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Dear Rabbi Hamm,

It is after Yom Kippur, and I thought that I should set down for you some of my misgivings about your recent sermon on Jewish women. These came into better focus following some readings today in the El Am discussion of Berakhoth 20b.

If I remember correctly, your position was (a) Jewish women are not required to perform mitzvot conditioned by time, (b) a minyan cannot depend on an onen for he is not required to say the Shema (or the prayers requiring the presence of a minyan), (c) a minyan cannot depend on the presence of one not commanded to say the Shema -- (d), hence women cannot be counted towards a minyan.

I leave these problems:

(1) On what is the Rabbinic dictum, to the effect that women are not required to perform mitzvot conditioned by time, based? Is it based on a fortiori reasoning, or on notions of obligations of women that may be different today than formerly, or is it based on Biblical exegesis?

(2) I gather that women are commanded to say Kiddush if no other adult is present, and that it is only custom that has the male head of the household saying the blessing instead of the mother. Why is this time-conditional mitzvot different from the mitzvot of Kefilin or Shema?

(3) The one, I understand, is excused from saying Shema because of the reasonable belief that he will be thinking of his dead relative rather than God. Hence, it is entirely proper that a minyan should not depend for its existence on one who is only physically, and not mentally or spiritually, part of the group. That condition is quite distinguishable from the status of a woman interested in full participation in the activity of the minyan.

I would very much like to discuss these thoughts with you, perhaps next Saturday before mincha.

With best wishes to you, Midge and your family for the New Year,

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