

Masorah and the Role of the Jewish Woman

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I

In this study we seek *be"H not* originality, rather renewed understanding and appreciation of ancient, eternal truths.

This study draws heavily from, and is framed by, Rav Soloveitchik's (the Rov's) *Torah*.

II

וזכרתי את בריתי יעקב ואף את בריתי יצחק ואף את בריתי אברהם אזכר והארץ אזכר

I will remember my *bris* (covenant) with Ya'akov as well as my *bris* with Yitzchok, and I will remember my *bris* with Avrohom, and I will remember the land.¹

ועתה אם שמוע תשמעו בקלי ושמרתם את בריתי והייתם לי סגלה מכל העמים כי לי כל הארץ

And now if you will comply with my words and observe my *bris* you will be My treasure from amongst all the nations, for the entire earth belongs to Me.²

אלה דברי הברית אשר צוה יקוק את משה לכרת את בני ישראל בארץ מואב מלבד הברית אשר כרת אתם בחרב

These are the elements of the *bris* that Hashem commanded Mosheh to establish with *Bnei Yisroel*, in addition to the *bris* that He established with them at Har Sinai.³

A *bris*, or covenant, always implies obligations and commitment. The Torah speaks of two⁴ *brisin*, *bris avos* and *bris Sinai*. We understand that *bris Sinai* entails a commitment to *taryag mitzvos*. But *bris avos* is opaque. Its only mitzvah, *bris milah*, serves only as an *os*, a representative sign, of the *bris*; it does not comprise its substance. What obligations and commitments are imposed by *bris avos*?

(*Bris avos*) expresses attitudes, ideals, and sentiments... it guides our feeling and consciousness... it is the backdrop of (*bris Sinai*); (*bris Sinai*) is the behavioral fulfillment of the truths, values, and Jewish self-awareness established by (*bris avos*).⁵

In short, *bris avos* consists of core values and attitudes, an approach to life and *avodas Hashem*. These values and attitudes obviously have practical, normative applications to and implications for all situations – old and new.

In truth, normative, repercussive values are not limited to *bris avos*; they are prominently featured and reiterated in *bris Sinai* as well. See, for instance, Ramban's tour de force explanation of the *mitzvah* of *ve-aseeso ha-yoshor ve-ha-tov*.

והכוונה בזה, כי מתחלה אמר שתשמור חקותיו ועדותיו אשר צוך, ועתה יאמר גם באשר לא צוך תן דעתך לעשות הטוב והישר בעיניו, כי הוא אוהב הטוב והישר:

¹ Vayikrah 26:42

² Shemos 19:5, see Rashi *ad loc*.

³ Devarim 28:69

⁴ *Bris Mo'av*, is not our focus presently.

⁵ Man of Faith in the Modern World: Reflections of the Rav, Vol. Two (adapted by Rabbi Abraham R. Besdin), p.68

וזה ענין גדול, לפי שאי אפשר להזכיר בתורה כל הנהגות האדם עם שכניו ורעיו וכל משאו ומתנו ותקוני הישוב והמדינות כלם, אבל אחרי שהזכיר מהם הרבה, כגון לא תלך רכיל (ויקרא יט טז), לא תקום ולא תטור (שם פסוק יח), ולא תעמוד על דם רעך (שם פסוק טז), לא תקלל חרש (שם פסוק יד), מפני שיבה תקום (שם פסוק לב), וכיוצא בהן, חזר לומר בדרך כלל שיעשה הטוב והישר בכל דבר, עד שיכנס בזה הפשרה ולפנים משורת הדין, וכגון מה שהזכירו בדינא דבר מצרא (ב"מ קח א), ואפילו מה שאמרו (יומא פו א) פרקו נאה ודבורו בנחת עם הבריות, עד שיקרא בכל ענין תם וישר:

The meaning of this (*mitzvah* according to *Chazal*): it is impossible for the Torah to specifically legislate all of a person's interactions with his neighbors and friends, all his business dealings, and civil obligations. The Torah provides many specific directives, such as "do not gossip", "do not take revenge or hold a grudge", "do not stand by idly when your fellow Jew is in mortal danger", "do not curse (even) a deaf person", "stand up in honor of the elderly", and the like. Then the Torah generalizes (that extrapolating from these specific directives) in all matters we must do what is good and straight, an overarching imperative which encompasses, *inter alia*, the mandate to compromise in litigation, go beyond the letter of the Law, to follow the guidelines of *Chazal* in the *halachah* of granting a neighbor the right of first refusal, and even *Chazal's* mandate to speak gently, so that in all areas a person's behavior will be wholesome and straight.⁶

Ramban's compelling, value based depiction of Torah speaks for itself. Nevertheless, in our generation the following needs to be underscored. The normative, core values (and principles) of Torah, are pivotal; they make Torah relevant, applicable and normative at all times and in all situations. A particular situation, or constellation of circumstances, may be new and unprecedented, and yet the *Torah ha-kedoshah* through its timeless, transcendent values (and principles) contains clear directives.

III

ויברא א' את האדם בצלמו בצלם א' ברא אותו זכר ונקבה ברא אתם

The Almighty created man in His image; in the image of the Almighty He created him; male and female He created them⁷

The Torah's account of *briah ha-adam* focuses on his defining spiritual, metaphysical quality, *tzelem Elokim*. It is seemingly incongruous that, in the same breath, the Torah mentions the physiological differentiation of masculinity and femininity. The Torah is highlighting *Adam* as a unique spiritual being; why, in such a context, would the Torah mention mere biological variations of masculinity and femininity?⁸

A brief excursus into one element of theology and religious experience will try to resolve this incongruity.

HKBH is, of course, *echod*, one, singular, and unique in the simplest, most absolute sense. In speaking of HKBH Himself we cannot speak of different aspects or qualities. Nevertheless, in His interaction with the world, we perceive different aspects or qualities and may legitimately speak in such terms. In fact, the Torah itself does so in listing the *yud gimel midos ha-rachamim*. We perceive HKBH as acting with compassion, grace, etc. Similarly, within our personal religious experience, we experience different qualities or aspects. Whenever we speak of HKBH we must bear this crucial distinction in mind. We are speaking of our perceptions and experiences, not describing HKBH Himself.

On the one hand, we perceive, and experience, HKBH as immanent. He is very much present in this world, but His presence is limited and understated. Otherwise His presence would be too

⁶ Commentary to Devarim 6:18

⁷ Bereishis 1:27

⁸ Rav Soloveitchik, *Family Redeemed* (henceforth FR), p.160

overwhelming.⁹ Divine will and providence, masked by *teva*, are self-effacingly exercised. We perceive, and experience, HKBH as tolerant and passive. He does not impose his divine will. Instead He modestly allows for human free will and “suffers” people’s actions even when *r’/l* they contravene His will and thereby further obscure His presence.

דבי רבי ישמעאל תנא: מי כמוכה באלים ה' - מי כמוכה באלמים

In the academy of Rabbi Yishmael it was taught: “Who resembles You amongst the mighty?!” (should be understood to mean) who resembles You amongst the silent?!¹⁰

Kabalah teaches that all these qualities associated with HKBH’s self-effacing immanence belong to the feminine *sefirah* of *malchus*, a/k/a *shechinah*.

On the other hand, we also know and perceive HKBH as transcendent, existing in infinitude above and beyond His creation. He is Being, and, as such, is the source of all being. He is the omnipotent creator whose inscrutable will inexorably governs the world. He is the ultimate giver and *mashpe’a*.

Kabalah teaches that these qualities belong to the masculine *sefiros*.

In the words of the Rov,

God is both our Father and Mother. Masculine and feminine motifs in our approach to and craving for God are of great significance for the understanding of our universal religious experience... The principles of creativity and receptivity, acting and being acted upon, energizing and absorbing, aggressiveness and toleration, initiating and completing, of limitless emanation of a transcendent being and measured reflection by the cosmos, are portrayed by the dual motif of masculinity and femininity within our religious experience... Unconditioned, creative, infinite transcendence and self-conditioned, receptive, finite immanence of God are symbolized by masculinity and femininity.¹¹

We perceive, and experience, HKBH in maternal terms as loving and comforting, giving and forgiving. But we also perceive and experience HKBH in paternal terms as a demanding teacher and disciplinarian. Once again in the words of the Rov, “Both modes of loving, caring and helping are manifested by the Almighty. He is our disciplinarian: “the Lord your God disciplines you just as a man disciplines his son.” We invoke Him as *Avinu She-bashamayim*, our Father in heaven. We also have trust and faith in Him in a manner reminiscent of the child’s trust in its mother. In fact, God is our mother, the *Shechinah*. “As one whom his mother comforts, so will I comfort you... Every sensitive Jew knows that at times we run to the Almighty for advice and encouragement just like a confused, frustrated and disappointed child runs to its father, while at other times we cling to the *Shechinah*, just like a child who, in despair, hides is

⁹ “The attribute of *tzimtzum* expresses itself in two ideas: concealment and disclosure. On the one hand, God sustains the cosmos through concealing and hiding His glory, and were He to reveal Himself, then all would revert to chaos and the void, for who can withstand the splendor of His excellence when He comes forth to overawe the earth? It is the concealment of the Divine countenance which brings into being all existence. On the other hand, the Almighty gives life to and sustains all existence through the disclosure of His glory, for He is the root and source of reality, and the concealment of the Divine countenance would result in the destruction of the world and the negation of reality. Only the act of disclosure creates. This powerful antinomy, “splendid in its holiness”, is practically the central axis of Chabad doctrine. Concealment and disclosure – both equally sustain the cosmos, but both equally cause it to revert back to nothingness and naught.” Rav Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, fn61.

¹⁰ *Gitin* 56b. That is, quiet, self-effacing endurance expresses incomparable strength.

¹¹ *ibid* p.69

head in shame in his mother's lap, finding there solace and comfort. May we call God both Father and Mother? Certainly yes!"¹²

The Torah's seemingly incongruous description of *briah ha-adam* is now resolved. There are two *tzelem Elokims*, masculine and feminine. *Zochor u-nekeivah* constitute two different spiritual personae. Man and woman were created differently not only physiologically, but also psychologically, spiritually and metaphysically. They represent and express different facets of *tzelem Elokim*.

In the words of the Rov,

"We are mystified by the inclusion of the physiological fact of sexual differentiation in the story of man created in God's image. It is obvious that the difference between man and woman, Adam and Eve, asserts itself... in personality differentiation as well... The spiritual essence of man differs from that of woman..."¹³ "The *Qabalah* based its doctrine of bi-personalism upon the verse, "And God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them... Sexual differentiation expresses more than a physical property; it manifests an ontic contrast, a dual aspect within the essence of creation, something deeper and more fundamental than natural sexual differentiation, which finds its full expression in two bi-existential experiences, in two ideas of personalism."¹⁴

IV

There is, of course, no hierarchy within *tzelem Elokim*. Thus while man and woman constitute two distinct spiritual personae, they are axiologically equal. They possess equal *kedushas yisrael*. In the words of the Rov,

"There is no doubt that in the eyes of the Halacha man and woman enjoy an equal status and have the same worth as far as their *humanitas* is concerned. Both were created in the image of God, both joined the covenantal community at Sinai, both are committed to our metahistorical destiny, both crave and search for God, and with both He engages in a dialogue... The mere fact that among our prophets we find women to whom God has addressed Himself is clear proof that we never differentiated between the sexes axiologically."¹⁵

V

As a natural expression and vital consequence of their different *tzelem Elokims* men and women are blessed with different strengths¹⁶ and entrusted with different missions. In the words of the Rov,

There is a distinction between mother's and father's mission within the covenantal community, since they represent two different personalistic approaches. Father's teaching is basically of an

¹² *Ibid* pp.166-7

¹³ *Ibid* p.160

¹⁴ *Ibid* p.70

¹⁵ *Ibid* pp.71-2 Rav Moshe Feinstein (*Igros Moshe* 4:49) and Rav Shamshon Refoel Hirsch (*Ha'ishah* Ha'yehudis) also emphasize this equality.

The formal rules and criteria for triage adumbrated in *Mishnah Horiyos* are just that – formal classifications which do not reflect ultimate, respective value of two lives. Only HKBH can render such a judgment. On the other hand, Halachah wanted as much as possible to avoid human arbitrariness in triage. Hence the formal *mitzvah*-based criteria.

¹⁶ Clearly, to a degree men are called upon to cultivate the "feminine" qualities of *tzne'us* et al. and *vice versa*. כי עיקר הענין הוא כי זכר ונקבה כל אחד לכול מזכר ונקבה (פרוש הגר"א לספרא דצניעותא, פרק ב).

Quoted in Mrs Miriam Kosman, Circle, Arrow, Spiral, p.346. See also Family Redeemed, p.161.

Still, the "feminine" and "masculine" qualities define women and men respectively, and their respective missions.

intellectual nature. Judaism is to a great extent an intellectual discipline, a method, a system of thought, a hierarchy of values... However, Judaism is not only an intellectual tradition but an experiential one as well. The Jew not only observed but experienced the *Shabbas*, the Jew experienced *Rosh Hashana* and *Yom Kippur*. He did not only recite prayers on those days. The *seder* was... a great experiential event. There is beauty, grandeur, warmth, and tenderness to Judaism. All these qualities cannot be described in cognitive terms. One may behold them, feel them, sense them. It is impossible to provide one with a formal training in the experiential realm. Experiences are communicated not through the word but through steady contact, through association, through osmosis, through a tear or a smile, through dreamy eyes and soft melody, through the silence at twilight and the recital of *Shema*. All this is to be found in the maternal domain. The mother creates the mood; she is the artist who is responsible for the magnificence, solemnity and beauty. She somehow communicates to him the heartbeat of Judaism, while playing, singing, laughing and crying.¹⁷

In his *hesped* for the Talner Rebbitzin the Rov returned to this theme. Here are his beautiful words.

We have two *massoros*, two traditions... – the *massorah* community of the fathers and that of the mothers. “Thus shalt thou say to the house of Jacob (= the women) and tell the children of Israel (= the men). “Hear my son the instruction of thy father (*mussar avicho*) and forsake not the teaching of thy mother (*toras emecho*)... One learns much from father: how to read a text – the Bible or the Talmud – how to comprehend, how to analyze, how to conceptualize, how to classify, how to infer, how to apply, etc. One also learns from father what to do and what not to do, what is morally right and what is morally wrong. Father teaches the son the discipline of thought as well as the discipline of action. Father’s tradition is an intellectual-moral one. That is why it is identified with *mussar*, which is the Biblical term for discipline.

What is *toras emecho*? What kind of a Torah does the mother pass on?... Permit me to draw upon my own experiences. 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... She talked *meinyana de-yoma*. 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.

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 *mitzvos*. 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... The fathers knew much about the *Shabbas*; the mothers lived the *Shabbas*, experienced her presence, and perceived her beauty and splendor.

The fathers taught generations how to observe the *Shabbas*; mothers taught generations how to greet the *Shabbas* and how to enjoy her twenty-four hour presence.¹⁸

The Rov’s beautiful, stirring words provide a framework for us to understand and appreciate the words of earlier *Chachmei Hamasorah*.

אמר ליה רב לרבי חייא: נשים במאי זכיין? באקר״י בנייהו לבי כנישתא, ובאתנו״י גבריהו בי רבנן, ונטרין לגבריהו עד דאתו מבי רבנן.

¹⁷ *Ibid* pp.114-5

¹⁸ “A Tribute to the Rebbetzin of Talne” (henceforth, *Hesped*), *Tradition*, Vol.17, No.2, Spring 1978, pp.76-7

Rav asked of Rabbi Chiya: what special merit do women enjoy? (He answered:) bringing their sons to Yeshiva to learn, and sending their husbands to Yeshiva and awaiting their return.¹⁹

Chazal do not refer here simply to arranging the logistics of carpool. They also refer to the vital role of mother and wife in influencing her sons and husband, her capacity to motivate, and her ability to touch the inner lives and core of her husband and children. Rabbi Chiya answers that women exert a formative influence by imparting their *toras emecho* which inspires their husband and sons to *Talmud Torah*.

This understanding of the *Gemorah* is further borne out by *Chazal's* comment on the verse of *koh somar leveis Ya'akov ve-sageid levnei Yisrael*.

כה תאמר לבית יעקב, אלו הנשים, ותגיד לבני ישראל, אלו האנשים, למה לנשים תחלה... כדי שיהיה מנהיגות את בניהן לתורה

Why in offering the Torah to *Klal Yisrael* does HKBH instruct *Mosheh Rabeinu* to speak first with the women and only subsequently to the men?.. So that they will assume responsibility to guide their sons to Torah.²⁰

This theme echoes as well in the words of *Rabeinu Yonah*.

ולמה נצטוו לדבר עם הנשים תחלה? מפני שהן שולחות בניהן לבית הספר, ומשימות עיניהן על בניהם שיתעסקו בתורה, ומרחמות עליהם בבאם מבית הספר, ומושכות לבם בדברים טובים שיהא חפצם בתורה, ושומרות אותם שלא יבטלו מן התורה, ומלמדות אותם יראת חטא בילדותם ... ונמצא על פי הדברים האלה כי הנשים הצנועות מסבבות התורה והיראה

Why was *Mosheh Rabeinu* commanded to speak with the women first? ... because they send their sons to school, supervise them that they should be preoccupied with Talmud Torah, envelop them with love when they return from school, *inspire and motivate them that they should desire Torah*, guard them to prevent neglect of Talmud Torah, and teach them fear of sin in their youth. Due to all this, women are the catalysts of Talmud Torah and fear (of sin).²¹

Our final representative quote is from the Malbim's commentary to *Sefer Tehilim*.

אשר בנינו כנטעים מגדלים בנעוריהם בנותינו כזויות מחטבות תבנית היכל

For our sons are like saplings, nurtured from their youth; our daughters are like cornerstones, crafted in palatial form²²

Malbim explains the comparison of *bnos yisrael* to the cornerstones of a building:

בנותינו דומים כזויות שהם מחוטבות תבנית היכל, כי תבנית היכל ילקח מן הזויות אם עשוי ביושר, כן הם צנועות יושבות בירכתי הבית, ובכ"ז הם יתנו תכנית היכל כולו, וכפי צדקתם תהיה הנהגת הבית בכלל

Our daughters resemble the cornerstones of a palace. The structure of a palace depends upon the correct, straight placement of its corners. Similarly *bnos yisrael* are modest, residing at home. Nevertheless they determine the character of the home. The overall conduct of the home reflects their righteousness.²³

¹⁹ *Berachos* 17a

²⁰ *Shemos Raba* to 19:3

²¹ *Igeres HaTeshuva*, para.51. I do not recall where in the secondary literature I first came upon this reference.

²² 144:12, Artscroll trans.

²³ *Ad loc.* Cited by Rav P.E.Falk in *Oz Ve-hadar Levushah*

VI

The Rov's portrait of the feminine *tzelem Elokim* reveals the profound nature and true depth of the Jewish woman's *tzne'us*. Of course, modest dress and behavior are crucial, indispensable expressions of *tzne'us*. But they are only external expressions. A woman's *avodas Hashem* being concentrated in the privacy of the home is also a key, crucial expression of *tzne'us*. But this too only reflects but does not constitute the essence of modesty. Ultimately, a woman's *tzne'us* consists of her rich, inner life which is hidden from view, an inner strength which, *inter alia*, allows her to imperceptibly mold character and inspire behavior. Therein lays the ultimate *tzne'us*, the focus on inwardness and inner experience. Publicity and public roles are antithetical to the feminine *tzelem Elokim* which emphasizes inwardness. An *isha tzenu'ah*, focused on authentic inwardness for herself and others, enjoying a rich inner life and eschewing the inauthenticity and vulgarity of extroversion and ostentatiousness, naturally lives self-effacingly and dresses and acts modestly.

VII

The Rov further elaborates the respective strengths of the differing *tzelem Elokims*.

While intellectual involvement is important, in times of crisis and distress the experiential commitment is indispensable. Were it not for the mother, the Jews would not have been able to defy and survive so many crises which threatened to annihilate our people... The greatness of the man expresses itself in everyday action, when situations lend themselves to logical analysis and discursive thinking. The greatness of the woman manifests itself at the hour of crisis, when the situation does not lend itself to piecemeal understanding but requires instead instantaneous action that flows from the very depths of a sensitive personality. 'God gave woman *binah yeserah*, an additional measure of understanding over men.'²⁴

The Rov illustrates this feminine strength with examples from Chumash. *Sarah Imeinu* safeguards *zerah Avrohom* by demanding the expulsion of *Yishma'el*; *Rivkah Imeinu* ensures that the *masorah* is exclusively transmitted to *Yaakov Avinu*, etc.²⁵ In the Rov's words,

The Biblical woman ... was a dialectical personality. She combined two mutually exclusive characteristics. (She) was humble and shy, and yet she possessed an indomitable will and an unshakeable determination. She was simple and tenacious, meek and fearless. The Biblical woman was never at the center, always in the wings. She was never loud, always quiet. At the same time, the Biblical woman was the leader and the head of the household. In times of crisis, the Biblical woman assumed unlimited responsibilities and made the gravest decisions... Sarah was a humble woman, always in the tent, always shy and modest. Abraham sat in front of the tent; she was inside. She was always ready to comply with Abraham's requests and yet, in critical times, when she was concerned over the destiny of her son, the humble Sarah displayed unlimited strength of will and made Abraham listen to her. She instructed Abraham: 'Cast out that slave woman and her son,' and God instructed Abraham to listen to Sarah.²⁶

VIII

Before proceeding let us pause and summarize. In our perception HKBH is both immanent and transcendent. In His understated immanence He models self-effacement and modesty, a paragon of inwardness and receptivity (being *tzanua* and a *mekabel*). These qualities are emphasized in the feminine *tzelem Elokim*. In His Majestic transcendence HKBH appears as the Almighty, who created and

²⁴ FR pp.115-7, concluding with quote from Niddah 45b

²⁵ *Ibid* pp. 117-9

²⁶ Hespel, pp.79-80

governs the world, revealed Himself at *Har Sinai* and continues to teach Torah to *Klal Yisrael*, a paragon of leadership and influence (being a *mashpe'a*). These qualities are emphasized in the masculine *tzelem Elokim*.

IX

The Rov's identification and exposition of the two *tzelem Elokim*s relies heavily on Kabbalistic teachings. Most assuredly *Kabbalah* is an esoteric discipline, and entrée into its portals is reserved for the elite. *Primo facie*, it might seem inappropriate to draw upon Kabbalistic lore in an exoteric, normative discussion of "Masorah and the Role of the Jewish Woman". Understanding at least one dimension of the relationship of *Halachah* and *Kabbalah* will *iy"H* dispel this erroneous impression and account for the exoteric relevance of the Rov's exposition: *Kabbalah* "simply" provides a deeper understanding of *Halachah*. It delves into the conceptual, metaphysical underpinnings of concrete, normative *Halachah*.

Consider the following analogy. Electrical appliances come with instructions for safe, responsible use, with explicit warnings about dangerous, reckless misuse. These instructions allow the consumer to safely use the appliances. Knowledge of physics, however, provides an understanding of the scientific underpinnings of the instructions. The analogue is clear.

In our context the contours of the respective roles of men and women emerge clearly from halachic sources. By providing insight into the underpinnings of the various halachos *Kabbalah* helps us better understand and appreciate *Halachah*.

Let us turn to some representative halachic sources. The Torah associates the *mitzvah* of procreation with conquest.

ויברך אתם א' ויאמר להם א' פרו ורבו ומלאו את הארץ וכבשה ורדו בדגת הים ובעוף השמים ובכל חיה הרמשת על הארץ

God blessed them; and God said to them "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue (conquer) it and rule over the fish of the ocean and the bird of the sky"²⁷

Based upon this association *Chazal* see the *mitzvah* as being incumbent only upon men inasmuch as

אמר ר' אילעא משום ר' אלעזר בר' שמעון, אמר קרא: ומלאו את הארץ וכבשוה, איש דרכו לכבש, ואין אשה דרכה לכבש

It is the nature of aggressive man, not reticent woman, to engage in conquest.²⁸

The *mitzvah* of honoring one's parents is incumbent upon men and women. Nonetheless, the Torah associates it primarily with men. *Chazal* explain,

איש אמו ואביו תיראו - ומדרשו אין לי אלא איש, אשה מנין, כשהוא אומר תיראו, הרי כאן שנים אם כן למה נאמר איש, שהאיש סיפק בידו לעשות, אבל אשה רשות אחרים עליה

A man should (honor and) feel awe for his parents. We derive that a woman is likewise obligated because "feel awe" is written in the plural. If so, why did the Torah speak in terms of man?

²⁷ Bereishis 1:28

²⁸ *Yevamos 65b* See also *Kidushin 2b*, מלחמה ואין דרכה של אשה לעשות מלחמה, and *Sefer Ha'chinuch mitzvos* 603,604.

Because he always has the ability to fulfill the *mitzvah* whereas a woman is subject to the authority of others²⁹

In other words, married women are often exempted from the *mitzvah* because (and when) it conflicts with her responsibilities to her husband.

According to Rambam, only men can be appointed to communal positions of *seroroh* (authority).

אין מעמידין אשה במלכות שנאמר עליך מלך ולא מלכה, וכן כל משימות שבישראל אין ממנים בהם אלא איש.

One may not appoint a woman to kingship, as is written king (in the masculine form) and not king (in the feminine form) and similarly for all positions of authority only men may be appointed³⁰

A husband is obligated to go out and provide for his wife; reciprocally, she shoulders domestic responsibilities.

מתני'. ואלו מלאכות שהאשה עושה לבעלה: טוחנת, ואופה, ומכבסת, מבשלת, ומניקה את בנה, מצעת לו המטה, ועושה בצמר

These are the services a wife performs for her husband: she grinds, bakes, launders, cooks, nurses her son, makes the bed and works with wool³¹

The halachic lines delineating the different personae and roles of men and women respectively are clearly drawn. The kabalistic teachings regarding masculine and feminine *tzelem Elokim* broaden our perspective, enrich our understanding and deepen our appreciation for the halachic structure. But clearly, in this context, *Kabalah* is interpreting halachic norms, not generating its own. In the words of the Rov, commenting upon a *gemoroh* in *maseches Kidushin*,

רב יוסף כי הוה שמע קל כרעא דאמיה, אמר: איקום מקמי שכינה דאתיא.

‘Whenever Rav Yosef heard the footsteps of his mother, he would say: Let me rise because the *shechina* is coming.’³²

“Behind every mother, young or old, happy or sad, trails the *shechina*. And behind every father, erect or stooped, in playful or stern mood, walks *Malka Kadisha*, the Holy King. This is not mysticism. It is *Halachah*. The awareness of (*Malka Kadisha* and) the *shechina* results in the obligation to rise before father and mother.”³³

X

The foregoing depiction of the Jewish woman/feminine *tzelem Elokim*, culled from the Rov’s writings, despite being limited to a representative sampling, draws from an incredibly broad and comprehensive array of sources. Biblical, halachic and kabalistic sources converge; they paint a single, consistent and beautiful picture. The complimentary antinomies of public and private, *mekabel* and *mashpe’a*, aggressive and reticent, *gevurah* and *rachamanus*, *pesach ha’ohel* and *bo’ohel* depict the respective roles and strengths of men and women.

²⁹ Rashi to *Vayikrah* 19:3, citing *Toras Kohanim* and *Kidushin* 30b. The translation of “subject to ...” taken from Artscroll

³⁰ *Hilchos Melachim* 1:5

³¹ *Kesubos* 59b

³² *Kidushin* 31b

³³ FR p.168. The words supplied in the parentheses are either assumed or, alternately, were accidentally omitted.

Our foregoing discussion provides a framework for commenting, as requested, upon the consensus of all *gedolim* that ordination of women violates *Halachah*.

At the outset we noted the pivotal role of values and principles within our *Masorah*, both *bris avos* as well as *bris Sinai*. The eternal, universal relevance and applicability of Torah depends upon applying Masoretic values and principles to new situations.

The mandate of *tzne'us* is always operative; standards of *tzne'us* must be adhered to in both the religious and secular spheres. Accordingly, guidance must be sought as to what is permissible and what prohibited, what appropriate and what inappropriate for women in the secular sphere as well. (My ensuing comments are not intended, in any way, to provide or even imply such guidelines. The present forum does not allow for addressing this crucial aspect of our topic.) There are, however, at least two crucial, defining differences between the two spheres. First of all, the religious sphere is real in a sense that the secular is not. There is no analogy whatsoever between the synagogue and the corporate boardroom. Whatever meaningfulness, if any, roles and positions in the boardroom possess they do not in the least compare to the significance of roles and positions in the Torah community. Behavior in the religious sphere most directly upholds or violates the Torah's axiomatic gender differentiation in *avodas Hashem*. Thus the question of women serving as CEOs is not linked to the question of women being ordained and/or serving as rabbis.

Second of all, regardless of the sincere, *le-shem shomayim* motivation of some individual women who aspire to serve as rabbis, the broader religio-social context is crucial. Let us be honest and straight forward with ourselves. There is currently an undeniable, concerted effort afoot to egalitarianize *Yahadus, r"l*. The profane roots of this antinomian movement reach back to the 1970s with the demands for *sifrei Torah* for women during *hakafos* and women's tefillah groups. Ordination of women is one of the more recent fronts in that misguided effort.

In light of all of the above we are privileged to understand and appreciate the authoritative *position of all gedolim*. (Of course, its authoritativeness does not depend upon our oftentimes inadequate understanding.) It is overwhelmingly clear that a woman serving in the very public, religious leadership role of rabbi directly violates and contradicts the entire *Masorah* regarding the Jewish woman and her feminine *tzelem Elokim*.

In order to *be"H* forestall misunderstanding two further points must be underscored. Firstly, by no means am I implying that *masorah* is the "only" (sic) impediment to having women rabbis. I comment from the Masoretic vantage point because that vantage point has been the focus of our discussion.

Moreover, the claim that the possibility of women rabbis represents a new and unprecedented situation is somewhat dubious. Formal schooling and instruction for Jewish girls is relatively new; instances of remarkably learned Jewish women are not. Most famously Bruriah, wife of Rabi Meir and daughter of Rabbi Chanina ben Tradyon, was a very great Torah scholar who even adjudicated a dispute between Rabbi Tarfon and the *Chachamim*. Rabbinic literature and lore through the centuries knows of other remarkable instances as well.³⁴ And yet the existence of such eminent, learned *noshim tzenu'os* never yielded women rabbis or even a suggestion therefor. The explanation would seem to be simple. It was self-evident that such a development was unthinkable as it contradicts the Torah's religious gender differentiation.

³⁴ Rav Wahrman, [She'aris Yoseif, vol.2, siman 4](#). I thank one of Rav Wahrman's talmidim who wishes to remain anonymous for sharing this source with me.

Communal introspection is vital, and, to be candid, long overdue. With open minds and hearts please join me.

We tend to think of assimilation in concrete, practical terms – eating *treif*, *chilul Shabbos*, etc. And, obviously, such behaviors are painful instances of assimilation, *r"l*. But assimilation often begins more subtly. It often begins in the realm of thought, ideas, and values. Practical assimilation with its frightening manifestations is often the result of ideational and axiological assimilation.

Ideational assimilation occurs when we absorb ideas and values, antithetical to Torah, from the surrounding culture. Often these ideas and values imperceptibly penetrate our minds and hearts by osmosis. Having penetrated our minds, they dictate our mindset. Sometimes the infection of assimilation reaches so deeply within our being that we mistake transient Western societal values for absolute, universal values. And then we proceed to zealously, self-righteously reinterpret (in reality, obviously, misinterpret) Torah accordingly.

To be specific: Western society is aggressively egalitarian. It equates equality with uniformity, and diversity with inequality. This Western social axiom stands in marked contrast to the traditional Jewish view. In the words of the Rov, “The *Halachah* has discriminated between axiological equality pertaining to their Divine essence and metaphysical uniformity at the level of the existential personal experience. Men and women are different personae, endowed with singular qualities and assigned distinct missions in life. Hence, axiological equality should not level up the uniqueness of these two sexual personalities.”³⁶

Another truism: over the past half century Western society has denigrated traditional women’s roles, attributing them to a misogynist patriarchal society. Once again the Rov has formulated the Torah outlook.

The narrative in the Bible that both the male and female were created in the image of God suffices to refute the... misogynous tradition... The Bible, however, sees the uniqueness of man expressed in... his ability to withdraw... to sacrifice... in his giving of himself to others, in his craving... for communion with God; therefore, there is hardly any cogent reason to place the worth of man above that of (woman). On the contrary, sacrificial... action is more characteristic of... woman than of man.³⁷

Both of these axiomatic Western values – i.e., egalitarianism and denigration of traditional Women’s role have infiltrated and infected our minds and hearts. They represent insidious ideational assimilation, deeply disturbing and entirely intolerable, in its own right. But they are also fueling practical assimilation and, if unchecked, will continue to do so, and at a frightening pace.

Let us step back for a moment and reflect. Obviously, there is never any reason whatsoever to feel apologetic, insecure or inferior in openly rejecting transient societal mores and axioms in favor of *retzon Hashem*. But a moment’s reflection will *be”H* strengthen our *yeitzer ha-tov* in combating the *yeitzer ha-rah*. Without minimizing the accomplishments or virtues of modern society an objective assessment is simply staggering. In the realm of intimacy where, above all, *kedushah* is to be sought and realized, popular Western culture rejects chastity and sanctity in favor of vulgarity and promiscuity. In general, Western culture rejects *tzne’us* in favor of ostentatiousness. It rejects self-effacement in favor of self-

³⁵ Re the discussion of assimilation in this section see my article “[Halakhic Values and Halakhic Decisions: Rav Soloveitchik’s Pesak Regarding Women’s Prayer Groups](#)”, esp. section III.

³⁶ FR p.72

³⁷ *Ibid* p.71

aggrandizement. It rejects *bushah* (shame) in favor of shamelessness. It rejects moral-religious discipline, the bedrock of *Halachah*, in favor of self-gratification. It rejects inwardness and authenticity in favor of extroversion and empowerment. Obviously, such a society cannot appreciate the sanctified lifestyle of *tzne'us*. Obviously, such a society cannot understand or appreciate the feminine *tzelem Elokim*.

But *Bnei Yisrael* are *bishonim*. And we have the *Torah ha-kedoshah*. We can appreciate authentic Torah values. Why do we allow ourselves to be brainwashed and assimilate? And why, even when we appropriately reject ordination of women, do we do ourselves the disservice of constantly talking about increasing leadership roles for women as though that were an ideal? Such talk only reinforces ideational assimilationist tendencies. Instead of such short-sighted accommodationism we should be accurately, effectively, and proudly projecting the Torah's beautiful vision of *tzne'us* in *avodas Hashem*.

In our generation, surrounded as we are by self-aggrandizement and extroversion, every single one of us should commit to memory and etch in our hearts the following passage from Reb Chayim Vital

הוראת מעשיו לבריות, ידעת מה שאמרו חז"ל באותה האשה שהיתה נענשת בגהנום על שהיתה מספרת לחברותיה היום התענית. ולא די שאינו מקבל שכר אלא שנידון בגהנום, כי הרי מגלה דעתו שאין מעשיו לשם שמים וכו', ואם יכול האדם שיעשה כל דרכיו לשמיים ולא יפרש לבריות אפילו אחד מהם, שכרו כפול ומכופל, מפני שכבוד אלקים הסתר דבר

With regard to publicizing one's actions: you are familiar with our Sages' account of the woman who was being punished in *Gehinom* because she used to tell her friends "I fasted today". Not only is one not rewarded but is instead punished because he reveals that his actions are not for the sake of heaven etc. And if a person can gear all his activities for the sake of heaven and not reveal any of them to others, his reward increases manifold, because (one renders) glory to the Hashem by concealing one's (divine) service³⁸

XII

Unquestionably, a woman's mandate to cultivate and maintain uncompromising *tzne'us* at all times is, privilege notwithstanding, a perennial challenge. Moreover, undoubtedly it is true that being called upon to resist contemporary societal influences poses an additional challenge to the modern Jewish woman in devoting herself to authentic *avodas Hashem*. It was with this perennial challenge with its added contemporary dimension in mind that the Rov penned the following lines.

The Biblical woman is modest, humble, self-effacing. She enters the stage when she is called upon, acts her part with love and devotion in a dim corner of the stage and then leaves softly without applause and without the enthusiastic response of the audience which is hardly aware of her... It is quite interesting that although Abraham survived Sarah by thirty eight years, his historical role came to an end with Sarah's passing. Isaac leaves the stage together with Rebecca. Jacob relinquishes his role to Joseph with the untimely death of Rachel. Without Sarah there would be no Abraham; no Isaac were it not for Rebecca; no Jacob without Rachel... The *Halachah* was cognizant of the greatness of the covenantal mother when it formulated the rule that *kedushas yisrael*, one's status as a Jew, can only be transmitted through the woman. The *Halachah* was also conscious of the loneliness and the tragic note in the feminine commitment when it accepted a (seemingly) contradictory rule that the child takes his father's name and family status.³⁹

XIII

³⁸ *Sha'arei Kedushah* Part 3, Gate 4, quoted in Rav Aviezer Bernig, *Eishes Lapidos*, p.39

³⁹ FR pp.119-20

Our penultimate quote concerning gender differentiation in *avodas Hashem* is an incredibly powerful, eschatological statement of *Chazal*.

גדולה הבטחה שהבטיח הקדוש ברוך הוא לנשים יותר מן האנשים

The Holy One, blessed be He, promised a greater reward to women than to men⁴⁰

XIV

Our final quote comes from the Rov. The Rov was responding to a halachically outrageous initiative to try and obviate the need for a *get*; the assimilationist mindset which produced that initiative is hauntingly familiar. The excerpt that we are *iy"H* about to read together addresses that mindset.

We must not yield – I mean emotionally, it is very important – we must not feel inferior, experience or develop an inferiority complex, and because of that complex yield to the charm – usually it is a transient and passing charm – of modern political and ideological *sevoros*. I say not only not to compromise – certainly not to compromise – but even not to yield emotionally, not to feel inferior, not to experience an inferiority complex. The thought should never occur that it is important to cooperate just a little bit with the modern trend or with the secular modern philosophy. In my opinion *Yahadus* does not have to apologize ... to the modern woman ... There is no need for apology – we should have pride in our *Masorah*, in our heritage. And of course certainly it goes without saying that one must not try to compromise with these cultural trends and one must not try to gear the halachic norm to the transient ways of a neurotic society, which is what our society is.⁴¹

⁴⁰ *Berachos* 17a

⁴¹ Excerpt from talk known as, "Talmud Torah and *Kabalas Ol Malchus Shamayim*", available at various places on line, e.g., arikahn.blogspot.com