**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

**\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\***

**Deracheha: Women and Mitzvot**

[Click here](https://deracheha.org/kol-isha-3-in-context) to view an updated version of this shiur with additional features
on the Deracheha website.

Did you know there's more to Deracheha than our shiurim? Sign up for our newsletter [here](http://deracheha.org/newsletter) and get all our content!

Have some feedback for us? Please [click here](https://www.deracheha.org/feedback)!

Kol Isha III: In Context

How do contextual factors affect application of kol isha? Is the halacha different in a religious context?

# Contextual Factors

When is a woman’s voice subject to the *halachot* of *kol isha*? In this final installment of our series, we first explore how context in general contributes to the definition of *kol isha* and then hone in on religious contexts. Rulings based on context can sometimes enable a woman to sing while remaining supportive of men's observance.

[Previously](https://deracheha.org/kol-isha-1-halachic-basis), we saw Rav Mosheh Lichtenstein's argument that the prohibition of *kol isha* applies only when there is either *kiruv da'at* (emotional connection) or physical expression of femininity. This argument allows for room to be lenient when there is no inherent *kiruv da’at.*

However, halachic authorities who prohibit men from hearing a woman's singing voice even absent concern of *kiruv da'at* may still view the prohibition as dependent on context, in one or more of the following ways:

**I. Visible or Known Woman** A Talmudic statement highlights the role of seeing in inciting arousal:

*Sota* 8a

Didn’t Rava say: We have a tradition that the evil inclination only has control over what one’s eyes see.

Ra'aviyah cites a view that limits *kol isha* based on this principle:

Ra’aviyah I *Berachot* 76

I say that the reason is that, although the voice cannot be seen, nevertheless, there are inappropriate thoughts…and some explain that it is because he normally looks at her when she sings. This means that regarding [his hearing a woman's voice while reciting] a *beracha*, it is not prohibited when he does not look, but it is prohibited to look.

A man's inability to see the woman singing reduces the potential for inappropriate thoughts and feelings, and may at least reduce the severity of the prohibition.[[1]](#footnote-1) Tzitz Eliezer cites this argument as grounds to permit a man to hear a recording of a woman's voice:

Responsa *Tzitz Eliezer* V:2

One can also say that whenever he is not facing her it is permitted, even when he knows her and is familiar with her, since in any case he cannot end up looking at her….. There are, though, grounds to permit where she is not present, based on what is said in Ra’aviyah.

However, Rav Ovadya Yosef argues that a man who knows the woman singing, or even just knows what she looks like, may be forbidden from hearing her sing even if she is not visible to him at that moment:

Responsa *Yabia Omer* I OC 6

If he “knows her and is familiar with her” (*Sota* 8b), even through a picture, it is prohibited to listen to her voice on the gramophone or radio, but if he does not know her it is permissible, and there is no problem of *kol be-isha erva*.

When a man is not familiar with a woman’s appearance, Rav Ovadya sees no *kol isha* constraint on his hearing her recorded voice. According to this and other views concerned with hearing a woman's voice when she is visible, a woman singing over video could present a man with a question of *kol isha*, even though an audio recording would not.

**II. Unmodified** **Voice** The halachic status of a man hearing a woman's voice may also depend on whether he hears her voice itself, or a modified or recorded version of it.

In the [first installment](https://deracheha.org/kol-isha-1-halachic-basis) of this series, we saw Rav Ya'akov Breisch argue that song over the radio is fundamentally unlike song heard in person. When it comes to *kol isha*, however, he rejects the idea that the technology would make a difference, since a man's enjoyment of a voice over radio may be the same as that of a voice heard in person:

Responsa *Chelkat Ya’akov* OC 30

I do not know of any way in which this is permissible – even though it is clear in *Sota* 8a, “Rava said, we have a tradition that the evil inclination only has control over what one’s eyes see” – this is specifically regarding having inappropriate thoughts about her afterwards, but when he hears her voice and enjoys it, this is the prohibition and it is *erva*… for even when he does not see the woman and does not know her, it is prohibited to hear her voice

We saw above, though, that Rav Ovadya Yosef is more lenient regarding *kol isha* over a radio or recording, allowing for listening when the listener is unfamiliar with the singer's appearance. So, too, Rav Eliezer Waldenberg writes that the technological element of a woman's voice being transmitted over the radio can be partial grounds for leniency, though he makes this contingent on a man's intent.

Responsa *Tzitz Eliezer* V:2

Furthermore, when the voice comes through the radio, there seems to be an additional reason to permit, because this is not the woman’s actual voice…for the voice we hear is not the person’s voice, for the person’s voice passes and disappears and is transformed into a variable current and air waves change into tiny electric currents and then the electric currents change back into air waves and new soundwaves are formed…If so, it turns out that we don’t hear the woman’s original voice over the radio at all, but the echo of the voice, and therefore there is room to find basis for leniency in this from a *kal va-chomer* (a fortiori), since we have seen that one cannot fulfil a mitzva, like hearing the shofar or reading *megilla*, in this way, because it is considered only the sound of an echo, and if so, all the more so, this should not be considered a transgression of hearing the voice of *erva*…as long as he does not have intention to derive pleasure…

Generally speaking, an obligation that requires hearing cannot be fulfilled by sound transmitted over the radio. A voice over radio may not have the full halachic status of a human voice.

Discussing the use of amplification for *megilla* reading, Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach argues that a voice heard over a microphone may also have less than the full halachic status of a regular voice, since a microphone alters the voice through electric current.

*Minchat Shelomo* 1:19

The sound of a microphone is indeed considered the action of the person speaking but it is not in the category of a "human voice"…For the voice of a person speaking [via microphone] is stopped and disappears entirely from the world, but with his voice he only caused change in electric current which ultimately causes a membrane to vibrate by way of a magnet, in a mechanical way…For this is not considered like hearing a human voice at all.

Rav Shemuel Haber suggests that this may provide grounds for some leniency with *kol isha* when necessary (e.g. a man's attendance is required at an event in which women sing):

Rav Shemuel Haber, *Et Tzenu'im Chochma* II 473

Certainly we should not independently decree against an artificial voice, even if it is really similar to a woman's voice…Therefore it seems in my humble opinion that there is room to be lenient at times of need to hear [a woman's voice] also via a microphone…

Those who are stringent regarding hearing a woman's voice over radio or recording would not accept the microphone as grounds for leniency either, because, as Rav Breisch argues, the man may still enjoy it as much as an unmodified voice.

On the other hand, those who do maintain that *kol isha* technically applies only to an unmodified voice might also use this argument as a basis to be lenient regarding men watching videos of women singing.

**III. Solo Voice** A woman's voice sounded as part of a group, in which it can be difficult to pick out, has less impact than her voice sounded solo.

This may relate to the Talmudic principle, originally taken from the discussion of shofar, that two voices cannot be heard simultaneously. On the one hand, two people cannot read the Torah at once because neither voice will be heard clearly. On the other hand, the Talmud also recognizes special cases in which the listener would be able to distinguish between the voices.

*Megilla* 21b

Our rabbis taught: With Torah [reading] one reads and one translates, as long as there is not one reading and two translating [Rashi: because of 'two voices are not heard']…But with *Hallel* and *megilla*, even ten can read and ten translate. What is the reason? Since it is beloved, they [people] pay attention and hear.

Based on the principle that "two voices are not heard" a man hearing a group of women sing might not violate *kol isha*, since he is not hearing any one of their voices distinctly.

However, acquaintance between the man and woman may make a difference here as well. The Talmud suggests that we can successfully make out the sounds of matters that are dear to us to which we pay careful attention, such as *Hallel* and *megilla*. Similarly, a man might be able to pick out a woman's voice for which he is listening.

Additionally, Rashi interprets the Talmudic passage decrying men and women singing responsively after *churban* as describing a violation of *kol isha*, even though the women described sing as a group:

Rashi *Sota* 48a s.v. Like fire in flax

[When women sing and men respond] it is like fire in flax - Since the one who responds inclines his ear to hear the singer in order to respond after him, and these men end up paying attention to the voice of the women and the voice of a woman is *erva*.

Following Rashi, adding other women's voices does not ameliorate *kol isha*, at least not when men listen to them in order to respond. For these reasons, in a responsum we revisit at greater length below, Rav Yechiel Ya'akov Weinberg attests to disagreement as to whether a man may rely on women singing together with others as grounds for leniency with *kol isha*.

*Seridei Eish* I:77

It was told to me that Rav Azriel Hildesheimer and also Rav Samson Rephael Hirsch in Frankfurt am Main permitted singing sacred *zemirot* together [men and women], for the reason that two voices cannot be heard simultaneously, and since they are singing together there is no concern of prohibition. But I am not comfortable with this.

Many communities rely on the ruling of Rav Hildesheimer and Rav Hirsch, notwithstanding Rav Weinberg's discomfort. Rav Yehuda Henkin, for example, lists women singing together as a consideration toward leniency. He adds, though, that a man joining creates additional grounds for leniency:

Rav Yehuda Henkin, *Understanding Tzeniut* (Jerusalem: Urim, 2008), 61

Two or more women singing together are preferable to a soloist, because of the difficulty of hearing any one voice clearly…Singing along with the women by the man or men is preferable to passive listening.

**Summary** [Previously](https://deracheha.org/kol-isha-1-halachic-basis), we saw that questions of content, context, and purpose determine whether or not any Jew should engage in song. With respect to *kol isha*, Rav Henkin points out that we can derive a number of contextual factors from the verse in *Shir Ha-shirim* that the Talmud cites as a basis for the prohibition of *kol isha*:

*Benei Banim* IV Article 20

"For your voice is pleasant and your appearance is comely" is cited in *Berachot* 24a as a basis for "*kol be-isha erva*." Separating this verse into its components reveals, in my opinion, the qualities of *kol be-isha erva* in its sharpest and most stimulating form, and they are: (1) a woman (2) solo (3) who makes her voice heard (4) that is pleasant (5) with intention to give pleasure (6) to an individual man (7) who intends to hear and (8) to benefit from her voice and (9) enjoys her appearance. All these are reasons to be stringent, and corresponding to them are reasons to be lenient.

# Religious Song

One last question to investigate is how sacred context or content affects the application of *kol isha*. To lay the groundwork for this discussion, let's explore sources on the nature of religious song, with an eye to their relevance to *kol isha*.

Songs of Joy

Song can be a powerful tool for joyously praising God. Tanach records several instances in which religious leaders glorify God in song. We [opened](https://deracheha.org/kol-isha-1-halachic-basis) this series with reference to two of the most significant: Miryam at the Song of the Sea, and the Song of Devora. These songs are among the precedents for recitation of [*Hallel*](https://deracheha.org/hallel),[[2]](#footnote-2) when we praise God with *Tehillim* (Psalms) at times of miraculous deliverance and on festive days.

The Torah commands the *Levi’im* in song as part of the daily sacrificial service, and the Talmud describes that song as a unique vehicle for joyous worship.[[3]](#footnote-3) In this spirit, *Sefer Tehillim* urges us repeatedly to sing new songs to God.[[4]](#footnote-4) God's song is with us, and we respond by singing our own songs of thanks.[[5]](#footnote-5)

As early as medieval times, we learn of singing as an essential part of the Shabbat meal.

*Orchot Chayyim* I Laws of the Shabbat Meal

After *kiddush* we begin songs in honor of Shabbat, out loud… and some add additional songs, and afterwards we break bread

Joyous singing in praise of God features prominently at synagogue, as well, so much so that our sages refer to it as *mekom rina*, a place of song.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Rashi *Berachot* 6a

In a place of song: In synagogue, for there the congregation recite songs and praises with the pleasantness of a sweet voice.

It follows that a sweet voice, a "*kol areiv*," is a consideration in choosing a prayer leader:

*Ta'anit* 16a

We only have a practiced man lead prayer. (Who is a practiced man?) Rabbi Yehuda says: …he can keep a tune and his voice is sweet and he is expert in reading Torah and *Nevi'im* and *Ketuvim* and in learning *midrash*, *halachot* and *aggadot*, and expert in all the *berachot* altogether.

Halachic authorities warn us, though, that a prayer leader's musical expression should serve as a means to praise God. It must not become an end in itself, or take precedence over more essential qualifications such as fear of Heaven:[[7]](#footnote-7)

Songs of Sorrow

Song also has its place at times of sorrow. Ancient religious rites of mourning include the *kina*, or dirge. Yirmiyahu, who himself composed dirges, suggests that women typically led the chanting of them:

*Yirmiyahu* 9:16

Thus said the Lord of Hosts, contemplate and call the women who lead dirges and they will come, and send to the wise women and they will come.

A mishna in *Mo'ed Katan* teaches us that women continued to lead dirges in call and response in mishnaic times, as *mekonenot*, and also had the role of *me'anot*, chanting dirges in unison.[[8]](#footnote-8) On Rosh Chodesh, Chanuka, and Purim, limitations were put on this intensity of mourning:

Mishna *Mo'ed Katan* 3:9

On Rosh Chodesh, on Chanuka and on Purim, they wail and strike [hands in mourning] on all of these, but do not lead dirges responsively. When the deceased has been buried, they don't wail or strike. What is wailing? That all wail in unison. A dirge? That one speaks and everyone answers after her, as it is written "and teach weeping to your daughters and each woman a dirge to her neighbor" (*Yirmiyahu* 9:19)

# Religious Song and Kol Isha

We've seen a number of contextual factors that arguably mitigate concerns of *kol isha*. Does the halacha of *kol isha* apply differently to songs with religious content or songs sung in a sacred context?

Our first thought might be to look to Miryam's song or Devora's or to the *mekonenot* as precedent for relaxing strictures of *kol isha* for religious singing in the presence of men. None of these cases, however, provides a clear halachic precedent.

In general, the term “*shira*” in Hebrew is extremely broad, so we often have no clear indication whether a song or poem was spoken, chanted, or sung.

Additionally, in accordance with a simple reading of the verse, a midrash explains that Miryam led specifically the women in call and response,[[9]](#footnote-9) and thus might not teach us about *kol isha*, which does not apply when no men are present:

*Mechilta De-Rabbi Yishma’el Beshalach, Masechta De-shira* 10

Just as Moshe led the men in song, so Miryam led the women in song.

In the cases of the Song of Devora, Rav Ya'akov Eilenberg rejects its potential to serve as precedent for women singing religious songs because Devora, as a prophetess, may have received unique Divine approbation:

Responsa *Be’er Sheva Be’er Mayim Chayim* 3

Do not answer me based on the verse: “And Devorah sang, and Barak ben Avinoam…” as I was asked by a learned woman. For one can say that this is different [because she acted] according to [God’s] word…

Lastly, the dirge of the *mekonenot* may have been more chanted or spoken than sung. The mishna above notes that one "speaks" and the others answer. If so, it would not provide us with a basis for leniency with *kol isha* for religious song.

Opposing Effects

Treating religious contexts as distinct from others with respect to *kol isha* can cut in the direction of leniency or of stringency:

**I. Leniency** On the one hand, religious songs constitute a unique halachic category in the [*halachot* of music](https://deracheha.org/kol-isha-1-halachic-basis) , treated more leniently than other song.

One reason for this is that we expect more controlled behavior and impulses in a sacred atmosphere, perhaps leaving room for less concern regarding *kiruv da'at* and for greater leniency with *kol isha* as well.

Chida makes this type of argument, drawing on a Talmudic passage that implies that a man is not susceptible to inappropriate thoughts while the fear of the *Shechina* (Divine presence) is upon him:

*Nidda* 13a

….Since one is afraid, inappropriate thoughts do not come. And here, what fear is there?...if you want, say: fear of his teacher, and if you want, say: fear of the *Shechina.*

Chida takes this statement another step, suggesting that *kol isha* does not apply when one is acutely aware and in awe of the *Shechina*:[[10]](#footnote-10)

Chida, *Devash Le-fi* 100:19

A woman’s voice is *erva*. If there is dwelling of the *Shechina*, so that there is fear of the *Shechina*, the commentators wrote that it is permissible for a woman to sing …for since there is fear of the *Shechina*, there are no inappropriate thoughts…If so, men and women are permitted to sing together…"Hear kings, give ear princes, I to God I will sing" )Song of Devora, *Shofetim* 5:3(. If you say a woman's voice is *erva*, to this I say, "I to God," I am a vehicle for the *Shechina* and the prophecy has spoken. Therefore, I, a woman, will sing and there is no [halachic cause] for concern for the fear of the *Shechina* hovers over us and there are no inappropriate thoughts….In this, my dear son, Rav Yishaya explained: “Sing and rejoice, daughter of Zion” )*Zecharya* 2:14(, the daughter of Zion is also a woman, and you should not be concerned with *kol isha* “for I am coming and I will dwell within you” – and there is dwelling of the *Shechina*, and there are no inappropriate thoughts.

Although his logic could in theory extend to non-prophetic female solos, Chida applies it practically here only to permit men and women to sing together.[[11]](#footnote-11)

**II. Stringency for the Sacred** On the other hand, a sacred atmosphere is also one in which we are particularly concerned about matters of *erva*. That's why the gemara emphasizes modesty specifically in the context of *keri’at Shema*. This is the basis for perspectives such as Yere'im's, that view *kol isha* as uniquely or particularly at issue when a man recites *keri'at Shema*, learns, or prays.

*Yere'im* 392

Shemuel said: A woman’s voice is *erva*, as it is written, For your voice is sweet, meaning, the singing voice. And all these, Rav Yehudai Gaon explained as being for the matter of *keri’at Shema*. Therefore, it is prohibited to recite *keri’at Shema* or sacred words while hearing a woman’s voice singing. In our iniquity, we dwell among non-Jews and at "a time to act for God, abrogate strict law" )*Tehillim* 119:126(. Therefore, we are not careful about learning while hearing the voices of non-Jewish women.

A man may recite *Shema* or the like when a woman's singing is audible only if there is no other realistic choice: it is "*et la'asot*," a "time to act for God [and thus] abrogate strict law".

This school of thought may also rebut Chida's line of argument. The *Shechina* is said to be present in any minyan, or at any time that an individual studies Torah, and *keri'at Shema* is considered an act of learning Torah. Yet there is still concern about a man hearing a woman singing.

*Berachot* 6a

Rabin bar Rav Ada said in the name of Rabbi Yitzchak:…. From where [do we know] that when ten pray together, the *Shechina* is with them – as it is written “God stands in the congregation of God” (*Tehillim* 82:1) ….And from where [do we know] that even one who sits and occupies himself with Torah, the *Shechina* is with him – as it is written, “in every place where I cause My name to be mentioned, I will come to you and bless you.” (*Shemot* 20:21)

Halachic authorities who have particular concerns about *kol isha* when a man recites *Shema*, prays, or studies (alone or in a minyan) do **not** usually quote the passage about fear of the *Shechina* impeding inappropriate thoughts as presenting a mitigating factor for *kol isha*.

Caution Beyond *Kol Isha*

The prohibition of *kol isha* usually only applies to a woman’s singing voice. However, some authorities call for an extra measure of caution and modesty, even with regard to a woman’s speaking voice, when in the context of a sacred space. Rav Efrayim Margoliyot, for example, argues that a woman may not recite mourner's *kaddish* in synagogue (in his community, 18th-19th century Ukraine, this was done solo), in large part because the men would have to hear her voice, which would be a breach of *tzeniut*:[[12]](#footnote-12)

*Mateh Efrayim*, Laws of *Kaddish Yatom* 4:8, *Elef La-mateh* 9 ad loc.

…One should not allow her to recite the *kaddish* of the prayer, and it is prohibited even if she is unmarried, and all the more so, Heaven forfend that a married woman should make her voice heard to the masses by recited *kaddish*, whether in synagogue or in a minyan…[*Elef La-mateh*:] For at this time, immodesty is common and one should not do so…even though this isn’t *kol isha*…

Rav Margoliyot asserts that a woman's voice creates halachic issues in synagogue even when *kol isha* is not involved. Not everyone advocates such caution, however. For instance, Kenesset Ha-gedola (Rav Chayyim Benveniste, 17th century Turkey) strikes a different note in his discussion of *birkat ha-gomel*:[[13]](#footnote-13)

*Kenesset Ha-gedola* OC 219

I am astonished by the general custom that women do not recite *birkat ha-gomel*, and it seems to me to be a mistaken custom….If it is because one must give thanks in the presence of ten, of whom two are rabbis, and it is not in accordance with a woman’s honor to stand before men….this claim is not sufficient to exempt her from a *beracha* in which she is obligated, and furthermore, it is possible for a woman to stand in the women’s synagogue [women’s section] and recite *birkat ha-gomel* and the men in their synagogue will hear…

Neither Mateh Efrayim nor Kenesset Ha-gedola suggest that these synagogue rituals, which are not sung,[[14]](#footnote-14) present an issue of *kol isha*. Rather, Mateh Efrayim does not permit women to recite *kaddish* out of *tzeniut* concerns. Kenesset Ha-gedola, on the other hand, explicitly rejects excessive concern with *tzeniut* that prevents a woman from reciting a *beracha* in which she is obligated. He views her remaining in the women's section– where she is audible but not visible– as sufficient grounds to permit her to recite a *beracha* publicly in synagogue, to which men give ear and respond.

# A Voice in Synagogue

In the synagogue, both the atmosphere of sanctity and the concern for detracting from it are heightened.

We begin our discussion of *kol isha* in the synagogue with the Talmud's discussion of Torah reading. A minyan of ten men is required for Torah reading, and in mishnaic times, an *aliya* entailed reading from the Torah. A baraita records a dispute as to whether a woman may be counted as one of those called up to the Torah to read it:

*Megilla* 23a

Our rabbis taught: All are counted towards the count of seven, even a minor and even a woman. But the sages said: A woman should not read from the Torah because of *kevod ha-tzibbur*.

Neither side raises the question of hearing a woman’s voice. The sages base their position on concern for "*kevod ha-tzibbur*," lit., the honor of the congregation (to which we plan to devote a future piece). This baraita seems to imply that concern for *kol isha* is irrelevant to the question of a woman reading Torah for a minyan of men in synagogue.

Indeed, Rashi states that women can read *megilla* for men, without raising any potential halachic concerns such as *kevod ha-tzibbur* or *kol isha*:

Rashi *Arachim* 3a s.v. *le-atuyai nashim*

For they are obligated in reading *megilla* and fit to read it and to discharge the obligations of males.

Opposing this view, Kol Bo writes that a woman cannot discharge a man's obligation in *megilla* reading because of *kol isha*, and raises the possibility that her reciting (or perhaps singing) the *berachot* on Chanuka candles in public could potentially raise concerns of *kol isha* as well:

*Kol Bo* 45

The author of *Aseret Ha-dibrot* (Ba’al Ha-itur) wrote that women do not discharge men’s obligations with their reading, and the reason is *kol be-isha erva*, and even though they light Chanuka candles and recite the *berachot*, this is not similar because there is no need for men to be present at the time of lighting.

Kol Bo does not explain how he reconciles his view with the baraita about Torah reading, though it could be based on the fact that *megilla* reading does differ from Torah reading in some respects. For example, it can take place without a minyan when one is unavailable.

Troubled by how these rulings fit with the general *halachot* of *kol isha*, halachic authorities offer a range of possible resolutions, each with potential implications for how we view a woman’s voice in the synagogue.

**I. Speaking, Not Singing** Rav Eliezer Waldenberg suggests that the baraita assumes that the woman would read the Torah in a spoken voice, to which *kol isha* would not apply, rather than chant it.

Responsa *Tzitz Eliezer* XX:36

If it were because of *kol be-isha erva*, in time of need it would be permissible for a woman to read without the cantillation and count towards the count of seven, but since the reason is because of *kevod ha-tzibbur*, if so, a woman should not read for the community and count towards the count of seven in any manner at all.

This position of the Tzitz Eliezer fits with the halachic consensus that a woman using her regular speaking voice (even in a synagogue ritual) does not present a problem of *kol isha*. However, there are other halachic concerns, and Rav Waldenberg's discussion is theoretical, not a practical ruling. In practice, he sympathizes with Mateh Efrayim, who (as we saw above) calls for extra caution with women's speaking in the synagogue, beyond the issue of *kol isha*.[[15]](#footnote-15)

**II. Chanting, Not Singing** Kaf Ha-chayyim makes an alternate suggestion for understanding the baraita. Perhaps *kol isha* is not at issue for ritual reading such as *megilla* (or Torah reading) because chanting cantillations differs from singing, and thus does not fall under the rubric of *kol isha*:[[16]](#footnote-16)

*Kaf Ha-chayyim* 689:13

…According to the first opinion [that women discharge men’s obligation in *megilla* reading], this voice is not considered *erva* because it is not a singing voice.

On this view, though there might be other halachic concerns, a woman speaking or chanting in synagogue ritual does not present a concern of *kol isha*.

**III. Singing in the Presence of the *Shechina***  Rav Ovadya Yosef discusses the baraita on women reading Torah in a responsum on the topic of women reciting *birkat ha-gomel* in synagogue. He seems here to understand cantillation as a form of singing, and cites Chida's leniency with *kol isha* in synagogue to theoretically allow a woman to read Torah if no qualified man is available.

Responsa *Yechaveh Da’at* IV:15

How did they permit calling a woman up to read from the Torah with cantillation, for this is a woman’s singing voice… We are forced to say that they permitted a woman to read for the congregation when there are not seven men qualified to read, because in a place where the *Shechina* dwells, the sages were not concerned about inappropriate thoughts.

Rav Yosef accepts Chida’s position that awareness of the *Shechina* reduces our susceptibility to inappropriate thoughts. Therefore, he reasons that *kol isha* may not present a problem in synagogue, where God’s presence is strongly felt.

In practice, Rav Yosef acknowledges hesitation about relying on Chida to permit a man to hear an individual woman’s singing voice in synagogue. His responsum thus takes into account other factors to permit a woman to recite *birkat ha-gomel* there (even, if necessary, in the men's section), including that the recitation is brief and spoken:

Responsa *Yechaveh Da'at* IV:15

I say that the evil inclination is not found for a short period of time like this [reciting *birkat ha-gomel*]…. One can say that also in this matter, since the woman enters [the men's section] solely for *birkat ha-gomel* and [since] the *Shechina* dwells where there are ten, therefore one should not be concerned in this way for breaching *tzeniut* with *birkat ha-gomel*. Even according to what Benei Yissachar wrote, that regarding the fundamental law there is room to doubt Chida's words, it seems that this [doubt] regards a woman singing, which is not the case in our matter regarding *birkat ha-gomel*, which is permitted according to all opinions…

Leading Prayer

A woman leading prayer, as opposed to reciting a *beracha*, may raise *kol isha* concerns or special concern for *tzeniut* in the synagogue. (This raises other halachic questions, which we plan to discuss in a future piece.)

In recent years, a few congregations have invited women to lead *pesukei de-zimra* or *kabbalat Shabbat*, which are typically chanted or sung. To address the question of *kol isha*, some have referenced Rav Ovadya and Chida. However, neither of them issued a direct halachic ruling on these practices.

Prayer is sustained, may be chanted or sung, calls for attentive listening and response, and, as distinct from ritual readings, builds a sense of connection. The Talmud uses the same term, "*kol areiv*" (a sweet voice), both to describe the ideal prayer leader and to present the prohibition of *kol isha*. In a responsum unrelated to *kol isha*, Rav Moshe Sternbuch describes the prayer leader's role:

*Teshuvot Ve-hanhagot* 5:173

The primary task of the *chazzan* or prayer leader is to sing the tune in a sweet voice in a manner that draws the congregation to have intent…

This hints at some of the potential complexity the role presents for women, even setting aside the formal question of *kol isha*. As we will see, even those authorities who rule leniently on mixed singing of religious songs or prayers do not explicitly allow for a man to listen to a woman sing them solo, even outside of a prayer setting.

# In a Mixed Crowd

How do these arguments play out with respect to voices joining to sing in praise of God, whether at prayer or a Shabbat table, when not all present are members of the same family?[[17]](#footnote-17)

**I. Stringent** Rav Yissachar Eilenberg takes a stringent approach to men and women singing religious songs together, arguing that the sanctity of the material sung makes this especially problematic.

Responsa *Be’er Sheva Be’er Mayim Chayyim* 3

I will give a fine and proper open rebuke with young men and young women, elders and youth, and especially married women, who sing and make their voices heard [feminine verbs] in song during *zemirot* on Shabbat with young men and elders and youth together. They do not care that this is a mitzva that leads to a serious transgression… It is clear that this is not just for *keri’at Shema*, but is the halacha for anything sacred…

Tzitz Eliezer adds that, in his view, Chida does not provide sufficient basis for mixed singing of religious song:

Responsa *Tzitz Eliezer* XIV:7

…Chida’s *Devash Le-fi* discusses a situation where there is actual revelation of the *Shechina*… If so, what is the basis to come and make an analogy and derive from there to a general case of men and women singing sacred songs together, where there is certainly no revelation of the *Shechina*, and even if they start out with intent for the sake of Heaven, it is clear that afterwards it ceases, and the reward is cancelled by the loss, and the breach here will generally be greater than what is left standing…

Tzitz Eliezer questions Chida’s assumption that the song of the prophetess Devora, accompanied by clear manifestation of the *Shechina*, can serve as a general halachic precedent. Even a mixed group that starts singing with pure religious intention may not feel a strong and sustained awareness of God’s presence, and are likely to find themselves inappropriately distracted as they continue to sing.

In the context of the synagogue, Chatam Sofer prohibits mixed singing of *tefillot* if the women's voices are audible in the men's section. He goes so far as to suggest that a man hearing women sing along with prayers in synagogue has nullified his prayer.

Responsa *Chatam Sofer* V: Omissions, 190

For we believe that every prayer or praise or thanksgiving that mixes with any [sexual] stray thoughts, even of his wife, will not ascend on high before God and will not be received before Him. And therefore, we separate the women from the men, in a synagogue to themselves, so that they [the men] not come to stray thoughts at the time of prayer and their prayer be rejected, Heaven help us …Since we clarified that a woman’s voice is akin to *erva*; if so, the voice that travels from the women's section to the men's section arouses stray thoughts and nullifies intentionality during prayer….. It seems, in my humble opinion, that for this reason we should stop the sound of women singing in their [women’s] synagogue at the time that men are in their [men’s] synagogue

In softer terms, Rav Kook writes that ensuring that women's voices don’t travel beyond the women's section is part of maintaining the separation between genders in the synagogue:

Responsa *Orach Mishpat* OC 35

They should be careful with the customs of our holy ancestors and with all the gravity of the prohibitions in matters of the sanctity of synagogues and study halls, and should build the synagogues in the architectural fashion that our departed ancestors built them for generations, with a division between the men’s section and the women’s section, and the sound of women singing should not be heard in them, and our camp should be holy

**II. Lenient** Despite these concerns, men and women did sing *zemirot* together in the community of Rav Samson Rephael Hirsch. In a responsum on mixed singing within youth groups in the inter-war period (excerpted above), Rav Yechiel Ya'akov Weinberg presents a number of context-based reasons why this could be permissible:

Responsa *Seridei Eish* I:77

…When I came to Berlin, I saw that in Orthodox homes men and women sang sacred *zemirot* together on Shabbat, and I was amazed at this custom, which violates an explicit halacha… However, after research and investigation, it was told to me that Rav Azriel Hildesheimer and also Rav Samson Rephael Hirsch in Frankfurt am Main permitted singing together for sacred *zemirot*. The reason is that “two voices are not heard,” and since they sing together there is no concern of a prohibition, but I was not comfortable with this… I searched and found in *Sedei Chemed, s.v. Kol*, that he brought in the name of a Sephardi Rav to permit sacred *zemirot* of men and women together ….Afterwards, I saw it brought in the name of Chida in his book *Devash Le-fi, s.v. Kuf*, that when there is dwelling of the *Shechina* it is permitted for a woman to sing and there is no problem of inappropriate thoughts. One can at least rely on what he brought from Sedei Chemed, that with sacred songs we are not concerned with inappropriate thoughts … The opinion of those who are stringent is to prohibit during *keri’at Shema* in any manner. But at times not during *keri’at Shema* there is certainly no prohibition unless he has intention to enjoy, as according to the Rambam’s opinion. If so, one can say that with sacred *zemirot* we are not concerned that they would intend to enjoy a woman’s voice…There is room to say, that with sacred *zemirot* the *zemer* awakens holy feelings and not thoughts of sin….One can say that since those who sing sacred *zemirot* also intend for the sake of Heaven, in order to awaken religious feelings among the girls and to plant in their hearts affection for the sacred things of Israel, one can rely on those who are lenient. See *Yoma* 69a regarding Shimon Ha-tzadik: “A time to do for God, [they have abrogated Your Torah] etc., and Rashi there….

Looking for a rationale to support mixed singing of religious songs, aside from the leniency of multiple voices, Rav Weinberg draws on Chida's *Shechina*-based leniency for religious song and on an inference from a quotation in *Sedei Chemed*.[[18]](#footnote-18) He relies on Rambam’s position that a man violates *kol isha* outside of *keri'at Shema* only when he listens with intent to enjoy. He adds an original corollary to this principle: men who participate in joint singing in order to praise God and promote religious feeling are unlikely to have such intent.

Rav Weinberg himself voices some hesitation about this leniency, though he ultimately rules in favor because he sees the pressing situation of the Jews of France as a "time to act for God and thus abrogate strict law." His hesitation notwithstanding, this responsum is often relied upon in communities where there is mixed singing of *zemirot* at the Shabbat table beyond the immediate family or of religious songs at a simcha or kumsitz, or in which men's and women's voices join in prayer. (For more on this, see the discussion of "Not Singing" in our [previous installment](https://deracheha.org/kol-isha-2-mutual-responsibility).)

In addition to Rav Hildesheimer, Rav Hirsch and Rav Weinberg, more recent rabbinic luminaries reportedly were also lenient about mixed singing of *zemirot*, at least in a private home. Rav Eliezer Melamed cites a couple of examples, including Rav Ovadya Yosef, who was apparently lenient based on the woman's voice being heard but not pronounced during mixed singing.[[19]](#footnote-19)

*Peninei Halacha,* Family 7:12, note 4:

…We are accustomed not to be particular about the women’s singing emerging from the women’s section (*Chatam Sofer* CM 190 was stringent about this). Regarding Shabbat songs in a family setting with guests, the basis for the lenient position is set out in Seridei Eish I:77, and as he testified that this was the practice of God-fearing families and Rabbis in Germany, and one can infer that this was also their practice with Torah-observant guests who were not members of the family. I originally thought that the widespread custom is that if there are second-degree relatives present, the women do not sing. However, over the years I have heard testimony that even in the homes of Rabbis from other communities, the practice was for women to sing with second-degree relatives. Professor Shaul Stampfer told me that in the home of Rav Tzvi Pesach Frank, who was his grandfather’s uncle, everyone present sang Shabbat *zemirot* together – men and women. In order to confirm his childhood memory, he went back and asked Rav Frank’s son, Rav Avraham, and his wife, and they testified that women indeed sang, and their voices were audible because they enjoyed singing out loud. And similarly, Rav Dvir Azulay sent me testimony that Chief Rabbi Yitzchak Yosef sent him: “In the home of our master, my esteemed father and Rav [Ovadya Yosef], the practice throughout the years was for all the family to sing together Shabbat night and day, with the siblings-in-law and all the siblings, and our master said to them, that since the girl is not singing “solo,” but her voice is absorbed with all the voices, there is no prohibition in this, even if her voice is also heard, and this is for a voice that is not especially strong, but ordinary, and not especially high in tone.” (He wrote similarly in *Yalkut Yosef*, Shabbat, Part I, vol. 3, pp. 368-73.)

Rav Melamed also notes that common practice is to be lenient about women's voices from the women's section carrying into the men's section during prayer, even among some of those who are stringent at the Shabbat table, presumably on account of the gender separation at synagogue.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Summary

In this section, we’ve surveyed a range of views on *kol isha* in the context of singing songs of a religious nature when women sing solo or together with men.

Because the synagogue is a sacred space where issues of modesty demand extra consideration, there are those who are not comfortable with the idea of a woman’s solo voice being heard there at all, even her speaking voice. Others agree that there is no concern of *kol isha* when a woman speaks, but only when she sings, and some equate a chanting voice with a speaking voice. Rav Ovadya Yosef suggests that there may be room for further leniency with a woman's solo singing voice in a prayer setting, but does not himself apply leniency so widely.

With regard to singing together, some prohibit it in any form, including a kumsitz, *zemirot* at the Shabbat table or *tefillot* in synagogue. Others permit singing as a group in such cases, or at the very least in a synagogue where there is gender separation and the voices meld into one collective group.

As with many other issues that concern modesty, community norms and customs play a significant role in determining appropriate practice.

How can we balance women’s spiritual needs with the halachot of kol isha?

Many of us experience singing as a primary vehicle for religious inspiration and expression. Especially in a group or during prayer, singing arouses intense feelings of joy, thanksgiving sorrow, and yearning.

In a piece for an undergraduate YU publication, Sima Grossman describes the power of zemirot:[[21]](#footnote-21)

Sima Grossman, “The Magic of Zemirot,” *Kol Hamevaser* VII:1

The familiar tune starts off softly. There are still whispers of conversation ringing throughout the room. Some people become self-appointed shushers. Soon the whole room is singing. Some sing loudly, others softly. Some sing in tune, others sing horrendously off tune. There is even some harmony mixed in. The quality of the singing may not be able to win any talent competitions, yet it is hard not to get caught up in it. And as I look around the room, I start to notice some interesting things. The girl who I know would never be caught listening to Jewish music is singing with her eyes closed, pounding unconsciously on the table as she belts out the tune. The girl who is not the so called “mushy type,” and who rolls her eyes at the “fluff” she proclaims her teachers teach, is putting her arm around the girl who sits next to her as she gets caught up in the melody. Even the shy girl whose voice is rarely heard is sitting with her finger pointing to each word in her bentcher as she softly sings along. Soon some of the more outgoing people are standing up and proudly doing hand motions as they sing. They try to get others to join them. If the atmosphere is particularly intense, soon the whole room will be on its feet, completely caught up in the zemirot’s ancient words and tunes.

It is possible to pray with great intensity and fervor without singing. The Talmud Yerushalmi describes the Biblical Channa’s quiet prayer as a mark of her closeness to God:

Yerushalmi *Berachot* 9:1

For it is said “And Chana was speaking to herself, only her lips moved but her voice was not heard and God heard her prayer.” (*Shemuel* I 1:13) And so it is with all living creatures, as it is said “A prayer for the poor man when he wraps himself, [before God he pours out his conversation].” Like a person who speaks in his friend's ear and he hears. Is there a God closer than this, that He is close to His creatures like a mouth to an ear?

God doesn’t need for our prayers to be loud, but we sometimes feel that it enhances our ability to connect to the words we are saying and to focus on them. Experiencing spiritual connection through song doesn't necessarily demand that one sing audibly in public. But it can certainly feel that way sometimes.

The more central communal singing becomes to religious life, the more apt women are to feel left out of spiritual experiences, at least in communities in which men and women do not sing together. In an anonymous blog entry, a young woman describes some of her frustrations:[[22]](#footnote-22)

Kol Isha, Life after Stern College Blog

Starting zemirot at a shabbos table is one example of a situation where Kol Isha is difficult for me.....There are certain tunes in davening that I love, and instead of sitting there on the women’s side trying to send telepathic messages to the chazan of what tune I hope he’ll sing, I wish I could be the one choosing the melodies and putting my heart into every syllable.... Luckily most of the time Kol Isha is not a problem at all, and I find appropriate means to channel my love of singing.

On the whole, Halacha mandates that we balance a desire for religious ecstasy and connection with self-restraint. Often this places equal limitations on women and men. For example, the laws of Shabbat dictate that we refrain from using musical instruments during Shabbat prayers, even though they might enhance our prayer experience.

Kol isha, on the other hand, can result in an imbalance, with women exercising great restraint while men enjoy free expression. This can be particularly pronounced in religious contexts. Especially given that the prohibition of kol isha falls on men, some communities and halachic authorities have endeavored to maximize opportunities for women to sing within a halachic framework. Others have taken the opposite approach in mixed company, in an effort to head off any possible halachic violation.

How can women experience the spiritual power of religious song within a halachic framework? In some communities, mixed singing is possible; in others, groups of women and girls may sing together where men will not hear them.

For many women and girls, even (or especially) those most connected to prayer and spirituality, some frustration will be inevitable. In a halachic framework, this remains a challenge that can be ameliorated but not eliminated, and that demands continued sensitivity from all members of the community.

We began this series with Miryam leading the women in a song of praise to God after Keri’at Yam Suf:

*Shemot* 15:20-21

And Miryam the prophet, sister of Aharon, took the timbrel in her hand and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dancing. And Miryam called out responsively to them: Sing to God for He has triumphed greatly, horse and his rider He has cast into the sea.

Why does the Torah devote extra verses to describe the women’s song specifically? Throughout the story of the Exodus women are presumed to be among Benei Yisrael, but seldom singled out for special mention.

Perhaps to emphasize that joyous musical praise is ideally separate, with Moshe leading the men and Miryam leading the women, allowing women to express thanksgiving freely in song and dance. This is relevant today as well; even in communities that are stringent with kol isha in mixed company, there are increasing opportunities for spiritual musical expression in women’s-only groups. Even in more open communities, women may feel less inhibited without a male audience.

Perhaps to emphasize that women possess a unique and powerful impulse to praise God in song, Rashi makes the following comment:

Rashi *Shemot* 15:20

“With timbrels and with dancing - the righteous women of the generation were certain that God would perform miracles for them, and took timbrels out of Egypt.”

Even before they left Egypt, the women were ready to sing in praise. In Tanach, women’s voices are heard in songs of celebration and mourning laments. Singing is an authentically feminine mode of avodat Hashem.

As women, we are sometimes in the mode of Miryam, singing joyously as a separate group. Sometimes, depending on our communities’ customs, we may be in the mode of Devora, singing together with Barak in a mixed group. And sometimes - not always voluntarily - we find ourselves in the mode of Channa, whose voice was not heard by Eli but expressed her fervent connection to her Creator. All members of our community, regardless of gender, should keep the potential significance of each mode in mind when addressing questions of kol isha.

1. Maharam Schick EH 53

If he doesn’t see her face and doesn’t know her, it seems there is no concern at all [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Pesachim* 116a

Our rabbis taught: This *Hallel*, who said it? Rabbi Eliezer says: Moshe and Yisrael said it when they stood at the sea…Rabbi Elazar Ha-moda'i says: Devora and Barak said it when Sisera stood against them… [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Arachin* 11a

Rav Yehuda said in the name of Shemuel: What is the Torah source for the basic [obligation] of song [with the Temple offerings]? …Rav Matna said it is from here: “Because you did not serve the Lord your God with joy and with a goodness of heart” (*Devarim* 28:47). What is service with joy and with goodness of heart? You have to say: it is song [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Tehillim* 96:1-2

Sing to God a new song, sing to God all the land. Sing to God, bless His name, spread word of His salvation from day to day.

 See also *Tehillim* 33:3, 98:1, 149:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Tehillim* 42:9

In daytime God extends His grace, and at night His song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life.

See also *Tehillim* 28:7. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Maharil Minhagim, Likutim*

In synagogues on festivals and holidays it is a mitzva to sing songs and praises in honor of the great and awesome King, may He be blessed. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Responsa of Rashba I:215

If this *shali'ach tzibbur* [prayer leader] is joyous in his heart over giving praise and thanks to God with a sweet voice and tune and his joy stems from awe, may a blessing come upon him. For one of the requirements for someone whom we designate to lead prayer is that he keep a tune and have a sweet voice…But he must pray with gravity…Therefore this prayer leader if he is joyous and stands with awe as is written "Serve God with awe, rejoice with trembling,” (*Tehillim* 2) this is praised. But if he intends to make his voice heard and is joyous about his voice that the people will hear it and praise him, this is censured. Regarding him and those like him is said, “She raised her voice upon Me; therefore, I hated her...” (*Yirmiyahu* 12:8).

Responsa Rosh 4:22

But I protested that the *chazzanim* in this country are for their enjoyment, to listen to a sweet voice, and even if he is a completely wicked person they are not concerned, only that he be a pleasant singer; and the Holy One, blessed be He, says: “She raised her voice upon Me; therefore, I hated her...” (*Yirmiyahu* 12:8). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Tractate Semachot teaches that even where no relatives wish to take financial responsibility for the funeral, mekonenot are among the basic minimal requirements:

*Semachot* 14:7

…The burial is by her husband [i.e. his responsibility], because her husband is obligated to provide her with her food and her ransom and her burial. Rabbi Yehuda says, with two flutes and women leading dirges. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Pesikta Zutreta Shemot* 15

”*Va-ta’an*” (she called out) means that one would begin and they would all respond.

Elsewhere in Tanach, we see similar language used to describe women greeting victorious warriors with song. For example:

I *Shemuel* 18:6-7

As [the troops] came, when David returned from smiting the Philistine, the women went out from all the cities of Israel to sing and with dances to greet King Shaul, with timbrels with joy and with cymbals. And the celebrating women called out and said, "Shaul has smitten his thousands and David his tens of thousands." [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Available here: <https://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=19580&st=&pgnum=140&hilite=> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Another source often cited here is Rav Aharon Toledo, author of *Divrei Chefetz*, who offers a more limited argument for leniency. He claims that *kol isha* depends on intent, and thus there is no concern when a man happens to overhear a woman singing songs of a religious nature to herself. In this case there is no intent on his part to take pleasure in her singing, which is different from a situation where women sing together with men present, which he considers a case of what the Talmud describes as *peritzut*, immodesty. In truth, his ruling is based more on man's lack of intent and the innocent nature of a woman singing to herself than on a unique quality of religious song *per se*. (Available here: <https://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=45380&st=&pgnum=229> )

*Divrei Chefetz* p. 113

For whoever does not incline his ear to listen to her voice and intends to enjoy it, if it is not an immodest situation where men sing and women answer, where there is mingling and frivolity …if the woman was singing alone, there is no problem…When he intended to hear her voice, whether during *keri’at Shema* or during the rest of the day, there is an aspect of *erva*, but if she is singing to herself songs of praise and thanksgiving to God for the miracle that was done to her, or if she is crooning to a child to get him to sleep or singing a dirge over someone deceased, there is no aspect of *erva* and even for *keri’at Shema* there is no problem…. We conclude that the statement “*kol be-isha erva*” applies when she warbles and sings suggestive songs and he intends to enjoy her singing, and also when women call out and men respond, since he inclines his ear to hear her voice and whatever she utters. But if she is singing to herself songs and praises and thanksgiving to His great name for a miracle that was done to her, or if she is crooning to a child to get him to sleep or singing a dirge over someone deceased, there is no place to be concerned about inappropriate thoughts and we have no problem… [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Available here: <https://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=33305&st=&pgnum=105>

We plan to discuss *kaddish* in a future piece. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Available here: <https://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=9342&st=%d7%91%d7%90%d7%a0%d7%a4%d7%99+%d7%a2%d7%a9%d7%a8%d7%94&pgnum=62>

We plan to address *birkat ha-gomel* in a future piece. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Men often recite these in a sort of chant or singsong, which falls short of real singing. While we have no way of knowing what happened historically, in synagogues today women are likely to recite them in their regular speaking voice. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Responsa *Tzitz Eliezer* 14:7

We saw a few [authorities] who are stringent even with a woman's speaking voice in public, such as reciting *kaddish*…We thus learn clearly to forbid our matter [mixed singing]. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Available here: <https://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=14425&st=&pgnum=325&hilite=>

This follows Rav Yehuda Henkin's reading of *Kaf Ha-chayyim*:

Responsa *Benei Banim* IV:8

And the reason that they were not concerned about *kol be-isha erva* for *megilla* reading seems to be …only the singing or musical voice is prohibited, and one can say that in the opinion of all these early authorities, that chanting the cantillations is not in the category of song or music, Heaven forbid, and thus wrote *Kaf Ha-chayyim* 689:13 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. We touched on the question of *kol isha* within the family in our previous installment: deracheha.org/kol-isha-1-halachic-basis [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. He seems to interpret Divrei Chefetz more broadly than what Sedei Chemed himself quotes. See footnote 11 supra for Divrei Chefetz's view, which differs from Seridei Eish's account of it.

For his part, Sedei Chemed rules against following the lenient view he attributes to Divrei Chefetz, that a woman can freely sing religious songs, though he does concede that that view is halachically plausible. (Available here: <https://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=14145&st=&pgnum=485&hilite=>  )

*Sedei Chemed* Letter Kuf 42

From the words of the Rav Divrei Chefetz p. 113b…he concludes that when the voice is not of suggestive songs and he does not intend to take pleasure in her voice when she sings words of songs and of praise to God over a miracle, or she sings to put her child to sleep or she bewails the dead, we have no concern as long as he does not intend to take pleasure in her voice…Even though it is certainly correct to be stringent not in accordance with the words of Divrei Chefetz above, in any case it is not considered an astonishing matter [i.e. it is a plausible view]… [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Available here: <https://ph.yhb.org.il/11-07-12/> [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Mixed choirs existed at some Orthodox synagogues in the 20th century, primarily in Britain and the Commonwealth. They were sometimes tolerated by the rabbinic establishment, but never explicitly condoned, and are now exceedingly rare. (Rabbi Raymond Apple, “Mixed choirs in Jewish worship.” In [*Eshkolot: Essays in memory of Rabbi Ronald Lubofsky*](https://www.oztorah.com/2010/08/eshkolot-essays-in-memory-of-rabbi-ronald-lubofsky-book-review/) (Melbourne: Hybrid Publishers, 2002). Available here: <https://www.oztorah.com/2012/07/mixed-choirs-in-jewish-worship/#.Xw10cSgzbIW> )

Rav Zvi Hirsch Chayes cited the *gemara* in *Sota* 48a about “fire in flax” to condemn such choirs in the strongest terms (*Minchat Kena’ot*, 7b note, available here: <https://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=43015&st=&pgnum=18> )

Because choir members function like prayer leaders or even performers, they may be halachically similar to solo singers, even if a particular arrangement does not include female solos. They also may stand with men and women intermingled. This is distinct from the case of the voices of female and male congregants joining in prayer, in which there is room for leniency. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Available here: <http://kolhamevaser.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/7.1%20Music%20and%20Spirituality.pdf>  [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Available here: <https://lifeaftersterncollege.blogspot.com/2010/05/kol-isha.html>  [↑](#footnote-ref-22)