

***The Three Blessings: Boundaries,
Censorship, and Identity in Jewish Liturgy***
by Yoel Kahn (Oxford University Press, 2011)
224 pages

Reviewed by Tamar Jacobowitz

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***The Three Blessings: Boundaries, Censorship, and Identity in Jewish Liturgy* by Yoel Kahn (Oxford University Press, 2011) 224 pages**

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In *The Three Blessings: Boundaries, Censorship, and Identity in Jewish Liturgy*, Yoel Kahn offers an engaging guided tour through Jewish history—from classical rabbinic times to the contemporary period—using a highly selective lens: the three morning blessings. [“Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has not made me a heathen, ...who has not made me a slave,...who has not made me a woman.”] Chapter by chapter, Kahn investigates the particular challenges faced by Jews in a variety of historical periods in developing, maintaining and making sense of these three *she-lo asani* blessings. In so doing, Kahn’s study of the evolution of these blessings also exposes the general reader to the continuities and discontinuities in Jewish thought, legal practice, and social and political realities. Kahn’s condensed historical study strongly diverges from the recent slew of articles on the triad of *she-lo asani* blessings,¹ all of which focus on pragmatic issues for the contemporary traditional community, that is to say, whether or how to adapt them, in conformity with modern values.

To a Modern Orthodox reader, Kahn’s historical orientation takes the pressure off of the hot-button issue of *she-lo asani ishab* (“who

has not made me a woman”). His discussion shifts the focus away from our fixation on the third blessing towards the awareness that all *three* blessings were the subject of debate at different points in Jewish history. His study also highlights the cultural specificity of our discomfort with “othering” (gentiles, slaves, or women), or asserting our own identity by appearing to denigrate others.

In the ancient world—where the blessings originate—this way of talking was universally accepted. Kahn’s historical perspective helps us to “own” and contextualize our reservations about the liturgical formulae. Furthermore, as his study demonstrates, social and political exigencies have continually caused communities to seek changes or adaptations to the blessings. We can benefit from learning how communities and their leaders have responded to similar pressures in the past and evaluating the advantages and disadvantages of their solutions, from both halakhic and sociological points of view.

Kahn begins his analysis with an exploration of the blessings’ origin in Greek culture. While he does not reconstruct the process of adaptation, Kahn suggests that the rabbis reworked a

1. The most animated discussion has centered on the *she-lo asani ishab* blessing; some scholars have proposed a variety of alternatives, while others have criticized these solutions on halakhic grounds. For example, see Gili Zivan, “The Blessings of *Shelo Asani Isha* and *She 'asani Kirtzono*” in *Jewish Legal Writings by Women*, (Efrat, Israel: Urim Publications and Lambda Publishing, 1998), pp. 5-24 (Hebrew section); Moshe Benovitz, review of *Jewish Legal Writings by Women* in *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women’s Studies and Gender Issues* 2, 1999, pp. 146-160; Joseph Tabory, “The Benedictions of Self-Identity and the Changing Status of Women and Orthodoxy,” *Kenishta II* (2001), pp. 107-138; Joel Wolowelsky, “Who Has Not Made Me A Woman?: A Quiet Berakha”, *Tradition*, 29/4 (1995), pp. 61–68 and Aharon Feldman, “Halakhic Feminism or Feminist Halakha?” *Tradition*, 33/2 (Winter, 1999), pp. 61–79.

familiar saying attributed to Socrates in order to create the Jewish blessings.²

“There were three blessings for which he was grateful to fortune: First, that I was born a human being and not one of the brutes; next, that I was born a man and not a woman, and thirdly, a Greek and not a barbarian.”³

If the Greek slogan was a terse way to assert identity around essential values, the Jewish formula “derived its power as a counter-narrative to the widely known Hellenistic version” (p. 12), redirecting the praise from “fortune” to God while offering gratitude for nearly the same values. Kahn is not the first scholar to identify this link between the Jewish blessings and an ancient Greek identity slogan,⁴ but situating the blessings within a Hellenistic

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attributed to Socrates*

milieu at the outset of the book creates a frame for the book-length exploration of the cultural environments that shaped and continue to shape these blessings. In other words, the composition of the blessings reflect an early negotiation between “Jewish” values and non-Jewish traditions much in the same way that the development, reception and modification of the blessings have engaged Jews in cross-cultural exchange.

In the first half of the book, Kahn deals with the internal development of the blessings, that is, the messy early textual history, as well as the increasing movement in the Geonic period towards regularization of the blessings and

their public recitation. As for an original *ur*-text, Kahn asserts that no such version exists, but that competing versions coexisted from the blessings’ earliest appearance. Comparison of Genizah liturgical fragments with canonical texts (the Tosefta and both Talmuds)⁵ yields several important differences. For one, the Palestinian texts preserve the ‘affirmative not negative’ formulation of the Greek saying; for example, “Praised are you.... Who created me an Israelite and not a gentile.”⁶ Second, many Genizah fragments include the Greek-originated blessing “who made me a person and not a beast.” Although the three blessings—together with the longer unit of *birkhot hashabar* (“who has given insight to the rooster, etc...”) with which they were associated—appear in Geonic legal compendia with explicit instructions regarding the proper place and time to recite them, significant diversity persisted among local customs until the widespread distribution of printed *siddurim*.

In the second half of the book Kahn discusses the continued development of the blessings in the medieval period through contemporary America, including “Censorship in Medieval and Renaissance Liturgy,” “Recasting Boundaries and Identity in Nineteenth-Century European Prayer Books,” and “Identity and the Creation of Community in Modern American Liturgy.” The common thread that binds these chapters is the tension between external pressures to modify the blessings on the one hand and fidelity to R. Meir’s statement in the Talmud, “A person *must* recite three blessings every day, and they are...” on the other hand. The variable among the chapters is the source and nature of the external pressure, as well as the degree to which communities felt bound to R. Meir’s

2. See pp. 10-11 where Kahn discusses the other ancients associated with this slogan, which circulated for several hundred years.

3. Kahn, p. 9, n. 2.

4. For relevant literature, see Kahn, p. 10, n. 5.

5. In the classical sources, the list of three appears in Tosefta *Berakhot* 6:18, BT *Menahot* 43b, and Palestinian Talmud *Berakhot* 9d.

6. See chapter 4, “Competitive Traditions,” pp. 35-43.

dictum. Beginning in the thirteenth century and continuing for several hundred years, Jews adopted a variety of strategies to avoid the Church burning their prayer books because of objectionable phrases. In the majority of cases, Jews voluntarily censored their *siddurim*, by removing ‘*she-lo asani goy*’ altogether or by replacing ‘*goy*’ with a variety of creative euphemisms, such as ‘*kuti*,’ ‘*oved elilim*,’ ‘*aku’um*,’ ‘*nokbri*’ and even ‘*yishma’eli*’ (Ishmaelite). The Palestinian-influenced “who made me an Israelite” also reappeared during this period, in an effort to avoid the impression that Jews were casting aspersion on their Christian neighbors.

“It is possible that they do this like one who accepts the justice of the harsh decree.”

In response to civil emancipation in the nineteenth century, Jews voluntarily adjusted their prayer books to do away with the impression that Judaism was hostile to foreigners, or that Jews had a distinct status. In this fascinating chapter, Kahn shows how traditionalist and Reform leaders’ struggles to shape these three blessings reflect on their respective ideological positions.

In the chapter entitled “Women, Slaves, Boors, and Beasts,” Kahn deals with the earliest indication of blessings that women would say in place of *she-lo asani ishab*. In the early 14th century, the author of the *Arba Turim* (Jacob ben Asher) records the first mention of a blessing specifically for women. Ben Asher does not attribute the *she-asani kirtzono berakhab* to any source, and Kahn suggests that women, grassroots style, introduced the innovation. However, Ben Asher supplies an explanation for the blessing: “it is possible that they do this like one who accepts the justice of the harsh [decree].”⁷ In other words, women recite this

blessing as a “statement of faith and resignation... to their secondary status.” (p. 67) This *berakhab* was eventually codified in the *Shulhan Arukh* and became standard practice in Orthodox communities today. And yet there is another side of the story. In this chapter, Kahn discusses a striking alternative formulation that crops up in several women’s *siddurim* of the Renaissance period: “who made me a woman and not a man.”

The final chapter of the book concludes the story of these blessings with the Jewish community in America. The dramatic overhaul of the blessings that began to take hold in the early Reform movement found fertile ground in America, where reformers did not have the constraints from the government or an entrenched rabbinic establishment as did their European counterparts. Indeed, during the last century, Jews of varying denominations have exercised considerable creativity to “update” these blessings in conformity with modern values. I read with great interest the ways in which the Reform and Conservative prayer books have wrestled with these *berakhot*, and have reshaped them to mirror—even help to advance—communal values.

As to the Orthodox establishment, Kahn offers an interesting analysis of Artscroll’s staunch and unapologetic defense of the blessings, following on Rabbi Hertz’s “elaborate, apologetic commentary” in the 1940’s. Unfortunately, Kahn did not attend to Rabbi Sack’s recent commentary (Koren *Siddur*), which includes the following eloquent lines:

These blessings have nothing to do with hierarchies of dignity, for we believe that every human being is equally formed in the image of God. Rather, they are expressions of acknowledgment of the special duties of Jewish life.⁸

7. Kahn, p. 67 footnote 34.

8. The Koren *Siddur*, with introduction, translation and commentary by Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks, Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd. First Hebrew/ English Edition, 2009. p. 26.

In light of Kahn's analysis, Rabbi Sack's characterization of the blessings is clearly apologetic. Yet it bears traces of the struggle to reconcile the supreme value of *Tselem Elokim* with the triad of ancient distinctions. As Kahn

demonstrates, interpretations like Sacks' are one of the many strategies Jews have adopted to make sense of these blessings, while navigating the ever-changing project of communal self-definition.