

וילך

THE TORAH OF WOMEN

הקהל את העם האנשים והנשים והטף

Gather the people together, men, women and children (*Devarim* 31:12).

When the Torah commands *Klal Yisrael* to receive Torah instruction, there is a separate command for men, women and children. The *Gemara* (*Chagigah* 3•) comments that the men came to learn, the women to hear, and the children came so that their parents would be rewarded for bringing them. The question arises: is the charge “to hear” given to the women equal in obligation to the charge “to learn” given to the men?

This issue is addressed in a dispute between two *Tannaim* (*Sotah* 21:). Ben Azzai teaches:

חייב אדם ללמד את בתו תורה

A man is responsible to teach his daughter Torah

— because the *zechus* —merit— of Torah will serve to protect her from calamity.

Rabbi Eliezer ben Azaryah says:

כל המלמד את בתו תורה מלמדה תיפלות

He who teaches his daughter Torah — teaches her immorality.

Rabbi Eliezer believes that the necessary protection against harm offered by the Torah can be acquired by a certain involvement with the Torah, albeit not necessarily Torah learning. As the *Gemara* states:

נשים במאי זכין באקרויי בנייהו לבי כנישתא ובאתנויי
גברייהו בי רבנן ונטרין לגברייהו עד דאתו מבי רבנן
Whereby do women earn merit? By making their
children go to the synagogue to learn Scripture, and
their husbands to the *Beis Hamidrash* to learn
Mishnah, and waiting for their husbands till they
return from the *Beis Hamidrash* (*Berachos* 17•).

Hence, the actual Torah instruction given to women is limited to teaching them the *mitzvos* relevant to them. As far as women are concerned, no consideration is given to the protection that actual Torah learning offers (*Tosafos*, entry beginning “Ben Azzai,” *Sotah* 21:). Rabbi Eliezer’s statement is consistent with the view of the *Gemara Kidushin* (29:) in interpreting the verse:

ולמדתם אותם את בניכם

And you shall teach them to your children,
(*Devarim* 11:19),

which means that you shall teach your sons Torah, but not your daughters.

The Rambam (*Hilchos Talmud Torah* 1:13) treats the concept of woman’s reward a bit differently than does *Tosafos*:

A woman who learns Torah does receive reward —
but not identical to a man’s reward — because she
was not commanded. But as far as the Written
Torah is concerned... if she does learn it — it is not
immorality.

According to the Rambam it seems that there is a degree of reward for women for studying Torah (see Rabbi Isaac Sher, *Leket Sichos Musar* II:304). The *Chidushei Maharatz Chi’us* (*Sotah* 21:) supports the Rambam’s view on the basis of the following *Mishnah* (*Nedarim* 35:):

[המודר הנאה מחברו] מלמד הוא את בניו ואת בנותיו
מקרא

If one is prohibited by a vow to his fellow man, he may still teach Torah to the former's sons and daughters.

To which the *Tosafos Yom Tov* amends: "He may even teach *Mishnah*." This *Mishnah* seems to support the Rambam in a more liberal view of what may be taught to women.

In a definitive statement, the Taz (*Yoreh Dei'ah* 246:4) rules very categorically that *Tanach* is permitted to women. Women should also study all rules and regulations applicable to them. Women are exempt from all other Torah study because their time-consuming roles as wives and mothers preclude their spending the time in other areas of study.

Although women are exempt from some Torah study, the Torah definitely does not denigrate women's intellectual capacity. There are those who are of the opinion that the statement

נשים דעתן קלות

women are lighter minded (*Kidushin* 80:)

refers to the intellectual inferiority of women. However, this view is difficult to understand in light of the statement of *Chazal*:

שנתן הקב"ה בינה יתירה באשה יותר מבאיש

Hashem granted greater understanding to women more than men (*Nidah* 45:) (see *Torah Temimah, Devarim* 11:19 [48]).

The proper definition of the term "lighter minded" can be inferred from the *Gemara's* (*Shabbos* 33:) narrative regarding Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's reluctance to reveal his hiding place to his wife. Rabbi Shimon stated that because "women are lighter minded," she might be persuaded to reveal his hideout if she were tortured by the Romans. Hence, the term actually means that women are more persuadable than men; it has nothing to do with intellectual ability. Similarly, Rashi (*Avodah Zarah* 18:) offers a similar definition of the term in reference to Brurya, wife of Rabbi

Meir, who acquiesced to commit a sin, against her better judgment, with one of Rabbi Meir's students. The term is obviously not intended as an intellectual standard, but as more of an emotional standard.

The true role of women in Torah society must be discerned. Women are exempt from performing positive *mitzvos* which depend on a given time of the day or year (*Kidushin* 1:7). The reason for this is that their primary responsibility is either maternal or wifely in nature, and they cannot be presented with a potential contradiction to their primary duty. Hence, men recite a *berachah* daily praising Hashem for not having been made a woman (*Menachos* 43:). Men are afforded greater opportunity to carry out the Torah's *mitzvos* than women. Women acquire merit by sending their sons to study and by encouraging their husbands to study (*Berachos* 17•). Both roles are equal in the eyes of Hashem.

Women are held in the highest esteem by the Torah. A man without a wife lives without joy, blessing, or good. A man must love his wife as himself and respect her more than himself (*Yevamos* 62:). When Rav Yosef heard the approaching footsteps of his mother he exclaimed, "Let me arise before the approach of the *Shechinah*" (*Kidushin* 31:). A man must be careful never to speak slightly to his wife, because women are prone to tears and are sensitive to wrong (*Bava Metzia* 59•). Women have greater faith than do men (*Sifri, Bamidbar* 133), they have greater powers of discernment (*Nidah* 45:), and they are generally especially tenderhearted (*Megillah* 14:).

Every ship must have a captain. The captain's role is to guide, direct and pilot the ship. If there are two captains on the same ship it will spell chaos and disaster for it. Hashem's plan for human marriage is that the male is physically imposing compared to the female. He is generally taller, broader, stronger, and more physically dexterous than his counterpart. His voice is deeper, which imparts authority, and his facial hairs make his chin more prominent. In a reproductive sense, one male can keep several females busy at the same time. Generally, men are more capable of protecting and defending the home in a physical sense; and men are

more capable in successfully negotiating manual labor. It seems that the plan of Hashem is that in the family relationship the stature and design of the male is to make him the dominant force.

The purpose of life is to achieve closeness with Hashem. The corporal form with which an individual is endowed is essentially meaningless in the greater scheme of things. What is important is to achieve perfection. The *Kohein* is provided with much greater potential for holiness than is the Levi or Yisrael. That does not mean that the *Kohein* is essentially a being superior to the Levi or Yisrael. The King is blessed with infinitely more potential holiness than the commoner, yet intrinsically each human being has equal potential to achieve perfection. A *mamzeir* who has achieved perfection is considered to be greater than even a *Kohein Gadol* who is remiss in realizing his potential (*Horayos* 13•). For any human being to claim superiority over another due to physical station is ludicrous; what is important is that each must activate his or her potential into actual accomplishment.

In order to help human beings accomplish their potential, Hashem established conventions for gender roles within society. It is the female's role to be the homemaker and the male's role to be the breadwinner. To violate these roles would be to violate divinely-established convention. The *Gemara* (*Sotah* 11:) explains the term “*avodas perech*” — rigorous service — associated with the slavery of Mitzraim (*Shemos* 1:12) as the reversal of the natural male and female roles.

Women are generally more sensitive and tenderhearted than are males (*Bava Metzia* 59•; *Megillah* 14:). This is obviously in accordance with their ascribed role as child-rearer. Unquestionably, of the two parents, the mother is the more suitable for this role, while the father is naturally sterner and usually plays the role of disciplinarian.

In connection with the true meaning of the term “*kal*” discussed above (that women are more easily persuaded), again, this is part of the Eternal plan, for if both husband and wife were to be intransigent, no quarrel would ever get resolved. Hence, by nature women will acquiesce first so that peace may reign supreme.

There was one period in history, the era of the *Shoftim* in which women were permitted to attain leadership positions. *Chazal* (*Rosh Hashanah* 25:) point out that the *Shoftim* leadership should not be judged on superficialities. Their piety, virtue, and idealism were so great that they deserve mention with veritable leaders of previous generations. The *Shoftim* generations were so elevated that it was not necessary to have the greatest Torah scholars as leaders, but rather individuals who displayed other admirable traits. Their holiness manifested itself in their attitude toward Hashem and to their fellow man. Hence, female leadership was also a possibility for those great generations. The restraints of future generations did not yet present themselves, and this permitted the individual's nobility of soul and sterling character to shine forth. The *Gemara* (*Sanhedrin* 106:) characterizes the differences between generations by applying the *pasuk*

וה' יראה ללבב

Hashem looks at the heart (*Shemuel* I 16:7).

Nevertheless, Rav Nachman (*Megillah* 14:) comments, in regard to an inappropriate action on the part of the prophetess Devorah:

לא יאה יהירותא לנשי

Haughtiness does not befit women.

Rashi (*ibid.*) expands on this by commenting: "prominence is unsuitable for women." The *Sifsei Chachamim* (*ibid.*) adds that women can certainly achieve lofty spiritual levels, but positions of leadership are not fitting for them.

The reason for this attitude is simply modesty. The only way *Klal Yisrael* can achieve perfection is to practice separation of the genders. The *Yeitzer Hara* of lust is so overwhelming that contrariness to this notion will result in an impediment to perfection.

The *Gemara* (*Berachos* 63:) states:

שאין התורה נקנית אלא בחבורה

Torah can only be acquired through study groups.

Only a study group, or *chavrusa*, offers the Torah student the intensity and concentration necessary to master *Torah Shebe'al Peh* (*Berachos* 63:; *Ta'anis* 7•; *Makos* 10•), and this only applies to males. If women were permitted to participate in these groups — there is no question that the *yeitzer hara* would quickly turn the Torah experience into a *tiflus* experience. Any gathering of the opposite sexes, purity of intentions notwithstanding, would ultimately deteriorate to at least a degree of immorality; a fact that any honest observer would affirm. This explains the very strong language of Rabbi Eliezer ben Azaryah: “He who teaches his daughter Torah teaches her immorality.”

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