

WOMEN AND PRAYER: OBLIGATIONS AND PRIORITIES

by Rabbi Doniel Neustadt

The Halachah obligates men to daven to Hashem three times every single day—Shacharis, Minchah and Ma'ariv. The degree to which women are obligated to daven, however, is a subject debated by the early poskim. There are halachic authorities who exempt women from formal davening altogether as long as they recite a simple supplication in the morning[1]. Other poskim maintain that women are obligated to daven twice[2] a day—Shacharis and Minchah—just like men[3]. Although most poskim agree with the second view that women are obligated to daven[4], it was a rare woman who davened formally in the olden days. Running a household was an all-consuming task[5], and many women were illiterate to boot. Most women, therefore, dispensed with their obligation to daven by reciting a simple supplication[6].

Nowadays, we are witnessing a remarkable turnabout in regard to women's formal prayer. Many women, especially single girls and older women have assumed the obligation of davening regularly, as the halachah dictates. Even busy mothers attempt to daven as often as they possibly can.

Nevertheless, women are still not as free to daven as men and the demands on their time may legitimately conflict with the halachic times for davening. We will therefore list, in order of importance, the parts of davening which take priority for a woman whose time is limited[7]. Depending on how much time she has she should recite as many as she can, and recite them in the order in which they appear in the siddur:

1. Reciting a simple supplication is the very least a woman must do according to all the poskim. Any supplication that opens with praise of G-d (shevach) and ends with thanksgiving for His benevolence (hoda'ah), such as Birchos ha-shachar[8] or Birkos ha-Torah[9] is sufficient[10].
2. Shemoneh Esrei of Shacharis and Minchah. This is the minimum requirement according to most poskim[11].
3. The first verse of Shema[12] and Baruch Shem[13]. Although women are technically exempt from Shema since it is a time-based mitzvah, the poskim recommend that at the very least they recite the first verse, which is the declaration of accepting Hashem's sovereignty upon oneself[14].
4. Birchos ha-Shachar[15], including Birchos ha-Torah[16]. [If a woman has already davened Shemoneh Esrei, she may no longer recite the blessing of Al netilas yadayim, since that blessing can be said only before davening[17].]

5.The blessing of Emes v'yatziv until Ga'al Yisrael[18], followed immediately, without any break, by Shemoneh Esrei, so that they fulfill the mitzvah of semichas geulah l'tefillah—the halachic requirement that no break take place between Shemoneh Esrei and the blessing that precedes it.

6.Pesukei d'Zimrah[19], with priority given to Boruch sh'amar, Ashrei (Nishmas on Shabbos) and Yistabach.

7.The entire Shema[20] prefaced by Kel melech ne'eman[21].

8.The blessings of Yotzer ohr and Ahavah rabbah[22].

9.Korbanos[23], while giving priority to Parashas ha-Tamid[24]. As mentioned earlier, a woman who has the time to do so, should daven all of the parts of the davening that we have listed, in the right order and at the right time.

Additional notes:

- The correct time to recite Birchos Kerias Shema is until the end of zeman tefillah, which is a third of the day, or four halachic hours from sunrise. A woman may not recite Birchos Kerias Shema after that time under any circumstances[25].
- Shemoneh Esrei should also be completed before the end of zeman tefillah. If, however, a woman is unable to daven before then, she may daven Shemoneh Esrei until midday (chatzos)[26]. After that time she may no longer daven Shacharis[27].
- Just as it is forbidden for men to eat before they fulfill their obligation of davening[28], women, too, should not eat before davening. But many women eat after reciting Birchos ha-shachar, since as explained earlier, some poskim rule that they fulfill their minimum obligation of daily prayer by reciting any supplication. They may rely on this leniency even though they are planning to pray the entire Service later on[29].
- Women are exempt from Tachanun, Ashrei-U'va l'tziyon and the Shir shel yom[30] It has become customary for them to recite Aleinu after Shemoneh Esrei.[31]
- Women are exempt from Hallel on Rosh Chodesh, Pesach[32], Succos and Shavous, because it is a time-based mitzvah[33]. Some poskim require women to recite Hallel on Chanukah[34], while others exempt them[35].
- The poskim debate whether women are obligated to daven Mussaf or not[36]. It is customary that they do[37].

Note that all tefillos in which women may be exempt, such as the daily Ma'ariv, Hallel, Musaf, Ashrei and U'va l'tziyon, are still permitted to be davened by women. [Sepharadic women should consult the rav as to which tefillos they are permitted to daven[38].]

1. Magen Avraham 106:1, based on the view of the Rambam.

2. Most authorities agree that women are not obligated to daven Ma'ariv, since Ma'ariv was initially established as a voluntary prayer even for men, and while eventually men accepted Ma'ariv as an obligation, women did not. A minority opinion holds that women should daven Ma'ariv as well, see Aruch ha-Shulchan 3.106:7 and Kaf ha-Chayim 299:62, and this is the custom of some women nowadays.
3. View of the Ramban (Sefer ha-Mitzvos 5).
4. Mishnah Berurah 106:4.
5. The Chafetz Chayim's son reported (Sichos Chafetz Chayim, pg. 13) that his mother rarely davened when her children were young. She said that the Chafetz Chayim exempted her from formal davening during that period in her life.
6. Rav M. Feinstein (quoted in Ko Somar l'Beis Yaakov, pg. 29) once remarked that the fact that many women were illiterate and were not required by the rabbanim to learn how to read is proof that they relied on the poskim who did not require women to daven Shacharis and Minchah, although women certainly recited supplications. See below.
7. The list is formulated for Ashkenazic women only, since some Sephardic poskim (see Yechaveh Da'as 1:68; 3:3) rule that women are not allowed to daven certain parts of the davening from which they are exempt.
8. From asher nasan lasechvi vinah until gomeil chasadim Tovim l'amo Yisrael.
9. Machazeh Eliyahu 19:5-15.
10. See Emes l'Yaakov, O.C. 106:1 and Halichos Shelomo 1:2-4 and Devar Halachah 5.
11. Mishnah Berurah 106:4. See also Mishnah Berurah 263:43.
12. Rama, O.C. 70:1
13. Levush, quoted by Peri Megadim and Kaf ha-Chayim 70:1.
14. Mishnah Berurah 70:4; 106:4. It is not, however, required that the Shema be said within the time frame allotted to men; Eishel Avraham (Butchach) 70:1. See also Aruch ha-Shulchan 70:2.
15. Mishnah Berurah 70:1; Aruch ha-Shulchan 70:1.
16. O.C. 47:14. See Beiur Halachah, s.v. noshim, that women are exempt from Birchos ha-Torah according to the opinion of the Vilna Gaon. Accordingly, a woman who is short of time should give priority to the other blessings.
17. Mishnah Berurah 4:1.
18. This blessing is given priority in order to satisfy the view of some poskim who hold that women

are obligated to fulfill the daily mitzvah of Zecher l'yetzias Mitzrayim (the daily mitzvah to remember the Exodus); Magen Avraham 70:1. Other poskim, however, recommend that women recite this blessing but do not require it; see Rigshei Lev 4:18 quoting Rav Y.S. Elyashiv.

19. The poskim disagree whether or not women are obligated to recite Pesukei d'Zimrah; see Mishnah Berurah 70:1 and Sha'ar ha-Tziyun 4; Aruch ha-Shulchan 47:25; 70:1; Yechaveh Da'as 3:3. [See The Daily Halachah Discussion on 10 Tammuz whether or not women who come late to shul should skip parts of Pesukei d'Zimrah in order to daven b'tzibbur.]

20. Although clearly exempt from reciting Kerias Shema, it has become customary for women to try to recite the entire Shema, so that they, too, accept Hashem's sovereignty and commandments upon themselves.

21. Minchas Elazar 2:28.

22. Aruch ha-Shulchan 70:1.

23. Although some poskim, including the Mishnah Berurah (Beur Halachah 47:14, s.v. noshim) require women to recite korbanos, it is not customary that women do so, and there are many poskim who exempt them altogether from korbanos; see Halichos Beisah 4:1 and Machazeh Eliyahu 14:4.

24. See Shulchan Aruch ha-Rav 47:10 and Rav Y.S. Elyashiv in Koveitz Teshuvos 1:14 and Peninei Tefillah, pg 136.

25. Rav Y.S. Elyashiv, quoted in Rigshei Lev 5:17; Halichos Beisah 5:5. See Yisrael v'Hazmanim 8:33. See, however, Peninei Tefillah, pg. 139.

26. O.C. 89:1.

27. Rav M. Feinstein (quoted in Ko Somar l'Beis Yaakov, pg. 34); Machazeh Eliyahu 19:5-14.

28. O.C. 89:3. See details in The Monthly Halachah Discussion, pgs. 164-169.

29. Based on Igros Moshe, O.C. 4:104-4; Emes l'Yaakov, O.C. 106:1; Minchas Yitzchak 4:28-3; Rav S.Z. Auerbach (Halichos Shelomo 1:2-4); Rav Y.S. Elyashiv, quoted in Deror Yikra, pg. 363.

30. See Machazeh Eliyahu 20, Halichos Beisah, pg. 51-52 and Halichos Bas Yisrael, pg. 44, who offer various reasons for this.

31. Machazeh Eliyahu 20.

32. Except for the Hallel said at the Seder, which they are obligated to recite.

33. Beur Halachah 422:2, s.v. Hallel.

34. Toras Refael, O.C. 75; Minchas Pitim 683; Moadim u'Zemanim 2:146. See also Igros Moshe, O.C. 1:190.

35. Halichos Shelomo 2:17-6; Rav Y.S. Elyashiv (quoted in Rigshei Lev 6:3).
36. Both views are quoted in Mishnah Berurah 106:4 without a decision.
37. Kaf ha-Chayim, O.C. 286:7. See also Rav Akiva Eiger, O.C. 106.
38. See note 7.

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