliezer, effectively excluding women from this extremely important *mitzvah*—"the study of Torah is

---

<sup>7</sup> Rav Kook intuited the dual role of men and women, although he formulated it rather differently from the way that we here elaborated. Thus, he writes: "Man... has the distinct disadvantage of being limited to the narrow limitations of his spiritual and physical makeup, which can lead him astray from God's ultimate plan. Woman is superior by virtue of her receptivity. This superiority allows her to be impressed and inspired by the all encompassing bounty which God created in this world. She therefore recites the blessing "Blessed is He ... who has made me according to His will. She can aspire to fulfill God's will without turning astray." Rabbi A.Y. Kook, *Olat Re'iyah*, pps. 71-72. However, contrary to my opinion above, he considers Talmudic views on women to be intrinsic – ontological or essentialist – and not extrinsic and sociological..

*ke'negged kulam*, as important as all the other commandments combined" (*Peiah* 1:1). Teaching her Torah could result not in her acquiring Torah but *tiflut*. Nevertheless, in the course of many generations distinguished Torah scholars did teach their daughters Torah, presumably because they knew their daughters well and trusted them to do their learning responsibly. In the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as the ghetto walls weakened and became more permeable, young women were found to become proficient in various non-religious areas. They were studying foreign languages, music, art—all but the Torah, the very wellspring of all Judaism. Clearly, the future of Judaism was threatened by the possible disaffection of half the population. An autodidact seamstress, Sarah Schnirer, petitioned the most illustrious personages of the day, the "Chafetz Chayyim" of Lithuania and the Hasidic eminence, the "Belzer Rebbe," who approved the idea of educating girls in the learning of *Chumash*. Shnirer at first managed to open a school and library for Jewish girls in Krakow in 1918, and then proceeded to found a successful educational movement – the "Bais Yaakov schools" – which was widely accepted in the populous Jewish regions throughout Poland, Lithuania, Hungary, indeed all East European Jewry, thus stemming at least for a while the growing defection from Judaism that endangered European Jewry.

More recently, women's advanced Torah education has become more and more accepted in Orthodox circles. The Bais Yaakov curriculum (*Chumash* and *Rashi*, no or very little *Talmud*) continues to flourish, both in America and Israel, and the Modern Orthodox world under the Rav's influence continues to gain strength both in Israel and in the United States, resulting in the serious study of *Talmud* at Yeshiva University's Stern College for Women and in Yeshiva University's post-graduate program in *Talmud* for women, and in Israel educational endeavors such as *Nishmat*, *Matan*, the women's programs in Bar Ilan University, and various unaffiliated institutions.

This means that, effectively, the view of Ben Azai is challenging the hegemony or monopoly heretofore accorded to R. Eliezer's ruling forbidding Torah education for women because of *tiflut*, and hence the fear of misinterpretation and the conclusion that they are incapable of serious, responsible study of Torah. But what of R. Eliezer's restrictive ruling that bans Torah study for women, a ruling that was accepted by the great majority of observant Jews for so many generations?

To understand the controversy between Ben Azai and R. Eliezer, we must look more closely at that key word, *tiflut*. The word in Hebrew can be spelled in two ways, תפלות or תפלות, and they are interchangeable. It is one of those Hebrew words that are maddeningly elastic, but the various ways the term is used in different contexts indicates a common feeling of inadequacy: unserious; unsalted; tasteless; superstitious; secondary; nonsensical; pointless; baseless; make-work. Basically, it indicates a want of *gravitas*, a lack of maturity, perhaps even encouraging frivolity, leading to the probability of misinterpretation.

I believe that *tiflut* is closely related to, or even identical with, קלות -- *kallot*. They share the same semantic universe. R. Eliezer, I hold, was not making a statement about the essential, *ontological* quality of women, but a *sociological* one. In his experience he found that his contemporary women were, by and large, immature, unserious, even superstitious. He therefore felt that placing the holy Torah in the hands of such people could prove disastrous. If that is so, we may venture the proposition that had R. Eliezer lived in our days and witnessed the extraordinary progress of women in all the arts and sciences, in business and in philosophy, in leadership and in government, he would have acceded to the opinion of Ben Azai that, indeed, the study of Torah is *obligatory* for women. Indeed, I sometimes rue the fact that we have failed to exploit the talents of one half of our population for the past 2,000 years...



If all the above is reasonable and consistent with the sources, then we conclude with a different understanding of the Sages' conception of the role of women in the religious life of the community: the different blessings, based upon the penchant for *mitzvah* and *ratzon*; the rationale for their characterization of woman's personality as *kallot* and their study of Torah as *tiflut*; and the applicability to different circumstances and eras.

### A Post Script on Apologetics

In making these remarks I do not presume that my ideas are the original intent of the Sages who composed these blessings and formulated these judgments. Rather, they are interpretations and, in the words attributed to Rashbam, "the gates of interpretation have not been closed."

Perhaps my analysis will appear as apologetics. If so, I plead guilty. I believe that apologetics has for too many ears had a bad press. There is nothing inherently wrong with defending a premise or theory or belief from challenge or attack. It is part of the discourse of concerned and intelligent human beings who, without each presuming that only he is right and all others wrong, believe their convictions are worthy of spirited defense in the face of criticism. This is especially true in a case such as ours where a law or mode of conduct was promulgated centuries ago and explicit rationales often were not offered for it. We are commanded to abide by the inherited norms, but we prefer to understand them; we strive to be elevated when the traditions are presented in language that is part of our experience. In general, apologetics is crucial in the debate among the generations. Without it, each generation seems divorced from all that is past; but a people of every new era deserve to benefit from the rich wisdom of the centuries by expressing it in new forms, using new paradigms that make such wisdom accessible and thus comprehensible and germane to the changing ways of articulating vital concepts and approaches. Without apologetics, there is little sense of continuity, and a people deprived of such awareness of continuity is culturally sterile and without a meaningful history. And people without a history, as the Greeks taught us, are barbarians. Apologetics breathes new life into the ancient wisdom, making it relevant and germane to the ever-changing modes of life and the articulation of its unspoken assumptions.

This is a determination which must be undertaken with the greatest care and discrimination, with personal humility, and with religious seriousness and even solemnity. If we cannot do this in the proper reverence for our sacred tradition, we may be guilty of being *kallot* and bereft of both *mitzvah* and *ratzon*.

NORMAN LAMM  
September 4, 2008  
Ellul 4, 5678