**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

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

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**Deracheha: Women and Mitzvot**

Prayer 8: *Birchot Keri'at Shema*

What are *birchot Keri'at Shema*? Should women Say them?

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# *Birchot Keri'at Shema*

The *berachot* before and after *Keri’at Shema* expand on its main themes.

Before *Shema*, the *berachot* express our understanding of God and covenant. *Yotzer Or*, the first *beracha* recited in the morning*,* prepares us for *kabbalat ol malchut shamayim* by revisiting a main theme of the prayers recited upon arising—God’s daily renewal of creation. God created and administers the world and all that is light and dark within it (a theme also in the parallel *beracha* at night, *Ha-ma'ariv Aravim*). In this *beracha,* we praise God as Ruler of the natural universe, whomthe angels sanctify.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The second *beracha* before *Shema*, *Ahavat Olam (in ma’ariv) or Ahava Rabba (in shacharit),* complements the first by emphasizing another aspect of divine kingship—God's particular covenant with the Jewish people. God makes the covenant manifest by lovingly granting us the gift of Torah. We reciprocate that love in *Shema* by accepting *ol malchut shamayim* and *ol mitzvot*.

The *beracha* after *Shema, Emet Ve-yatziv* in the morning or *Emet Ve-emuna* at night*,* further develops these ideas:

*Berachot* 12a

Rabba bar Chinena Saba said in the name of Rav: Anyone who does not say *Emet Ve-yatziv* at *shacharit* and *Emet Ve-emuna* at *ma'ariv* has not fulfilled his obligation [of *Keri'at Shema* as fully enacted], as it is said, "To tell in the morning of your kindness and your faithfulness in the nights." (*Tehillim* 92:3)

These *berachot*, which both begin with the word *emet*, true, describe how the redemption from Egypt demonstrates God's faithfulness and lovingkindness and how the faithfulness to God that we discuss in *Shema* culminates in redemption*.*

**Birchot Ha-mitzva?** Halachic authorities debate whether the *berachot* of *Keri'at Shema* are independent blessings of praise (*birchot ha-shevach*)[[2]](#footnote-2) or *berachot* over the mitzva of reciting *Shema (birchot ha-mitzva)*.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The time window for reciting the *berachot* tells us about their nature.

Shulchan Aruch rules that one should ideally complete the *berachot* within *zeman* *Keriat Shema*.[[4]](#footnote-4) These *berachot,* then*,* should be attached to *Shema*. But after the fact, he allows one to recite the *berachot* later, up to the end of the fourth halachic hour (*zeman tefilla*, the time frame within which *shacharit* should be recited).[[5]](#footnote-5)

Why is this time significant for understanding the *berachot*? Mishna Berura explains:

*Mishna Berura* 58:25

The fourth hour: For the *berachot* do not belong to *Keri'at Shema,* for even though they were enacted [to be recited] before *Shema,* nevertheless they are not *berachot* [over the mitzva] of *Keri'at Shema*. For one does not bless, "Who sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to recite *Shema.*”Indeed, they are like *tefilla,* and therefore their law is like *shacharit,* which is only through the first third of the day.

Mishna Berura defines *Birchot Keri'at Shema* as independent *berachot* of praise similar to *tefilla*, not *birchot* *ha-mitzva* of *Keri’at Shema*. Therefore, in the morning, one may recite them until the end of the time frame for *shacharit*. In *Bei'ur Halacha*, he goes further and permits reciting the *berachot* until halachic midday, the most liberal time possible for reciting morning prayers.

While the *berachot* ideally frame the mitzva of *Keriat Shema,* theydo have independent significance.

# Exemption

If *Birchot Keri'at Shema* are an independent element of *tefilla*, then in theory women should be obligated to recite them as part of the mitzva of *tefilla*. In practice, this argument has not become prominent in halachic discourse.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Instead, Mishna Berura articulates two grounds for women's exemption from *birchot Keri'at Shema*:

I. Since the ideal timing for the *berachot* is right before and after *Keri'at Shema,* which is time-bound, then they are also time-bound, so women are exempt.

*Mishna Berura* 70:2

They [women] are exempt also from the *berachot* of *Keri'at Shema,* for they [the *berachot*] also have a set time.

II. If we view *Birchot Keri'at Shema* as blessings on the mitzva of *Keri'at Shema,* then it follows that women are exempt, just as women are exempt from *Keri'at Shema* itself.

*Bei'ur Halacha* 70

It doesn't make sense to be more stringent with *Birchot Keri'at Shema* than with *Keri'at Shema* itself.

However we categorize these *berachot*, there are grounds for exemption.

**Voluntary Recitation** Though exempted, women are able to recite the *berachot* when fulfilling the mitzva voluntarily, just as women recite other *berachot* over voluntary mitzva performance. Many halachic authorities, including Mishna Berura[[7]](#footnote-7) and Aruch Ha-shulchan, permit this:

*Aruch Ha-shulchan* OC 70:1

They [women] are exempt from *Birchot Keri'at Shema,* for they are also time-bound…In any case, if they wish, they can recite the *berachot* and *Keri'at Shema* like *sukka* and *lulav,* from which they [women] are exempt and they still recite *berachot* over them. Our women do this and may a *beracha* come to them.

Even those who follow *Shulchan Aruch* and do not usually permit women to recite *berachot* over voluntary mitzva performance may allow it here, because the potentially problematic language "*ve-tzivanu"* "and He commanded us", does not appear in the *berachot.*[[8]](#footnote-8) For example, Kaf Ha-chayim allows women to recite *Birchot Keri'at Shema* without any modification*.[[9]](#footnote-9)*

*Kaf Ha-chayim* OC I 70:1

Women who know how to learn are accustomed to pray the full order of prayers like men, no less.

A woman reciting no less than the full order of prayers is a woman who recites the complete *Birchot Keri'at Shema*.

Rav Ovadya Yosef, however, does not allow it, following his position that the main concern over women's reciting a *beracha* over voluntary performance is *beracha le-vatala,* which remains an issue regardless of the precise language of the *beracha.*

Responsa *Yabi'a Omer* II OC 6:10

…We are very concerned about the law of mentioning God's name in vain. Therefore, one should certainly instruct women who recite *Birchot Keri'at Shema* not to continue to do thus…We must instruct them not to recite *Birchot Keri'at Shema* and bring them back to the opinion of our master [*Shulchan Aruch*],whose rulings we have accepted. The language of the Rambam is, "Women and bondsmen and minors are exempt from *Keri'at Shema.* We teach the minors to recite it in its time and to recite *berachot* before it and after it, in order to train them in *mitzvot."* It is clearly derived from this that women may not recite *Birchot Keri'at Shema…*In any case, if women wish to recite them, they should recite the *berachot* of *Pesukei De-zimra* and *Birchot Keri'at Shema* without mention of the name of God.

According to Rav Ovadya, we can infer from Rambam's silence regarding women and *Birchot Keri'at Shema* that it is *prohibited* for women to recite them in full. A woman who really wishes to recite them should omit mention of God's name from the lines that start “*Baruch ata*…”.

# *Zecher Yetzi'at Mitzrayim*

Through the Talmud's discussion of *Va-yomer*, we learn about another aspect of reciting Shema—remembering the exodus from Egypt, *zecher Yetzi'at Mitzrayim*.

The mishna in *Berachot* discusses when *zecher* *Yetziat Mitzrayim* is obligatory:

Mishna *Berachot* 1:5

We mention *yetzi'at Mitzrayim* at night. Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya said: Behold I am like a man of seventy years and I had not merited to [understand why we] mention *yetzi'at Mitzrayim* at night until Ben Zoma expounded from the verse, as it is written "So that you remember the day of your leaving the land of Egypt all the days of your life" (*Devarim* 16:3). "The days of your life" refers to the days. "All the days of your life" refers to the nights.

Many of us are familiar with this teaching from the Pesach *haggada*. However, this mishna is not found in the discussion of the Pesach *seder* in tractate *Pesachim*, but in tractate *Berachot* – in the section devoted to *Keri’at Shema.* Based on this context, the mishna is referring to remembering *Yetzi’at Mitzrayim* in the evening *Shema*. Although in theory any portion related to the exodus might do,[[10]](#footnote-10) *Va-Yomer* would seem is the optimal method for remembering the exodus regularly, since there are a number of other reasons to integrate it into *Keri'at Shema*.

We include *Va-yomer* in the evening *Shema*, even though *tzitzit* aren't obligatory at night, to ensure that we remember *Yetzi’at Mitzrayim* not just in the days, but in "all the days," every nighttime as well as every daytime. Rambam expands on this point:

*Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchot Keri'at Shema* 1:3

Even though the mitzva of *tzitzit* does not apply at night, we read it at night because it mentions *yetzi'at Mitzrayim*. It is a mitzva to mention *yetzi'at Mitzrayim* during the day and at night, as it is said "So that you remember the day of your leaving the land of Egypt all the days of your life." Reading these three portions in order is what is called *Keri'at Shema.*

Interestingly, Rambam only mentions daily *zecher yetzi'at Mitzrayim* **here** in the *Mishneh Torah*, in the context of *Va-yomer* and *Keri'at Shema.* He also omits remembering the exodus daily from his list of positive *mitzvot* in *Sefer ha-Mitzvot.* These omissions indicate that daily remembrance of *yetzi'at Mitzrayim* is an element of the mitzva of *Keri'at Shema,* and not an independent Torah obligation*.*

**Emet Ve-yatziv** A line in the Talmud about the *beracha* of *Emet Ve-yatziv* following *Shema* adds another possibility for satisfying this requirement:

*Berachot* 21a

[Saying] *Emet Ve-yatziv* is a Torah-level obligation.

Asserting that *Emet Ve-yatziv* is obligatory on a Torah-level is surprising, because *berachot* are typically rabbinic. *Emet Ve-yatziv* here may refer both to the *beracha* and to *Va-yomer.*[[11]](#footnote-11)

Alternatively, once the sages enacted *Emet Ve-yatziv* and *Emet Ve-emuna* at night, they may have considered them the preferred method of fulfilling the Torah-level mitzva of *zecher yetzi'at Mitzrayim,[[12]](#footnote-12)* because they also lay the groundwork for our prayers for redemption in *Shemoneh Esrei*.

***Semichat Ge'ula li-tfilla*** In *shacharit*, the *beracha Emet Ve-yatziv* – which concludes with the words *Ga'al Yisrael*, “Who redeemed Israel” – is followed immediately by *Shemoneh Esrei*. The Talmud praises connecting the *beracha* of redemption to *Shemoneh Esrei*:[[13]](#footnote-13)

*Berachot* 10b

What does "I have done what is good in Your eyes" (Yishayahu 38:3) mean? Rav Yehuda said in the name of Rav: That he connected *ge'ula* to *tefilla.*

What makes *semichat ge'ula li-t’filla – beginning Shemoneh Esrei* immediately after the words *Ga'al Yisrael* – so important? The Talmud Yerushalmi offers a parable:

Yerushalmi *Berachot* 1

Rav Ami said: Whoever does not immediately follow *ge'ula* with *tefilla,* to what is he compared? To the king’s friend who came and knocked on the king's door. [The king] comes out to know what [the friend] seeks, and finds that he withdrew.

When we recite *Shema*, we acknowledge God’s kingship, accept His Torah, and thank him for redemption. Prayer – as an expression of our dependence on Him and as fulfillment of our obligation to serve our Redeemer – is the natural continuation of this process.[[14]](#footnote-14) If we don't follow the expression of love in *Shema* by turning to God in prayer, we effectively jilt God at the door.

# Obligation?

Since the predominant view is that women are exempt from reciting *Keri'at Shema* and *birchot Keri'at Shema,* it follows that *semichat ge'ula li-tfilla* is not obligatory for women, though a woman reciting *Shema* and its *berachot* should strive for it.

Are women obligated in daily remembering of *yetzi'at Mitzrayim*? This question depends on whether remembering the exodus every dayis an independent mitzva or part of the mitzva of *Keri’at Shema*.

Let's lay out the possibilities:

**I. Part of *Keri'at Shema*** If *zecher yetzi'at Mitzrayim* is part and parcel of the mitzva of *Keri'at Shema,* then women should be exempt, just as women are exempt from *Shema*. Rav Yitzchak Yehuda Schmelkes[[15]](#footnote-15) makes this point:*[[16]](#footnote-16)*

Responsa *Beit Yitzchak* OC 12

Rambam included it [*zecher yetzi'at Mitzrayim]* in the mitzva of *Keri'at Shema.* From here [we know] that women, who are exempt from *Keri'at Shema*,are also exempt from this mitzva, for it is not a distinct mitzva, but rather is included in *Keri'at Shema.*

**II. An Independent Time-Bound Mitzva** Alternatively, if we view *zecher yetzi'at Mitzrayim* as an independent obligation that we simply prefer to satisfy when reciting *Shema,* then women's obligation depends on whether we define the obligation as time-bound.

Sha'agat Aryeh argues that *zecher yetzi'at mitzrayim* is an independent obligation, but also time-bound:

 Responsa *Sha'agat Aryeh* 12

Learn from this that women are not obligated in this mentioning. The reason is that it is a positive time-bound mitzva from which women are exempt….For mentioning during the day and at night are two *mitzvot* and they are two acts of mentioning. Since the day’s [mitzva] does not [apply] at night and the night’s [mitzva] does not [apply] during the day, each individual mention is a positive time-bound mitzva.

Day and night for this mitzva are like day and night for *Shema,* two separate fixed times rather than one continuous obligation, so the mitzva is time-bound and women are exempt.

**III. An Independent Non-Time-Bound Mitzva** Magen Avraham writes that women are obligated to recite *Emet Ve-yatziv*:

*Magen Avraham* 70:1

It seems to me that in any case they [women] are obligated to say *Emet Ve-yatziv* for mention of *yetzi'at Mitzrayim* is a Torah-level obligation …and if so, they must connect *ge'ula* with *tefilla.*

Note an additional point here—once a woman recites *Emet Ve-yatziv,* it becomes possible for her to connect *ge'ula li-t’filla* as well.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Ba'al HaTanya spells out the rationale for women's obligation. When we say *zecher yetzi'at mitzrayim* is obligatory day and night, we mean that the obligation can be fulfilled at any time, and it is not time-bound.

*Shulchan Aruch Ha-Rav* OC 70:1

In any case they [women] are obligated in mentioning the exodus from Egypt, for it is a positive mitzva that is not time-bound, for its commandment is in the day and in the night. Therefore, women should recite the *beracha* that was enacted on *yetzi'at Mitzrayim,* which is *Emet Ve-yatziv.*

Mishna Berura also rules like Magen Avraham and adds that a woman who recites *ma'ariv* should recite *Emet Ve-emuna* at night, too.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Out of concern for Magen Avraham's viewpoint, women are encouraged to fulfill *zecher yetzi'at Mitzrayim* and *semichat ge'ula litfilla* by reciting *Emet Ve-yatziv* (and *Emet Ve-emuna*). But a woman who does not recite *Emet Ve-yatziv* and still wishes to remember *yetzi'at Mitzrayim* can rely on reciting *Va-yomer* alone instead.

**Summary**: If a woman wishes to fulfill the mitzva of *Keri'at Shema* voluntarily, then she should ideally perform it in its full glory, including the *berachot* that our sages enacted. They also provide her with the opportunity to remember the exodus from Egypt and connect *ge'ula li-tfilla.* More than that, each *beracha* explores core elements of Jewish belief, with an eye to redemption.

## Why should a woman make the time and effort to recite *birchot Keri'at Shema?*

Let's let the transporting language of the berachot speak for itself:

Excerpts from *Birchot Keri'at Shema*

Who in His goodness renews each day always the act of creation….He will light a new light over Tziyon, and may we all soon merit its light….

An eternal love You loved Your people the house of Israel, Torah and mitzvot, laws and precepts, You taught us.

Therefore, Hashem our God, we shall speak in Your laws, and rejoice in the words of Your Torah and Your commandments forever. For they are our lives and the length of our days, and we shall think about them day and night….

You are first and You are last and other than You we have no king, redeemer, and savior. You redeemed us from Egypt….

Rock of Israel, arise in aid of Israel and redeem, as your promise, Yehuda and Israel.

The *berachot*, together with *Keri'at Shema* can lead all of us on a path to understanding our relationship with God and how it leads to *ge'ula*.

Additionally, as Israeli scholar Dr. Yael Levine notes, traditional sources attest to a connection between the *ge'ula* of the past and the *ge'ula* of the future, whose light we all should pray to merit.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Dr. Yael Levine, "A Vision of the Future to Come"

…The seeing of the Divine Presence [at the sea] by [even] the maidservant and by Israel [as a whole] is considered a sort of model of the future occurrence. In this reality, the Divine Presence will dwell over all of Israel, including the boys and the girls, the bondsmen and the maidservants, and all flesh will see together that the mouth of God has spoken.

1. There is halachic debate whether a person praying outside of a *minyan* recites the verses *"Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh"* and *"Baruch Kevod Hashem"* in this *beracha,* known as *kedushat yotzer.* The common ruling is to allow it. See *Shulchan Aruch* OC 59:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Responsa of Rashba I:47

For the *berachot of* Keri'at *Shema* are not actual *berachot* over *Keri'at Shema* like *birchot ha-Torah* or like *birchot ha-mitzvot.* For if it were so, we should also recite 'on reciting *Shema*’ as we say over Torah reading and *megilla* reading. Rather, their *berachot* were enacted independently. But they enacted to recite them before and after *keri'at Shema.* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ramban *Berachot* 11b

*Birkat Yotzer Or* and *Ma'ariv Aravim* are blessings of praise…and *birkat Ahavat Olam* is a *beracha* over a mitzva for the obligation of reciting *Shema.* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. As we have seen, the mitzva of *Keri’at Shema* has a set time. The morning *Shema* must be recited before the end of the third halachic hour (*zeman Keri’at Shema*). However, the Talmud permits us to recite *Birchot Keri’at Shema* after the time for *Keri'at Shema* has passed.

*Berachot* 10b

One who reads [Shema] from here [the beginning of the fourth hour] and onward has not missed out, but makes the two *berachot* before it and one after it. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Shulchan Aruch* OC 58:6

Even though its time continues until the end of the third halachic hour, if the third halachic hour passed and he did not recite it [*Shema*], he may recite it with its *berachot* for the entire fourth halachic hour, which is one third of the day, and he does not receive the reward of one who recites [*Shema*] in its time. If the fourth hour passed and he did not recite it, he may recite it without its *berachot* all day long*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Rav David Auerbach considers this possibility, but rejects it. (See *Halichot Beitah,* chapter 5, fn. 8.) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Mishna Berura* 70:2

It is clear that they [women] can extend an obligation to themselves and recite *berachot,* even *berachot* of *Keri'at Shema.* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See our discussion here: https://deracheha.org/beracha-on-voluntary-performance [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Available here: <http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=8140&st=&pgnum=246> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Berachot* 14b

He needs to mention *Yetzi'at Mitzrayim*! He [did, and] said thus "We are grateful to You, Lord our God, Who took us out of the land of Egypt and redeemed us form the house of slavery and performed miracles and mighty deeds for us at the sea, and we sang to You. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Tosafot *Berachot* 21a

The whole matter of *yetzi'at Mitzrayim* is called *Emet Ve-yatziv* because the reason for *Emet Ve-yatziv* is because of *Yetzi'at Mitzrayim* and therefore the portion of *tzitzit* is considered part of *Emet Ve-yatziv.* [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Mishna Berura* 67:3

One is obligated in any event in the *beracha* of *Emet Ve-yatziv* until the fourth halachic hour and from here on they did not enact on this a *beracha*, but one should say out of doubt some verse about *Yetzi'at Mitzrayim.* [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Berachot* 4b

For Rabbi Yochanan said: Who merits the world to come? One who connects *ge'ula* to *tefilla* in *aravit.*

*Berachot* 9b

*Vatikin* would finish it [*Keri'at Shema*] with sunrise, in order to connect *ge'ula* to *tefilla* and [also] end up reciting *Shemoneh Esrei* in the [beginning of] the daytime.

In ma'ariv the connection is longer, with extra prayers considered to be an elongated statement about redemption. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For additional explanations, see *Talmidei Rabbeinu Yona* *Berachot* 2b. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Available here:

<http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=626&st=&pgnum=50> [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Aruch Ha-Shulchan adds that this is especially true if we take women's exemption from *tzitzit* into account:

*Aruch Ha-shulchan* 70

They did not impose this obligation upon women because the exodus from Egypt is included in the portion of *tzitzit* and women are exempt from *tzitzit.* Therefore, the mishna and the Talmud and the halachic authorities, when they said women are exempt from *Keri'at Shema* and *Keri'at Shema* also includes *yetzi’at Mitzrayim.* If you were to think that they are obligated in this, it should have been stated clearly, but from their silence we learn that they [women] are exempt. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ba'al Ha-Tanya also makes this point:

*Shulchan Aruch Ha-Rav* 70

Since they [women] are obligated in the *Shemoneh Esrei* prayer…they also should connect *ge'ula* to *tefilla.* (If they want to also recite the remaining *berachot* of *Keri'at Shema* and also *Pesukei De-zimra* and its *berachot,* they are permitted to*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Mishna Berura 70:2

The *beracha* of *Emet Ve-yatziv* which was enacted over the matter of remembering *yetzi'at Mitzrayim* and also the *berachot* after it [*Shema*] of *aravit* they [women] are obligated to say, for the mention of *yetzi'at Mitzrayim* is done day and night, and if so, naturally they need to connect *ge'ula* to *tefilla*, because they are obligated in *tefilla.* [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Dr. Yael Levine, "Re'iya Shel La-atid Lavo." *Mekor Rishon,* 3.29.18.

Available here:

<https://musaf-shabbat.com/2013/03/29/%D7%A8%D7%90%D7%99%D7%99%D7%94-%D7%A9%D7%9C-%D7%9C%D7%A2%D7%AA%D7%99%D7%93-%D7%9C%D7%91%D7%95%D7%90-%D7%99%D7%A2%D7%9C-%D7%9C%D7%95%D7%99%D7%9F/> [↑](#footnote-ref-19)