

Women and the *Mitzvot* – JewishClarity.com

Before discussing what the Torah says specifically about women, let's first see what it says about all Jews and the *mitzvot*. Almost all of the *mitzvot* are dependent on some factor. Some depend on time (like Shabbat and the holidays), some on place (such as the agricultural *mitzvot* which apply only in the land of Israel), some on situation (for example, the existence of the Temple for many *mitzvot*), etc. There are, in fact, only six out of all 613 *mitzvot* that are not dependent on anything specific. Since they are applicable, and therefore obligatory, in every possible situation, they are referred to as the Six Constant *Mitzvot*. They are:

1. Know there is a G-d
2. Don't believe in any other powers
3. Know that G-d is one
4. Love G-d
5. Fear G-d
6. Don't follow the desires of your heart and your eyes

These Six Constant *Mitzvot*, along with the additional *mitzvah* to emulate G-d, really define the Jewish relationship with G-d, and are the goal of all of Judaism (as the *Ramban* explains in his commentary at the end of *Parshat Bo*). The fact that they are all identical for men and for women conveys a very important message: There is no difference whatsoever between the genders when it comes to the ultimate goals of Judaism. It is merely the means to achieve these goals (i.e., some of the other *mitzvot* like *tefillin* and *tzitzit* which help us to connect with the Six Constant *Mitzvot* and the *mitzvah* to emulate G-d) which are somewhat different.

Separate but Equal?

An interesting question to consider is — Why would this idea of there being certain differences between men and women (i.e., in their means to achieve these identical goals) bother anybody?

This may be based, in part, on a seminal event in recent American history. For decades, the U.S. had separate school systems for white and black children, claiming that although the schools were separate, they were equal. In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court declared (in the landmark case of *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*) that there was no validity to this concept of “separate but equal,” because separate necessarily means unequal.

While there is widespread agreement that the U.S. Supreme Court was correct in ending racially segregated schools, an important question for us to consider is whether there is any situation in which this principle of “separate but equal” **does** apply? Is it really the case that separate always implies unequal? In the case of men and women in Judaism, for example, where they have somewhat separate paths, but the same ultimate goals, could it be that the concept of “separate but equal” is actually valid?

The determining factor in whether or not the concept of “separate but equal” is appropriate to apply to two groups is whether those two groups are themselves similar or different. As a very trivial example, think about the fact that cats and birds eat different types of food. Should we try to force cats to eat bird food, or birds to eat cat food? Or perhaps we should search for some new food which happens to be good for both cats and birds. All of this is obviously silly. We realize that cats are quite different than birds, and, therefore, it makes sense that they would each need a different type of food.

This is the critical difference between the “separate but equal” that was rejected by the U.S. Supreme Court, and the “separate but equal” of how the Torah relates to men and women. Since the U.S. Supreme Court was dealing with white and black children, that are essentially the same,

they were clearly correct — the segregated schools gave an advantage to the white children over the black children. In the case of men and women, however, the Torah recognizes that they do have some inborn differences, and are not merely socialized to be different. Since the Jewish perspective is that there actually are some inborn differences between men and women, it should not surprise us that the Torah has some distinctions in their *mitzvot*. And these distinctions are, in fact, necessary to help each of them to arrive at the same ultimate goals.

The Key Question

The key question when discussing women and the *mitzvot*, therefore, is — are men and women essentially similar or different? If, indeed, there is an inherent gender difference, then that will certainly impact the “separate but equal” issue with the *mitzvot*:

If the two groups are similar, then treating them differently would be favoring one group over the other. But if the two groups are different, then it would be the insistence on treating them the same which would actually be doing a disservice to one or both of them.

The question about the various differences which would then make sense to ask would not be — “How can any differences exist?” — but rather, “Are these differences between the two groups appropriate to the actual differences that exist between them?”

It is interesting that this issue of gender differences is much different today than it was in the recent past. Beginning in the 1960’s, and continuing to the 1970’s and 1980’s, a tremendous effort was made to minimize any possibility of gender differences, and to attribute whatever could not be denied to socialization, not genetics.

By the 1990’s, however, there was much less of an obsession to try to ignore or minimize all gender differences. For example, the January 20, 1992 cover story of Time magazine was headlined —

“Why are men and women different? It isn’t just upbringing. New studies show they are born that way.”

And, in terms of popular culture, the book, *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*, written by John Gray and first published in 1993, was fabulously popular. According to CNN, it was the “highest ranked work of non-fiction” of the 1990’s, and spent 121 weeks on the bestseller list. The central premise of the book is that most relationship problems between men and women are the result of various innate differences between the genders. In the 20 plus years since this shift in perspective occurred, there has been much less tension between the Torah view about basic gender differences and that of the world at large than there was during the previous three decades.

Different paths in *mitzvot* for men and women

Before discussing the differences between men and women with regard to the *mitzvot*, it is important to appreciate that the overwhelming majority of the *mitzvot* (i.e., even besides the Six Constant *Mitzvot*) are identical for all Jews. Virtually all of the prohibitions in the Torah are exactly the same for men and women, and most of the positive obligations as well. The main differences between men and women are specifically in a number of positive obligations which depend upon some aspect of time (such as *tefillin* and *tzitzit*, which are both obligatory only during the daytime). Furthermore, even among these time-bound *mitzvot* which are different for men and women, there are no *mitzvot* that men are required to do and women are forbidden to do. Women are rather able, but not required, to fulfill them. The areas in Judaism where women are not able to do something generally involve either Rabbinical enactments or *minhagim* (customs), and are mostly centered in the *shul*.

Rav Motty Berger once suggested a useful metaphor for how we should view the *mitzvot*. Every person has three essential relationships — with people, with G-d, and with ourselves. Think of every *mitzvat asei* (positive obligation) as an opportunity to build a bridge that will strengthen one of these three relationships. Every *lav* (prohibition), however, is where the Torah is telling us — there is already a bridge in place — just don't blow it up! What then would be the implication of men being obligated with more *mitzvot asei* than women? While both would have the same number of intrinsic bridges in terms of the prohibitions which are the same, men must then have more bridges that they need to build (with their positive *mitzvah* obligations) than do women. Who should feel good about this, and who should be bothered by it? If women are required to build fewer of these bridges (meaning that their connection is solid enough that it does not need extra strengthening), does it really make sense that they should feel insulted or upset by this?

The *mitzvot* of *tefillin* and *tzitzit* provide a good illustration of this point. The *Rambam (Hilchos Tefillin 4:25)* writes that while one is wearing *tefillin*, one is given an extra degree of humility and *yirat Shamayim* (fear of Heaven), and one is protected from negative thoughts and nonsense. And as for *tzitzit*, the Torah itself (*Bamidbar 15:39-40*) says that they help one to remember all of the *mitzvot*, to do all of the *mitzvot*, to control one's desires, and to be sanctified to G-d. What, therefore, do we see from the fact that men are required to wear *tefillin* and *tzitzit*, while women are never obligated to perform these *mitzvot*? Since men have been given these two *mitzvot*, with all of the spiritual assistance that they provide, to be done on an almost daily basis, it must be that men need much more help in these very significant areas — humility, *yirat Shamayim*, to be protected from negative thoughts and nonsense, to remember all of the *mitzvot*, to do all of the *mitzvot*, to control their desires, and to become sanctified to G-d — than women do. And they must require this help on an almost daily basis. This recognition and acknowledgment of the spiritual strength of women relative to men is neither an apologetic nor sophistry. It is a simple deduction derived from this difference in their *mitzvah* obligations.

The fact that many women are, in fact, bothered by these gender differences, seems to touch on a fundamental problem within their feminism. My *Rosh HaYeshiva*, Rav Noach Weinberg, *zt"l* once expressed this irony in the following manner — A problem with many feminists is that they sometimes shoot much too low. Their goal seems to be for women to be like men, whereas the Torah's goal for them is much loftier — for them to try to be like G-d.

“Shelo asani ishah” — “She'asani Kirtzono”

There is an obvious question that could be asked on all of this. Every morning men say the blessing “*shelo asani ishah*,” which thanks G-d for not having made them women. If, in fact, women have many spiritual advantages relative to men, then why would men give thanks for being created without these advantages? This question is sharpened by what seems to be a second difficulty with this blessing. The *bracha* of “*shelo asani ishah*” (which sounds like it is saying that there is something negative about being a woman) also seems to contradict the daily “*sh'asani kirtzono*” blessing said by women, thanking G-d for having “made them according to His Will.” Whatever the meaning of “*shelo asani ishah*” is, since women thank G-d, also every single morning, for having “made them according to His Will,” the Torah perspective cannot be that it is negative to be a woman. After all, every one of the other blessings that we say each morning — for our eyesight, clothing, strength, etc. — are giving thanks for and acknowledging the many positives we have in our lives. Being created according to His will must clearly be a positive statement as well.

I heard the following approach to understanding the blessing “*shelo asani ishah*” from a colleague of mine —

As we have said, women have aspects of spiritual strength which men don't have, as reflected in their smaller number of obligatory *mitzvot* (to strengthen their connection with G-d). This means that their spiritual challenges will be somewhat less difficult than those of men. Therefore, in practical terms, they will be more likely to achieve spiritual greatness than men will. When it

comes to men however, the greater spiritual challenges that they face will, paradoxically, end up giving them a larger theoretical potential for greatness, if they are able to successfully overcome them.

How one feels about this difference may depend upon one's perspective and mode of thinking, which will usually correspond to one's gender:

Men generally appreciate the challenge of overcoming obstacles, particularly for the possibility of actualizing a larger theoretical potential for greatness. Therefore, it makes sense that they would express their appreciation for what they see as a benefit with the blessing "*shelo asani ishah*" which thanks G-d for not having made them women.

Women, on the other hand, usually more practical than men, will tend to view their greater practical potential for greatness as an advantage. Therefore, it is logical that they would express their appreciation for what they see as this benefit with the blessing "*sh'asani kirtzono*", in which they thank G-d for having "made them according to His Will."

One more element in addressing this issue involves how we should view *mitzvot*. The *mitzvot* are the precious tools that G-d gave us to build ourselves as well as the entire world around us. While it may be that men require more *mitzvot* specifically because of their greater spiritual challenges, the fact remains that men are the recipients of more of these special tools from G-d.

Therefore, we can suggest a second aspect that men are expressing with their blessing of "*shelo asani ishah*." Not only are they thanking G-d for their larger theoretical potential for greatness, they are also appreciating the extra *mitzvot* that they were given to help them to actualize this larger theoretical potential. This is consistent with the two blessings which precede "*shelo asani ishah*" — thanking G-d for not making us a non-Jew and a slave, both of whom also have fewer *mitzvot*.

And while it is true that women were given a few less of these precious *mitzvot*, it is still appropriate for them to say the blessing of "*sh'asani kirtzono*," as we explained, to express their thanks to G-d for their spiritual advantages, and consequently their greater practical likelihood to achieve greatness.

The Structure of the Brachot

Why is it that the structure of the *bracha* is for men to say "*shelo asani ishah*" in the negative, while women say "*sh'asani kirtzono*" in the positive?

I heard a possible approach from Rabbi Orlofsky. He suggested that men should not say — "*sh'asani ish*" ("thank you for making me a man") because it would be a *chutzpah* for them to thank G-d directly for their larger number of *mitzvot* (and their extra tests in life) when they so often stumble with them.

And it would be inappropriate for women to say — "*shelo asani ish*" ("thank you for not making me a man"), because that would sound as if they were denigrating those *mitzvot* which they are not obligated in. Even if their intention, with the *tzitzit*, for example, is to thank G-d for having less of a problem with their desires than men do, the message would still end up being — thank you for exempting me from the *mitzvah* of *tzitzit*.

Mechitzah – Why must there be a separation between men and women during prayer?

The first point to appreciate with this question is that this is not a woman's issue at all. Both men and women require this separation to be able to *daven* (pray) properly. Anyone that *davens* on a regular basis realizes just how challenging prayer is even in the best of circumstances. It is extremely difficult to feel that one is actually communicating directly with the transcendental Creator of the universe. And it is very hard to not be distracted, and to put every other thought out of one's mind.

When a group of men and women are together, there is, at the very least, a social atmosphere, and often some degree of a sensual energy, in the air. It should be obvious to all that this will significantly add to the challenge of trying to communicate in a meaningful way with G-d. In fact, it is difficult to avoid the suspicion that when this question is being asked specifically as a "women's issue", it indicates some lack of appreciation for the nature, difficulty, and significance of prayer on the part of the one that is asking the question in this way.

Having said that, there is an entirely separate issue which is related to this need to have separate areas for men and women to *daven* in. In many shuls, this separate area for women is not adequate for them to be able to *daven* properly. This is particularly ironic since the main purpose of the *mechitzah* is to facilitate and enhance everyone's ability to *daven* well. If, therefore, in the process of setting up the separate areas for men and women to *daven* in, which both certainly need, a *shul* doesn't end up giving women a decent place to *daven*, it has then fundamentally undermined the very concept of the *mechitzah*. That is both ironic and extremely unfortunate.

Conclusion

There is no difference between the genders when it comes to the goals of Judaism, just the means to achieve them. These relatively few differences in their *mitzvot* follow directly from the differences that Judaism, and even society at large, recognizes between men and women. The greater spiritual strength that women have (demonstrated by their requiring less assistance than men in their relationship with G-d) gives them a greater likelihood of spiritual success than men have. They express their appreciation for this with the daily blessing of "*sh'asani kirtzono*", thanking G-d for having "made them according to His Will."