

From Patriarchy to Partnership — The Evolution of the Jewish Woman*

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Introduction

It is often said that women have always held an honored and respected position in Jewish tradition. If this is so, why then does Jewish law seem to discriminate against women? This question has spawned a growing dialogue which is taking place today among Jewish women and between Jewish men and women.

Are there types of discrimination which have remained an integral part of Jewish religious tradition? This is both a very new and a very old question. Jewish women asked it of Moses almost before he had a chance to sit down and rest, after carrying the tablets from Mt. Sinai. The Bible tells us that Zelophehad had died before reaching the Promised Land. His five daughters asked Moses that they be granted the right to inherit land when they got to the Promised Land. At that time only sons had the right of inheritance. Moses, with guidance from God, granted their request and ever since then Jewish law directed that daughters could also inherit property. As a result of their courage in making an "issue" of this, these women benefitted not only for themselves but for all future generations.

Our aim in this paper is to examine some aspects of Jewish tradition in terms of how Judaism views women. What was the status of women in various periods of Jewish history? Did women have the same rights and responsibilities as men, and if not, how and why were they different? It is important to ask these questions if we are to explain and understand the contemporary relationships between Jewish men and women.

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First, we should say that the classical writings of Judaism which were almost exclusively written by men, actually depicted a variety of views on women, and therefore it is impossible to speak of an all-encompassing Jewish attitude toward women. Attitudes toward women were affected by different cultural and social backgrounds, by special circumstances in a given age, and by the personal experiences and individual temperaments of Jewish teachers and writers. It is true, however, that everything in our written tradition comes from men. The *Halakah*, or Jewish law, is the product of many generations of men.

Jewish philosophy and theology are the work of men and it was also men who designated women's three mitzvot—to light the Sabbath candles, to bake challah and to keep the laws of family purity.

Two Views of Women

Two major interpretations generally prevail about the role of the woman—a negative and a positive one. The negative interpretation essentially says that Judaism imposed a status of second-class citizen and second-class worshiper upon the woman. The woman was relegated to the home, did not have equal rights with men, was barred from equal inclusion in religious observances with men, and was prevented from assuming leadership roles in the synagogue and within the Jewish community.

The Positive View:

The positive interpretation of the Jewish woman emphasized the important role she played in the family. This view said that the

Jewish woman had her own special sphere of duties, and although she was excluded from a variety of other obligations, this exclusion only served to allow her to carry out her special role and function in the home. Separate but equal might characterize this point of view about the Jewish woman.

In examining this positive view of the Jewish woman, we see that most positive comments about the Jewish woman are not about the woman as an individual, but rather about the woman as she related to men, as a wife and enabler. A good wife was highly valued and received deep affection. The value placed upon the Jewish woman was therefore based upon what she did for her husband and family. However, throughout Jewish history certain women were honored for their own talents and attributes: Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. Miriam, a prophetess; Deborah, a judge; Huldah, a woman of great learning; Beruriah, wife of Rabbi Maier, who lived in the second century CE in Palestine and who gained fame because of her great knowledge of Talmudic literature. In Chassidism several women were known for their superior intelligence. The most famous of all Chassidic women was Hannah Rachel Werbermacher, known as the "Maid of Ludmir," who wore *tzitits*, wrapped herself in a *tallit* and put on *tefillin*. Every *shabbat* she preached a sermon attended by rabbis and scholars and many referred to her as "rebbe."

In modern times and in a more secular vein, there were women like Emma Lazarus who wrote the "New Colossus," the poem inscribed on the Statue of Liberty. Emma Goldman was a leading feminist and pioneer advocate of birth control; Lillian Wald founded Henry Street Settlement. Nelly Sachs won the first Nobel Prize for Literature. The Honorable Lilly Montagu made religion her life and helped to found the Liberal Jewish Movement in England—and of course there were women like Henrietta Szold, Hannah Senesch and Golda Meier.

The Negative View:

Jewish women are certainly not being physically or socially oppressed. However I would agree with Rabbi Saul Berman when he says that "Jewish women have been culturally and religiously colonized into acceptance of their identities as 'enablers.'" He goes on to say that "Jewish society has projected an unidimensional 'proper' role for women which denies to them the potential for fulfillment in areas other than that of home and family." In dealing with the positive and negative interpretations of the role of Jewish women, I think we are probably dealing with a number of rationalizations. It is probably time to say that we have attempted through some of these rationalizations to make a virtue of what in an ancient patriarchal society was a necessity.

It is therefore important to examine some of those laws and social practices which have limited and circumscribed the woman's role.

The Lilith Myth

The Bible begins with the story of Creation and there is an interesting myth about the Creation. This ancient myth tells us that God created the first man and the first woman at the same time. This woman was Lilith. Lilith, we learn, felt that she was equal to Adam.

One version of this myth tells us that the Holy One created the first man, Adam. He said, it is not good for Adam to be alone. He then created a woman who also came from the earth and he called her Lilith. They quarreled immediately. Adam said, "I will not lie below you but above you, for you are fit to be below me and I above you!" She responded, "We are both equal because we both come from the earth." Neither listened to the other, and Lilith flew away from Adam and the Garden of Eden.

Adam rose in prayer before the Creator and said, "The woman you gave me has fled me" and the Holy One sent three angels after her. The Holy One said to Adam, "If she wants to

return, all the better; if not, she will have to accept that one hundred of her children will die every day." The angels went after her and finally located her in the sea, in the powerful waters in which the Egyptians were later to perish. They told her what The Creator had said and she did not want to return."

One possible interpretation of this myth might be that Lilith was determined to retain her independence and dignity and therefore chose loneliness over subservience. However, in Jewish tradition, Lilith was made into a demon and this demonic notion of Lilith remains and overshadows the independent notion of Lilith. In all subsequent legends, Lilith is portrayed as a demon who kills newborn babies and mothers in childbirth. In fact, metal amulets sometimes appear in rooms where women are to give birth to ward off the evil effects of the demonic Lilith.

The traditional biblical view of Creation and woman's origin is that she was formed from a rib taken from Adam and her essence as a human being is linked with her function as a companion to the male.

Woman was created to serve man as a suitable helper. We therefore have two views of the origin of the Jewish woman. Is the Lilith myth a clue to some part of our history reflecting some assertive, rebellious behavior of women in the past? Does she represent a whole group or a generation which demanded equality with men? Lilith may also be an expression of the thoughts and views of women about their equality, even if they could not act upon this in their own generation. Why was Lilith made into a demon and witch? There are so few materials about women, particularly of this nature, that it is only possible to speculate about the meaning and derivation of this myth.

The Role of Men and Women in Biblical Times

In biblical times all society was patriarchal and polygamous, and male and female roles were clearly defined. While a man was clearly the master of the household, children were

commanded to give their mother the same respect due their father. This was probably the only area in which there was equality between husband and wife. It suggests to us that a woman must have been treated with respect by her husband, otherwise it would have been impossible for her to have commanded the respect of her children.

While the Biblical woman was always subject to male domination, a new attitude toward women began to develop. For example, in *Exodus*, only the male servant was freed after six years of service. Later, the *Deuteronomic Code* commanded that the female servant should also be set free. A major difference can also be seen in the two versions of the Ten Commandments. In *Exodus*, Chapter XX, the last of the Commandments reads, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house, thy neighbor's wife nor his manservant nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is thy neighbor's." The neighbor's house was mentioned first and perhaps was viewed as the most precious possession. In *Deuteronomy* Chapter V the order has been changed and the prohibition against coveting your neighbor's wife comes first. She was no longer quite on the same plane as the man's oxen, or his neighbor's house.

The Ketuba

In looking at the women's role, it's also interesting to look at the *Ketuba*, or marriage contract, whose major thrust was to protect the wife and to ensure that she was provided for in the event of divorce or death. The development of this document shows a significant change in the attitudes toward women, a change which for the most part displayed concern and sensitivity towards women as human beings.

The conditions for divorce were included in the fifth clause of the *Ketuba*. Here a woman could institute divorce proceedings, but she could not force her husband to grant her a bill of divorce. The husband on the other hand, had full freedom to divorce his wife without cause. If the woman committed adultery or if

she burned his food, or if she simply did not appeal to him, he could send her away. One of the main purposes of the *Ketuba* however, was to discourage divorce. The *Ketuba* required that the husband had to return the dowry, or an amount equal to the dowry which he had received at the time of marriage.

Women's Role in Religious Observance

In religious matters, a woman was exempt from all commandments, such as reciting the *Shema*, and putting on the *tefillin*, so that she would have sufficient time to raise her family and care for her home. This did not mean that she was prohibited from performing these commandments, she was not obligated to do so. She was obligated with regard to some commandments, i.e. kindling the Sabbath lights, baking challah, and maintaining the laws of family purity. It is interesting to look at these laws of family purity. According to Jewish law, all sexual contact between husband and wife is prohibited during the wife's menstrual period and for seven days after. The woman was regarded as unclean for the first seven days after giving birth to a child and forbidden to touch consecrated objects or visit a sanctuary for the next 33 days. Both of these amounts of time are doubled if the newborn is female. Before sexual relations could be resumed, the wife must immerse herself in the *mikvah*, the ritual bath. The development of modern sanitary facilities in the home has not altered traditional Judaism's retention of the laws of family purity as a symbol of the sanctity of the Jewish home. Primitive taboos made the menstruating woman ritually impure and she was to be avoided. What then has been the psychological effect upon women of this belief and practice and how has it affected woman's self-esteem and attitude toward herself and her body?

The Middle Ages:

In the Middle Ages, we see that philosophers and scholars accepted the teachings of the Talmud in regard to women. Men were cautioned to honor and respect their wives and

to provide adequate care for them. Women were expected to fulfill their household duties and weren't encouraged to go beyond their family responsibilities. The academies of learning were not open to women and according to Maimonides, they were not to hold any communal office. In the *shtetl*, the woman's realm was also the home; the man's realm, the synagogue. But, in running the house, the woman also managed the financial affairs of the family. She did the buying and selling and knew how to converse with merchants in the market place. Men were content to study and women became effective managers of their domestic affairs, and in many ways exerted considerable influence.

The Emancipation:

With the coming of emancipation in the early 19th century, many German Jews believed that religious reform would ensure their right to freedom. In an attempt to be more like their neighbors, American Jews began to introduce changes into the synagogue service. A traditional male choir was replaced by a male and female choir and hymns were sung in German instead of Hebrew. An organ was installed in the temple and the service shortened. A sermon was preached in German and became a regular part of the worship. Confirmation exercises were instituted first for boys and soon afterwards for girls.

Women benefitted from this wish to modernize religious practices. In Frankfurt on Main, in July 1845, the conference of the rabbis of Germany stated, "One of the marked achievements of the Reform Movement has been the change in the status of women." This conference declared that "The woman has the same obligation as man to participate from youth up in the studying of Judaism, and the custom not to include women in the number of individuals necessary for the conducting of a public service, a *minyone*, is only a custom and has no religious base." A year later, in 1846, the Breslau conference granted women total equality. Some excerpts from this conference highlight the spirit and intent of this con-

ference:

The *Halachic* position for women must undergo a change, and it is hoped that all members will be unanimous on that subject. Jewish women have received assurances of their capabilities for emancipation without however being . . . permitted to become emancipated. It is useless to argue why the religious situation of women has become so impaired. In the face of so many offending slights in civic life, she could not even complain about the fact that the House of God was as good as closed to her. She had to beg the rabbi's permission for the daily expression of her faith. She was permitted a share in neither religious instruction nor in certain sacred parental duties. The execution of sacred acts before forbidden to her, are now permitted. And finally, through the man's daily benediction for the good fortune of not having become a woman, she had to experience the most bitter offense in the very House of God, and yet all this appears most mild when compared to the conferences of a Christian Council in the middle ages, debating whether a woman had a soul at all. A resolution coming from this conference submits the following proposal, "The rabbinical conference shall declare the female sex as religiously equal with the male in its obligations and rights."

Judging from the language of this resolution, its authors intended to eliminate all discrimination against women. There were several areas however, in which they did not take action, namely, no mention was made of the separate seating in synagogues, and there was no encouragement for women to seek leadership roles within the synagogue.

Reform in America:

Soon after Reform Judaism was introduced in Germany, it spread to America where it was to exert a considerable influence. Once again women benefitted from this revolt against tradition. On July 10, 1892, the Central Conference of American Rabbis adopted the following resolution, "Whereas we have progressed beyond the idea of a secondary position of women in Jewish congregations,

we recognize the importance of their hearty cooperation and active participation in congregational affairs; therefore, be it resolved that women be eligible to full membership with all the privileges of voting and holding office in our congregations." Rabbi Stephen Wise said, "We must have women in the choirs, and on the committees. We must have women on the school boards. We must have women on the boards for the sake of the principle, but all other considerations aside, the principle of justice and the law of God inherent in every human being, demand that women be admitted to membership in the centers, the Jewish community center, informal play groups, etc. She is therefore faced with a number of choices which a changing society offers, but doesn't help her to resolve. For example, she may be a college graduate who finds herself at a time of life when her major homemaking responsibilities are diminishing. She is faced with the question of whether to go back to work, train for a profession, be satisfied to stay at home or volunteer. What her husband thinks about her dilemma is also important. I saw a book in a public library recently which captures this dilemma. When I saw it I thought it was a joke, but when I picked it up, I saw it was far from humorous. The name of the book was *How To Go To Work When Your Husband Is Against It, Your Children Aren't Old Enough, and There Is Nothing You Can Do Anyhow*.

The Liberated Woman

It is clear to see that there are serious Jewish women of Orthodox, Conservative and Reform background who are looking at the history of Judaism, tracing Jewish attitudes toward women and pointing out some discriminatory practices. These women are questioning why they cannot be included in more religious observances in the synagogue. They point out that Jewish women serve on synagogue boards as the secretary rather than the president. The woman is also called upon to pour the tea rather than to give an *aliyah* at

the *bima*. In Orthodox Judaism women still have difficulty in initiating religious divorce, and the *agunah*, the deserted woman, may never remarry. We are also reminded that Judaic culture was polygamous for a long time and this has deeply affected the *Halachic* concept of adultery. For example, in the Orthodox tradition, a married woman commits adultery when she has sexual relations with any man other than her husband, while a man is an adulterer only when he becomes sexually involved with another man's wife.

In addition, Jewish women in community life are saying that they often feel either underused or misused by male Jewish community leaders. These women wish to share as equals in the decision making process which shapes their Jewish community. When qualified, they want to be hired on the staffs of Jewish Federations, to become executives of agencies, and preside over the boards of synagogues.

Women also point out some contradictory messages which cause conflicts for them. On the one hand they are told "times have changed and women should go to work and fulfill themselves." At the same time Jewish women hear another message, "To truly fulfill your Jewish commitment as a woman, you should remain at home and nurture your children." These double-edged messages always cause conflicts. However, which message should the Jewish woman listen to? Probably she should listen to the answers to a number of inner questions, "Who am I?" "What do I really want?" "Why?" "When is the best time to pursue my interests?" When children are small, it is important that a mother be actively involved in caring for them. Many women can enjoy being full-time mothers. However, other women have different needs involving the need to work or to be active in communal life. Neither woman should be made to feel guilty about her needs

and her choice in meeting them. The most important factor is the quality of her relationship with her child rather than the quantity of time she spends at home. There are mothers who can parent very effectively and work outside the home. If a woman feels trapped at home, her mothering will echo her resentment and lack of fulfillment.

Does the current search for self fulfillment in women pose a threat to Jewish family life? For some families it might. However, if this search evolves from a discussion between the man and woman, and an agreement is based on both the man's and woman's needs—I do not see this as a threat. However, this involves an ability to understand and fulfill another person's needs. It also requires men and women to be open about their needs. This requires trust and risk taking. For many women it seems safer to remain silent or to deny their needs. I think that if there can be honest communication between a husband and wife, this process can permit them to seek and strive for what each really needs. It continues to be a struggle for women to make a healthy and satisfying choice today, and it certainly isn't easy for men either.

It is certainly clear today that any imposed definition of what is a male or female role is becoming harder to support. Both men and women are attempting to discover and express what is unique for them as human beings rather than as males or females.

If we can risk examining our Jewish tradition and institutions, if we modernize some of our Jewish traditional and community organizational patterns to respond to today's Jewish woman, who is asking for full participation, I think we will be contributing to an enriched personal life for the Jewish woman as well as her family, and to a stronger Jewish community.