SheLo Asani Isha: An Orthodox Rabbi Reflects on Integrity, Continuity, and Inclusivity

View PDF

Rabbi Avraham (Avi) Weiss is Founder of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah and Yeshivat Maharat, as well as co-founder of the International Rabbinic Fellowship (IRF). He is the rabbi emeritus of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. He is the author of Women at Prayer (KTAV: 1990); Spiritual Activism (Jewish Lights: 2008), and Holistic Prayer (Koren/Maggid 2013). This article originally appeared in issue 17 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

***SheLo Asani Isha*: An Orthodox Rabbi Reflects on Integrity, Continuity, and Inclusivity**

Avraham Weiss

There is a well-known anecdote about the rabbi who carefully prepared a sermon. In its margins were brief notes on how it should be delivered. On the side of one paragraph it read— “weak point, speak loud.” As the argument progressed, the rabbi, in the margins of the next paragraph, jotted down— “weaker still, speak even louder.”

Looking back over my years in the rabbinate, that is how I feel about the way I taught the three negative blessings recited every morning: “Blessed are You, Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe….who has not made me a gentile (*goy*)…a slave (*eved*)…a woman (*isha*).” In countless classes, most often when I taught prayer at Yeshiva University’s Stern College for Women, I did somersaults to explain this phraseology, especially the last one—“who has not made me a woman—*sheLo asani isha*.”

Conceptual Analysis

The challenge was obvious. If the goal of the liturgy was to thank God for who we are, why do so by declaring who we are not? Granted, these blessings have a powerful source as they are found in the Talmud.[1] Notwithstanding this authoritative source, the language has grated on the moral conscience of many people, especially women living in contemporary times. And so, I struggled to explain these blessings, sometimes spending several full sessions on their meaning.

My teachings varied. They began with the most commonly given explanation: Men are obligated in more affirmative commandments than women—specifically some of the affirmative mitzvoth fixed by time.[2] Hence, when men bless God for "not making me a woman," they are expressing gratitude for being obligated to perform more mitzvoth—which are, as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks notes, "not a burden but a cherished vocation."[3]

But if this is the reasoning, why not recite the blessing in the positive and state, "Blessed are You, Lord our God… for making me a man"? For this response, I culled from the thoughts of some of my own teachers. Men, they argued, are by nature more aggressive; in contrast, women are more passive, kinder, more compassionate.[4] Hence, men establish who they are by brazenly proclaiming who they are not. This line of reasoning also explains why women, unlike men, employ a softer language, blessing God for making them "according to His will" *she'asani kirtzono*.[5] Although less obligated in mitzvoth, women declare their willing acceptance to perform *ratzon Hashem*—the will of God.[6]

Another justification for *sheLo asani isha* is that the primary obligation of women to be homemakers is seen as more onerous, requiring a higher level of commitment and spiritual sensitivity. Men, therefore, offer thanks that they are not women encumbered by this more difficult, taxing role. Women, however, say *she'asni kirtzono*—although their obligations are more difficult, they accept them willingly.

There were other interpretations I presented as well. Yaavetz argues that the blessing relates to women being more susceptible to physical danger during pregnancy and childbirth. By reciting the blessing *sheLo asani isha*, men offer thanksgiving that they were not placed in such danger.[7]

Other approaches are even more farfetched. One of them points out that after conception, an embryo initially develops into a female. To become a male, the embryo must receive a genetic signal to turn away from its original form. *SheLo asani isha* reflects this "biological process." *She'asani kirtzono*, recited by women, traces their evolution. From the moment of conception they were women.

Another explanation relates to the conclusion reached by the Talmud that it would have been best for the human being not to have been born at all. Once born, however, we are asked to do the best we can to lead meaningful lives.[8] As we only recite blessings for our benefit, and it is not optimal for humans to have been created, the blessing is formulated in the negative.[9]

Still others insist that the negative blessings can be understood in their historical context. These blessings were first introduced by Greek philosophers and Zoroastrian scholars.[10] Hundreds of years later the rabbis incorporated them into the liturgy as a way of rejecting the rise of Roman culture. The blessing "Who has not made me a gentile" specifically referred to the Romans, who were loathed by the Jewish community for their glorification of slavery and treatment of women. "Who has not made me a slave" and "Who has not made me a woman" were blessings through which Jewish men expressed gratitude for not having been victimized as were slaves and women were during that period.[11]

So I taught for many years. In my courses on *parshanut haTefillah,* I would go over these arguments meticulously, trying to convince my students, and myself, that these ideas were sound.

Then something happened. One of my earlier students, one of my finest, suddenly left the school. Try as I did, I could not find her. Having come from a non-ritually observant background, she had become ritually observant. Then, as quickly as she became more committed, she disappeared.

Years later, walking along the streets of New York, I saw her. We engaged warmly in conversation, like two close friends who had not seen each other in years but could pick up their friendship in an instant. She shared with me that she had left ritual observance. I haltingly asked why. Was it something I said, something I taught? Over the years I've come to understand that teachers must be wary of every word; you never know which one could make the whole difference. She then told me it was a composite of reasons, but one that stands out were those classes I gave on *sheLo asani isha*. I know, she went on respectfully, that this was your understanding but, for me, it was pure rationalization. Yes, she continued, I found those classes dishonest.

I was shattered—shattered that my words, my teachings had contributed to her turning away. It was then, right then for the first time, that something hit me. My heart dropped as I, in that instant, realized that not only did she reject those teachings as poor rationalizations, but so did I. All those classes, which I had carefully crafted, carefully organized, quickly became a maze of apologetics and excuses that ran contrary to the very core of my moral sensibilities.[12] It felt like the moment in the folktale when the child calls out, "The emperor has no clothes." Of course, *sheLo asani isha* is only a blessing, mere words. However, words are important, as they translate into deeds; they shape a psyche; they reflect a mission—certainly when they are words that define our attitudes toward those who, too often, are cast aside and suffer discrimination. Furthermore, these words constitute a blessing. In no small measure, words of blessing define our perspectives on life itself.

This encounter with my former student took place many years ago. Simultaneously something else occurred. As I encouraged women mourners to recite *Kaddish*, some began coming to daily services.[13] Arriving early for the first *Kaddish*, they would hear the leader of the service recite the blessing, *sheLo asani isha*. I could see the pain on some of their faces. Several women told me that when they hear those words, they feel violated, as if they do not count. One said, "What do you mean when you say, 'Thank you that I am not a woman'? But that's who *I* am."

It was then that I was faced with a dilemma. How could I reconcile moral sensibilities with the serious halakhic matter of *matbe'ah shel tefillah*—the sacredness of the original text of the liturgy? Looking deeply into the halakhic issues, it became clear to me that there were legitimate options—options that allowed the halakha to be true to the words we sing out when returning the Torah to the Ark, *derakheha darkhei no'am veKhol neti'voteha shalom*—"Its ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace" (Proverbs 3:17).[14]

Halakhic Reflections

The *birkhot haShahar* in which the three negative blessings appear are codified as part of our obligation to recite one hundred blessings daily.[15] It can be suggested that even if one does not recite the three negative blessings, there are certainly ample opportunities during the course of the day to achieve this number.

In the end, the three negative blessings are *birkot shevah veHoda'ah*, blessings of praise and thanksgiving. There may be room to suggest that not all *birkot shevah veHoda'ah* are obligatory in the strict sense of the word. An example of this can be found in Magen Avraham's comment that women do not have a custom to recite *birkat hoda'ah* after going on a trip overseas or through a desert because these blessings are "*reshut*."[16] One can logically extend this argument to other *birkot hoda'ah* as well.

Still, while these blessings may be non-obligatory, they are part and parcel of the liturgy. They take their place in the larger framework of *birkhot haShahar*, wherein we express gratitude for everything God has given us. It is then that we take a moment to offer thanksgiving for our identity as men and women who are free and part of the Jewish covenantal community. Thus, expression of that identity should be articulated.[17]

SheLo asani isha touches directly on the tension between fidelity to traditional formulations rooted in talmudic directives and other Torah values, such as *kavod haBriyot*, human dignity, not causing pain to others, and affirming the *tselem Elohim* in every person. For many people in the community the recitation of *sheLo asani isha* creates a deep and profound *tsa'ar nafshi*—personal, soulful hurt. One should therefore bear in mind that there are alternative texts to *sheLo asani isha*, specifically, *she'asani Yisrael,* "Who has made me a Jew." This text is quoted in the Talmud as an alternative view.[18] No lesser giants in halakha than Rosh and Vilna Gaon prefer this language.[19]

Much has been written about the role of minority opinions in deciding Jewish Law.[20] There is ample evidence that, when a minority opinion is supported by accepted luminaries in halakha, their views can be followed *beSha'at ha'dhak*, in times of pressing need.[21] The *tsa'ar nafshi*, the soulful pain that these blessings cause is such a *sha'at ha'dhak*.[22] Following this approach, we can rely on those Gedolim and *she'asani Yisrael* can be said.[23]

Once *she'asani Yisrael* is said, as noted by Bah and *Arukh Hashulhan*, the other blessings, "Who has not made me a gentile," and "Who has not made me a slave" should be omitted.[24] After all, if I am a Yisrael, a Jewish man, I am not a Yisraelit, a Jewish woman. Nor am I a slave or a gentile.[25]

Rabbi Nati Helfgot has tentatively suggested exploring an alternative approach. In prayer we have a concept that one should not "express falsehoods before God," *dover shekarim lifnei Hashem.* In practical terms, this has ramifications during *Neilah* of Yom Kippur when—if the *sheliah tsibbur* is reciting *haYom yifneh, haShemesh yavoh veYifneh:* "the day is passing, the sun will soon set and be

gone”—it is already after sunset. In this case, the *Mishnah Berurah,* citing Magen Avraham, writes that one should change the *nussah* to *haYom panah, haShemesh bah uPanah;* “the day has passed, the sun has already set and gone.”[26] Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein offers a similar approach to the *Nahem* blessing recited on Tisha B’Av in our day and age. He suggests that the words in the blessing *hashomeimah haAveilah mi’bli baneha*—“[the city] that is desolate, that grieves for the loss of its children” be left out, as it is no longer true today.[27]

Theoretically, one could make a case that if one feels deeply that this idea is untrue and not reflective of what one believes, nor reflective of society, it would make *sheLo asani isha* a declaration of a personal falsehood. It can thus be another *snif leHakel*, another factor coupled with others, that may lead one to look for other *nusshaot* that one can say with honesty and integrity before God. Rav Nati has suggested that although the cases are obviously not analogous in every sense, it is a framework that might be explored.

My position relative to *sheLo asani isha* is part of a more general approach to halakha. Halakha is not a computer system of physics or chemistry that operates irrespective of the individual and his or her circumstances. Like Torah from which it emerges, halakha is an *eitz hayyim*, a tree of life, a living organism, synergizing halakhic decisions transmitted verbally and orally through the generations with the needs of the day. From this perspective, halakha functions within parameters, outside of which the answer to a question may be an emphatic “no.” But within those parameters there is significant latitude and flexibility, allowing the *posek*—the decisor of Jewish Law—to take into account the sentiments and feelings of the questioner.[28] Halakha is, therefore, not an unyielding system, but one in which there may be more than one answer to a question—and given the situation, both may be correct.

Relative to the issue of *sheLo asani isha*, and for that matter the larger issue of women and halakha, I have been influenced by different women whom I respect and admire.[29] On the one hand, my wife Toby—a person of profound religious commitment and depth—is comfortable with the traditional role of women in synagogue and is more accepting of the *sheLo asani isha* text.

On the other hand, I have been impacted by my mother of blessed memory, a woman of valor, who never quite understood why she was so limited in what she could do in traditional Jewish ritual circles. To this day I see her tears as she, for the first time, came to the Torah to recite blessings at our women’s prayer group. If this group was established just for that moment alone—*dayenu*. And then there is my older sister, one of the great influences in my life who, as a feminist and

renowned novelist, grew up attending yeshivot that taught Judaism in a manner she felt was discriminatory against women.

My personal lenses on *sheLo asani isha* are more in line with the spirit of my mother and sister. Within my heart and soul I find the negative blessing formulation discordant, out of sync with the message of Jewish ethics.[30] Also, as one whose rabbinate seeks to embrace all Jews, I have come to recognize that the *sheLo asani isha* blessing has become a barrier to the many people who otherwise might be attracted to what Judaism has to offer. The blessing sends the message that women are inferior. Even if this is not its intention, that is the perception it leaves. And the only difference between perception and reality is that it is more difficult to change perception.

And yet, I fully appreciate the posture of those who, like my wife, do not understand the blessing as denigrating women and wish to maintain the text used by their fathers and mothers and grandparents all the way back. Wanting to be sensitive to both positions, I opted early on to instruct the leader of the service in at our shul (the Bayit) to begin with the *Rabbi Yishmael* prayer, leaving it up to the individual to decide whether to recite these blessings or not.[31] Concomitantly, this approach does not force anyone to hear a blessing they find inwardly painful and unacceptable.

The *Berakha* in Context: Women in Synagogue

It is my sense that in general, Orthodox synagogues that do not audibly and publicly recite *sheLo asani isha* are more welcoming to women in a whole variety of other areas. The most obvious relates to the structure and placement of the *mehitza*. A *mehitza* is meant to separate women and men. This doesn't mean that women should see or hear less. For me, the test of a fully welcoming *mehitza* is the following: When no one is in the sanctuary, one should be unable to know on which side the men or women sit.[32]

The term used for public *tefillah* also makes a difference. Although the word *minyan* is commonly used to refer to a prayer service, my preference is to use *tefillah*. *Minyan*, in Orthodoxy, includes men but does not count women. *Tefillah* transcends gender. Women are not part of the quorum of ten, but *tefillah* describes an experience in which both are critical participants.

A further test of welcome to women is whether they are encouraged to recite *Kaddish*, even if they are the sole "*Kaddish*-sayer."[33] Additionally, do women carry the Torah around their section?[34] Are they welcome to give *divrei Torah* in synagogue?[35] Most important for an inclusive atmosphere, is to create a safe space in the synagogue where open and honest discussion on such issues as *sheLo asani isha* can be conducted respectfully.[36]

That is no simple challenge. When my dear colleague Rabbi Yosef Kanefsky wrote in his blog that he no longer says *sheLo asani isha*, the pushback was shameful—not because people disagreed, but in the way people disagreed. Some went as far as to say that Rav Yosef—a man of profound religious commitment and impeccable integrity—could no longer be considered part of the Orthodox community.[37]

In speaking to many colleagues during this controversy, some told me that they, too, no longer say *sheLo asani isha*, but were fearful of making this public.[38] Today there is fear, amongst even the most seasoned rabbis, to say what is on their minds. There is concern of being ostracized and cast out of the Orthodox community. This resonates personally. How I remember during the Rabba controversy, colleagues calling to express support for my decision to ordain Rabba Sara Hurwitz and designate her title Rabba, but were afraid to speak their minds and hearts on the issue.

The time has come to stop looking over our shoulders seeking authenticity from the right. We ought to recognize that there are many, many who are proudly Orthodox, but open—open to honest discussion, honest debate, honest struggle with issues of heightened ethical and moral sensibilities. We should not be looking toward others for approval, but toward ourselves and, of course, toward God, Torah, and halakha itself.

The issue of the negative blessings is no small matter. In many ways, these blessings represent three areas that distinguish Open Orthodoxy—our attitude toward the gentile (*goy*), the most vulnerable (*eved*), and women (*isha*). For many people, articulating them in the negative sends a wrong message—that we care less about these people.

Thus, the significance of these blessings goes far beyond their narrow formula. They reveal much about ourselves and our relationship to others. Invoking God's name in these blessings also reveals how we believe that God wishes for us to interact with the world. The language we use in these blessings goes a long way in defining who we are as individuals and as part of a sacred community, an *am kadosh*.[39]

[1] *Menahot* 43b, Jerusalem Talmud *Berakhot* 9:1. See also *Tosefta Berakhot* 6:18.

[2] Although the Talmud declares that women are exempt from affirmative commandments fixed by time (*Kiddushin* 29a), Rabbi Saul Berman points out that there are more exceptions to this rule than the rule itself. The rule that women are exempt from affirmative commandments fixed by time is descriptive rather than predictive. See Rabbi Saul Berman, "The Status of Women in Halakhic Judaism." *Tradition* 14, no. 2 (Fall 1973: 5–28).

[3] See Koren Siddur, Commentary by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (Jerusalem: Koren Publishing. 2009), in his explanation of *sheLo asani isha.*

[4] See, for example, Rabbi Ahron Soloveichik, "The Attitude of Judaism Toward the Woman" *Major Addresses Delivered at Mid-Continent Conclave and National Leadership Conference, Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations*, (November 27–November 30, 1969), pp. 29–30 (New York: UOJC, 1970).

[5] See *Shulhan Arukh*, *Orah Hayyim* 46:4 quoting David Ben Joseph Abudraham of the fourteenth century.

[6] While Rav Ahron outlines the character difference between men and women, its application to *sheLo asani isha* and *she'asani kirtzono* was my own.

[7] See *The Weekly Siddur*, B.S. Jacobson (Tel Aviv: Sinai), 1978, p. 42. See also *Meshekh Hokhmah*, Commentary to Genesis 9:1, s.v. *pru u'r'vu*, where he suggests that women are exempt from the mitzvah of being fruitful and multiplying as they cannot be commanded to perform a mitzvah that may be physically dangerous, even life-threatening.

[8] *Eruvin* 13b. In the words of the Talmud, "Now that he has been created, let him investigate his past deeds, or, others say, let him examine his future actions."

[9] See Taz to *Shulhan Arukh*, *Orah Hayyim* 46:4.

[10] See Yoel Kahn, *The Three Blessings: Boundaries, Censorship and Identity in Jewish Liturgy* (Oxford University Press, 2011) pp. 10–11. There, he argues that the rabbis reformulated these negative blessings that were originally introduced by Socrates. See also Tamar Jakobowitz's review of Kahn's book in "*Meorot*: A Forum of Modern Orthodox Discussion." Tishrei 5772/2011, published by Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School.

[11] Note that unlike the other morning blessings, which are discussed in *Berakhot* 60b, the negative blessings are found in *Menahot* 43b. As the negative blessings are quoted in the name of Rabbi Meir or Rabbi Yehuda depending on one's *girsa*, it would appear that they came about in the second century c.e., after Rome's destruction of the Second Temple. There is a possibility that Rabbi Meir or Rabbi Yehuda is quoting preexisting blessings.

[12] Often, the existence of many explanations for an idea does not speak to the idea's strength, but to its weakness.

[13] See Rabbi Ahron Soloveichik, *Od Yisrael Yosef Beni Hai* (Yeshivas Brisk, 1993), no. 32, p. 100, who says that it is forbidden to prevent women from reciting the Mourner's *Kaddish*.

[14] See Maharsha's final commentary to *Yebamot*, s.v. *ve'amar*.

[15] See *Menahot* 43b; *Tur Orah Hayyim* 46; *Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayyim* 46:1–4.

[16] See Magen Avraham to *Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayyim* Introduction to n. 219.

[17] Halakha is a system that recognizes that although the roles of men and women overlap in the vast majority of areas, there are clear distinctions. There are things a woman can do that a man cannot, and vice versa.

[18] *Menahot* 43b.

[19] See Rosh to *Berakhot* 9:24 and Vilna Gaon in his *Bi'ur HaGra* to *Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayyim* 46, s.v. *sheLo asani*. *She'asani Yisrael* as it appears in the Talmud may be a corrupted text, introduced by the censor as there was fear that *sheLo asani goy,* "Who has not made me a gentile," would provoke the ire of non-Jews. For an analysis of this censorship see Rabbi Zev Farber, "Creation and Morning Blessings."

It is unclear whether Vilna Gaon believes *she'asani Yisrael* was a corrupted text or not. Still, the fact that Vilna Gaon cites in his gloss on the *Shulhan Arukh* that our texts follow Rosh, indicates that he proactively preferred the *she'asani Yisrael* language.

[20] For an analysis of this issue, see Rabbi Nati Helfgot, "Minority Opinions and Their Role in Hora'ah" in *Mishpetei Shalom: A Jubilee Volume in Honor of Rabbi Saul (Shalom) Berman*, edited by Rabbi Yamin Levy. (Jersey City: KTAV Publishing), 2009, pp. 257–288.

[21] *Berakhot* 9a "Rabbi Shimon is a great enough authority to rely upon in cases of emergency/pressing need, *sha'at ha'dhak*." See also Tosefta *Eduyot* 1:15.

[22] For some examples of *tsa'ar nafshi* interfacing with halakha see *Rosh HaShanah* 33a, Responsa Mase'it Binyamin 62 and Responsa Maharshal n. 46.

[23] This is the position I have followed for many years.

[24] See Bah to *Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayyim* 46 s.v. *ve'yesh od* and *Arukh HaShulhan Orah Hayyim* 46:10.

[25] *Mishnah Berurah* to *Orah Hayyim* 46:15 exhorts one to avoid reciting *she'asani Yisrael* as this would preclude the saying of the two other negative blessings.

[26] See *Mishnah Berurah* to *Orah Hayyim* 623:2 and *Sha'ar Hatsiyun* n.6.

[27] Cited by Rabbi Lichtenstein's close student Rabbi Chaim Navon at the close of his essay, *Nusach Ha-tefilah Be-Mitziut Mishtaneh*, Tzohar 32. It seems to me that the same reasoning would apply to some of the words found in the *Mi*

Shebeirakh after *Yakum Purkan* said during Mussaf on Shabbat. There the text reads *Mi shebeirakh avoteinu Avraham, Yitzhak v'Yaakov, Hu yeVarekh et kol haKahal haKadosh haZeh…hem u'nesheihem u've'neihem u've'no'teihem…*— "May He who blessed our fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, bless all this holy congregation…them, their wives, their sons and daughters…". Reciting the words *hem u'nesheihem u've'neihem u've'no'teihem*— "them, their wives, their sons and daughters," would be saying that wives and children are not part of the holy congregation.

[28] Examples of such matters that have become part and parcel of the halakhic decision-making process include *hefsed merubah* (extensive financial loss), *beMakom tsa'ar lo gazru rabbanan* (the rabbis did not intend their decrees for cases of great distress), *leTsorekh holeh/ holah* (for the sake of the sick), *ahnus* (matters involving physical or psychological coercion).

[29] It too often occurs that rabbis make decisions pertaining to women without any understanding or input from them; they are unfortunately, quite simply, left out of the discussion.

[30] As a youngster I attended Hareidi yeshivot. While there was one rabbi, Rabbi Moshe Wolfson, who deeply impacted my spiritual growth, most others did not. I can recall how, too often, my rebbes denigrated gentiles, especially African Americans using the "S" word over and over to describe who they were. There was also a clear culture of viewing women as less than men. When a student would offer an analysis (*sevara)* to explain a Gemara that fell short, the rebbe would often say that's a *veibishe sevara,* that's the way women think. *(*At times when a student's *sevara* was subpar, rebbeim would react by saying "you are thinking with a *goyishe kup*—a gentile's head.") I feel emotional upset when recalling those moments. For me reciting or hearing the three negative blessings reverberates with the teaching that gentiles and women are of less importance.

[31] See Dr. Joel Wolowelsky, "A Quiet Berakha." *Tradition* 29:4, 1995. It is not uncommon in yeshivot for the leader of the service to begin with the *Rabbi Yishmael* prayer.

[32] The *mehitza* in our shul in Riverdale (the Bayit) bisects the sanctuary, merging into the walls that surround an elevated *bimah* in the center of the *shul*, and an elevated *Aron Kodesh* against the eastern wall. Both the *bimah* and *Aron*

are therefore equally placed within the mens' and womens' sections; in fact, that space can be considered a third section, a neutral section. When men are there, women are not, and vice versa. Not only is the sanctuary perfectly divided, but both men and women have equal access to the *bimah* and *aron kodesh*.

Yet another measure of welcome related to *mehitza* is whether the women's section of the sanctuary is sacrosanct, that is whether their place of prayer is reserved for them alone. In too many synagogues, when women are not in *shul*, men sit in their section. Over the years, I have seen women forced to sit in the lobby when seeing their section occupied by men. This especially happens in daily *tefillah*, Kabbalat Shabbat, and Shabbat Minha. It sends the negative message that women are not welcome. An equal place for women should not only be available on Shabbat morning, but for daily *tefillot*, thus welcoming women to attend at all times.

[33] At the Bayit, *Kaddish* is introduced with these words: Let us rise and listen closely as women and men recite the Mourner's *Kaddish*.

[34] See Avraham Weiss, "Women and Sifrei Torah." *Tradition* 20, no. 2 (Summer 1982): 106–118.

[35] At the Bayit, women speak from the *Bimah*, which, as pointed out, is in a third, neutral section.

Rabbis should also be conscious that women and men are in the synagogue. Care must therefore be taken to use gender-friendly language that is inclusive of both men and women. The rabbi must also be careful to turn to both sides of the *mehitza* when speaking.

In a similar vein, when a child is named, care should be taken to mention both the father's and mother's names. In recent years, I have asked that when coming to the Torah for an *aliya*, I be called as the son of my father *and* mother.

[36] There are many other areas where women can feel more welcome in synagogue. Some of the possibilities—many of which have already been adopted in some Orthodox congregations—include women announcing the *molad*, a woman *gabbait*, women opening and closing the Ark, women *makriyot*, women reciting the *mi shebeirakhs,* and women leading the *tefillah le'shlom haMedinah*.

[37] See Rabbi Avi Shafran, "The "O"-Word." *Ami Magazine*, August 23, 2011.

[38] Some colleagues told me that they recite *she'asani Yisrael*. Several others told me they omit these blessings entirely. See, however, Rabbi Marc Angel, in an article that originally appeared in a volume published by the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA), "Modern Orthodoxy and Halacha: An Enquiry," *Journal of Jewish Thought, Jubilee Issue* (Jerusalem), 1985, pp. 115–116. There, almost 30 years ago, Rabbi Angel forthrightly writes:

> A true Modern Orthodox position would be to change the blessing [*sheLo asani isha*] to a more suitable formula, one that does not cast negative aspersions on women. Making such a change does not imply that we are more sensitive or more intelligent than our predecessors; it only reflects the fact that we are living in a different world-time and that we are responding to the needs of our generation.

This comment evoked little reaction. What could be said 30 years ago in a spirit of respectful, open discourse can no longer be said without rancor and personal, often brutal criticism—symptomatic of our community's pull to the right. A few years after writing these words, Rabbi Angel became national president of the RCA.

[39] Many thanks to my dear colleague and treasured friend, Rabbi Aaron Frank, with whom I reviewed this essay. I am deeply grateful for his editing and general insights.

Many thanks also to my wonderful congregant Gabriella de Beer for her editorial review.

Rabbi Nati Helfgot, Rabbi Yaakov Love, and Rabbi Zev Farber offered comments on parts of the Halakhic Reflections section of this article. While acknowledging their input, I bear full responsibility for what is written here.