



Women and Liturgy July 7, 2019

In the past century, the position of women in the liturgy in Judaism has changed radically. Within Judaism, traditionally, only men served as cantors and led liturgical service prior to 1900. Even during the Haskalah in the late 1700s and 1800s, and the advent of Reform Judaism, women did not participate in leading liturgy. In Reform, and Conservative Judaism, and in certain segments of Messianic Judaism, this has changed.

There are positive and negative aspects to this change. Here at Shuvu, it is important for us to address both the positive and negative aspects of introducing women into liturgical leadership.

First, the negative. Traditionally, only men lead liturgy. There are several reasons for this. There are multiple references in the Talmud regarding the female voice been alluring and therefore a distraction to men. However, the context of these references is really about men not allowing themselves to be distracted, or putting themselves in a position to be distracted. In the modern age, it is neither practical nor preferable for men to try to isolate themselves from hearing women's voices. Women's voices surround us all daily and therefore truly are not the distraction that they may have been hundreds of years ago.

From a more practical perspective, when a synagogue has a mechitzah, as most synagogues did in past years, it is virtually impossible to smoothly allow women out from behind the mechitzah to come to the bimah to lead liturgical services. Today, Messianic synagogues rarely have mechitzah, so this rarely poses a problem.

There is, however, a Halachic issue that is important. As we know, the primary function of the synagogue service is to commemorate the Temple sacrifices and offerings that are commanded in Numbers 28 and 29. Since the national sacrifices are positive time related commandments, they are, strictly speaking, obligations of men. Because the liturgical service is as close as we can get to fulfilling the commandment of the national sacrifices, it is men who are obligated to the liturgical service. Here is where the problem occurs. Bavli Sukkah 38b outlines a halachic principle called *shome'a k'oneh*, hearing is answering. The context of the discussion indicates that hearing an obligation is equivalent to fulfilling the obligation. In other words, hearing the liturgy fulfills men's obligation to participating in the liturgy. Now, a key element in this fulfillment is the idea that an obligation can only be fulfilled through someone who is obligated. That is, one who is not obligated may not fulfill an obligation involving someone who is obligated. In order to fulfill men's obligation to liturgical service, the service must be led by someone obligated i.e. a man. There are 3 segments of the liturgy where this comes into play, the Barchu, the Amida, and reading the Torah. These are the 3 segments that are considered obligatory.

Second, the positive. There can be no dispute that many women are capable of leading liturgical service beautifully. Certainly, in the last century, the equality of men and women has made great leaps forward, culturally. This rise in the consciousness of equality is of great benefit to all mankind. However, one of the casualties in this awakening of the consciousness of equality is the inability to recognize different roles of men and women. Men and women are equal, but not equivalent. This is an ongoing



AHAVAT AMMI

FOR THE LOVE OF MY PEOPLE

Phone: +1 (214) 272-0392

E-mail: info@ahavatammi.org

www.ahavatammi.org

P.O. Box 40327

Fort Worth, TX

76140

learning process not only for mankind, but for Judaism as well. Today many women feel slighted in the recognition of different roles of men and women. This is unfortunate and in certain communities, this may be exceedingly divisive. We do not wish division on any of our Kehilot.

The state of Jewish education in the world today is abysmal. This is one of the great tasks of Yeshivat Shuvu, to increase Jewish education and Judaic literacy throughout the world. The situation is unfortunate and we strive to change it. However, it is a situation that we live in. That being the case in many communities, we may see that the only people capable of leading the liturgical service are women. It makes no sense to throw out the liturgical service because of a restriction on women. Rather, we should thank Hashem that capable women are available to lead.

In conclusion, at Shuvu, we encourage men to lead liturgy. We do however, recognize that different Kehilot in different communities around the world have different concerns and stresses. We do not want to foment division in any way. So we think it is best to leave decisions regarding women and liturgy up to each individual Kehila and leader to proceed in the manner they feel is best.

Rav Steven Bernstein