

Understanding the Morning Blessing "Shelo Asani Isha"

One of the most discussed blessings in the Jewish morning prayers is the line traditionally recited by men:

"בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, שְׁלֹא עָשִׂיתָ אִשָּׁה" –

"Blessed are You, Hashem... for not having made me a woman."

At first glance, this statement may appear chauvinistic or dismissive of the dignity of women. However, a deeper look into its origin, structure, and purpose reveals a far more nuanced and respectful understanding.

Let us begin with the context: these blessings are part of a group known as *Birkot HaShachar*—the Morning Blessings—which express daily gratitude for our physical, spiritual, and communal identity. According to the Talmud (*Menachot 43b, Berachot 60b*), the original idea was to say:

"שֶׁעָשִׂיתָ יִשְׂרָאֵל" –

"Who made me a Jew."

However, the sages recognized that while this blessing expressed an important sentiment, it would only count as one blessing. In order to help fulfill the halachic ideal of saying **one hundred blessings each day** (*me'ah berachot b'chol yom*), they divided the broader gratitude into **three distinct blessings**, each acknowledging a different aspect of Jewish identity and spiritual opportunity:

1. "שְׁלֹא עָשִׂיתָ גּוֹי" – *Shelo Asani Goy* –

"Who has not made me a non-Jew."

2. "שְׁלֵא עָשׂוּי עֶבֶד" – *Shelo Asani Aved* –

"Who has not made me a slave."

3. "שְׁלֵא עָשׂוּי אִשָּׁה" – *Shelo Asani Isha* –

"Who has not made me a woman."

These three blessings reflect levels of access to mitzvot. Non-Jews and slaves are not obligated in the full range of commandments that Jews are. Similarly, women are exempt from many *mitzvot aseh she'hazman grama* (positive time-bound commandments), due to their traditionally different societal and familial roles. Thus, the blessing is not an expression of superiority, but rather a statement of gratitude for the additional mitzvot and the responsibility they entail.

In no way was this meant to be a statement that men are superior than women. Far from being derogatory, *Shelo Asani Isha* is a humble recognition that with greater obligation comes greater accountability. It is a way of saying, "Thank You for entrusting me with more commandments—even though that means more spiritual work and responsibility."

In this light, the custom that some women have adopted—saying:

"שְׁעָשׂוּי כְּרִצּוֹנוֹ" – *She'asani Kirtzono* –

"Who has made me according to His will,"

while well-intentioned, is not sourced in the Talmud or early halachic literature. It arose much later and is not a required or universally practiced blessing. In fact, there is a strong halachic and philosophical argument to be made that women, like men, should say blessings that express gratitude for their divinely-given identity and spiritual mission—without needing to adopt a phrase that may seem vague or reactive.

Finally, on a lighter note: I like to say that when I attend a Broadway show and there's an intermission, as I walk past the long line outside the ladies' restroom on my way to the men's room, I quietly say *Shelo Asani Isha*. There are just certain times when that Beracha really comes in handy.

In all seriousness, it's also important to emphasize that in Jewish belief and scripture, no one group is considered inherently superior to another. Rather, each group—men and women, Kohanim and Yisraelim, Jews and non-Jews—has its own unique set of duties, responsibilities, challenges, and beauty. The world that Hashem created is like a symphony, where every instrument has its role. Only when all these parts work together in harmony can we truly fulfill God's will. This perspective turns distinctions into a source of mutual respect rather than division.

In conclusion, "**שְׁלֹא אֲשֵׁנִי אִשָּׁה**" is not a statement of superiority but of **spiritual gratitude and responsibility**. It's part of a carefully structured set of blessings designed not only to acknowledge our place in the world, but also to fulfill the beautiful mitzvah of reaching **a hundred daily blessings**, which keep us spiritually aware throughout the day.