YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**On Being Chosen:**

**A Philosophical Investigation into the Election of the Jewish People**

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**Shiur #22: Chosenness in Liturgy**

Judaism is a liturgical religion. Its prayers are organized around a fixed text. Some Jewish thinkers encourage spontaneous prayer in addition to the recitation of the liturgy,[[1]](#footnote-1) and others discourage it,[[2]](#footnote-2) but there is a clear consensus that we have certain basic halakhic prayer obligations. Whatever the status of those obligations – be they of Biblical or Rabbinic origin – the relevant duties are not discharged unless one sticks to the fixed text established by the Rabbis (or a translation of that text).[[3]](#footnote-3)

When we look at the liturgy, we find numerous references to the election. To the extent that we’re halakhically bound to say these words, we should (ideally) believe in the truth of what they say (at least under some interpretation). Accordingly, our theory of the doctrine of the election, to qualify as a real contribution to Orthodox Jewish philosophy, should seek to be consistent with what we declare, and imply, when we read the liturgy with sincerity.

**Blessing on the Torah**

One of the morning blessings over the Torah reads as follows:

Blessed are you, Lord, our God, King of the universe, who chose us from all the nations, and gave us His Torah. Blessed are you, Lord, who gives the Torah.

I say this blessing each day without hesitation. But what about those models of the election according to which God didn’t really choose us, so much as we choose Him?[[4]](#footnote-4) What about the tradition that says God offered His Torah to every nation on earth before arriving at us?[[5]](#footnote-5) Can adherents to that view recite this benediction with hand on heart? Or do they perhaps give it a special interpretation, reading God’s choice very liberally, as occurring only *after* we chose Him?

**The Blessings of Love**

In both the morning and the evening, we recite two benedictions before saying the *Shema*. In each pair, the second member concerns God’s love for Israel:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Morning** | **Evening** |
| [With] unbounded love You have loved us, Lord our God. [With] great and abundant pity have You pitied us. Our Father, our King, for the sake of our forefathers who trusted in You, and whom You taught statutes of life, so too, be gracious to us and teach us ... You have chosen us from among all peoples and tongues, and You have brought us close to Your great Name, forever in truth; that we may give thanks to You, and proclaim Your Oneness, with love. Blessed are You, Lord, who chooses His people Israel with love. | [With] an everlasting love You loved the House of Israel, Your people. You taught us Torah and commandments, statutes and laws... [May] Your love never be removed from us. Blessed are You, Lord, who loves His people Israel.[[6]](#footnote-6) |

Both of these blessings imply that God loves Israel more than He loves others, an implication that would sit well with the Marriage Model of the election.[[7]](#footnote-7) But even if we were chosen from all other nations, it’s important to note that the claim that He *loves us* *more* than others isn’t explicit. We’ve already seen how the question of the election’s exclusivity was raised by multiple verses in the Bible.[[8]](#footnote-8) These blessings don’t settle that issue; at least, not decisively. The morning blessing declares that we were chosen from among all nations and tongues, for some purpose or other. That doesn’t decisively rule out the possibility that other nations and tongues were chosen for other purposes.

God’s love for Israel is here presented as the result of the merit of Israel’s ancient founders, who trusted in God. This is *zekhut avot.* The Name-bearing Model is also present, in the morning blessing, with the notion that we have been brought close to God’s great *name*. The implication saturating both blessings is that the election is manifest primarily in our being given the Torah, and in our duty to observe its laws, proclaim God’s unity, and reciprocate God’s love. This is reminiscent of the Heavenly Father-in-law Model.[[9]](#footnote-9) Do these blessings suggest that we’d lose God’s love if we didn’t adhere to His Torah?

The relevant Biblical verses suggest that the election can be, so to speak, put on hiatus, but never entirely rescinded. At the same time, however, the threat of revocation never totally disappears.[[10]](#footnote-10) This same tension is present in the evening version of our blessing. It starts with a proclamation of God’s everlasting love for us, but then beseeches God not to *withhold* His love from us – as if there always exists a possibility that the love could be rescinded.

To summarize: we see in these benedictions many of the models, as well as the unresolved tensions, that we found in the Biblical and Rabbinic data.

Finally, we should note that what has been chosen, according to these blessings, is a nation and a language. These are things that one can be born into, but they can also be adopted by outsiders. Once again, we find that the election is not *racial*.

The notion that we’re chosen is woven throughout the woof and warp of the rest of the daily liturgy, which also speaks at length about the wonders that God has wrought on our behalf. Having said that, the daily prayer services don’t *explicitly* relate to our chosenness outside of the examples we’ve seen so far – except in the *Aleinu* prayer, which concludes each service, and one benediction made before the morning service. I shall come to those texts later. First, I turn to the blessings that are added to the silent standing prayer – the *Amida* – on Sabbaths and festivals.

**Exaltation and Favor**

During the *Amida* on Shabbat morning, we say:

You, O Lord our God, did not give [the Sabbath] to the other nations of the world, nor did You, our King, give it as a heritage to those who worship idols. In its rest the uncircumcised do not dwell, for You gave it to Israel Your people, to the seed of Jacob, whom You chose.

On this occasion, the more ethnic notion of Jacob’s seed emerges. But as we discussed in lesson 13, there is a sense in which even a convert becomes the seed of Jacob. Moreover, the context here implies that a non-Jew *can* become a recipient of the gift of the Sabbath, if only they stop worshiping idols and (for the men) opt to become circumcised. It is those matters, rather than genealogical descent, that stand in the way.

In the afternoon *Amida* of the Sabbath, we say:

You are One and Your name is One; and who is like Your people Israel, a nation unique on earth? Splendor of greatness and a crown of salvation is the day of rest and holiness You have given to Your people. Abraham will rejoice; Isaac will sing for joy; Jacob and his children will find rest in it… May Your children recognize and know that their rest comes from You, and that by their rest they sanctify Your name.

Here we move away from the Heavenly Father-in-law, and the Heavenly Husband, manifest in the blessings before the Shema, and move into the imagery of the Heavenly Father. Israel is, among other things, His treasured child (“Your children”).

In the *Amida* prayers of the festivals we say:

You have chosen us from among all peoples. You have loved and favored us. You have exalted us above all tongues. You have made us holy through Your commandments. You have brought us near, our King, to Your service, and have called us by Your great and holy name.

This is the text in the liturgy that most explicitly speaks to Divine favoritism, and thus poses something of a philosophical challenge to those who think that such favoritism is incompatible with a just and kind God. But there are elements of contingency in these words. We have been made holy *specifically* through the commandments. That is our only true exaltation. So, what happens if we don’t keep the commandments? Are we moving back, here, towards the Heavenly Father-in-law Model?

It’s also important to note that we’ve been exalted only above “other tongues” – which is to say that the nations are individuated here not racially but linguistically, which is probably to say, somehow, culturally. Once again, the election isn’t racial. A favorite culture is surely less uncomfortable than a favorite race. It is a culture to which, in accordance with the Name-bearing Model, God has attached His great and holy name.

Similar things could be said about all the benedictions we say over the performance of commandments. Those blessings declare that God has “sanctified us with His commandments,” which is to say that our sanctity stems exclusively from our relationship to the Torah and its laws. Of course, this only heightens the question: why were the Jews given this privilege, when others weren’t? Many of these themes reach their most explicit expression in the formula we recite on Friday night, over a cup of wine, to sanctify the Sabbath day:

Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who has made us holy through His commandments, who has favored us, and in love and favor, gave us His holy Sabbath as a heritage… For You chose us and sanctified us above all the peoples, and in love and favor gave us Your holy Sabbath as a heritage.

We have been chosen, sanctified, and favored, above all peoples – but not as a race. In fact, the first distinction mentioned in the blessing is that He made us holy through His commandments. This might suggest that all of the subsequent distinctions are grounded in our relationship to the Torah. The door is still left open, however narrowly, to the possibility that God has other special relationships with other peoples who are perhaps sanctified in other ways, exalted for other purposes.

As hinted above, my survey of the relevant liturgy so far has omitted two of the most controversial passages. The first appears at the beginning of our daily prayers; the second at the end of each service. I address them now.

**Three Benedictions**

Every morning, we say a series of benedictions, including the following three blessings:

1. Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the universe, who did not make me a gentile.
2. Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the universe, who did not make me a slave.
3. Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the universe, who
4. [Men say] did not make me a woman.
5. [Women say] made me according to His will.[[11]](#footnote-11)

We shall later explore the history of these benedictions, in which it becomes clear that they have something to do with being commanded. A Jew has more commandments to obey than a gentile, and both women and slaves are exempt from various commandments that bind free men. I think it appropriate for Jews to thank God for giving them the privilege of having so many commandments. It is, after all, an honor of gigantic proportions. On the other hand, there can be no room for arrogance. In fact, we mentioned in lesson 20 the Talmudic teaching that states God cannot be present in a heart that contains arrogance or pride.[[12]](#footnote-12) The election only takes on the hews of an *honor* when the elect *don’t* take any sort of arrogant pride in it. In fact, many of the models of the election that we’ve seen suggest that rather than indicating anything inherently special about the Jews (then or now), there may be something *arbitrary* about the fact that God chose the Jews. He could have chosen others.

I think that the strangely negative formulation of these blessings is a result of the delicate balance between gratitude and arrogance that we should be hoping to strike. If we said, each morning, “thank you for making me a Jew, and a man, and free,” we might run the risk of habituating ourselves to taking un-earned pride in these statuses. By saying, instead, thank you for *not* making me a gentile, a woman, or a slave, the hope is that we express our understanding that whether or not a person is born with these statuses is wholly arbitrary; there’s every chance we *could* have been born in different circumstances, with fewer commandments binding us to God and with correspondingly less honor.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Given this explanation, we can also understand the different formulation of the blessing commonly recited by women. It would be inappropriate for a woman to thank God for not being made a man, as it might sound like she’s thanking God specifically for binding her with *fewer* commandments. And yet, there are certainly other respects in which being a woman, rather than a man, *is* an honor; an honor not manifest in being bound by more commandments, but in other respects, an honor for which she should thank her Maker. Nevertheless, to say “Blessed are You…for making me a woman” would run the risk of the sort of pride that we’re trying to avoid by way of the negative formulations in the other benedictions. Consequently, she thanks God for making her a woman, but she does so in a roundabout way.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Understood in this light, I don’t take the blessing over not being a gentile to be an expression of any sort of Jewish superiority. In fact, Rabbi Reuven Margoliot claimed that these benedictions were instituted to reconcile the Jewish man to the fact that, ultimately, he must work harder to earn a place in heaven, compared to gentiles and Jewish women, who have fewer commandments in which to stumble.[[15]](#footnote-15)

**Intentions Backfired?**

Even if this is an accurate explanation of these benedictions, it could be argued that the motive behind their formulation has backfired. By thanking God for not making us gentiles, we make it sound as if there’s something dishonorable about *being* a gentile. By comparing slavery, gentilehood, and womanhood, in these negative formulations, we end up making all three categories look dishonorable.

Erica Brown embraces the blessing said by women, yet she also expresses discomfort with the formulation recited by men:

If there is a more beautiful blessing that embodies God’s love for the individual, then I do not know of it. I find the blessing stunning. And, for this reason, I feel sorry for men who do not recite it. I do not view this blessing as a consolation prize….

[W]hen I heard my own sons say these blessings aloud in shul, I felt startled and unnerved. Even in the mouth of my husband I had felt a pang of anxiety but it was not as acute as hearing my own children — the next generation — use this language.[[16]](#footnote-16)

In his commentary to the Jerusalem Talmud, Rabbi Yisachar Tamar writes about a pious woman from the eighteenth century who was also perturbed by this blessing:

I heard that the learned and wise Rebbetzin, daughter of Rav Yitzchak of Hamburg and wife of Rav Menachem of Lesko and mother of [Admor Naftali Tzvi Horovitz] of Ropczyce, asked her husband the Rav, “Is the water carrier from this cistern more important than me, that he recites “that he didn’t make me a woman”?” And her husband appeased her…[[17]](#footnote-17)

Now, of course, as Rabbi Chaim David Ha-Levi points out, the benediction *shouldn’t* hold that connotation:

When [a man] blesses “who did not make me a woman,” he should have in mind that even though [a woman] is just as important as he is, she is not obligated in all the commandments like a man. And from here [we learn] that these blessings are intended primarily in order to thank God for the obligation of Torah and commandments in which we are obligated.[[18]](#footnote-18)

But even if this is the proper intention, one might argue that it’s been lost in transmission. In his responsum on this issue, Rabbi Yehuda Henkin concedes that “since out-of-place thoughts have become intermingled with [men’s] intentions [in reciting] the blessing,” it is now often the case “that the man blesses over his superior social status” even though this isn’t the proper intention. And this is what leads many women (and men) to find the blessing objectionable.[[19]](#footnote-19)

What can be said for women, in this context, can also be said for gentiles. It may have been no part of the intention of the relevant blessing to express a sense of Jewish superiority. The intention may well have been a delicate balancing act – thanking God for the un-earned honor of being a Jew, without expressing arrogance or pride. But to echo Rabbi Henkin, we might worry that out-of-place thoughts have become intermingled with our intentions when we nowadays recite this blessing. Instead of expressing our gratitude for an un-earned honor, I fear that we end up expressing a sense of ethnic superiority.

Some have argued that the benediction over not being a woman, especially if its continued recitation is somehow backfiring, should be revised or deleted.[[20]](#footnote-20) We might make a similar case regarding the blessing over not being a gentile. The halakhic scope for amending this part of the liturgy is beyond the remit of this series.[[21]](#footnote-21) My own opinion, for what it’s worth, is that amending or editing the liturgy (to the extent that it might be possible or desirable) is far less important than amending our hearts and our intentions. I say all three blessings. But we should recognize the difficult balancing act of getting these benedictions right. We should realize that if they descend into an expression of superiority, then we have so reversed their intention as to raise the concern that we have committed the sin of a *brakha le-vatala* (a benediction uttered in vain).

**Isaiah 40:17**

When we look at the original sources behind these benedictions, an issue emerges that threatens to undermine what I’ve said thus far. The Babylonian Talmud cites a *beraita*:

It is taught, “Rabbi Meir would say, “A man is obligated to recite three blessings every day.” These [blessings] are: who did not make me a gentile; who did not make me a woman; [and] who did not make me an ignoramus.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

The continuation of the Talmudic discussion replaces the blessing for “not making me an ignoramus” with the blessing for “not making me a slave.” The ignorant and the learned Jew are, after all, commanded by the same number of commandments. A slave, by contrast, is bound by fewer.[[23]](#footnote-23)

The Tosefta and the Jerusalem Talmud both preserve more of the original *beraita,* though they report it in the name of Rabbi Yehuda, rather than Rabbi Meir. They also provide a rationale for each blessing:

1. Men bless God for His not having made them a woman, because “women are not obligated in [as many] commandments.”[[24]](#footnote-24)
2. The reason behind the blessing for not being an ignoramus is that such people have less fear of sin.[[25]](#footnote-25) (But this blessing was discounted, as we’ve said, by the Babylonian Talmud, because the ignorant are still bound by as many commandments.)
3. In the words of the Tosefta, the blessing over not being a gentile is said “because it is stated, ‘All the nations are nothing before Him. He considers them to be empty and void’ (Isaiah 40:17).”[[26]](#footnote-26) Or, in the words of the Jerusalem Talmud, because “gentiles are not considered to be anything; ‘all the nations are nothing before Him’ (Isaiah 40:17).”[[27]](#footnote-27)

In context, it still makes sense to say that gentiles having fewer commandments is *part* of the underlying rationale for the benediction. This links it to the benediction about slaves and women. But it becomes clear that there’s an additional motivation. Apparently, what we’re grateful for is being Jewish, given the supposed fact that Jews *count* while gentiles *don’t*. That’s what it looks like. And all of this is based upon the verse in the book of Isaiah: “All the nations are nothing before Him. He considers them to be empty and void.”[[28]](#footnote-28)

But this must be a misunderstanding. Can we accept that the same God who rebuked Jonah for his lack of concern for the gentile citizens of Nineveh, considered them to be worthless? “Should I not care about Nineveh,” God asked Jonah, “that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons…?”[[29]](#footnote-29) Are we to assume that Rabbi Yehuda ignored the book of Jonah as well as the entire narrative frame of the Hebrew Bible – which, as we saw in lessons 2 and 3, is shot through with God’s concern for every human being? Are we to assume that Rabbi Yehuda, who insisted that Antoninus had a place in heaven regardless of his descent from Esau,[[30]](#footnote-30) thought that God had no concern for the gentiles? What’s going on?

The key to unravelling this puzzle is to distinguish between a *goy*, literally a *member* of a gentile nation, and *ha-goyim*, the gentile nations themselves. What Isaiah is saying is that the nations, *ha-goyim*,as collectives, as social entities, are worthless, in and of themselves. This has no bearing whatsoever on God’s attitude toward each and every individual.

What I argued, all the way back in lesson 8, is that the nation of Israel was supposed to be something of a social commentary on the nature of nationhood itself. The narrative frame of the Bible, with its dispersion of the nations from Babel, and with its continued (albeit less distinct) differentiation between the various nations in the end of days, suggests that God values the cultural diversity fostered by differences of nationality. But at the same time, Abraham was commanded to leave his homeland and his father’s house, we argued, because the holy nation was, in part, supposed to be a rejection of the very notion of a nation having some sort of chauvinistic ownership over its territory; a rejection of the dynastic pride that often attaches to national identities. These things, which matter so much to so many people, are ultimately meaningless to God. That is surely what Isaiah means when he says that *the nations* are nothing before God – and that entails nothing about the worth of any given gentile individual.

The fact that Israel’s identity isn’t essentially bound up with any of the notions – ethnicity, land, monarchy, or military – that tend to define a nation, is beautifully expressed by their formation occurring not in their “homeland,” but in the wilderness. As Rabbi Hirsch puts the point:

In the wilderness it received the Torah, and thus in the wilderness, without land or soil, it became a nation… as a people it was to show the peoples that God is the Source, and the Giver, of all blessing; that to dedicate oneself to the fulfilment of His will means the attainment of all happiness that man can desire; that this sacred resolve is sufficient to give stability and security to human existence.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Indeed, for this reason, Rabbi Hirsch went so far as to insist that (at least in some sense) Israel “accomplished its task better in exile than in the full possession of good fortune.”[[32]](#footnote-32) He writes further:

With its own eyes the nation [of Israel] saw the destruction of the power and the splendor which had dazzled it, and which it had begun to revere as its gods. Could it ever again revere wealth, power, and grandeur as the gods of life? Without power, without splendor, without brilliant show of human grandeur, it preserved its faithfulness toward the All-One and the spirit and the maintenance of its only rescued treasure, the Torah – preserved it alive amidst suffering and agony, enabled it to endure all the blows of savage fanaticism unchained.[[33]](#footnote-33)

More simply, Saadya Gaon argued that it is their relationship to the Torah, and nothing else, that constitutes the identity of the Jewish people: “the Children of Israel is a nation only by virtue of its laws.”[[34]](#footnote-34)

The existence of such a nation, and its survival against all odds, is a cogent message to humanity. The yardsticks by which the might of nations tend to be measured are empty in the eyes of God. The only yardsticks that matter are those of justice, kindness, righteousness, and holiness. To thank God for not being a gentile is to thank Him for not belonging to a nation that measures itself with vanities; it is to thank God for being free from the powerful chimeras of natural power and pride. How ironic then that some people utter this blessing as an expression of pride and superiority. That is literally the opposite of what it is supposed to express.

***Aleinu***

One of the most problematic elements of liturgy, for some understandings of the election, is less about what we say and more about what we don’t say. There are very few prayers said for the welfare of gentiles. True, Jews in exile are commanded to pray for the welfare of the states in which they live.[[35]](#footnote-35) And they do. But that obligation is expressed in one prayer, once a week. On the whole, our liturgy is written to be said by Jews and *for* Jews. We tend to pray in the first-person plural, as the community of Israel. We pray for the recovery of sick Jews, for God to bring the Jews back to Israel, to restore their Davidic Kingdom, and to hear the prayers of the Jews. There’s nothing wrong with any of this, of course, but if our entire national *raison d’être* is to be a blessing to the world, such that, through us, all of the families of the earth will be blessed,[[36]](#footnote-36) it should at least be surprising that we don’t have many prayers explicitly devoted to the material and spiritual wellbeing of the non-Jewish world.

There is one prayer, however, that we recite each day – *Aleinu* – that has a very universal tenor. Indeed, Rabbi Sacks writes:

No prayer more eloquently expresses the dual nature of the Jewish people: its singular history as the nation chosen to be God’s witnesses on earth, and its universal aspiration for the time when all inhabitants will recognise the God in whose image we are formed.[[37]](#footnote-37)

That universal aspiration is the driving force of the second (and final) paragraph of the prayer:

We therefore put our hope in You, O Lord, our God, that we may soon behold the glory of Your might in banishing idolatry from the earth… And all mankind will invoke Your Name… All of the inhabitants of the world will realize and know that to You, every knee must bend, and every tongue must swear. Before You, O Lord, our God, they will bow and prostrate themselves, and to the glory of Your Name they will give honor. And they will all accept [upon themselves] the yoke of Your kingdom, and You will reign over them, soon, forever and ever… as it is written in Your Torah: “The Lord will reign forever and ever” (Exodus 15:18). And it is said, “And the Lord will be King over the whole earth; on that day the Lord will be One and His Name One” (Zechariah 14:9).

But in the first paragraph, we read:

It is our obligation to praise the Master of all, to ascribe greatness to the author of the creation: that He has not made us like the nations of the lands, and has not positioned us like the families of the earth; that He has not assigned our portion like theirs, nor our lot like that of all their multitudes. For they prostrate themselves to vanity and nothingness, and pray to a god that cannot deliver. But we bow, prostrate ourselves, and offer thanks before the Supreme King of Kings, the Holy One blessed is He…

There may have been a time at which only the Israelites were monotheists. But that time has passed. Christians and Muslims may have many disagreements with us about the nature and actions of God, but we’re all trying to worship the same being. These non-Jewish monotheists could reasonably register their offense at our continued practice of reciting the words of this prayer. Do we really think that they all bow to emptiness?[[38]](#footnote-38) That the true God is deaf to their prayers? That only we Jews have any sort of relationship whatsoever with God?

Menachem Katz suggests a different way to understand this prayer.[[39]](#footnote-39) Basing himself on the research of Aharon Mirsky, Joseph Heinemann, and Israel Ta-Shma,[[40]](#footnote-40) he contends that the entire prayer dates back to the Second Temple Period. Katz notes that it wasn’t only Jews who visited the Temple; it was also frequented by non-Jews who believed in the God of Israel. These non-Jews were known as “God-fearers” or “fearers of Heaven.” Indeed, the book of Psalms seems to include a prayer, presumably for recitation at the Temple, that would call for participation from the Israelites, the Priests, and from the God-fearing non-Jews in attendance:

Let the Israelites say: His kindness lasts forever.

Let the House of Aharon say: His kindness lasts forever.

Let those who fear God say: His kindness lasts forever.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Katz argues that *Aleinu* was also written to be recited by Jews and gentiles together. He notes that the prayer doesn’t mention Israel by name. All monotheists can thank God for their being distinguished from those nations or families – the multitudes – who worship idols. Katz writes:

I propose that this is not a prayer that contrasted between the Jewish people and other nations, as portrayed by the common interpretation [including the interpretation of Rabbi Sacks], but rather – as I see it – that it served as a common prayer for all those who came to the Temple, both Jews and gentiles… I believe a distinction is made here, but not between the people of Israel and others, but between those who believe in one God, the Creator of the world (including God-fearers), and others, be they idolaters or believers in the twoness of God … What we have then is a prayer that stresses the unfathomable difference between idol worshipers, and those who believe in one God, creator of the world, “Master of all, and Creator of the universe.”[[42]](#footnote-42)

In this *tefilla* that closes each of our prayer services, we Jews look forward to a future in which all people worship the same God, and as we do so, we can pray not just as Jews, but as monotheists, alongside all other people, of whatever background or identity, who fear the same God.

**Summary**

Most of the Biblical and Rabbinic data regarding the election finds some expression somewhere in the liturgy. Some passages sit more easily with some models, and some more comfortably with others. But the two passages that have the power to cause the most offense to gentiles have been thoroughly disarmed. The blessing over not being a gentile has nothing to do with nationalistic pride, and if uttered in such a spirit, undermines itself entirely. Moreover, it’s plausible that the *Aleinu* prayer should be uttered, not on behalf of Jews, but on behalf of the global community of monotheists.

1. For a key Chasidic source that advocates for spontaneous prayer, see *Likkutei Maharan* (by Rabbi Nachman of Uman),Part II, Torah 25:1. See also Rivka Horwitz, “Abraham Joshua Heschel on Prayer and His Chasidic Sources,” *Modern Judaism*, 19/3 (1999): 293-310. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See *Nefesh Ha-Chaim* II:13, and the note affixed to the end of that chapter. It is there suggested that reciting the Hebrew words of the fixed liturgy is a higher form of prayer than reciting any other words in any other language. See also BT *Berakhot* 33b. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. BT *Berakhot* 40b; *Mishneh* *Torah*, *Hilkhot* *Kri’at Shema* 1:7; and *Shulchan Arukh* OC 113:9. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See lesson 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See lesson 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Throughout this lesson, I deal only with the Ashkenazic formulation of the liturgy. Devotees of other formulations should be able to substitute citations without undermining the argument of the lesson. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See lessons 9 and 14. For the sake of accuracy, I should point out that the implication isn’t a logical one. The technical philosophical term for this sort of implicit suggestion is an *implicature*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See lesson 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See lesson 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See lesson 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Many Sephardicwomen don’t make this blessing at all, or say it without *shem u-malkhut* (i.e., without using the whole formula that addresses God by name and as King). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. BT *Sota* 5a. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Of course, it’s an interesting metaphysical question as to whether I could have been a woman. The wording of the benediction suggests that I could have been. But perhaps it only serves to express the fact that I could have been bound by fewer commandments. For more on this metaphysical question, and its relationship to this benediction, see Berel Dov Lerner, “Could I have been a woman?: Meditations on a controversial benediction,” *Philosophy and Literature* 34/2 (2010): 425-434. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Non-Jewish slaves owned by Jews were, as we discussed in lesson 4, quasi-converts to Judaism who would be automatically converted fully to Judaism upon emancipation. Accordingly, even as slaves, they were bound by some commandments, and exempt from others. The fact that both slaves and women are generally exempted from time-bound positive commandments means that the status of a woman and a slave have a pattern of exemptions in common. This might lead you to think that the blessing that a woman makes on not being a slave is *not* about her having more commandments, but about her higher social status. And if that’s what the benediction is about, then my argument is undermined. If the woman blesses God because she has a higher social status than a slave, then why not accept that the man makes a blessing on having a higher social status than a woman?

    I would dismiss this concern out of hand (which is why it’s been relegated to a footnote, despite its length). The fact that a woman and a slave share a class of exemptions from Torah obligations doesn’t undermine the claim that, in the final analysis, women are still bound more tightly to the Torah, in many ways, than a non-Jewish slave. For one thing, a Jewish woman can *own* a non-Jewish slave (see *Shulchan Arukh* YD 267:19). That means she's bound by all the commandments governing slave ownership. A woman can be an agent for delivering a divorce bill (even though she can’t issue her own divorce bill). A slave cannot perform this function. The reason for this, in the words of Rabbi Yochanan, is that “[the slave] is not included in the *Torah* [law] of divorce and betrothal” (BT *Gittin* 23b). In this instance, even though she and the slave are alike in the fact that neither of them can *issue* such a bill, she is nevertheless part of the *Torah* in question. The slave is not. For these reasons and more, it seems safe to say that even if these blessings are *only* about having more rather than fewer Torah obligations, a Jewish woman still has every reason to say the blessing on not being a slave. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Rabbi Reuven Margoliot, *Tal Orot* (Beersheva: Beit Moriah, 2008), p. 47, n10. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Erica Brown, “According to His Will: The View from a Pew.” [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Rav Yisachar Tamar, *Alei Tamar*, Yerushalmi *Berakhot* 4:4. One might note a certain irony here in that the pious woman, described as both learned and wise, is given no name, and is rather identified in terms of her relation to pious men. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Rabbi Chaim David Ha-Levi, *Mekor Chaim*, Volume 7, p. 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Rabbi Yehuda Henkin, *Benei Banim* 4:1. For the sake of accuracy, Rabbi Henkin only argues that this isn’t and shouldn’t be the *primary* intention of the blessing. I’m arguing that there’s room to go further and to say that this shouldn’t be *any* part of the intention at all. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See, for example, Rabbi Daniel Sperber, *On Changes in Jewish Liturgy: Options and Limitations* (Jerusalem: Urim, 2010), 41-46. For a critical response, see Rabbi Aryeh Frimer, “Review Essay,” *Hakirah* 12 (2011): 65-87. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. For more on this topic, see Laurie Novick, “Why do men say *She-lo-Asani Isha*? Why do women say *She-asani Kirtzono*?” available on the Deracheha website [here](https://www.deracheha.org/prayer-5-she-lo-asani-isha-she-asani-kirtzono/#n13). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. BT *Menachot* 43b. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Having said that, note that Rashi considers two explanations – one having to do with the number of commandments, and one having to do with social status (see Rashi 43b, s.v. *hainu isha*, and 44a, s.v. *zil tefei*). The *Tur* (OC 46) and the *Beit Yosef* (loc. cit.), it should be noted, both emphasize the number of commandments as the relevant consideration. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Tosefta *Berakhot* 6:23 and JT *Berakhot* 9:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Tosefta *Berakhot* 6:23. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. JT *Berakhot* 9:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Isaiah 40:17. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Jonah 4:11. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. BT *Avoda Zara* 10b [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Rabbi Hirsch, *Nineteen Letters*, Letter 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid., Letter 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Saadya Gaon, *Emunot Ve-De’ot*, III.8. In the translation by Samuel Rosenblatt, *Saadia Gaon: The Book of Beliefs and Opinions* (New Haven: Yale Judaica Series), p. 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. *Sefer Abudraham: Dinei Keri’at Ha-Torah*, final paragraph. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Genesis 12:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Rabbi Sacks, Commentary to the *Siddur*, Weekday Morning Service, *Aleinu*. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. This phrase was actually deleted from many *siddurim*, most likely by gentile censors. It has re-entered almost every contemporary edition of the prayerbook (sometimes in parentheses), but some people retain the custom not to say it. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Menachem Katz, “*Aleinu* – A Prayer Common to Jews and Gentile God-Fearers” in Alon Goshen-Gottstein (ed.), *Judaism’s Challenge: Election, Divine Love, and Human Enmity* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2020), pp. 83-97. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Aharon Mirsky, *Ha-Piyut* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1991), pp. 72-73; Joseph Heinemann, *Prayer in the Talmud: Forms and Patterns* (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1977), pp. 270-273; Israel Ta-Shma, *The Early Ashkenazi Prayer* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1983), pp. 143-144. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Psalms 118:2-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Katz, “*Aleinu,*” p.91. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)