



Women and Men in Communal Prayer: Halakhic Perspectives

By Rabbi Professor Daniel Sperber, Rabbi Mendel Shapiro, Professor Eliav Shochetman, Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin

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Communal prayer has always been a central component in Jewish life. Traditional orthodox services are structured around spatial and functional separation of men and women. In this book, introduced by Dr. Tamar Ross, Rabbi Daniel Sperber presents a halakhic justification for expanding the role of women in communal prayer services. Building on work by Rabbi Mendel Shapiro (included in the volume) in which the legal sources are examined and interpreted to permit women to lead parts of the service and participate in Torah reading, Rabbi Sperber highlights the pivotal importance of kevod ha-beri ot (human dignity) in encouraging fuller participation of women in communal prayer. Because of the relevance and timeliness of the topic, two articles that express opposition to Rabbi Sperber's position are included one by Rabbi Shlomo Riskin and one by Professor Eliav Shochetman. This anthology represents an example of a vibrant dialogue between leading scholars on a current issue and highlights the dynamic nature of the halakhic process.

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- Rank: #2966740 in Books
- Brand: Brand: KTAV Publishing House
- Published on: 2010-03-10
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.75" h x 6.00" w x 1.25" l, 1.30 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 432 pages



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Editorial Review

Review

The proper role of women in the synagogue is an issue that Modern Orthodoxy has been struggling with for over forty years. While everyone agrees that halakhah has to guide all changes in synagogue practice, women's changing self-perception and religious sentiment must be central to any discussion of synagogue life. ...In this provocative book, Rabbi Prof. Daniel Sperber, using his characteristic erudition, makes the case that in the 21st century it is time for women to be given their halakhic right and be permitted to read from the Torah. Together with the responses of Rabbi Shlomo Riskin and Prof. Eliav Shochetman, this book is Torah study on the highest level.... --Marc B. Shapiro, Weinberg Chair in Judaic Studies, University of Scranton, Scranton, PA

Let those who believe that the question of whether or not women may chant and be called up to the Torah in public is both narrow and obscure, and has long been settled by Jewish law read this eye-opening book by thoughtful contemporary Orthodox scholars and rabbis. They will soon discover that the question is not at all narrow and far from settled. In fact, it serves as key to discovering how Jewish law and changing social and cultural norms interact in important ways, while it shows us that examining women's relationship to the Torah scroll opens the door to a wealth of ideas about their role in today's Jewish life and the changing nature of congregational prayer. --Samuel C. Heilman, Distinguished Professor of Sociology, Harold Proshansky Chair in Jewish Studies, Queens College, City University of New York

The rise today of women to fuller, more equal participation in Jewish religious life is of historic significance and is, indeed, the eschatological dream of Judaism. Thankfully, it is being achieved by evolutionary means. Yet, every evolutionary path has its transformative moments and watershed experiences along the way, and this book is one of them. With his learning, his courage, his total grounding in the sea and language of halakhah, Rabbi Daniel Sperber connects the enterprise of partnership minyanim almost seamlessly to the tradition. Sperber presumes women's intelligence, their faithfulness, their spiritual longing. In doing so, he honors the struggle of Orthodox women as one that enhances community a machloket le shamayim. But there's more here. From the extraordinary and elegant opening by Tamar Ross, to the creative foundation document by Mendel Shapiro founding father and ideologue of the partnership minyanim, to the cogent and thoughtful dissenting views of Rabbis Shochetman and Riskin, every word in this treasured volume has value and meaning. Would that all halakhic and communal issues that arise in our time be engaged in so profound an analysis and so civil a discourse! --Blu Greenberg, author and founding president of JOFA, New York, NY

FROM A REVIEW BY RABBI ISRAEL DRAZIN FROM THE JEWISH EYE

Halakhic concerns

What are the halakhic concerns that bother the rabbis and scholars? Unfortunately, this volume makes it clear that there is no agreement either on what is significant or what the apparently significant concern means, and this is one of the many problems frustrating a solution. For example: The code of Jewish law, Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chayim 282:3, states that "congregational dignity," kevod ha-tsibur, is affected by women being called to the Torah, reading the passages, and making a Hebrew blessing. The book shows that the

reason for this exclusion is far from being clear. Did the concern develop, as many rabbis maintain, because there was a period in Jewish history when most Jewish men could not read Hebrew and when they saw women being able to do so they were embarrassed? Is this ancient notion still relevant? Men can now read the blessing in Hebrew or in transliteration. Rabbi Shapiro and Rabbi Professor Sperber argue that this is really the only tenable halakhic objection to women's aliyot, and there are reasons, as we will discuss below, why this halakhah should be overrun and women's aliyot should be allowed for all the Torah readings.

A second reason that some rabbis and scholars see restricting female participation in aliyot is the talmudic ban against hearing a woman's voice, called *qol ishah*. Shapiro and Sperber point out that Orthodox men hear women making blessings frequently, sometimes daily, without this *qol ishah* concern.

A third rationale for exclusion of women from aliyot is a principle in Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 3:8 that a person who is exempt from a mitzvah, meaning a woman, a child, or a non-Jew, cannot fulfill the mitzvah on behalf of a Jew who has the obligation.

Is the Torah the "defining Jewish experience and as such it is the spiritual property of all Jews: men, women, and children" as Rabbi Shapiro contends? Also, as he states, if women cannot discharge a man's obligation to hear the reading of the Torah, why doesn't Jewish law say this? By saying that females should not be given aliyot because of "congregational dignity," the rabbis clearly imply that if this hurdle is overcome, women may have aliyot and they will discharge the entire congregation's obligation. Rabbi Professor Sperber offers his view why and how the "congregational dignity" rule can be overcome.

The view of Professor Sperber

Professor Sperber argues, and presents a host of examples to support his view, that the concept of "congregational dignity" depends upon the concerns of a particular congregation at a particular time. If the congregation is not affronted by women having aliyot, another principle, *kevod ha-beri'ot*, "human dignity," overturns it. The concept of "human dignity" recognizes the humanity and dignity of women. In saying this, Sperber is not suggesting that Jewish traditions do not apply. He is arguing that the concept of "human dignity" is also part of halakhah and trumps the concept of "congregational dignity" in this case.

Followers of Shapiro and Sperber

Dr. Ross comments that a growing number of Orthodox congregations in the United States, Israel, and Australia have accepted the views of Rabbi Shapiro and Rabbi Professor Sperber and have established Orthodox egalitarian-style prayer groups where women are given aliyot and function as *shelichot tsibur*, prayer leaders, leading those parts of the synagogue service that do not halakhically require ten adult males, such as the repetition of the *amidah*, and which halakhah is understood to mandate that these portions be led by men. These groups, writes Dr. Ross, feel that they are taking the first step to address and solve the issue of female aliyot. --Dr. Israel Drazin, The Jewish Eye.com

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