

Women's Issues

Women And Prayer When Time is Short

Rabbi David Sperling

A major issue that often arises is not having enough time to pray in the mornings. This is especially acute when women either start working, and/or start raising a family. Obviously the ideal situation is to set aside twenty minutes or so in the morning in a quiet and unrushed atmosphere in which to pray. However, we are all aware that the reality often does not allow us this spiritual pleasure. Let's examine the obligations of a woman in prayer for a normal weekday, and the order of preference when time is short.

1. The Mishna.

In Masechet Brachot (Chapter 3, mishnah 3) we find "Women, slaves, and children are exempt from reading the shema and from tefillin, [but] they are obligated in tefillah, mezzuzah, and grace after meals." The gemara (Brachot 20b) states that the mishnah obligates women in prayer because they also need to request mercy from Heaven, even though we might have thought to exempt them on the basis of it being a time-bound precept.

There are two possible understandings of the obligation of women in tefillah (prayer) according to this mishnah. The Ramban, and many other rishonim, understand that the obligation of praying in general is rabbinic, and not from the Torah. If this is so, then the mishnah can only be obligating women in the rabbinical mitzvah of the Shmonah-Esrei (the center of our daily services found in the siddur) as there is no Torah-obligated "tefillah" that it could be referring to.

However, the Rambam is of the opinion that there is a Torah obligation to pray, learned from the words "And you shall serve Him with all your heart" (Deut. 10,13). This mitzvah is defined by the Rambam as praising God, making a request of Him, and giving thanks to Him, in any language, every person according to their ability. This is not limited to any definition of how often to pray each day, or any specific language to be used. (See Rambam Tefillah, Chapter 1,2). If so, is the mishnah coming to obligate women in this Torah mitzvah? Or, perhaps, the mishnah is obligating women further, to the rabbinic mitzvah of prayer, which encompasses the language of the Shmonah-Esrei found in the siddur, and the restrictions of when and how often one must pray.

The Magen Avraham (Orach Chaim, 106, 2) states that "According to the Rambam, from the Torah it is enough to pray once a day, in any form one chooses. Therefore most women are accustomed not to pray regularly, because they say a request immediately upon arising, straight after washing their hands, which suffices from the Torah. And it is possible that the Rabbis did not obligate them more than this. The Ramban and most of the poskim (codifiers) are of the opinion that prayer is [entirely] rabbinic in nature."

Based on this reasoning, there are certain halachic opinions that state that it is enough for women to recite one small "praise - request - thanks" each day. (Saying the morning blessings, the blessings on the Torah, grace after a meal, or making up one's own prayer - "O mighty God, please give me strength, and I thank you for all the things you do for us" - would suffice). This opinion is held by Rav Ovadiah Yosef (Yabia Omer Vol. 6, 17).

However, there are several reasons for not ruling in line with this opinion. Firstly, as the Mishna Brurah (106, 4) points out, most of the poskim rule in line with the Ramban against the Rambam. The Mishna Brurah writes, "And [the Ramban's opinion] is the major one, because that is the opinion of most of the poskim, and so too ruled the Sha'agat Ari'eh, therefore one should advise women to pray the Shmonah-Esrei".

Secondly, even the Magen Avraham himself does not rule that women are exempt from formal prayer. He merely tries to explain why many women do not pray regularly. He himself seems to rule in several places that women are obligated to pray the Shmonah-Esrei. (See the Sha'aray Tzion 106,5).

Thirdly, and most importantly, it is not at all clear that this interpretation of the Rambam is correct. We have already pointed out the possibility that the mishnah may be obligating women even beyond the Torah obligation, and placing them under a rabbinic commitment. This is borne out by the Rambam's commentary to the mishnah in Kidushin (chapter 3,7), where he lists tefillah amongst the list of mitzvot that women are obligated in even though the mitzvah is time-bound. The Rambam must be referring to the rabbinic commandment of prayer, because as we have seen, the Torah commandment is not bound by time restraints. This is also clear from the Rambam's Laws of Prayer (Code, Tefillah, 6: 10) where he obligates both women and children in prayer. This cannot be referring to the Torah obligation of prayer, because children are exempt from that, therefore it must be an obligation to rabbinic prayer. Accordingly, the understanding of the Magen Avraham is incorrect, and even the Rambam holds that women are obligated in the Shmonah-Esrei like

men. Rav Henkin in B'nei Banim (Volume 2, 6) rules this way, as do many other latter day poskim.

Based on these three reasons, it seems difficult to use the Rambam as a source for allowing women to refrain from praying the Shmonah-Esrei. (It is noteworthy that this is true irrespective of whether one is Askenazic or Sephardic.)

2. Why some women don't pray

Quite apart from the understanding of the mitzvah of prayer vis-à-vis women, is the reality of what women actually practice. This practice also has halachic weight, if we can find an acceptable halachic explanation for it. The reality of women's prayer is not so clear. Whilst we find statements like that of the Kaf HaChaim, (70,1) where he writes that "Women who know how to learn are accustomed to pray the complete prayer service like men", we also find statements like that of the Magen Avraham (ibid.) that most women are not accustomed to praying regularly. We must assume then that the practice of women varied greatly from community to community, between different types of women - from the learned to the less learned, perhaps even at different times in a woman's life, and at different periods in history. Even today in the religious world, we find pious women who pray the complete service, and others who do not pray on a regular basis at all.

We have already shown that the Magen Avraham's attempt to explain those women who do not say a regular Shmonah-Esrei, based on his understanding of the Rambam, is difficult to rely upon. However there are two other explanations that seem reasonable, and thus can be used to support the widespread practice amongst certain women not to pray.

3. "Serving the Sick."

Rav Yakov Kamenetzky is quoted as saying that just as we find that someone who is caring for the ill is exempt from prayer, so too women who are involved in the raising and care of children are exempt from prayer. This is either because they are unable to pray and are considered "anus" (unable to perform a mitzvah under compulsion), or because they are busy with one mitzvah, and come under the category of "osek b'mitzvah patur min hamitzvah" (those busy with one mitzvah are exempt from another mitzvah). (See Halichot Bat Yisra'el Chapter 2, footnote 2).

Obviously this justification of those women who do not pray can only apply to those truly involved in child-rearing. It would seem that once the children are all at school, or in childcare, the women would once again become obligated. Also, on the infrequent days that the woman is not involved with the children (such as when they have gone to the grandparents for Shabat etc.), she would also be obligated.

4. Lack of Concentration.

Some opinions (see B'nei Banim *ibid.*, and also the Responsa Machazeh Eliyahu 19) explain the reason for some women not praying to be based on the law that one needs to have extreme concentration when praying. The Rambam writes that "one who finds his concentration disturbed, and his heart worried, is forbidden to pray until his concentration returns. Therefore someone returning from a trip, who is tired or upset, is forbidden to pray until his mind is at rest. The Chachamim said that one should wait three days until his mind is at rest and only then pray." (Code. Tefillah 4,15). Due to the general lessening of concentration in prayer, the Shulchan Aruch rules that today we have accepted upon ourselves to pray even when our minds are not totally at rest (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim⁹⁸). However, perhaps women did not take upon themselves this stringency, and remain obligated to pray only when they are not involved with raising a family.

According to this line of thought, those women who are not overly burdened with the task of raising a family, would also be obligated to pray.

5. Shmonah-Esrei Conclusions.

The overwhelming opinion of the poskim is that women are obligated to pray the standard Shmonah-Esrei twice a day (shacharit and minchah). Those women who due to raising a family find this impossible should at least try to fulfill the Torah obligation and say a small prayer once a day (if they can manage to say the Shmonah-Esrei once a day, all the better). But it should be remembered that when the family situation changes and a woman has time, she should return to the practice of saying the full Shmonah-Esrei twice daily.

The obligation to recite the evening Shmonah-Esrei is also a matter of debate. There are opinions that obligate women to say the evening Shmonah-Esrei - such as the Aruch HaShulchan (106,7) and the Kaf HaChaim (299,62). However the practice of most women is in line with the Mishna Brurah (106,4) that the evening service was originally optional, and that only men took it upon themselves as an obligation, whereas women did not accept the responsibility.

(See also B'nay Banim Vol. 1, 19). Those women who desire to pray the evening service are certainly praiseworthy, but it may be advisable not to take this on as an obligation, but rather to expressly state that one only intends to pray the evening service when she has the opportunity.

6. The Shema.

We have already seen the mishnah that states that women are exempt from reciting the Shema. This is indeed the halacha (Orach Chaim, 70 : 1). However the Shulchan Aruch adds that "It is correct to teach [the women] that they should receive upon themselves the yoke of heaven." The Rema adds "And they should at least read the first verse". There is some argument about whether the Rema is only explaining the Shulchan Aruch, or perhaps ruling that whereas the Shulchan Aruch advises women to recite the complete first paragraph, the Rema is more lenient and requires the recitation of "at least" (and exclusively) the first line (Mishna Brurah 4 and 5).

A woman very pushed for time should at least say the first line of shema and "Baruch Shem kevod...". However, it would certainly be correct for women to say the complete first paragraph. A woman who has the time would certainly be praiseworthy in reciting all three paragraphs of shema, however this should not be at the expense of praying those sections of the service that she is obligated in. Rav Henkin has pointed out to me, that since women are only obligated to pray when they have full concentration (see paragraph 4 above), this may result in an added stricture for them. That is, when a woman does in fact pray, she must be even more careful than men to ensure that she concentrates. Because of this a woman should judge very carefully and make certain that she does not take on additional optional prayers at the expense of saying the Shmonah-Esrei with correct concentration.

7. Blessings Of the Shema.

Women are exempt from saying the blessings before the shema, because they are a time-bound mitzvah (see Mishna Brurah 70, 2). However the blessing after the shema - "Emet v'yatziv" - which was written in order to fulfill the mitzvah of recalling the exodus from Egypt daily, must be recited by women, according to the Magen Avraham (ibid). This opinion is widely quoted, although there are those that argue this point, and say that either a woman can (or should) fulfill this mitzvah by reciting the third paragraph of shema, or *shir haYam* etc., or that this is a time-bound mitzvah that only applies in the daytime and not at night. The practice today is for women to say this blessing. (For the Sephardi ruling concerning the brachah, see below).

If one is already saying this blessing, there are two important points to be taken into consideration. Firstly, there is a rule that one should connect "geulah", redemption, with tefillah. Therefore, one should make sure that the blessing after shema is said without any interruptions between it and the Shmonah-Esrei. (It is even more important not to interrupt the recitation of shema itself).

Secondly, even though women do not have to be particular to recite the shema by any particular time, the blessing must be recited before the end of the first third of the day (Mishna Brurah 58, 25). To determine the exact hour, one needs to consult a Jewish calendar with the last time for tefillah marked on it [one takes the daylight hours, divides by 12, then multiplies that number by 4, the result being the length of 4 halachic hours]. In cases where circumstances beyond the woman's control prevented her from praying on time, such as feeling ill, caring of children, etc, then there is an opinion that can be relied upon to recite this blessing, and the Shmonah-Esrei, up until half the day has passed (Bi'ur Halacha 58,6).

8. Morning Blessings.

The blessings recited in the morning for Torah study also apply to women. Even though women are exempt from the mitzvah of Torah study in and of itself, they are still obligated in knowing Halacha, and therefore are obligated to recite the blessings in the morning. (Shulchan Aruch 47, 14). It seems to me that a woman who is actually going to learn Torah, should be extra careful to recite this blessing before beginning her studies.

The rest of the morning blessings - "Elokai Neshamah", and the following blessings up to "ha'gomel chasadim"... - were decreed for women equally as for men. This can be seen by the language of the Shulchan Aruch (46, 4) where after writing that men say "who did not make me a woman", women recite "who made me according to His will". If time is lacking, these blessings can be recited until the end of the fourth hour, and (bedi'avad) if this was not possible, then they can be recited all day, even after nightfall (Mishna Brurah 52, 10).

In connection to reciting the korbanot (offerings), even though the Mishna Brurah rules in line with the Agur that women must say them (or at least the tamid (Shulchan Aruch Ha'Rav 47, 10)), the common practice of women today is not to recite them. This is based on the many commentators who question the Agur's ruling (Pri Megadim, Tehilah L'David, HaYa'avetz).

9. Pesukei D'Zimrah.

The Mishna Brurah (70, 2) learns from the ruling of Rav Akiva Eiger, who states that pesukei d'zimra was established in order to prepare for prayer, as the gemara in brachot (32a) says "a person should always prepare the praises of the Lord and only afterwards pray". From this he learns that because women are obligated to pray, they are also obligated in pesukei d'zimra. However, he also quotes (and questions) the ruling of the Shulchan Aruch HaRav, who exempts women from pesukei d'zimra. This is the view shared by the Aruch HaShulchan (though he states that women accepted this upon themselves as an obligation) and others.

A woman with the time should certainly recite all of pesukei d'zimra. If one has less time, then "baruch she'amar", "ashrei", and "yishtabach" would suffice. Those women who are very pushed for time and do not recite it all have authorities to rely upon.

10. Sephardiot and Blessings.

There is a major difference between the rulings of the Shulchan Aruch as opposed to the Rema in the question of whether one can say a blessing over a mitzvah that one is not obligated in. A woman is not obligated to hear the shofar, for example. Therefore, the Shulchan Aruch rules that she cannot recite the blessing over the mitzvah, in line with the rishonim who say that one cannot say "vetzivanu", "who has commanded us", when there is no obligating command. However the Rema rules in line with Rabbenu Tam, who holds that one can recite a blessing over a mitzvah even if the mitzvah isn't obligatory (see Orach Chaim 589, 6). To this day, most Sephardi women do not say blessings over mitzvot they are not commanded in (such as shofar, lulav etc), whereas Ashkenazi women do pronounce the blessing. [Though there are Sephardic communities where the women do say the blessings, and they should continue with their custom, see Birchei Yosef, Orach Chaim 654,2]

In connection to prayer then, it is clear that Ashkenazi women pronounce all the blessings, even over the sections of the service that they are not obligated in. However in the Sephardic community, there are two common practices. Rav Ovadya Yosef is of the opinion that women cannot say the blessings over the parts of the service that they are not clearly obligated in. Therefore, he rules that women do not recite the blessing with G-d's name in "baruch she'amar" nor in "yishtabach". They should also refrain from saying the blessing ("baruch ata Hashem ...") in the blessings before and after the shema. He has had a siddur for women printed with these blessings excluded from the prayer service.

There is a different custom for Sephardic women, which allows women to say all the blessings of prayer (except for those before and after hallel), because they are not concerned with being commanded in anything, and do not include the wording "vetzivanu", "who commanded us". This opinion is held by Rav Aba Shaul zt"l, and the Tzitz Eliezer (Vol. 9, 2). In practice, one should follow one's family tradition, or that of the local community.

11. Tachanun and the End of the Service.

The rest of the service, from the end of the amidah onwards, is not obligatory for women (see Halichot Bat Yisra'el, Chapter 2, 12). Even so, the gemara praises the idea of reciting "ashrei" thrice daily. Also ending the service with "aleinu" is of great importance. And as we quoted earlier, the Kaf HaChaim describes learned women as praying the complete service like men. However, these parts of the service are optional, and not obligatory.

12. Praying on the Bus or Train.

It is clearly preferable to refrain from praying on the way to work or school. The advantages, both halachic and spiritual, of having a fixed place in which to pray - a particular seat in the synagogue, or a corner of the room, are well known. (In passing, I would like to correct a common misconception that I have encountered, which is that many people think it is forbidden to pray in a bedroom. Whilst it may be more conducive to prayer to find a place in the living room, there are no halachic impediments to praying in a bedroom - as long as the other people who may be there are clothed, and there is no foul matter, such as dirty diapers. [Perhaps this misconception began when people still had chamber pots under their beds ?]).

Though it is not ideal to pray on the bus or train - and it is certainly forbidden to pray the amidah whilst driving at the wheel - if one has no other time in which to pray, then it can be done. (See Shulchan Aruch 94, 4-5). Preferably one should stand up in the vehicle to pray the Amidah, or at least for the first blessing, the places where one needs to bow, and the end of the Amidah in order to take three steps backwards. However, if one is unable to stand, or one would fear falling over, then one can pray sitting down. It seems to me that in a case where one will not be able to have the correct kavana (intention) during prayer if she stands (because of the fear of falling, or the self-consciousness of praying standing up in front of a busload of people), then one should pray sitting down. One should try to face Jerusalem in prayer, but if this is impossible, then it is enough to turn one's face in the correct direction. If the

vehicle constantly changes direction, or one is uncertain of the correct way to face, one should turn one's heart to Jerusalem.

I have seen it quoted that Rav Chaim Kani'evsky rules that if in the middle of the Shmonah-Esrei, the bus reaches your stop, you are allowed to alight and to continue praying after leaving the bus (as long as the break in praying was not longer than it takes to say the complete Shmonah-Esrei). This would also apply to having to move whilst standing up on the train, if you find yourself blocking someone's path.

13. Conclusions.

While when time allows, it is proper for women to pray the complete service, the order of preference would be as follows (see Ashei Israel Chapter 7, 18):-

1. A small prayer that includes praise, request and thanks.
2. The Shmonah-Esrei
3. The blessing of "emet v'yatziv" (which is found after the shema)
4. The morning blessings
5. The blessings over the Torah
6. Pesukay d'zimra ("baruch she'amar", "ashrei", "yishtabach")
7. The first verse of the shema and "baruch shem kevod"
8. The rest of pesukei d'zimra
9. The complete three paragraphs of shema.

Each item on this list that is added to the morning prayers must, of course, be added at the correct place in the service. Therefore, a women needs to estimate before she begins praying how much time she will have. If she only has a few minutes she will say only items number 1 or 2. If she knows that she will have five minutes or so, she will first say item 3, then the Shmonah-Esrei (item 2). A woman who knows she has about 15 minutes or so, should be able to recite the complete list, in the correct order that it appears in the siddur (items 5,4,6 + 8,7,9,3,2). Those women with more time could say the complete service as found in the siddur, just leaving out those parts that require a minyan (if she is not praying with one). This should normally take about 30 minutes or so.

May we all merit to have our prayers worthy of being answered, together with the prayers of the entire nation of Israel.