

# Women's Prayer Book, 1480

## Framing this unit

We will explore the controversy and evolution of one of the traditional morning blessings. Traditionally, men blessed God for “not making me a woman,” while women blessed God for “making me according to His will.” In this primary source, we will learn about the existence of an alternative blessing for women found in a siddur over 500 years ago.

This is a page from a siddur (prayer book) handwritten on parchment by Rabbi Avraham Farissol for an unknown wealthy Italian woman in 1471. According to one scholar, the siddur was written by a groom as a gift to his bride, but the woman's name is unknown since it was erased from the book.

The section in the photograph is from page seven of the siddur, the beginning section of the morning service. The morning service begins with a series of blessings called Birchot Hashachar or the morning blessings. The opening words, “Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe,” which are the formula for many blessings, are written as an acronym. This is followed by “who has made me a woman, not a man,” a unique and surprising wording for the women's prayer which today reads, “who made me according to His will.” Indeed, in the siddur as we know it today men recite, controversially, a morning blessing thanking God “for not making me a woman.” This Italian siddur from more than 500 years ago solves our contemporary controversy by making the women's prayer equivalent to the men's. There is a range of opinions on the significance of this version: some believe that this is an early form of egalitarian prayer, while others feel that it does not represent a widespread custom of the time.

Another interesting aspect of this siddur is the blank space at the end of the second line. It is possible that the blessing thanking God for “not making me a non-Jew” was originally written there but was removed by a censor.

## Group Activity

Ask students to write their feelings and opinions about the “opposite” gender. Have students read their essays and facilitate a respectful conversation allowing others to respond to and challenge each other's perceptions.

## Discussion

- Do you think that the prayers should be adapted to suit modernity or stay as they were in the past?
- Do you feel or express gratitude for being your gender?
- Do you like this version of the blessing or do you think that the blessing should be eliminated altogether?

- Do you believe that Jewish prayers and practice should be completely egalitarian?

### **Creative Activity**

Write three new blessings that you would want to put into the morning liturgy.

Artist Hillel Smith used the traditional morning blessing said by women: “sheasani kirtzono” to create this [Jewish-gay pride mural](#). Create a mural using the same words, giving it your own interpretation and imagery.

### **Primary sources in this lesson**

[Women’s Prayer Book, 1480](#)