

Chapter 8

The Man's Blessing: Boot Camp for Men

The siddur, the Jewish prayer book, is unique in its power to mold and form the thought processes and inner scenery of the Jewish nation. What we say every day, and sometimes three times a day, forms our thought world and defines our very selves.

Speech is a two-way channel. We are used to thinking of speech as an expression of what we feel on the inside, but in truth speech also allows us to give expression to nebulous ideas that we are only vaguely aware of. By articulating something, we give it existence.¹ⁱ

When we pray using the words of the Sages, we not only give expression to ideas that already exist, but we also internalize those ideas, bringing them to life in our lives. From this perspective, the siddur is an endeavor on the part of the Sages to mold and formulate the Jewish mind-set; by analyzing the words of the prayers we gain insight into what that mind-set should be.

THE FIRST OF THE MORNING BLESSINGS: THE ROOSTER WITH A HEART

The first blessing of the morning, recited after the blessings on the Torah, thanks God for giving the rooster (and the human heart—interestingly, the word *sechvi* can mean both)ⁱⁱ the ability to differentiate between light and darkness.

What makes the rooster's ability to differentiate between night and day worthy of mention in the morning blessings is that the rooster recognizes "day" way before the average person. The rooster begins its call when it is still pitch black outside.

¹ An interesting example of this is the story of Helen Keller, who was deaf and blind as an infant; for the first part of her childhood she lived in an impenetrable bubble. She was taken out of her cave of loneliness by Anne Sullivan, who taught her a sign language that she could feel on her palms and thus communicate. I remember reading a book where Helen describes her memories of those years before she learned to communicate. She wrote that she had no memories of feeling any emotions during that time. All she remembered was a tremendous rage. All the nuances like jealousy, loneliness, disappointment, and sadness were lost on her until she was given a language to articulate these ideas. It is by putting something into words that we actually give birth to our nascent thoughts and desires.

At the very darkest moment of the night, right before dawn, the rooster informs the world that morning is coming.²

This ability to discern light when the world is at its darkest is a powerful metaphor for the mission of the Jew.

Oftentimes, something looks great on the outside, and yet a discerning eye will see that underneath it is a can of ugly, slimy worms. Other times, something may seem black, dark, and ugly, but if one delves a bit deeper, it might actually be beautiful.

The Jew wakes up in the morning and articulates the wonder of being able to see beneath the surface; this is perhaps the most crucial tool at his disposal. As he enters the fray each day, he thanks God for the ability to move beyond the superficial and acknowledges that, as a Jew, he must never forget that darkness can conceal light.³

THE SECOND BLESSING: RIDING EASY IN THE HARNESS

The next blessing expresses thanks to God for not making one a non-Jew. Second only in unpopularity to the blessing thanking God for not making one a woman, this blessing also raises hackles at its seemingly condescending undertone. Why is it necessary to say that you are glad you are not a gentile when you want to express your gratitude for being a Jew? If you are happy to be a Jew, say that—why put down the gentile?

And yet, if we go back to our thesis that the morning blessings both formulate as well as express the thought world of the Jew, perhaps we can see a purpose in expressing this blessing in the negative.

The human being is a confusing paradox of conflicting emotions and drives that pull in different directions. As Jews, we sometimes experience ambivalence towards our Judaism. On the one hand, we rejoice in our chosenness, and recognize the gift that Torah and the mitzvot bequeath to us, but on the other

² The Hebrew term *alot hashachar*, literally “sunrise,” can also be read as *alot hashachor*, “the ascendancy of the blackest time.”

³ *From Mourning to Joy*, The Thursday Evening Lectures of HaGaon HaRav Moshe Shapiro, *Shlita* (Lakewood, NJ: ZYA Publications), vol. 4, issue 26.

hand there is an equally loud and vociferous part of us that wants to release itself from the burden of being Jewish.⁴

The very human response to the concept of chosenness is “Thanks, but no thanks.” I appreciate the fact that You have chosen me to be Your representative in the world, but, really, I would just rather slip into anonymity, out of the spotlight, and do my own thing, be it ever so unspiritual and temporal.

On the one hand, we joyously proclaim, “*Ashreinu, mah tov chelkeinu*—How fortunate are we, and how good is our lot,” and on the other we call the mitzvot “*ol malchut Shamayim*, the yoke placed on us by Heaven.”

These seemingly paradoxical sentiments realistically describe the inner landscape of the Jew: Mitzvot are indeed a “yoke” of responsibility. What positive thing can one say about having 613 obligations clunked on our head—the mitzvot can sometimes seem like 613 limitations on our pursuit of pleasure!

And yet, even while chafing at the bit, the Jew knows that this yoke is the source of everything beautiful and real in his life. Rather than limiting pleasure, the 613 mitzvot is the source of pleasure—and he knows that the depth of pleasure accessible through the structure of mitzvot far exceeds the pleasure accessible without mitzvot. But that doesn’t change the fact that the desire to be free and unencumbered is a basic human drive. Knowing that something is good for me doesn’t always translate into positive feelings.

When a Jew thanks God for not making him a gentile, he isn’t just thanking God for making him a Jew. He is affirming to himself, loudly and clearly, that while there is a part of him that wants to be “free”—that would prefer to be unencumbered by 613 mitzvot (like a non-Jew, who is only required to keep seven⁵)—that is not the part of himself that he wants to identify with.

He affirms that using his “rooster-like” wisdom to look beyond the surface, despite the responsibility and accountability that go with being Jewish, he doesn’t really want to live his life without the “burden” the mitzvot put on him. True, a non-Jew

⁴ The Maharal (*Tiferet Yisrael* 27) points out that this is the reason for the discrepancy between the name that the Torah gives the holiday of Shavuot and the name used by the Sages. The Torah calls Shavuot *Yom HaBikkurim*, the Holiday of the First Harvest, and the Sages call it *Zeman Matan Torateinu*, the Holiday of the Giving of the Torah. God does not ask us to celebrate having 613 responsibilities plunked on our shoulders. He asks us to celebrate the harvest season. It is only we, who understand that the yoke of Torah is the source of all blessing, who can choose to call Shavuot the Holiday of the Giving of the Torah.

⁵ These are the seven Noahide laws, or moral imperatives. See Tractate Sanhedrin 56a..

has his role to fill in God's world plan, but he affirms that he is grateful for having been chosen for the particular mission of a Jew.

THE THIRD MORNING BLESSING: I WAS JUST FOLLOWING ORDERS

“Thank You, God, for not making me a bondsman.”

Human beings are paradigms of paradox. A part of us yearns for freedom—would like to wriggle out from under the “burden” of chosenness—yet often we are unwilling to face the fact that freedom and responsibility are flip sides of the same coin. In reality, there is no responsibility greater than real freedom.

When you really believe in free choice, you understand that you bear complete and total responsibility for your choices.⁶

One can't say, as Adam and Eve did in the Garden of Eden, “Someone else made me do it.” God's answer to them was clear and unambiguous. You are a free human being. It matters not how the snake tempted you or what your wife said. You are not a puppet pulled by external strings. You hold complete accountability for every one of your actions!

A bondsman, like an unthinking robot, does what he is told. As long as he is obedient, he bears no responsibility for the outcome, and there is a seductive pull to this pseudo-freedom.

With this blessing, we reiterate, “I don't want to be a subsumed extension. I want, and I know God wants me to be, a free, independent agent, able to make my own decisions and liable for my own choices.”

In a type of cognitive therapy, the Jew creates his thought world. I don't want to be a non-Jew, and I don't want to be a bondsman. I affirm that though there is a part of me that desires this, it's not the real me.

⁶ Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* describes the temptation to enter into a situation where one is owned by another. Despite our desire for independence, there is the conflicting desire to make our lives easier. “Indeed, along with the ethical urge of each individual to affirm his subjective existence, there is also the temptation to forgo liberty and become a thing. This is an inauspicious road, for he who takes it—passive, lost, ruined—becomes henceforth the creature of another's will, frustrated in his transcendence and deprived of every value. But it is an easy road; on it one avoids the strain involved in undertaking an authentic existence” (Simone de Beauvoir, introduction to *The Second Sex* [New York: Knopf, 1953]).

THE FOURTH BLESSING: MY JOB IS TO CONQUER THE WORLD

The fourth blessing men say is “Thank You, God, for not making me a woman.” If the second two blessings help us clarify to ourselves which parts of ourselves we want to identify with, what is it that the male is disavowing here? What is the inner voice he has to negate in order to live fully and joyfully as a Jewish male?

The classic explanation is that men are thanking God for having more mitzvot,⁷ and in particular for the commandment to learn Torah.⁸

The question that begs to be asked, though, is *why* do men have more mitzvot? Why are they obligated in time-bound mitzvot, though women aren't, and why do they have a mitzvah to be constantly engaged in Torah learning? What do these specific obligations that women don't have tell us about men and their nature?

HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS

In the Garden of Eden, man and woman each took on one aspect of the *tzelem Elokim*. Man, as reflected in his biological essence, took on the role of the active influencer, the conqueror, who goes out with a vision to change and perfect the world. He was the one who was given the commandment to conquer the world and subdue it. In the twin command “to work the land and to guard it,”⁹ his job was to work the land, hers was to guard it.¹⁰ⁱⁱⁱ

Her job is to live, not to conquer. Her very name means “to experience”¹¹—she is the life-giving, nurturing force; the “be”-er, not the “do”-er; the circle, not the arrow bursting upwards. Her goal is *to live* the goodness of God's presence. Man is trained towards discipline and focus, while woman leads the inclusive, harmonious, experiential life.

In a certain way, the woman's “living of life” is what gives the man the purpose for all his doing. True, without someone to go out and bring home the resources, there

⁷ Beit Yosef, *Orach Chaim* 46. The slight disparity between the obligation of men and women in mitzvot is discussed at length in chapter 20.

⁸ Both men and women are obligated in the study of Torah, but man's obligation is more all encompassing. See chapter 21 for elaboration.

⁹ Genesis 2:15.

¹⁰ Rabbeinu Yochanan Luria, *Meshivat Nefesh*, (Machon Yerushalayim), p. 9.

¹¹ The name *Eve* in Hebrew is Chavah, whose root, *chet, vav, hei*, is the same root as in the words *chavayah*, experience, and *lachvot*, to experience.

would be no resources with which to build a home—all would starve to death. But on the other hand, if there was no one at home, there would be no purpose in going out to bring things home. She needs him to provide the wherewithal to live, and he needs her to give an end goal to the process.

In illustration, picture the olden-day work division: Men went out and worked hours of back-breaking labor—perhaps they were hunters, or farmers, or even soldiers protecting the borders. At the end of a day’s work, they came home—replenished themselves through eating, drinking, and sleeping—in order to have the energy to do the same thing the next day. If you asked a man what he was driving himself for, he would have said, “To support my home and family.”

Of course, her work at home was similarly backbreaking—but, in a sense, she was where the action was. She was at home; *he went out to come back home*.

While a woman in those days likely couldn’t sustain herself without her husband, he had no purpose or reason to work so hard without his wife. In the same way that the six days of the week are a preparation for Shabbat—the ultimate purpose—she was the purpose of his going out to work the land—to fix the world.

MEN IN TRAINING

Both baby boys and baby girls are born from a mother. But while a baby girl can go with the flow, naturally becoming a woman like her mother, the baby boy at some point has to make a dramatic change. He needs to make a conscious choice to break out of the holistic, female environment of the home and charge into his active role as man. He was born to and nurtured by his mother, but he must become something different from her—a man.

Interestingly, unlike girls who seem to automatically become women, boys seem to need to make a conscious effort to become men, as we see from the following excerpt from David Gilmore’s book *Manhood in the Making*.

Among most of the people that anthropologists are familiar with, true manhood is a precious and elusive status beyond mere maleness, a hortatory image, that men and boys aspire to, and that their culture demands of them as a measure of belonging.... True manhood in other cultures frequently shows an inner insecurity that needs dramatic proof. Its vindication is doubtful, resting on rigid codes of decisive action in many spheres of life.... Because it is a restricted status, there

are always men who fail the test. These are the negative examples, the effete men, the men-who-are-no-men, held up scornfully to inspire conformity to the glorious ideal.... Although we [Western society] may choose less flamboyant modes of expression than the Amhara, or the Turkese, we too have regarded manhood as an artificial state, a challenge to be overcome, a prize to be won by fierce struggle: if not the “big impossible” than certainly doubtful.¹²

After listing various hair-raising rites that various cultures impose on their young boys to prove their masculinity, the writer concludes, “Real men are made...not born.”¹³

Indeed, even while primitive societies had complicated rites of passage that boys had to undergo both as an initiation into manhood and to prove their masculinity, our own sophisticated, supposedly egalitarian society also subjects its men to perhaps more subtle, but very-much-there tests. One humorous example is given in an article by David Wexler in the *Atlantic* magazine:

Several years ago, I was on a family trip, sitting on a bench with my wife in a plaza in Paris. Loaded down with shopping bags, she asked me to grab her purse and carry it over to a new spot across the plaza. That’s all. Yet even though I knew I was being stupid, I couldn’t do it. The fifteen seconds being seen carrying a purse were beyond my capacities as a card-carrying male. My wife looked at me like I was nuts and shook her head with disgust.

So what was my problem? All I could envision were people smirking as they saw me publicly toting that...purse, all of my hard-earned Guy Points accumulated from my half-century of being male suddenly disappearing without a trace....¹⁴

The Chatam Sofer explains the Talmudic teaching, “*Ashrei mi shebanav zecharim*—Fortunate is he whose sons are male,”¹⁵ by saying that this is not

¹² David D. Gilmore, “The Manhood Puzzle,” in *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 9–29.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ David Wexler, “Shame-O-Phobia: Why Men Fear Therapy,” *Psychotherapy Networker*, May/June 2010.

¹⁵ Tractate Sanhedrin 102a.

referring to the lucky man who has many sons, but to the lucky man whose sons are “male.”¹⁶ A “male” son is not a given from birth.

Interestingly, there doesn't seem to be corresponding rites for a girl to prove she is a woman. One ancient society I read about had the girl live in a hut for three weeks before adulthood. But the purpose there was to fatten her up to make her more attractive. While a man, depending on the values of his society, might have to prove his strength, hunting skills, physical prowess, lack of emotion, or ability to withstand pain,¹⁷ a woman is a woman by virtue of her being a woman.¹⁸

...An authentic femininity rarely involves tests or proofs of action, or confrontations with dangerous foes: win or lose contests dramatically played out on the public stage. Rather than a critical threshold passed by traumatic testing, an either/or condition, femininity is more often construed as a biological given that is culturally refined or augmented. [In many of these same cultures that require the passing of difficult tests and rites] predestined arrival at menarche is commemorated rather than forced by ritual.¹⁹

BOOT CAMP FOR MEN

For a man, it might be easier to escape into the harmonious wholeness, the receptivity of femininity, but his role as a male requires him to be the banner carrier, the conqueror, and the builder.²⁰

¹⁶ *Chatam Sofer, Shavuot 18b.*

¹⁷ “In one recent study, men were assigned to three different groups, and given the task of keeping their hand in painfully icy water for as long as they could. Those who were told that the ability to withstand the discomfort was a measure of the male sex hormones and an index of physical fitness showed greater cardiovascular reactivity, reported feeling more performance expectations, and kept their hand in the water the longest. This was in contrast to the group who were told the test was a measure of high levels of female sex hormones, and the ability to bond with children, and with the third group who received no explanation at all....

“What does this tell us? The length of time that a guy will tough it out with his hand submerged in the freezing water depends on whether he thinks his masculinity is in question. For some men, their hand could fall off before they risk the shame of not seeming ‘man enough’ to take it” (Wexler, “Shame-O-Phobia”).

¹⁸ Interestingly, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains that this is why the verse says about Sarah, “You shall not call her *Sarai*, because Sarah *is* her name.” While Abraham’s name change reflected a change in Abraham’s role, “...[Sarah] is not to become, she is this already” (Hirsch, *Commentary on Chumash*, Genesis 17:15).

¹⁹ Gilmore, “The Manhood Puzzle.”

²⁰ An example of this struggle is brought by Katherine Young, in discussing the obligation of men to go to war when necessary: “Many [men] have envied the privileged position of women, who because of their primary role in the reproductive process had to be protected and so could enjoy the positive role of supporting life through birth rather than death” (Katherine K. Young, introduction to *Fundamentalism and Women in World Religions*, ed. Arvin Sharma and Katherine K. Young [SUNY Press, 1987]).

If one had to find one word to describe the difference between men and women in halachah, it would be *obligation*. Men are in an almost constant state of obligation. They have to pray three times a day with a minyan (a quorum of ten men), they have to put on tallit and tefillin every day, they are supposed to try to learn Torah every spare minute.

Women are also obligated in prayer and Torah study,²¹ but a woman's obligation often falls into the area of "*reshut*," permissible or voluntary. A woman needs to study as much Torah as she has to in order to be a committed Jew. She needs to pray as much as she has to in order to keep herself in a relationship with God.²² This is less a constant obligation than an awareness and sensitivity to what is going on in the relationship.

In fact, this flexible parameter of women's obligations allows for dramatic fluctuations in how much women learn Torah or engage in formal prayer; there were periods in Jewish history when women didn't know how to read or write, and other periods in which women were great Torah scholars. There were times when women prayed only from their hearts, and other times when they said two or even three formal prayers a day.

The difference in men's and women's mitzvah obligations mirrors these inherent differences between the male and female force: Whereas a man is on duty twenty-four hours a day, a woman's task is to keep her finger on the pulse of her relationship with God and to act accordingly.

The Hebrew word for "man" is *gever*. *Gever* shares the same root as the word *gevurah*, strength. The Mishnah asks, "Who is strong? He who conquers [i.e., is in control of] his desires."²³ In Judaism, being a man is about being disciplined, focused, responsible, and committed. For a man who takes his religious obligations seriously, life is very serious business. While a woman needs to learn the art of *oneg*,^{iv} reveling in pleasure and goodness, a man needs a framework to gird him with obligation and responsibility. Like a soldier, he must keep himself fit and constantly focused on the goal.^v

Though in real life, as we have said many times, the continuum from male to female is extremely fluid, from a philosophical perspective, her life requires her to nurture the "being" aspect of life, and his requires him to get out there and do.

²¹ See part VI, which deals with this in depth.

²² See below, chapter 21, for a more comprehensive description of her obligations in prayer.

²³ Tractate Avot 4:1.

And to make matters more complicated, Judaism also requires of him that he develop his female side. In the exquisite balance that Judaism structures, he develops his female side through prayer, through Shabbat, through his relationship with his spiritual guide, and in myriad other relationships in his life.

He must learn that he is a multifaceted being who has both male and female aspects. And yet he is a man, and he can never forget his mission.

Within the context of the other morning blessings, by thanking God for not making him a woman, a man both acknowledges his draw in a particular direction and makes a statement that he understands that he must negate that aspect of himself. A Jewish male negates the part of him that wants to be free of obligation, like a non-Jew; he negates the part of him that wants no responsibility, like a bondsman; and he negates the female aspect of him that would prefer to “be” rather than take responsibility to “do.” Yes, he is thanking God for obligating him in learning Torah and for giving him more mitzvot—which pull him into obligation mode; he is also affirming that though he is pulled in other directions, he chooses to identify with his Jewish, free, and male self.

ⁱ נתיב הצניעות פרק ב': וכל זה מפני שהדיבור מוציא הכל את הגלוי.

נתיב הצניעות, פרק ג': וכמו שהפרי היוצא מהאילן מורה הפרי על עצם האילן כך מורה הדיבור היוצא מן האדם על עצם האדם מה שהוא... וכבר בארנו כי הלשון הוא הדבור שעל ידו יוצא האדם לפעל לגמרי.

ⁱⁱ רש"י, איוב פרק לח, פסוק לו: לשכוי - זה תרנגול לשון חכמים וי"א זה הלב שהוא שוכה וצופה ומחשב את הנולדות.

ⁱⁱⁱ רמח"ל, מאמר הגאולה, ח"ב ב' ט"ו: ויניחהו בגן עדן לעבדה ולשמרה ואמרו (זוהר בראשית כז א) לעבדה אלו מצוות עשה ולשמרה אלו מצוות לא תעשה.

^{iv} מסכת סוטה כ"א, ב: הוא (רבי יהושע) היה אומר: חסיד שוטה ורשע ערום, **ואשה פרושה** ומכות פרושים הם אלו מבלי עולם. מהר"ל, חידושי אגדות: פי' כי אילו הם יוצאים חוץ מן השיעור הראוי אל העולם, כי העולם ראוי שיהיה נוהג על פי טבעו ומנהגו, ואלו יוצאים במדות שלהם חוץ מן הענין אשר ראוי למנהג העולם.

^v גור אריה בראשית ח, יא: הנה אם תמצא דבר מה מן המאכל לא תביא אל הזכר לאכול, והזכר **מביא לפרנס הנקיבה** לכך כתיב "והנה עלה זית טרף" ולא אכל, כמו שדרך הזכר לטרוף ולהביא לנקיבה, ולאפוקי הנקיבה **דדרכה לאכול**.