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## WOMEN'S LIBERATION — AN ORTHODOX RESPONSE

Conservative and Reform Jewish women involved in feminist movements generally call for the elimination of all Halakhic distinctions which place Jewish women in what they see as an inferior position.<sup>1</sup> Orthodox women committed to the Halakhah find the solutions proposed unacceptable. Yet, many thinking Orthodox Jewish women remain disturbed and unhappy. Although they are committed to the Halakhah, there is a definite feeling that their role as defined by the Halakhah is not as important as a man's.

Despite all the "Mothers Day Sermons" by rabbis telling women that they are intuitively more religious, despite annual resurrections of Devorah and Esther, there is a gnawing feeling among many Orthodox Jewish women that there is something more important about the man's role.

It appears that this has occurred as a result of an unintentional ramification of women's status in Halakhah, particularly as a result of the Halakhic view that men's role is learning Torah and women's role is primarily taking care of the home. Rabbi Berman's call for a moratorium on apologetics<sup>2</sup> is particularly well taken with regard to Orthodox women who can only view these apologetics as hypocritical.

Although raising children is vital, the Sages stress the overriding importance of learning Torah. Thus, concerning Torah

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learning we find the command "And you shall study it day and night."<sup>3</sup> Certainly nothing commands or extols the value of raising children (even all day). The Talmud is packed with ideas glorifying the learning of Torah: "Make the Study of Torah a regular habit";<sup>4</sup> "An empty headed man cannot be God fearing."<sup>5</sup> "He who has acquired Torah has acquired for himself the life in the World to Come."<sup>6</sup> "If you have studied much Torah, much reward will be given to you."<sup>7</sup> Is there reward for raising good children? Surely there is, but the Sages reserve their highest praise for the learning of Torah.

A young woman having imbibed this attitude is confronted with an atmosphere which clearly indicates that her total commitment to the "highest" endeavor is not necessary, since the obligation to learn Torah applies only to men. The feeling that women's role is not the preferred role creates within men and, even more detrimental, within women an attitude of disparagement toward the woman. Before elaborating on the dire consequences of this inadvertent ramification of the Halakhah regarding women's role, it is necessary to state what was the position of our Sages with regard to women and learning, and to attempt an understanding of what motivated their attitude.

### I

Whereas it is clear that the obligation to learn Torah applies only to men, the Sages are divided on whether women can be taught the Oral Law at all. Ben Azzai says, "A man is obligated to teach his daughter Torah." Rabbi Eliezer says, "If a man teaches his daughter Torah, it is as if he teaches her obscenity."<sup>8</sup>

Maimonides accepts the view of Rabbi Eliezer.<sup>9</sup> It should be stressed that the learning which is forbidden to women is those parts of the Oral Law which have no practical application for them. Clearly women must study those things which allow them to function Jewishly. But learning for the sake of learning, namely that ideal which the Torah holds so lofty is disapproved.

However, Maimonides goes on to say that if a woman does

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study she is rewarded for that study. How strange! The Halakhah accepts *a priori* that there will be exceptions.

Indeed there have always been exceptions. The same Rabbi Eliezer—responsible for the above quotation who concluded that “Better you should burn the words of Torah than give them to women”<sup>10</sup>—was himself married to a highly intellectual woman.<sup>11</sup> Particularly outstanding were Beruria, known for her Halakhic erudition, and Yaltha, the wife of Rav Nachman, a profound *Talmida Chachama*.<sup>2</sup> Rashi's daughters were well known for their learning. One wrote Responsa in the name of her father. Another wrote Commentaries on the Talmud. The “Tashbetz” (Shimon Ben Zemach Duran) quotes one of their opinions. Another female descendant of Rashi taught in a Yeshiva. It is noteworthy that she taught while sitting in a tent so as not to be seen by her students because of *tzeniut* (modesty). One of the most amazing examples of women scholars is that of the widow of Rabbi Yaacov Mizrachi from Kurdistan who lived in the sixteenth century. It is recorded that she took over the learning in the Yeshiva since her husband was preoccupied with the monetary affairs of the Yeshiva. In fact the number of women who excelled in Torah learning throughout the ages and throughout the lands of our dispersion is amazing. The interested reader can easily be acquainted with their lives and works.<sup>13</sup>

There were even women who acted as Rebbes in Hasidism, such as the Baal Shem's daughter Hodel, Fage the daughter of Hodel and the mother of Nachman Bratslav. Also famous was Chanah Chavah, the daughter of Reb Mordechai Twersky. Perhaps the most interesting was a woman known as the Ludimir Moid (Virgin).<sup>14</sup> The list goes on and on and the question mark grows bigger and bigger. Given so much proof of women's obvious intellectual talent, why did the Rabbis insist on an anti-intellectual approach? In the face of all the evidence, it is impossible to believe that the Rabbis believed women to be without intellectual ability. And yet, by their general attitude, our Sages sacrificed one-half of our national talent by not giving women equal opportunity — that is, by not creating an atmosphere conducive to such learning. What was their reason?

II

It is here that we come to the question of priorities. Of the 36 capital crimes of the Torah, 18 deal with crimes which undermine the family unit: homosexuality, incest, etc. The other 18 are things which ensure the preservation of *Klal Yisrael* (for example, *Shabbat*). It seems clear that the priority is survival and for the sake of survival much must be sacrificed. Indeed, if viewed in this light, homosexuality and *Chilul Shabbat* are indeed crimes of treason and thus deserving of the extreme penalty. In an interview with Golda Meir reporters asked her how she felt about her husband, career, etc. She said in her blunt, wonderfully honest way: "Gentlemen, I sacrificed my husband, I sacrificed my family." She herself would be the first to admit that it would be a national tragedy if every woman was a Golda. Nor does this apply to women alone. Brahms, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, Hobbes, Locke, Nietzsche were all bachelors or divorced and none had children. Perhaps if one were to make a thorough study of unusually creative minds we would find that on the whole, true intellectual creativity and family life are not always good partners. God help us if the ideal woman from our Sages point of view was the Virgin of Ludimir! Anyone who has had the deep pleasure of hearing Nechama Leibowitz or of studying her works knows how great is this woman who has literally thousands of students. She is childless. One wonders if she would have achieved such heights if she had children.

The Torah idea of a *Talmid Chakham* is one of full time commitment. It is not a matter of several hours. It is certainly possible for a woman to have a career and hire someone to do the housework as long as her primary commitment is to motherhood. (Too many women confuse washing floors with motherhood.) But if the primary commitment for women were to study Torah, this would, as Chazal see it, be detrimental to the proper functioning of the family. Women are called upon to sacrifice part of their Torah-learning potential for the sake of national survival.

The concept of sacrifice is alien to the modern feminist movement. But, sacrifice is inherent in Jewish thought. The Midrash

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says that Yitzchak was blind after the *Akedah*. Perhaps what the Midrash is telling us is that when there is a priority involved, one never gets away as a whole person. The point of the *Akedah* is that every Jew is a sacrifice on the altar.

The feminist notion of "self-fulfillment" is likewise foreign to Jewish thought and attempts at translation result in the derogatory expression, *sipuk atzmi*, which has a selfish connotation. Perhaps we can view self-fulfillment in a Jewish sense by understanding the Hebrew word "to fulfill." We use the expression *lékayeim mitzvah*, meaning to fulfill a commandment. Self-fulfillment would therefore indicate the reflexive, "*lehitkayaim*," which is the Hebrew word "to survive."<sup>15</sup> It seems that our Sages saw self-fulfillment in terms of the nation's preservation. The first woman was called Chavah, mother of all living. That is to say, she was responsible for survival in a way that Adam was not. The word for daughter is in fact *bat*, or house.

Now we can come to the vital question: How does this position of women respond to the problem of personal unhappiness? It does not. The aim of the Torah in our view is not solely personal happiness. There are many things in the system that cause personal unhappiness. But the system is not such that we can pick and choose. Our Sages present their view as a prescription for the majority of Jewish women. Of course there is room for exception in terms of a woman becoming a Torah scholar. But if those exceptions became the rule, the problem of the vanishing Jewish family might be even more critical than it is at present.

Nevertheless, although Orthodox women may accept the concept of sacrifice, although they accept devotion to national survival as their goal even at the expense of some personal happiness, still this in no way alleviates certain problems arising from the ramifications of not encouraging women to excel in Torah study.

Orthodox women have gotten the message rather clearly that their learning endeavor is not as important as men's. This leads to a situation where women who might have directed their talents toward higher Jewish learning instead seek Ph.D.'s and M.A.'s in secular fields. Since the home is not all time-consuming, Orthodox women with intellectual talent feel they must go into

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secular areas to achieve recognition. In addition, because women accept the fact that their learning for its own sake is not important, after their children are grown Orthodox women begin using their spare time in yoga classes, world literature courses, etc. It never dawns on them that this time might be spent learning Torah.

But more important than the waste of women's intellectual abilities is the assumption on the part of Jewish men and women that their role of caring for the home is not on the same level as the role of Jewish men whose job is learning Torah. This stems from the knowledge that their learning of Torah is not that important.

From the *Berit Milah* celebration onward, Orthodox society stresses the glory of the male endeavor leading to the attitude that women's religious role cannot be very significant. In a typical modern Orthodox family the father is sure to train his son to pray, but he is lax when it comes to his daughter. This neglect of women's religious selves is clearly not what the Halakhah intended. In a similar vein, although the Halakhah requires women to pray, to say grace after meals, etc., many Orthodox women do not fulfill these *mitzvot* assuming that only their husbands have to do them since women's role is mothering. There will, of course, always be some women who will view their religious observance as important, but for a large majority, we feel, there is an attitude that their religious being is not as important as a man's.

This is not what the Halakhah wished to convey. On the contrary, by excusing pregnant and nursing women from certain religious obligations, it is obvious that non-pregnant or nursing women are as obligated as men are to perform certain *mitzvot*. But the above attitude is a necessary psychological extension of the belief that a woman's job is primarily mothering. It is also a result of the joy experienced at the *B'rit Milah* and the Bar Mitzvah indicating to men and women that women's role is nothing to rejoice about, and that they are somehow less important.

It is in this regard that the Bar Mitzvah ceremony in synagogue takes on special significance. Granted that the festivities

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which accompany a boy's becoming a Bar Mitzvah should not be as lavish or as central as we make them; nevertheless, even a subdued Bar Mitzvah party indicates to every young boy and girl that at the age of 13 a male becomes responsible for observance of *mitzvot*. This is pressed home by the rabbi's talk to the Bar Mitzvah boy about his religious significance, and by the rabbi's comments to the parents congratulating them for raising their son in a Torah way. The young girl and her parents naturally assume that her becoming 12 does not carry the same religious importance.

Certainly something can be done within the framework of Halakhah to create a strong sense of pride in women coupled with the conviction that what they do is religiously significant. Thus it would be quite simple for a rabbi to announce the name of a Bat Mitzvah girl, praise her for her attendance at synagogue or Hebrew school, and congratulate her parents. Even a *kiddush* afterwards could be in order. (A festive meal celebrating a Bat Mitzvah has even been considered by some to be a *seudat mitzvah*).<sup>16</sup> Happily, a number of Orthodox synagogues do in fact have special ceremonies for girls.

This is not an attempt to do away with recognized differences, but merely to encourage men and women to view women's religious selves with importance. In addition, in today's world not to encourage women to learn and not to take their learning seriously is self defeating. For if the goal of ignoring women's potential is that of national survival, we must ask ourselves whether this goal is attainable with women who do not have a positive feeling about their religious selves. We may not wish to encourage the proliferation of Ludimir Virgins, but inadvertently, we are encouraging women and men to view a woman as "the Jew who isn't there."<sup>17</sup>

If the survival of the Jewish people is entrusted to our women, we must maximize their religious potential. And since learning is the primary vehicle through which this potential is fully realized, we cannot deny it to our women. This will lead to a positive self-image for women which will ultimately express itself in stricter religious observance and in a feeling of well-being in living as Halakhically committed Jewish women.

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### NOTES

1. See, for example, Esther Tricktin, "A Modest Beginning," *Response* (Summer, 1973), Number 18, pp. 83-89. Trude Weiss-Rosmarin, "The Unfreedom of the Jewish Woman"; *Sisters of Exile*. Ichud Habonim Labor Zionist Youth, New York, pp. 126-130.
2. *TRADITION*, Fall 1973.
3. Joshua 1:8.
4. *Pirkei Avot* 1:14.
5. *Pirkei Avot* 2:6.
6. *Pirkei Avot* 2:8.
7. *Pirkei Avot* 2:21.
8. *Sotah*, 20a. — A problem of semantics arises when translating the word "Tiflut" (obscenity). From the context of the Mishnah, it seems that the concern is that women, by virtue of the essential sexual nature of their personalities would suffer morally from delving into the intricate sexual details of the law. A discussion of this issue is not within the scope of this paper.
9. Maimonides, *Hilkhot Talmud Torah*, 1:1.
10. Jerusalem Talmud, *Sotah*, Chapter 3.
11. *Eruvin*, 63a.
12. For a more complete list of outstanding woman scholars mentioned in the Gemara, see *Otzar Yisrael, Nashim*, Volume VII, I. D. Eisenstein, New York, 1912, pp. 117-119.
13. See S. Ashkenazi, *Ha-Isha be-Aspaklaryat Hayahadut*, Vol. I, Tel Aviv, 1953.
14. H. M. Rabinowicz, "World of Hasidism" (1970). *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Volume 16, p. 627.
15. We are indebted to Rabbi Joseph Kapnik for this observation.
16. Rabbi Zundel Grossberg, in Tevet 5733 issue of *Ha-ma'ayon* considers a festive meal for members of the family celebrating a Bat Mitzvah to be *seudat mitzvah*. In *Noam* VII (5724), Rabbi Isaac Nissim quotes Rabbi A. Musapiak whose view is that a banquet for a Bat Mitzvah celebration is *seudat mitzvah*. For divergent views, however, see "Survey of Recent Halakhic Periodical Literature," in *TRADITION*, Fall, 1973.
17. Borrowed from Rachel Adler's "The Jew Who Wasn't There," *Response*, Summer, 1973, Number 18, Volume II, p. 77.