

Parashat Yitro, 5773, 2013:

Women and Talmud Torah

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam and Moshe Reuven ben Chaya.

If you were to ask most people to describe the content of our *parasha*, they would most likely focus on the Revelation at *Har Sinai* (Mt. Sinai). This is understandable, since Parashat Yitro contains the *Aseret Hadibrot* (the 10 Utterances), whereby G-d majestically revealed himself to our ancestors with the immortal words: “*Anochi Hashem Elokecha*” (“I am the L-rd your G-d;” *Sefer Shemot* 20:2, this and all Torah and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*). According to the Rambam (1135-1204) in his *Sefer HaMitzvot*, these words embody the commandment to believe in the existence of G-d. In addition, on the meta-level, they serve as the preamble to the legal foundation of the spiritual constitution of our people – our holy Torah. The Torah itself summarizes its over-arching and transforming purpose when it states: “And you shall be for Me a kingdom of princes [literally “priests”] and a holy nation” (*Sefer Shemot* 19:6)

Sefer Shemot 19:3 offers us an illuminating introduction to the *Aseret Hadibrot* that often seems to be glossed over in our excitement to encounter Hashem via His own words: “Moses ascended to G-d, and the L-rd called to him from the mountain, saying, ‘So shall you say to the house of Jacob and tell the sons of Israel.’” In my estimation, this *pasuk* (verse) points to the essential difference that obtains between men and women in their

relationship to G-d, His Torah, and by extension, Torah study. Rashi (1040-1105), basing himself upon the early halachic Midrash to *Sefer Shemot* known as *Mechilta d'Rabbi Yishmael*, explains that “the house of Jacob” refers to the women, whereas “the sons of Israel” refers to the men:

So shall you say: With this language and in this order. **to the house of Jacob:** These are the women. Say it to them in a gentle language. **and tell the sons of Israel :** The punishments and the details [of the laws] explain to the males, things that are as harsh as wormwood. -[Mechilta, Shab. 87a]

It appears from this *Midrash* that, in stark contrast to men, women seem to have an innate connection to Hashem. Women do not need to be frightened with punishments and a myriad of legal details that are “as harsh as wormwood” in order to submit to and forge a link with G-d. The *Midrash* intimates that they are naturally more loyal to Torah observance, based upon the immediacy of their spiritual connection to the Almighty. Thus, general “gentle language,” that encapsulates the unique essence of their relationship to G-d, is all that is needed to encourage Jewish women to follow the path of Torah observance.

Given the above *Midrash*, it is not at all surprising that the very nature of *Talmud Torah* (Torah study) is different for men and women. Men are biblically mandated to explore and study every aspect of the entire Torah. This is based on two well-known verses from the first and second paragraphs of the *Shema*: “And you shall teach them to your sons and speak of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk on the way, and when you lie down and when you rise up,” and “And you shall teach them to your sons to speak with them, when you sit in your house and when you walk on the way and when you lie down and when you rise. (*Sefer Devarim* 6:7, 11:19, underlining my own). Significantly,

Talmud Bavli, Kiddushin 29b uses the latter verse as the proof text to exclude women from the obligation of Torah study. The Rambam codifies this position in simple prose: “Women, slaves and male children before the age of majority are not obligated (*paturim*) in the commandment to study Torah.” (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Talmud Torah* 1:1). In addition, however, Maimonides notes that women who study Torah do have a reward – even though it is different than the reward received by men:

A woman who has studied Torah has a reward, but it is not like the reward of a man since she was not commanded. [This follows the general principle] that the reward of anyone who does a thing concerning which he is not commanded is not like the reward of he who is commanded and has done it, but rather, it is less than it. (1:13, so too, *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreah Deah* 246:6)

Thus far, it appears that a woman may well have a reward for studying Torah; yet, she has no obligation to do so. On the practical level, however, this is not the case. The world-renowned *posek* (halachic decisor), Rabbi Moshe ben Yisrael Isserles (1530-1572), popularly known as the Rema, in his glosses to the *Shulchan Aruch's* version of Maimonides' ruling, states: “Nonetheless, a woman is obligated to study those laws that are relevant to a woman.” Given Rav Isserles' singular status within the world of Halacha, his opinion became a tipping point for change and the impetus for a paradigm shift in thinking about the entire subject of women and Torah study.

Armed with the seminal view of the Rema, we are now ready to ask: “What are ‘those laws that are relevant to a woman?’” Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, also known as “The Alter Rebbe,” “Baal HaTanya,” and “The Rav” (1745-1812), answers this crucial question in the following manner:

Nonetheless, women are also obligated to study those laws that are relevant to them and those that they must know. This includes the Laws of Family Purity and Immersion, salting meat, the prohibition of being in private spaces with one who is forbidden to

them, and laws that are similar in kind. Moreover, [they must study] all Positive Commandments that are not time determined and all Negative Commandments of the Torah and of the Rabbis, since they are duty-bound to be punctilious in them in the same manner as men. (*Shulchan Aruch HaRav, Yoreah Deah, Hilchot Talmud Torah* 1:14)

In sum, for Rav Schneur Zalman, women have the obligation to study and master all areas of Torah that are in any manner pertinent to their daily lives. This is a broad, deep, and vast sea of knowledge that, without question, has the potential to lead an intellectually curious and adept woman through the vast majority of Biblical and Rabbinic Literature.

Much closer to our own time, the inestimable Torah scholar, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Hakohen of Radun, Poland (1838-1933), known as the Chafetz Chaim, wrote of the crucial need for women's involvement in *Talmud Torah*. He opined that this was vital in order to guarantee the continuity and future of our people:

Nowadays, however, when the tradition of forefathers has weakened and many people do not live close to their parents, and especially in view of the who have had a secular education, it is necessary to teach them [i.e. women] the entire Bible, *Mussar, Avot, Menorat Hamaor* [ethical writings of our Sages], and so on so they will be strong in the principles of our holy faith. Otherwise, G-d forbid, they may totally abandon the path of G-d, and violate all the *mitzvot* (*Likutei Halachot, Talmud Bavli, Sotah* 20a, translation, Fraida Blau, *Woman's Place in Torah Study, The Jewish Observer*, Summer 1984, p.19)

Given the Chafetz Chaim's orientation and world-view, moral and ethical Rabbinic literature figures prominently in the education of a Jewish woman. This, it should be stressed, is in addition to, and not instead of, the study of *Tanach* (the Hebrew canon of Biblical literature). His goal is straightforward: "...so they will be strong in the principles of our holy faith."

To summarize: Beginning with the Rema and continuing on to the time of the saintly Chafetz Chaim, women, while biblically exempt from *Talmud Torah*, are nonetheless

obligated to study Torah in order to have the requisite knowledge base to live authentically Jewish lives. Moreover, this study must engage their souls and intellects so that they will be strong in "...the principles of our holy faith."

Women, as active participants in the world of Torah study, form a trans-historical spiritual and intellectual community that my rebbi, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1900-1993), celebrated as a unique and indispensable *massorah* (tradition):

People are mistaken in thinking that there is only one Massorah and one Massorah community; the community of the fathers. It is not true. We have two massorot, two traditions, two communities, two *shalshalot ha-kabbalah* – the massorah community of the fathers and that of the mothers...What kind of a Torah does the mother pass on? I admit that I am not able to define precisely the masoretic role of the Jewish mother. Only by circumscription I hope to be able to explain it. Permit me to draw upon my own experiences.

At this point we are privy to the Rav's personal reminiscences of his beloved mother:

I used to have long conversations with my mother. In fact, it was a monologue rather than a dialogue. She talked and I "happened" to overhear. What did she talk about? I must use an halakhic term in order to answer this question: she talked *me-inyana de-yoma* [about the halakhic aspects of a particular holy day]. I used to watch her arranging the house in honor of a holiday. I used to see her recite prayers; I used to watch her recite the sidra every Friday night and I still remember the nostalgic tune. I learned from her very much.

What, however, was the essence of that which the Rav learned from his mother? What gift did she give him that changed his being and perception of the world? As he states in his unique and unparalleled manner:

Most of all I learned that Judaism expresses itself not only in formal compliance with the law but also in a living experience. She taught me that there is a flavor, a scent and warmth to *mitzvot*. I learned from her the most important thing in life – to feel the presence of the Almighty and the gentle pressure of His hand resting upon my frail shoulders. Without her teachings, which quite often were transmitted to me in silence, I would have grown up a soulless being, dry and insensitive. (Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "*A Tribute to the Rebbitzin of Talne*," Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought, 1978, Vol. 17, number 2, pages 76-77)

It is, and perhaps always has been, the unique obligation and privilege of Torah- educated Jewish women to help our people "... feel the presence of the Almighty and the gentle pressure of His hand resting upon [our] frail shoulders." May Hashem give us the wisdom, insight, and understanding to recognize the crucial and beautiful role that women play in our lives. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email rdb718@gmail.com.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on "*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis," may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

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