

# *Is Shelo Asani Isha a Misogynist Blessing?*

## #1 PROBLEM: IT'S MISOGYNIST

### 1. Rabbi Dov Linzer from the-daf.com

I do not have a satisfying way – short of apologetics, which is never satisfying – to resolve this Gemara with contemporary sensibilities.

### 2. Rabbi Kanefsky

By its plain meaning, and by the simple smell test, it has the effect today of justifying our lack of progress, and of affirming for us that women do not possess the spiritual dignity that men do.

### 3. Rabbi Eliyahu Fink

It is easy to see why the blessing is an affront to many women. It implies inferiority at worst, or less opportunity at best. It could be argued that just because Judaism has some specific roles for men and women does not mean it deserves a blessing to that effect.

## PROBLEM #2: IT IS USED TO DEGRADE WOMEN

### 4. Rav Baruch Epsztejn (Epstein) from Mekor Baruch 4:46:3

How bitter was my aunt, as she would say from time to time, "... upon his recitation of the blessing, she is obliged to answer 'Amen.' "And who can muster enough strength," she concluded with great anguish, "to hear this eternal symbol of shame and embarrassment to women."

### 5. Efrat Gerber-Aron from Kipa.co.il

I don't have many memories from my childhood, but I remember this: a boy from my age-group in Bnei Akiva needed to count some girls who came to the Snif, but not to count them with numbers, right? So instead of the known verse "Save Your nation..." which has ten words, this precious boy chose the following "verse:" "Blessed are you G-d master of the universe who did not make me a woman. Amen."

He wasn't evil, he was just trying to insult the girls or to look cool in front of the boys. You can understand him in his age. It's true that one can understand, but what about me?... He was just a simple little boy and was stupid. I was offended before God. What did HaShem in his honor and himself, cause boys in my Shevet to tell me every day that they praise Him for not having made them like me. A woman.

## PROBLEM #3: IT'S NOT TRUE

### 6. Efrat Moshe on mo6.co.il – women today are different

Indeed, this section raises many questions but the main question which arises in essence is: Has the time not come to change Judaism a little to a place that's more fitting for our generation? Behold women today are not like the women who once were! They are independent and educated, they act and create, they are principals and are effective, etc. – no less than a man...

### 7. Rav Efraim Oshri from Responsa MiMa'amakim 3:6 – parallel question during Holocaust re "For he has not made me a slave"

*Question:* In the Hellish place of killing and the valley of crying the place of oppression through iron and darkness in the Ghetto at Kovno.... In these times, we must ask, if You judge the whole world, why do You hide Your face from us? Why have you hidden Your face from me?

When we pray the morning prayers, and when the prayer leader Rav Yosef may HaShem avenge his blood begins to say the morning blessings with horror, fear, and trembling, when he comes to saying the blessing "For he has not made me a slave," he called in a great voice, "Master, who is the master of masters, how can we say this blessing at a time when we find ourselves captured and imprisoned, and when we are sold without money, how can a servant bless being free at a time when his slavery is extended and placed on his neck and imprisonment on their bodies – how can a servant be bitter in disgrace?"

...how can a servant like this bless his creator and say, "For He has not made me a slave" – isn't it making fun and degrading, like a crazy person who has no intelligence or understanding, for is it not a rule in prayer that we should focus that the blessing on our lips should be equal to the soul, so how can one say a blessing like this?

*Answer:* The essence of the blessing is because the Cena'inite slave is not fit to enter the nation and is exempt from

mitzvoth, and therefore a captured Jew must still say this blessing.

### **8. Rabbi Gil Student on torahmusings.com – parallel question today re Nachem on Tisha B'Av**

R. Aviner was asked why we retain the same language of *Nachem* today, which refers to a desolate and destroyed Jerusalem, when it is a thriving and rebuilt metropolis full of Jews. R. Jonathan Sacks translates the prayer: "...the city that is in sorrow, laid waste, scorned and desolate; that grieves for the loss of its children, that is laid waste of its dwellings, robbed of its glory, desolate without inhabitants..."

The question of changing this text has been repeatedly addressed since 1967, with varying responses. Some say to change the prayer; some say not to change it because the Temple is not yet rebuilt; others say that an individual may change it but not the prayer leader.

## **SOLUTION #1: DON'T SAY IT**

### **9. Rabbi Safran re Rabbi Kanefsky – but omitting is pretentious!**

But when a contemporary rabbi, particularly one who has not yet garnered the wisdom that comes with many years that comes with many years of living and learning, proposes to reject an element – any element – of the Jewish mandate, there can be no question about his having relinquished the right to call himself Orthodox.

### **10. Rabbi Eliyahu Fink re Rabbi Shafran – what's the problem with omitting?**

His problem with Rabbi Kanefsky is two-fold. One, his is not "*choshum*" enough to make changes. Two, Rabbi Shafran makes that disingenuous claim that Orthodox Judaism does not change.

As for the first claim: This is a classic ad hominem attack. If the change is valid, the source of the change is irrelevant. Very weak argument by Rabbi Shafran. As the second claim: the entire concept is a lie. Things do change, especially in the liturgy.

What does Rabbi Shafran really mean to say? I think he means to say that changes that were made in the past were either needed, necessary or important enough to make. *This change is not* [sic.] In his opinion, the sensitivities of women who find this blessing offensive are not sufficient to warrant a change to the liturgy.

## **SOLUTION #2: HISTORICIZE IT**

### **11. Ori Weisberg – anti-Christian rhetoric**

[The blessing] originally had to do with the early polemics between rabbinic and Jesus movement Jews. Galatians 3:38 reads: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Remember that Christ is the Greek translation of *mashiach*. This teaching of Paul's suggests that the major divisions of humanity have been nullified by a messianic advent. As the rabbinic movement sought to discredit the Jesus movement and distinguished populations, these 3 brachot, which directly refute Paul, were instituted to emphasize that the mashiach has not yet come.

### **12. Diogenes Laërtius (3<sup>rd</sup> century CE), Lives of Eminent Philosophers (tr. R.D. Hicks), Vol. 1 (Harvard University Press, 1925), I:33 (p. 35) – Socrates' blessing**

Hermippus in his *Lives* refers to Thales the story which is told by some of Socrates, namely, that he used to say there were three blessings for which he was grateful to Fortune: "First, that I was born a human being and not one of the brutes; next, that I was born a man and not a woman; thirdly, a Greek and not a barbarian."

## **SOLUTION #3: CHANGE THE WORDING**

### **13a. Tzitz Eliezer (Rav Eliezer Waldenberg of Sha'arei Tzedek hospital) – transgender**

And as I said, as for a man like this – who was a woman who changed to a man – when he says morning blessings, he does not say "who did not make me a woman" because although he came out of his mother's womb and into the world as a woman, he should say, "Blessed are you, Lord our God, master of the universe who has changed me into a man (=שהפכני לאיש).

### **13b. Rav Daniel Sperber from "Our Dialogue with God: Tradition and Innovation"**

Can we nowadays sit down and decide to add to, subtract from, change or formulate new berachot, such as she'asani isha velo ish (who has made me a woman and not a man), shelo asani ama? (who has not made me bondswoman)? Halachically: Yes. Sociologically: Will it be accepted and by whom?

**13c. Rabbi Asher Lopatin – change the wording to “He who has made me an Israelite”**

In fact, many of the classic halachik commentators feel that the negativity of the traditional b'rachot is strange – and they work to come up with answers.... Therefore, I suggest that... we say, “She’asani Yisrael” instead of the negative, and that a woman says “She’asani Yisraelit” instead of the negative. Once the first b'racha is said in this way, the way it appears in the G'marra Menachot, then we have no choice, based on the p'sak of the Aruch HaShulchan (from the Bach) , to avoid saying the final two, negative b'rachot of “Shelo Asani Aved” (God did not make me a slave) and “Shelo Asani Isha”(God did not make me a woman), since they become unnecessary after such an all encompassing, powerful, and positive statement of Jewish identity of “She’asani Yisrael/Yisraelit”.

**13d. Siddur, Italian Rite (“The Woman's Siddur”) (JTSMS 8255) -- Italy, 1471 – the proto-feminist wedding present**

Scribe: Abramham Farissol, <http://www.jtslibrarytreasures.org/>

This siddur was copied by Farissol as a gift from groom to bride. The text is formulated for a woman's use; see especially the blessing on folio 5v, thanking God for "making me a woman and not a man"



**13c. Rabbi Eliyahu Fink**

The siddur, however, *does* [sic.] prove something very important in my eyes. It proves that the blessing of *shelo asani isab* is not as nefarious as it seems. See, if a woman is willing to say *she'asani isha v'lo ish* she must not feel that it is a degrading blessing. It would be extremely hypocritical for an oppressed group to turn around and use the same degrading

terminology against the group that it is oppressing them. It would be like civil rights activist in 1965 organizing a bus with black people in the front and white people in the back. Reversing the roles in degrading situations is hardly a fair or open minded approach to the problem.

**14a. Rav Yehudah Hertzl Heinkin from Responsa Bnei Banim – prohibited to change wording**

Others want to change the blessing from “who did not make me a woman” in the negative to “who made me a man” in the positive. I doubt that it is permitted to recite such a blessing with *Shem* and *malchut*, because it changes the format set by the Sages for these blessings.

**14b. Babylonian Talmud, Brachot 40b**

Rabbi Yosi says: if we deviate from the version fixed by the Rabbis for the benedictions, we have not fulfilled our duty with regard to the benedictions

**SOLUTION #4: SAY IT SILENTLY**

**16. Rabbi Dr. Joel Wolowelsky from “Who has not made me a woman: A quiet berakha”**

[I]t seems inappropriate to give thanks for a privilege granted oneself in front of a person who does not have the same opportunity. When women did not frequent the synagogue, there may have been no reason to not say the berakha aloud. But now that women are there in numbers at the start of the tefilla, it should be said quietly, albeit appreciatively. To say it aloud under contemporary circumstances was akin to lo'eg la-rash, mocking the poor and analogous to wearing one's tsitsit out at a gravesite... If such talk embarrasses dead people, so to speak, it hurts live people to be reminded of their lack of opportunity.

**SOLUTION #5: MEN HAVE MORE MITZVOT, WOMEN HAVE FEWER**

**17. Jerusalem Talmud, Brachot 9:1 – men are grateful for more commandments**

It was taught: Rabbi Judah says, “A person must recite three blessings each day: ‘Blessed...who did not make me a non-Jew,’ ‘Blessed... who did not make me a boor,’ ‘Blessed... who did not make me a woman.’”

What is the basis for these blessings? ... for women are not obligated to perform the commandments

**18. Rav Reuven Margalit in Margaliyot HaYam – so men aren't spiteful about more commandments**

A woman is not punished if she does not fulfill time-bound positive commandments, and her share in the World to Come is like that of a man. Hence, there might be a male Jew who will think that he would have been better off having been born a woman, for then he would have been freed from the yoke of these commandments. Hence, [the Rabbis] established that each male should make a daily declaration that these mitzvot are not a burden.

**19. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in the Sacks siddur – all people thank God for mitzvot**

[T]hey are acknowledgments of the special responsibilities of Jewish life. Heathens, slaves and women are exempt from certain commandments that apply to Jewish men. In these blessings, we express our faith that the commandments are not a burden but a cherished vocation.

**20. Emuna Braverman, "Blessed be God... Who Didn't Make Me a Man" – it's hard to be a Jewish man**

Women are frequently distressed by men's daily thanks for not being created female. I, on the other hand, am grateful for fewer commandments that I am required to fulfill, especially when it's 10 o'clock at night and I'm curling up in bed with a good book, while my husband is putting on his jacket and heading out the door to pray *ma'ariv*.

I whisper a little prayer, thanking the Almighty for not creating me male. On Shabbos morning when I pull the covers up over my head as my husband leaves for the synagogue, I am glad not to be obligated in time-bound commandments. I have no desire to put on *tefillin*, I think I look ridiculous in a *kipa*, and I enjoy the freedom to pray on a more relaxed schedule.

**SOLUTION #6: HALAKHIC/SOURCE BASED RATIONALES****21. Rabbi Dov Linzer on the-daf.com – Give Context to the Talmudic Section**

The sugya that ends the discussion of *tzitzit*, leaves women out of the conversation. Not only are women exempt from the *mitzvah* (although this is debated), but they also do not have the other markers of identity – *tefillin* and, as the story about King David drives home, the very mark of identity on their flesh – *brit milah*. Thus, when the Gemara finally gets to the statement of R. Meir that a person, i.e., a man, makes three blessings every day, one of which being "... that God has not made me a woman," this is less of a surprise than a concrete articulation of the theme that has been present throughout – women have less obligations than man, and also have fewer, if any, markers of identity.

**22. Rabbi Asher Lopatin – stating in the negative increases the number of brachot we can say**

Menachot, 43b, Rabbi Meir says that a person, "Adam", has to say three blessings every day: She'asani Yisrael, Shelo Asani Isha and Shelo Asani Bur. On the next line Rav Acha Bar Ya'akov replaces "Shelo Asani Bur" (God didn't make me an ignoramus) with "Shelo Asani Aved" (God didn't make me a slave). The G'marra questions why we need to say both Shelo Asani Aved and Shelo Asani Isha, and Rashi, in his second explanation of that answer, says that we need to say both in order to come up with the required daily allowance of 100 b'rachot. The Bach (O.C 46) argues that the main reason for saying all three is to increase the number of b'rachot we say to 100, and that is the main reason for saying three b'rachot in the negative (shelo asani): if you would say the positive "She'asani Yisrael" then you could not say "Shelo asani aved, isha".

**SOLUTION #7: INSPIRE CHANGE****23. Rabbi Ari Hart on Forward.com – a daily reminder that feminism has a way to go**

Rather than close my eyes and pretend that I am living in a world where men and women are equal, where I have not benefited from my gender and been granted opportunities, safety, and treatment that I did not earn but rather was born into, I use this blessing as a way to open my own eyes and challenge myself to fix the broken systems that harm others in this world. This may strike some readers as not going far enough and others as a harmful subversion of rabbinic text. I hear the criticism from both sides. For me, however, it is a helpful way that I am able to reconcile my commitments as a Jew and as someone who hopes and works for a world free of oppression and inequality.