YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Deracheha: Women and Mitzvot**

***Beracha* on Voluntary Performance**

When a woman VOluntarily performs a mitzva from which she is exempt, may she make a beracha?

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# **The Significance of *Berachot***

The *beracha* (blessing) we recite on a mitzva shapes and enhances our mitzva performance.

When we recite a *beracha* on performing a mitzva, we praise God for giving us *mitzvot*, and sanctifying us through them. The classic formula is: "*Baruch ata Ado-nai, Elo-heinu melech ha-olam, asher kiddeshanu be-mitzvotav ve-tzivanu…" "*Blessed are You, Lord our God, Who has sanctified us through His commandments and has commanded us…,"followed by a description of the mitzva about to be performed.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Beyond praise, a *beracha* may also be a sort of request for permission from God to go ahead and perform a Divine command.[[2]](#footnote-2) Even a command cannot be undertaken lightly.

Additionally, a *beracha* on a mitzva helps us orient ourselves properly toward the mitzva, as Ritva writes:

*Chiddushei Ha-Ritva, Pesachim* 7b And the reason that our sages said to recite a *beracha* before performing a mitzva is in order to sanctify oneself first with the *beracha* and reveal and make known that one performs it [the mitzva] because of the command of God, may He be blessed. And further, because the *berachot* are a service of the soul and it is fitting to put the soul's service before a [mitzva] act, which is service [by means] of the body.

Through *berachot*, we express our intention to fulfill the mitzva as *avodat Hashem*. A *beracha* is "a service of the soul." When we recite one*,* we serve God spiritually prior to performing a physical mitzva act, "service of the body."

# **The Question**

While exempt from certain [*mitzvot*](https://www.deracheha.org/positive-time-bound-mitzvot), women are allowed to perform them [voluntarily](https://www.deracheha.org/voluntary-mitzva-performance). Most authorities consider such performance meaningful and praiseworthy, a type of mitzva fulfillment.But the question remains: May a woman about to perform a mitzva from which she is exempt first recite a *beracha* over it?

On the one hand, the reasons for *berachot* – praise of God, intentionality, and engaging the soul – should apply even if the mitzva is voluntary. On the other hand, we invoke God’s name when reciting a *beracha*. This is a serious matter, and we can't just recite *berachot* whenever we want.

In his discussion of women and shofar, Rashi's student Riva (quoted by Or Zarua) connects this question to how we view voluntary mitzva performance, as a neutral act or as a fulfillment of a mitzva. (See [here](https://www.deracheha.org/voluntary-mitzva-performance).)

First, some background. We would expect blowing shofar on Rosh Ha-Shana to be rabbinically prohibited as a form of *muktzeh*, except when done specifically to fulfill the mitzva. However, the rabbis permit men to blow shofar on Rosh Ha-shana even if they have already fulfilled the mitzva, and we follow the opinion of Rabbi Yosei and Rabbi Shimon that women may blow the shofar on Rosh Ha-shana as well.

*Or Zarua* II *Rosh Ha-shana* 266 Rav Yitzchak bar Asher, of blessed memory, was in doubt – in the context of Rabbi Yose and Rabbi Shimon’s position – as to whether [women] can make a *beracha* over shofar or over other *mitzvot* in which they are not obligated, if it is considered a [proper] *beracha* or not.

Since we permit them to blow even though it is a rabbinic prohibition [for it is a form of *muktzeh* to blow shofar outside of the mitzva on Rosh Ha-shana], that implies that they are doing a good thing and they receive a reward. So they also make a *beracha*, for it is an optional [mitzva] for them to fulfill like men.

Or perhaps we permit them [to blow] because, since the rabbinic prohibition and blowing on Rosh Hashana is permitted to men – for a man who wishes to blow shofar all day long may do so, even though he already fulfilled his obligation – there is likewise no rabbinic prohibition for women. But how can she recite the *beracha* 'Who has sanctified us and commanded us (*vetzivanu*)' when she is not commanded?

Riva suggests two different ways to understand women's shofar blowing and possible implications for reciting a *beracha* on shofar and on other *mitzvot* from which women are exempt:

1. **Mitzva Fulfillment** It is "a good thing" for which women "receive reward." Though not obligated, women indeed fulfill a mitzva when acting voluntarily*.* Since it is a real mitzva act, reciting a *beracha* is appropriate.
2. **Neutral Act** Women’s shofar-blowing is halachically neutral, of merely subjective significance. It is similar to a man blowing shofar for recreation after he has already fulfilled his obligation. Since there is no mitzva to speak of, reciting a *beracha* referring to the commandment would be inappropriate.

Riva goes on to summarize different responses to his questions. We'll do the same, focusing on the positions of Rambam and Rabbeinu Tam.

# Early Rulings

RAMBAM Rambam permits a woman to perform a mitzva from which she is exempt, but without reciting a *beracha*.

*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of *Tzitzit* 3:9…Positive *mitzvot* from which women are exempt, if they want to perform them without a *beracha*, we do not rebuke them.

Why doesn’t Rambam allow women to recite *berachot* when performing *mitzvot* voluntarily? He doesn't say.

Though Riva suggested that this question depends on how we view the voluntary action, Rambam's position on voluntary performance is unclear. Rambam rules elsewhere that a woman receives halachic reward for Torah study, even though she is not formally obligated.[[3]](#footnote-3) That suggests that there is some mitzva fulfillment at play. But Rambam doesn’t mention a similar reward when he discusses women performing voluntary *mitzvot* here, and the phrase "we do not rebuke" does not convey enthusiastic endorsement.

How can we, then, explain Rambam's ruling? There are two main approaches:

I. **Unwarranted Beracha** Why would reciting a *beracha* over a voluntary act, especially if it is considered neutral, be a problem? To Rambam, a *beracha she-eina tzericha*, an unwarranted *beracha*, is a Torah-level prohibition,[[4]](#footnote-4) so we must exercise caution about *berachot* in general. For this reason, he does not permit *berachot* over customs – even if, like reciting Hallel on Rosh Chodesh, they have become universally accepted.

*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of *Berachot* 11:16 Every matter that is a custom…like reciting Hallel on Rosh Chodesh and on Chol Ha-moed Pesach, we do not recite a *beracha* on it, and so too any matter that you are in doubt about whether or not it requires a *beracha*, we do without a *beracha*, and a person should always be cautious about a *beracha she-eina tzericha*.

If binding practice does not override concerns about an unwarranted *beracha*, why should women performing *mitzvot* voluntarily be any different?

Even if we say that voluntary performance has halachic value, perhaps Rambam maintains that we can only recite a *beracha* when there is an obligation.

II. ***Ve-tzivanu*** Alternatively, perhaps Rambam is troubled by another question, raised here by Hagahot Maymoniyot (Rav Meir Ha-Kohen, 13th c. Ashkenaz):

Hagahot Maymoniyot, Laws of Tzitzit, 3:40 It is a great astonishment, for how can she say "Who has sanctified us in His commandments and commanded us” in a matter that they [women] are not commanded in, not on a Torah-level and not rabbinically?...How can they say "*vetzivanu?"*

How can women performing voluntary *mitzvot* say "*ve-tzivanu*," "and [God] has commanded us," as part of a *beracha*? Perhaps saying "*ve-tzivanu*" even suggests a blurring of the lines between voluntarism and obligation.[[5]](#footnote-5)

According to this logic, there is no fundamental objection to a woman reciting a *beracha* on voluntary performance. The required language formula just makes it impossible. When a *beracha* on voluntary performance, like the blessings on *keri'at Shema,* does not include *"ve-tzivanu,"* a woman may recite it. Perhaps a woman could even recite *She-hechiyanu* on relevant voluntary performance, even though she would not recite the *beracha* on the mitzva.

Although either of these difficulties might have led Rambam to rule out reciting a *beracha* on voluntary mitzva performance, Rav Yosef Karo, compiler of Shulchan Aruch, quotes only the issue of *ve-tzivanu* in his discussion of Rambam's position.[[6]](#footnote-6)

RASHI AND HIS TEACHERS Even before Rambam, at some point in the early Middle Ages, Ashkenazi sages began to clarify this halacha, presumably because the issue had begun to arise in practice.

Two of Rashi's teachers, Rav Yitzchak Ha-levi and Rav Yitzchak of Mainz,[[7]](#footnote-7) permit women to recite *berachot* over positive time-bound commandments.

*Machzor Vitry* 359 Rav Yitzchak Ha-levi ruled that we do not prevent women from reciting a *beracha* on lulav and sukka…. If they desire to bring themselves into the yoke of the mitzva, the permission is in her hand. We do not rebuke her. For it is no worse than one who is not commanded and does. Since she fulfills a mitzva, it is impossible without a *beracha*.

Rav Yitzchak Ha-levi considers a woman who acts voluntarily to be fulfilling a *mitzva*. As far as he is concerned, fulfilling a mitzva "is impossible without a *beracha*." *Beracha* and mitzva act are inextricably linked. He raises no concerns about unnecessary *berachot* or about imprecise language surrounding command.

On this point, Rashi breaks with his teachers:

*Or Zarua* II *Rosh HaShana* 266 And [Riva] wrote in the name of Rashi that he would prohibit [women from reciting a *beracha* on voluntary mitzva performance].

Rashi reportedly prohibits women from reciting *berachot* over *mitzvot* performed voluntarily. It is worth noting that Rashi, like Rambam, is generally conservative about reciting *berachot* when not clearly required*.* He too maintains that one should not recite a *beracha* on a custom.[[8]](#footnote-8)

RABBEINU TAM Rashi's grandson, the Tosafist Rabbeinu Tam, argues that women should be allowed to recite *berachot* on voluntary performance.

*Kiddushin* 31a Tosafot s.v. *Delo* Rabbeinu Tam inferred that women recite *berachot* over positive time bound *mitzvot* even though they are completely exempt, for even rabbinically they are not obligated…for if not, how was Rav Yosef happy [at the thought of being exempt from *mitzvot* and performing them voluntarily]? Would he not have lost all the *berachot* entirely?

Drawing on the Talmudic passage about the *eino metzuveh ve-oseh* (see [here](https://www.deracheha.org/voluntary-mitzva-performance)), Rabbeinu Tam[[9]](#footnote-9) points out that Rav Yosef originally found the idea of voluntary mitzva performance appealing. But according to Rabbeinu Tam, it’s unthinkable that he would have been happy to perform *mitzvot* if he were deprived of saying their *berachot*![[10]](#footnote-10)

It must be, then, that Rav Yosef took for granted that he would be allowed to recite *berachot* on the *mitzvot* that he would do voluntarily. A woman performing a positive time-bound mitzva is in a similar position and recites a *beracha* as well. Other halachic authorities, including Rashba, concur.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Rabbeinu Tam himself notes how his perspective relates to his general position on *berachot*. Unlike Rambam, Rabbeinu Tam maintains that *beracha she-eina tzericha* is a rabbinic-level prohibition.[[12]](#footnote-12) If so, other factors, like *nachat ru'ach shel nashim,* women’s gratification, can more readily override the prohibition.

Furthermore, Rabbeinu Tam typically permits *berachot* over customs, such as reciting Hallel on Rosh Chodesh.[[13]](#footnote-13) Customs can fully integrate into the halachic system, to the point that they merit proper *berachot*.[[14]](#footnote-14)

VE-TZIVANU Rabbeinu Tam does not address how a woman can say *'ve-tzivanu'* over a mitzva she wasn’t commanded to do. Ran, though, makes the argument for him. He explains that a woman's act derives its meaning to her from its being a mitzva in general.

Ran on the Rif, *Rosh Ha-shana* 9b One who is not commanded and does also receives a reward. Therefore they [the women] are within the mitzva. For they recite a *beracha*, and we do not say: Since they were not commanded, how can they say "*ve-tzivanu*" [and He commanded us]? … For it is not difficult, because since the men were commanded and [the women] also receive a reward, they can well say "*ve-tzivanu*."

*“Ve-tzivanu”* is plural. “Us,” in the context of the *beracha*, refers to the Jewish people as a whole. Women can recite the *beracha* with no concern of saying something inaccurate, because women are part of the Jewish people.

Women "also receive a reward" for voluntarily performing *mitzvot*, and Ran deduces from this that a woman is considered "within the mitzva." Even if she isn’t personally commanded, she performs the mitzva as part of the commanded community, acting in in the context of others' command.[[15]](#footnote-15)

# Practical Halacha

Rema permits women to recite *berachot* over positive time-bound *mitzvot*:

Gloss of the Rema to *Shulchan Aruch* OC 589:6 And the custom is that women recite a *beracha* on a positive time-bound mitzva.

Most Ashkenazi rulings[[16]](#footnote-16) follow Rema and allow women to recite *berachot*.[[17]](#footnote-17)

On the other hand, *Shulchan Aruch*, following Rambam, permits the mitzva act, but rules against women reciting these *berachot*. For example, regarding shofar, he writes:

*Shulhan Aruch* OC 589:6 Even though women are exempt, they can blow [the shofar]…But they may not recite a *beracha* and [men] should not recite a *beracha* for them.

Notwithstanding *Shulchan Aruch*'s ruling, major Sefardi authorities, among them Chida and Ben Ish Chai,[[18]](#footnote-18) allow women to recite *berachot* over positive time-bound *mitzvot*, at least those widely practiced.

Chida initially disapproved of the *beracha* as unfounded because women independently initiated this custom. He changed his mind when he encountered a responsum by Rav Yaakov of Marvège, permitting women to recite *berachot* on lulav and shofar.[[19]](#footnote-19) Rav Yaakov claimed that his responsum was literally revelatory, from on High.

Responsa *Yosef Ometz* 82 Since I saw the Heavenly response to Rabbeinu Yaakov of Marvège, as I wrote in *Birkei Yosef*, I have been accustomed to tell women to make a *beracha* on the lulav as was the old custom that women have practiced in the holy city. Although our master [*Shulchan Aruch*] ruled that they should not make a *beracha*, it seems that if he were to lay his holy eyes on Rabbeinu Yaakov of Marvège's responsum…certainly he would rule and implement custom like this. And in this case the principle "it is not in Heaven" is irrelevant, since there are many great halachic decisors who maintained that [women] may make *berachot*, it enables us to rule in accordance with them as we have Heavenly support.

Chida was prepared to condemn women’s *berachot* as a mistaken innovation. But the combination of accepted practice, a responsum written under Divine influence, and prominent halachic authorities who permit it enable Chida to support women reciting a *beracha*, at least on shofar and lulav.

In marked contrast, and in line with his halachic program of bringing Sefardi halachic rulings into conformity with the *Shulchan Aruch*, Rav Ovadia Yosef vociferously opposes women reciting these *berachot*.

Rav Yosef calls for the revision of custom so that all Sefardi women would follow the *Shulchan Aruch*:

Responsa *Yabia Omer* 5 O"H 43 For we did not come to rule for Ashkenazi women to do the opposite of the Rema’s ruling… Rather we have come to rule for Sefardi women (who according to the testimony of the elders of the sages of the generation of the Chida practiced thus [making *berachot*] without knowing [any better]) to return to the ruling of the Rambam and our master [the *Shulchan Aruch*], that they should not recite a *beracha* in vain.

Rav Yosef extends his ruling even to *berachot* in prayer that do not include the phrase "*ve-tzivanu*," since the main issue for him is *beracha she-eina tzericha*. As noted above, for all Rav Yosef's fidelity to Shulhan Aruch, this does not seem to be Rav Karo's main concern. Rav Karo refers instead to "*ve-tzivanu"* as the reason for which women may not recite a *beracha*.

Rav Yosef's contemporary, Rav Chayim David Ha-Levi (former Sefardi Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv) rules more moderately:

Mekor Chayim for Daughters of Israel, Introduction, p. 15 In conclusion of the Halacha: In a place where women are accustomed to reciting a *beracha* on a positive time-bound mitzva, one should rule for them that they continue to recite it. In a place where the custom is unclear, it is desirable to rule for those who ask [that they should] not recite a *beracha,* but one should not protest at all women who recite a *beracha,* or anyone who rules for them that they should recite a *beracha.*

Out of concern for Shulchan Aruch's view and for established custom, Rav Ha-Levi writes that "it is desirable" that a woman whose family practice on reciting *berachot* is unclear should be instructed not to, but he adds that a ruling to allow all women to recite *berachot* is valid, and that any woman who does recite *berachot* should be freely allowed to do so.

## ● How can women relate the halachic discussion to practice?

*When a woman performs a positive time-bound commandment from which she is exempt, it should be with care to perform it scrupulously and with intentionality, in accordance with the opinions that hold that the act is a fulfillment of a mitzva.*

*Women who do not make* berachot *on these commandments can consider reciting a* beracha *without mentioning God's name and kingship. The focus here remains firmly on the mitzva act, which may be fulfillment of the mitzva.*

*Women who do make* berachot *on these commandments should keep in mind the various purposes a* beracha *on a mitzva serves: praising God and preparing ourselves to perform the mitzva properly.*

*When saying "*ve-tzivanu*," a woman should remember that she is part of the Jewish people sanctified by God's commands and that her act's significance derives from God's commandment, even though she is personally exempt. And she can keep Rav Eliezer Waldenberg's statement in mind:*

Tzitz Eliezer 9:2 Happy are they the worthy daughters of Israel, who chase after the *mitzvot* to take them upon themselves to fulfill them and recite *berachot* to God over this, as is permitted to them, and who thank Him with the *beracha* of *She-hechiyanu Ve-kiyemanu…*

1. With the possible exception of the *berachot* on the Torah, *berachot* over *mitzvot* are usually understood to be obligatory on a rabbinic level. They were enacted by the *Anshei Kenesset Ha-gedola* (Men of the Great Assembly). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Berachot, 1:2-3* The rabbis [established the obligation] to recite *berachot* on every food beforehand, and afterwards to benefit from it…and anyone who receives benefit without a *beracha* has [acted like one who] benefitted [inappropriately] from a sacred object…Just as we recite *berachot* over benefit, we recite *berachot* over each and every mitzva and [only] then perform it. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of *Talmud Torah* 1: 13 A woman who learned Torah receives a reward, but it is not equivalent to the man’s reward because she is not commanded, and anyone who does something that he is not commanded to do, his reward is not equivalent to the reward of one who is commanded and did, but rather less than that. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of *Berachot* 1:15 Whoever recites an unwarranted *beracha*, takes the Heavenly name in vain and it is as if he made an oath in vain. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rav Yeshaya De-Trani suggests that, for this reason, a voluntary act performed along with a *beracha* is a violation of *bal tosif,* adding on to the commandments.

Shibolei Ha-leket, Rosh Ha-Shana 295 Rabbeinu Yeshaya wrote without a *beracha* is it permitted to women to blow for themselves, but if they recited a *beracha,* they have revealed their intention that they act out of obligation, and there are two [grounds] for prohibition: one, that they violate *bal tosif,*  and two, that there is a *beracha*  in vain. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Beit Yosef, O.C.* 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Or Zaru'a* II *Rosh Ha-shana* 266 Rabbi Yitzchak bar Yehuda permitted women to recite a *beracha* on every positive time-bound commandment. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Rashi *Sukka* 44b It is a custom of the prophets…therefore it does not require a *beracha*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This argument was anticipated by Rav Yitzchak bar Yehuda, quoted in *Moshav Zekeinim al Ha-Torah* *Vayikra* 23:24, available here: <http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=20791&st=&pgnum=398> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Tosafot, ad loc., do present a counter-argument, later echoed by other *Rishonim* such as Ramban. A blind man may be obligated on a rabbinic level from *mitzvot* from which he is exempted on a Torah level. Based on his rabbinic level obligation, Rav Yosef would have been able to make *berachot* even if his actions remained voluntary on a Torah level. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Responsa of Rashba 1:123 I agreed with the words of he who says that if they [women] want, they perform all positive *mitzvot* and recite a *beracha.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Rosh Ha-shana* 33a Tosafot s.v. *Ha* There is no problem of reciting an unwarranted *beracha* and violating the prohibition against saying God's name in vain, because that textual expounding is rabbinic [and the prohibition is not on a Torah level]. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Rabbeinu Tam presents a number of proofs that a *beracha* may be recited on a custom.

*Sukka* 44b Tosafot s.v. *Kan* And Rabbeinu Tam says that there is no proof from the willow [on Hoshana Rabba, which is a custom over which we do not make a *beracha*] that we should not make a *beracha* on Hallel [on Rosh Chodesh, which is also a custom]…For we recite *berachot* on Torah reading on both days of Yom Tov in the diaspora and this [second day] is merely a custom.

Mordechai presents Rabbeinu Tam as treating women's performance as a custom.

Mordechai *Shabbat* Chapter 2: 286 And so Rabbeinu Tam explained that women recite a *beracha* on positive time-bound commandments because they have a custom to perform them and fulfill them. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Yabia Omer* OC I:39 And at first, I thought that this matter depended on a different debate. If the prohibition of an unwarranted *beracha* is on a Torah level…and it would seem that one could say that this debate depends on the dispute of Rashi and Rabbeinu Tam in *Sukka* if we recite a *beracha* on a custom or not. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This logic is parallel to that advanced by Ramban to explain how voluntary performance is not the act of a simpleton, (See [here](https://www.deracheha.org/voluntary-mitzva-performance), "Advisability.") [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. A notable exception is Divrei Yetziv O.C. 5, who reports that his grandfather, the Divrei Chayim, first Admor of Sanz, objected even to women's voluntary performance.

Available here: <http://olamot.net/sites/default/files/pdfimages/9_55.png> [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Since the logic to permit reciting a blessing is based on the significance of voluntary performance of a mitzva act, Magen Avraham suggests that Rema may not extend that permission to *berachot* such as *havdala*, which are recited independently, and not as a precursor to a mitzva act.

Magen Avraham 296 And it is possible that the opinion of Rema [is that] in a mitzva that has an act women are permitted to act and to recite a *beracha* but in a matter that only has the *beracha* such as here [his example is *havdala*] they [women] are not permitted [to recite a *beracha*].

We will discuss this viewpoint further in connection with *havdala* and *kiddush levana*. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Responsa *Rav Pe’alim* I: *Sod Yesharim* 12Women may take lulav and recite a *beracha* like the logic of Rabbeinu Tam… [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Birkei Yosef OC 654:2 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)