

# A Note on Women's Tefillah

For those unfamiliar with the halakhic and educational values of women's tefillah, please read this note from Rabbi Wolkenfeld.

A.

In the 1970s, groups of Orthodox women in North America began to organize "women's tefillah groups" in which women would recite tefillot together and read Torah for one another without the context of a minyan and without reciting any prayers or blessings requiring a minyan. These women's tefillah groups, and the debate that circled around them, were one of the core and defining issues on the agenda of Modern Orthodoxy in the 1980s and 1990s. Although their popularity has waxed and waned over the decades, women's tefillah groups were sponsored by several large and prominent Modern Orthodox congregations and many Modern Orthodox women in their 30s and 40s grew up attending women's tefillah groups with their mothers and grandmothers or celebrated becoming bat mitzvah at a women's tefillah group.

Although he was skeptical of many liturgical innovations (including celebrating Yom Ha'Atzma'ut or incorporating new kinot for the Holocaust on Tisha B'Av), Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik nonetheless offered personal guidance on how women's tefillah groups could avoid some halakhic pitfalls and, in one of his last public acts before his death, notably refrained from joining a group of his students who condemned them.

I spoke about some of that history when I taught about the History of Modern Orthodoxy at ASBI last fall. You can watch that lecture [here](#). Women's Torah readings and women's tefillah gatherings have been a part of ASBI for many years and have been cherished both as a framework for celebrating a bat mitzvah, and also as a way for a multi-generational group of women to pray and read Torah together.

B.

Over twenty years ago, I visited an Orthodox shul in Jerusalem where the practice at the time was to convene a women's keriah (Torah reading by women for women without any of the blessings requiring a minyan) on Shabbat morning at the same time as the conventional keriat haTorah read by men. Subsequently, I saw that same practice when I moved to Lakeview where each Simchat Torah at ASBI, a women's gathering for Torah reading takes place in the main sanctuary while men gather in ancillary rooms of the shul to hear Torah being read. I now know of several other Orthodox congregations (OU member congregations with similarities to ASBI), in cities across the United States in which it is common for a women's keriah to take place on the Shabbat morning at which a bat mitzvah is celebrated.

C.

The most common halakhic position maintains that keriat haTorah is a communal obligation but not an individual obligation. This means that it is incumbent upon every Jewish community to convene a minyan and read Torah three days each week, but no individual man or woman has an obligation to hear the Torah being read. (The students of Rabbi Chaim of Brisk and their descendants are known for unusual strictness in this regard and will convene a minyan and read Torah, for example on a Monday afternoon, if they were unable to hear the Torah read that morning for any reason).