Women’s Obligations in Prayer

Mishnah Berakhot 3:3
Women, slaves and minors are exempt from reciting the Sh’ma and from tefillin and are obligated in tefillah, mezuzah and the grace after meals.

Mishnah Kiddushin 1:7
And in every positive commandment that is time-bound men are obligated and women are exempt, and in every positive commandment that is not time-bound both men and women are obligated; And in every negative commandment, whether time-bound or non-time-bound, both men and women are obligated…

Tosefta Kiddushin 1:7
What is a positive time-bound commandment? For example: sukkah, lulav and tefillin. What is a positive non-time-bound commandment? For example: returning a lost object, sending away the mother bird, building a parapet, mezuzah and tzitzit. R. Shimon exempts women from tzitzit because it is a time-bound commandment.

Talmud Bavli, Kiddushin 33b-34a
Our sages taught: What is a time-bound positive commandment? Sukkah, lulav, shofar, tzitzit, tefillin; What is a non-time-bound positive commandment? Mezuzah, building a parapet, returning a lost object and sending away the mother bird.

Is this a rule? Eating matzah on the first night of Pesah, rejoicing on the holidays, reading the Torah publicly once every 7 years are all positive time-bound commandments, and yet women are obligated in them! Moreover, the study of Torah, procreation and redeeming the first-born son are all non-time-bound positive commandments, and yet women are exempt from them! Said R. Yohanan: We do not learn from rules…
Rambam, Laws of Prayer 1:1-2

It is a positive commandment to pray every day, as it is written: You shall worship the Lord your God. By tradition, they learned that this worship is prayer, as it says: and to worship God with all of your heart—the sages said what is worship of the heart? This is prayer. The number of prayers is not biblical, the form of prayer is not biblical, and prayer has no bibliically fixed time.
Therefore, women and slaves are obligated in prayer because it is a positive commandment lacking a fixed time, but the obligation of this commandment is as follows: a person should supplicate and pray every day and relate the praise of God and afterwards ask for his/her needs as a request and a supplication, and afterwards give praise and thanks to God for the good that has been bestowed upon him/her, each person according to his/her ability.

Rambam, Laws of Prayer 6:10
Women, slaves and minors are obligated in prayer…

And a positive time-bound commandment is obligatory at a set time, and outside of this time, its obligation does not take effect, such as sukkah, lulav, shofar, teffilin and tzitzit (because wearing them is obligatory during the day but not at night), etc. And positive commandments lacking a fixed time are those commandments that are always obligatory, such as mezuzah, building a railing, and tzedakah. You already know that we have a principle that one does not learn from (heuristic) rules, and the term “all” (in the statements about women and positive commandments) truly means “most.” The specific details of women’s obligation in positive commandments have no general rule, rather they are passed on by tradition. Is it not the case that eating matzah on the first night of Pesah, joy on the festivals, the public reading of the Torah every seven years, tefillah, reading of the megillah, lighting Hanukkah candles, lighting Shabbat candles, and reciting kiddush are all positive time-bound commandments and for each of them a woman’s obligation is the same as a man’s obligation.

Rashi on Berakhot 20b
The text should read: “because they are for mercy”; the text does not read, “That is simple!” because [prayer] is not biblical.
Tosafot, Berakhot 20b

“’In tefillah’—it is obvious! Since it is written ‘evening and morning and noontime I will speak and moan’ it is like a positive time-bound commandment; it comes to teach us that it is [a request for] mercy” —and Rashi does not read it, for tefillah is rabbinic and what is the meaning of [the term] positive commandment regarding it.

Shulhan Arukh OH 106:1

And women and slaves, who, even though they are exempt from reciting the Sh’m’a, are obligated in tefillah, because it is a positive commandment lacking a fixed time.

Magen Avraham on above, R. Avraham Gombiner, Poland, 17th c.

“A positive commandment” – So wrote the Rambam, who thinks that tefillah is a positive biblical commandment, as it is written, “and to serve God with all of your heart…” But biblically, it is sufficient to recite one prayer a day, in any formulation that one wishes. Therefore, most women have the practice of not praying regularly, because immediately after washing their hands in the morning they say some request, and this is biblically sufficient, and it is possible that the sages did not extend their obligation any further. But the Ramban thinks that tefillah is rabbinic, and this is the opinion of most decisors.

Shulhan Arukh OH 299:10

…And one should also teach women, who do not make havdalah in the Amidah [because they do not pray the Amidah at the end of Shabbat], to say “Blessed is the one who separates holy from mundane” before they do any forbidden labor…
Magen Avraham on above

“Who do not make havdalah” – Even though they are obligated in the Amidah, as he [we?] wrote in Siman 107, nonetheless, most do not have the practice of praying at the end of Shabbat. Perhaps this is because the evening prayer is optional, save the fact that Jews accepted it upon themselves as obligatory, and women never obligated themselves to pray at the end of Shabbat.

Mishnah Berurah on Shulhan Arukh 106:1, R. Yisrael Meir Ha-kohen, Poland, 19th-20th c.

“Because it is a positive commandment” – This is all according to the Rambam’s opinion that only the times of tefillah are rabbinic but that the essence of the commandment of tefillah is biblical…and the Magen Avraham wrote that based on this reasoning, most women have the practice…but Ramban’s opinion is that the essence of the commandment of tefillah is from the sages…who ordained the required prayers of Shaharit and Minah and the optional prayer of Arvit. And even though [tefillah] is a positive time-bound commandment, and women are exempt from all such commandments…[the sages] obligated them in Shaharit and Minah just like men since tefillah is a request for mercy.

Arukh Hashulhan, OH 106:7, R. Yehiel Mikhael Epstein, Belarus, 19th-20th c.

It is clear that, according to Rashi, women are obligated in three tefillot a day like men, because according to him, the distinguishing factor of time-boundness does not apply to rabbinic obligations, and this is also true for Tosafot, because according to them, the gemara explicitly says that even though tefillah is time-bound, women were rabbinically obligated…and their obligation is equivalent to that of men. But for the Rif and the Rambam…who understand women’s obligation to be biblical and non-time bound, women are only obligated to pray once a day in any formulation that they wish.
And a further difficulty [with the position of the Magen Avraham is that] the Rambam wrote in the sixth chapter [of the laws of prayer] “women, slaves, and minors are obligated in tefillah.” And clearly he dealing there with all of the tefillot, and not simply with the biblical prayer of once a day in any form that one wants, but rather with the standard prayer that is the topic of that chapter; and furthermore, a comparison is made to minors who are obligated in all of the tefillot, and it thus is seen clearly that also the Rambam obligated women in all of the tefillot, and it is not as was written by the Magen Avraham and the Pri Meggadim.

And this comes out clearly from [the Rambam’s] version of the the gemara: “Tefillah—that is obvious! What would you have thought? Since it is written...[you might have thought that] it is a positive time-bound commandment, and all positive time-bound commandments women are exempt from, it comes to teach us otherwise.”...And this is itself the new information [that the sugya provides], that even in [the fixed times for prayer] women are obligated even though the rabbinic obligation is dependent on time, and the reasoning is that since the core of the obligation for prayer for the Torah is not dependent on time and women are obligated in it, even the sages did not exclude them from their obligation, even though they fixed for it a time. And this is why the Rambam wrote that “therefore women and slaves are obligated in tefillah, since it is a positive non-time-bound commandment...”...

And it seems to me that the way to justify the practice of those women who do not pray with regularity, is that most women are encumbered with dealingwith the needs of the house and the care of children and preparation of their needs, which distracts the heart and disorients proper intention, and in such a state one should not pray, as the Rambam wrote in Chapter Four: “If one’s mind is disoriented and one’s heart distracted, it is forbidden to pray until the mind gets settled”...And even though nowadays we are not concerned with this, since we do not have such kavanah in our tefillah [anyway], regarding this distraction of women [i.e. the raising of children] it is different...But those women who find themselves in a situation where they can pray, certainly need to pray all three prayers, because on the basis of the law they are obligated in all of the prayers according to all authorities.
Divrei Yatziv OH #121, R. Yekutiel Yehudah Halberstam, Transylvania/Israel, 20th c.

But after writing [that a woman can pray Minhah after candlelighting as long as she has makes her candlelighting conditional upon this intention], I realized that even if a woman forgot to light candles with the express condition that she still be able to pray Minhah, she should still be allowed to pray Minhah after candlelighting…because in truth the plain meaning of the Mishnah is that women are obligated in the Amidah…and the Magen Avraham’s suggestion to the contrary was only raised as a possibility…and there is great basis for requiring women to pray Shaharit and Minhah.

But I can still justify the practice described by the Magen Avraham, since the Talmud says that one who is not focused should not pray…and there is certainly a sound basis for saying that women today are not sufficiently focused…given that they are extremely burdened, subject to their husbands’ schedules and responsible for children. Therefore most women do not pray regularly, and only when they judge themselves to have sufficient focus do they pray. This, in my humble opinion, is correct…they are included [like men] in the original obligation of prayer…

Talmud Bavli, Berakhot 47b

It happened that R. Eliezer entered the synagogue and did not find ten, so he freed his slave and rendered him the completion of the ten…How could he act thus? Did not R. Yehudah say, “Anyone who frees his slave transgresses a positive commandment?”…For a mitzvah it is different. [But] it is a mitzvah that is performed through a transgression [and therefore is not valid]! A communal mitzvah [mitzvah d’rabim] is different. And R. Yehoshua ben Levi said, “A person should always get up and go early to the synagogue in order to merit and be counted with the first ten…
Talmud Bavli, Pesahim 46a

R. Abbahu said in the name of Reish Lakish: for kneading, for prayer, and for the washing of the hands—four mils.

Rashi, Pesahim 46a

And so too for prayer: if a person is traveling along the way and the time for sleep and to pray comes, if there is a synagogue ahead within a distance of four mils, then one should go on and pray there and sleep there.

Talmud Bavli, Berakhot 8a

And Abayye says: Originally, I would study in the house and pray in the synagogue. When I heard that which R. Hiyya b. Ami said in the name of Ulla—“From the time the Temple was destroyed, the Holy and Blessed One has only the four amot of the halakhah”—I would pray only where I studied. R. Ami and R. Assi, even though there were thirteen synagogues in Tiberias, would pray only between the columns where they studied.

Rambam, Laws of Prayer, 8:1, 3

The prayer of the community is always heard, and even if there are sinners in it, the Holy and Blessed One does not reject the prayer of the many. Therefore, a person needs to participate with the community, and not to pray alone when one could pray with the community, and a person should always arrive early and leave late from the synagogue…and anyone who has a synagogue in one’s city and does not pray with the community is called a bad neighbor…A beit midrash is greater than a synagogue, and great sages, even though they have in their city many synagogues, would pray only in the place where they would engage with Torah—and this is provided that they have tefillah be-tzibbur there.
We read in Pesahim…and Rashi explains…that backwards, one must go up to a mil to pray with ten; even though there are other explanations that explain it with regard to washing hands [for prayer]... Rashi’s understanding is correct. Therefore, one needs to try with all of one’s might to pray with the community; and this applies to most people, but for someone who has a fixed beit midrash in one’s home where one studies, it is a mitzvah to pray there even if there are not ten, as R. Ami and R. Assi…[source 4]… Nonetheless, my master, my father of blessed memory wrote in a response to a question, and the following is what he wrote: “It is better to pray with the community with ten…and our Torah study is not so much our occupation [i.e. we are not as punctilious in our study as were past generations], and we often waste time…and furthermore, if a scholar will not pray with the community, others will learn from him a fortiori and will not be concerned regarding tefillah at all, and the synagogues will be found to be empty…

Sefer Maharil, Laws of Eruvei Hatzeirot, R. Yaakov Möllin, Germany, 14th-15th c.
It is taught: We set an eruv tehumin only to rely on it for a mitzvah, such as to go to a house of mourning or to a wedding celebration. The Mahar”i Sg”l [i.e., the Maharil] said that he did not see in any authority that it is permitted to make an eruv tehumin to go to synagogue in order to pray with ten, only the Sma”k and the Aguda.
R. Ika said to him, “And should it be of less status than a wedding?” He said to him, to pray with ten is not truly a mitzvah, because one can direct one’s prayer in one’s house, for we do not find that the sages required one to pray with ten.
Responsa Havvot Yair, 115, R. Yair Hayyim Bacharach, Germany, 17th c.

Avraham has written…therefore it seems to me that he can prevent her from going to ten, and she does not count toward the minyan, and not for kedushah at all…and the Magen though the woman is obligated in prayer…since the woman is not commanded at all to pray with arguments, he could forbid her that she should not go to the synagogue at all, because even his wife who were accustomed to go to the synagogue…


I was asked by a certain settlement regarding a homeowner who had a room in house, and he had given permission to the community to enter into that room, men alone and women alone, to pray. I ruled that he could not forbid him…but regarding his wife, who was always starting to the synagogue…

Responsa Shevut Yaakov, 3:54, R. Yaakov Reischer, Prague/Germany, 17th-18th c.

And I ruled that he could not forbid him…but regarding his wife, who was always starting to the synagogue…yet nonetheless, it is not a positive commandment incumbent on a person…and therefore, one should not learn from that which is in the gemara in Berakhot 47 about R. Eliezer that he freed his slave…and it seems to me that the intent is not that a mitzvah is incumbent on all Israel, rather it means to suggest that it is the sanctification of God’s name, and only among the many, and had he not freed him, this mitzvah would have been unfulfilled by all of the people gathered together.

Responsa Havvot Yair, 115, R. Yair Hayyim Bacharach, Germany, 17th c.

And far be it from us to limit the positive commandment of “I will be sanctified…”…yet nonetheless, it is not a positive commandment incumbent on a person…and therefore, one should not learn from that which is in the gemara in Berakhot 47 about R. Eliezer that he freed his slave…and it seems to me that the intent is that a mitzvah is incumbent on all Israel, rather it means to suggest that it is the sanctification of God’s name, and only among the many, and had he not freed him, this mitzvah would have been unfulfilled by all of the people gathered together.
Orah La-tzaddik #3, R. Avraham Hayyim Rodrigues, Italy, 18th Century

Do you think that just because a person is obligated to pray the Amidah, on account of it being a personal request for mercy, he is necessarily obligated to pray with a minyan? A woman is obligated to pray the Amidah and yet is not obligated to pray with a minyan…