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## WOMAN'S ROLE — SOME ULTIMATE CONCERNS

"What is the role of woman in Jewish life?" is one of the most explosive issues debated in the Jewish community today. It is a question which cannot be ignored, but demands a thorough analysis and a positive approach emanating from that analysis. This paper will project some ultimate considerations concerning the question of woman's role in society and propose an approach based on these considerations.

The Women's Liberation Movement is generally acknowledged to be the leading social movement of today. Like any movement, it has a moderate wing, a militant wing, and a radical wing.

Much though it would seem that the desires of feminists are very clear, "The liberationists have no idea where their program would take us."<sup>1</sup> For example, in questioning the institutions upon which society is based, the movement attacks the institution of marriage as being detrimental to women.

According to Jessie Bernard, women have more of a stake in marriage because they put so many eggs in the marriage basket.<sup>2</sup> Bernard, in her studies, found that differences between married and unmarried women concerning their depression, dislike, and unhappiness, increased with age, suggesting that marriage has a traumatic effect on personality.<sup>3</sup> This, she states, may be explained by the fact that these women thought they were the major part of their husbands' lives when they got married, but then began to find out that the husband's work comes first, that the husbands are involved with adults, whereas the women are involved only with small children.<sup>4</sup>

Bernard questions whether "many women are 'happily married' because they have poor mental health?"

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There are more radical feminists than Bernard who would restructure society into altogether different groupings. For Phyllis Chesler,

the only acceptable groups are those that, unlike the family, can function as places of authentic responsibility and joy, as ways of supporting our deepest cravings for individual liberty, security, achievement, and love. Groups . . . which in any way kill the individual spirit . . . which enforce conformity, mediocrity, and conservatism—for *any reason* . . . such groupings are "male" and "female" rather than human groupings.<sup>6</sup>

Where does this all lead? Perhaps the following statement gives some indication:

Recognition of the validity of the lesbian life style and acceptance of lesbian activism in women's liberation is crucial to the women's movement's ultimate goal—a new, harmonious, cooperative, nonauthoritarian society in which men and women are free to be themselves.<sup>7</sup>

For Juliet Mitchell, the ultimate goal is the overthrow of the patriarchy, or the sequel to the overthrow of capitalism.<sup>8</sup>

The paranoid would very likely label women's liberation as a communist plot. Gilder is certainly not off the mark when he observes that the Women's Liberation Movement is designed to emancipate us from "the very institution that is most indispensable to overcoming our present social crisis: the family."<sup>9</sup> Admittedly, the radical wing of the movement does not speak for all women, but this wing is the most vocal and militant, and its philosophical base is one which weighs heavily and has great potential impact. The radicalism of today is often the moderate stance of tomorrow.

The radical wing of the liberationists would like to see an obliteration, even biologically, of the differences between man and woman. "Science must be used to either release women from biological reproduction—or to allow men to experience the process also."<sup>10</sup> The movement would destroy the differences and create one class of *human being*; no more men and women, only persons.

It is an ironic twist that the movement, which began by estab-

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lishing a separate category of people called women, should go full circle and desire a social state in which there are no women. It would be very hard to duplicate such an expression of male chauvinism.

Obliterating all sex differences is a more extreme extension of the Freudian notion that woman is essentially a castrated male. Clara M. Thompson is correct in denouncing this view and in insisting that women's identity is a positive reality.<sup>11</sup>

Cross-cultural studies indicate that males almost everywhere show greater sexual aggressiveness, compulsiveness, lack of selectivity, and are overwhelmingly more prone to shallow and indiscriminative erotic activity.<sup>12</sup> Thankfully, women are different.

## II

There are a number of aspects of the movement which call for some comment. There seems to be a slight case of misplaced priorities which are at work. Dr. Spock tells of a conversation he had with one of his students who said she would be bored with child-rearing at home, but not with the agonizing and enervating task of child psychiatry because "the psychiatrist is trying to *accomplish* something."<sup>13</sup>

It seems as if the movement has put all of its eggs in the career basket, but if career should be defined as the chief source of freedom and fulfillment, the psychological effect would be to devastatingly doom most women to feelings of failure and inadequacy.<sup>14</sup>

Montagu observes that in our materialism we have over-emphasized achievement in the arts, science, and technology and have forgotten the most valuable human quality, the capacity to be loving and co-operative.

And, as Gilder points out,

The woman assumes charges of what may be described as the domestic values of the community; its moral, aesthetic, religious, nurturant, social, and sexual concerns. In these values consist the ultimate goals of human life: all those matters that we consider of such supreme importance that we do not ascribe a financial worth to them.<sup>15</sup>

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It may be true that the materialism of capitalistic society is the enemy, but there must be alternatives other than destroying that society *in toto*, the baby with the bath water.

Another problem in the liberation movement is the self-centered approach. In Chesler's words:

"Women must try to convert the singleminded ruthlessness with which they yearn for, serve, and protect a mate or biological child into the "ruthlessness" of self-preservation and self-development.<sup>16</sup>

In the ambiance of this approach, women are urged to

Adopt the attitude that you are not trying to have an orgasm with your partner to please him but to please yourself.<sup>17</sup>

Not surprisingly, with this attitude of "what's in it for me," women do not heartily accept the role of enabler, and this apparently applies also to Jewish women.<sup>18</sup>

There is a psychological aspect of the what's-in-it-for-me approach which must be seriously considered; the fact that self-actualization is self-defeating and is, in fact, a bottomless pit. As Frankl puts it;

Human existence is essentially self-transcendence rather than self-actualization. Self-actualization is not a possible aim at all, for the simple reason that the more a man would strive for it, the more he would miss it. For only to the extent to which man commits himself to the fulfillment of his life's meaning, to this extent he also actualizes himself.<sup>19</sup>

Even giving of oneself to others because it brings satisfaction or self-actualization is seen by Frankl as self-defeating. It is an elusive dynamics which is as doomed to failure as finding identity through specific norms. The transcendent quality of meaning, or, in Jewish terms, *Imitatio Dei*, being immersed in the God-given lifestyle, is the crucial factor philosophically, as well as psychologically.

The bottomless pit of self-actualization is a vital consideration in any approach to the woman's role in society. Emphasis on self-gratification is likely to lead to frustration and more radical

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desires, in the desperate hope that somewhere in elusive space fulfillment will be found. It is possible that the radical wing, which, as has been shown, emphasizes the fulfillment of the self, is just a few steps ahead of where the moderate wing eventually will be forced. The notion of fulfilling the other has already been shown to be not only philosophically more laudable, but clinically more functional.<sup>20</sup> This must be carefully taken into account in the present circumstances.

### III

Concerning the relevance of women's liberation to Judaism, it must be appreciated that Jewish feminism is, in no small measure, related to feminism in general. Judith Plaskow observes that woman's sense of exclusion

arises partly from the fact that everything in our written tradition comes from the hands of men. The *halakhah*, most obviously, is the product of many generations of men. The same is true of the *aggadah*. The bible was written by men.<sup>21</sup>

As if there were a masculine plot deriving from God to subjugate the female.

To achieve balance, a number of individuals have come up with their own rituals. One couple has designed a ritual for the birth of a daughter to include *sheva brakhot* as in a wedding, with one of the blessings being, curiously, the blessing one recites upon seeing a rainbow. Also, there is a redeeming of the first born daughter.<sup>22</sup> Another contribution is a new form of *Bat Mitsvah* where instead of a *tallit*, the girls make headbands with scriptural verses of their own choosing inscribed on them.<sup>23</sup>

Some have introduced a new, and in their view, more balanced *Ketubah*.<sup>24</sup> Another proposed suggestion is that *Rosh Chodesh* become a woman's holiday, even though it already is a woman's holiday; the new suggestion being that it should be accompanied by special rituals and prayers.<sup>25</sup>

In this spirit, one feminist has performed radical surgery to make a Jewish woman's *Haggadah*. Her first task was to make God "Ruler of the universe" instead of "King."<sup>26</sup>

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The feminists probably don't realize that long ago Jews of Galieia had taken any sexist implications out of the reference to God, whom they addressed as *Hakudoish Burich He*. (*He* is the particular twist of the Jews of Galicia for *Hu*. *Hu* is masculine and *He* is feminine, or *Hu* is He and *He* is She.)

A more radical proposal is offered by Mary Gendler. She suggests two new rituals. The first is a ritual rupturing of the hymen, or should it be hyperson, soon after birth. The operation should, of course, be performed by a woman. The second suggestion is a special blessing and perhaps celebration, if the girl wishes, upon the occasion of her menstruation, which, assuredly, would have to be renamed womenstruation.<sup>27</sup>

Gendler's suggested new ritual is curiously missing from the otherwise beefy section on new rituals in the book edited by Koltun. Perhaps Koltun was embarrassed to include it, but it obviously shows an indication of where the trend might go, uncomfortable as it might be. Radicalism is not restricted to secular norms.

## IV

It has been contended that "The most formidable barrier to change and to the acceptance of women as authority figures and as the equals of men lies in the psychological rather than the halakhic realm."<sup>28</sup>

This observation, even if true, does not lessen the problem. Halakhah itself must be psychologically responsible. Indeed a very strong case can be made for the fact that halakhah is formulated on an authoratative understanding of the true nature of men and women and the means through which their characters can be molded and best traits elicited. In fact, in espousing belief in the Divine origin of the Torah, it is hardly possible to assume anything less. Bandwagoning here, even within the domain of halakhah but outside the psychological realm, is an approach which must be considered suspect. It might alleviate a momentary crisis, but in the end, may set into motion a harmful chain of events. Perhaps a more militant approach to the entire question of women's liberation should be pondered, an

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approach in which the uniqueness of women is positively espoused and elicited, and which is coupled with a more humble attitude, justly earned, by man.

Berman suggests that women's exemption from commandments associated with time<sup>29</sup> is "to assure that no legal obligation would interfere with the selection by Jewish women of a role which was centered almost exclusively in the home."<sup>30</sup>

One could go a step further and theorize that the differences were also intended to establish the radical otherness of male and female in that though they were alike in what they could not do, they were different in what they had to do. This specific exemptive quality within the halakhah, serves to program what halakhah obviously considered a healthy reality. The healthy reality is perhaps best illustrated through the remarks made by Berman. He says,

To suggest that women don't really *need* positive symbolic *mitsvot* because their souls are already more attuned to the Divine, would be an unbearable insult to men; unless it were understood, as it indeed is, that the suggestion is not really to be taken seriously but is intended solely to placate women. Could we really believe that after granting women this especially religiously attuned nature, God would entrust to men—with their inferior souls—the subsequent unfolding of His will for man as expressed in the *Halakhah*?<sup>31</sup>

The answer to Berman's question may very well be a resounding "yes." After all, did not Rav declare that, "The precepts were given to Israel for the purpose of shaping humankind."<sup>32</sup> Obviously, if men were given more precepts than women, it is because they are in need of more shaping, because women are in better shape than they are. If the Divine will is towards bringing humankind to a specific level of spiritual excellence, then the fact that men have more commandments merely indicates that they need it in order to get there. It is possible, even logical, to take seriously the fact that women do not need positive symbolic *mitsvot*. It is not to placate women; neither is it an unbearable insult to men as much as it is a bearable challenge.<sup>33</sup>

What is really gained by including women in the wearing of *titzit* or other norms from which they are exempt? It merely perpetuates the myth of the superiority of males as the prime

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actualizers of God's commandments and reduces women to the state of men, in need of the commandments to rise above and transcend their nature. It is a less extreme expression of the syndrome of sameness and a distortion of the unique essences of man and woman. It is time to deflect the discussion of women's role away from what may be merely halakhically permissible towards what is socially desirable; away from the immediate, particular concerns towards ultimate concerns.

### V

The notion of male inferiority, honestly projected, must be countered with the positive projection of woman's greatness.

Montagu asserts that "It is the function of women to teach men how to be human."<sup>34</sup> True humanness, in Montagu's concept, involves true love. Montagu claims that woman knows what true love is, and cautions against women being tempted by the false idols man has created.

Woman must stand firm and be true to her own inner nature; to yield to the prevailing false conceptions of love, of unloving love, is to abdicate her great evolutionary mission to keep human beings true to themselves . . . to help them to realize their potentialities for being loving and co-operative. Were woman to fail in this task, all hope for the future of humanity would depart from the world.<sup>35</sup>

Gilder echoes Montagu when he says that "there is no way that women can escape their supreme responsibilities in civilized society without endangering civilization itself."<sup>36</sup>

Gilder is even more assertive concerning the importance of the family. He believes that the family is the "only agency which can induce truly profound and enduring changes in its members."<sup>37</sup> Within the family there is an essential role for both man and woman. Gilder claims that the delicate balance between inner space and outer space is not only social reality, but healthy reality. Women are basically superior and integral to the family. Men cannot be expected to remain as integral parts of the family if their roles are obviously inferior to women and even demand open subordination. In the trade-off, the husband must be at



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least the principal provider. In a matriarchy, the husband does not even do this and, having no tie to the family, will almost always leave.<sup>38</sup>

Within the family, child-rearing is one of the most vital staples. A society which places a great emphasis on child-rearing is likely to be generous and cooperative. In this emphasis there is no evidence from cross-cultural studies that roles can be switched back and forth.<sup>39</sup>

The male population must approach the women's liberation situation with humility and honesty, placing into concrete reality the essentiality of women rather than just parroting nice statements.

To honestly project the absolute essentiality of women for civilization and to militantly defend their unique role as not only necessary for the survival of Judaism, but of society itself, demands, besides humility, the capacity to weather the present storm in the honest conviction that a perhaps unpopular stand is nevertheless the correct one.

It is not a matter of being patronizing, or apologetic, or even of encouraging women to be obsessed with their own superiority. Female chauvinism is as much a malaise as male chauvinism. It is more a message for the male population to become convinced of their own inferiority relative to women, and to recognize, in humility, their absolute dependence on women and hence, their deep-rooted and uncompromising appreciation of them.<sup>40</sup> This, they must do with militancy.

## VI

Margaret Mead's findings, from anthropological studies, were that women are most content not when granted influence, power or wealth, but when the female role of wife and mother is properly valued.<sup>41</sup> At stake are not only woman's contentedness, but the integrity and stability of society in general and Jewish life in particular. A non-apologetic, affirmative stance to women is vital.

There are obvious and subtle ways in which this stance can be incorporated. Perhaps rabbis today are paying the price for

egocentrically emphasizing the importance of attending *shul* instead of emphasizing the Jewish home. Also, it is a retrograde step to advocate glorious *Bat Mitzvah* celebrations to convince girls they are as important as boys. If anything, *Bar Mitzvah*, modern-style, has done wonders in denigrating Jewish values and in discouraging Jewish continuity. To have girls share in this farce is to again reduce them to the level of boys.

Perhaps, too, in deciding who should be honored by the community, attention should be given not to those who have been enabled, but to the enablers, who are, in the Talmudic view,<sup>42</sup> greater than the doers. The sincerity with which this is approached may convince women that man's conception of their importance is not merely apologetic, but is honestly felt and meant; not demanded, but appreciated.

The thesis herein presented is not intended to "relegate" women to the home. The perspective proposed here would indicate the reverse, that men have been "relegated" to the outside world, to *outer* space. But through some fancy public relations work or distorted world view, the *outer* space has gained greater prominence, such that the experts of inner space somehow feel imprisoned. Inner space has been devalued, and the march of humanity towards its destiny has been taken out of the basic parameters of the home and placed in the streets.

The flow of society, its value orientation and moral commitment, gains its most noble expression from a value-laden and value-actualized inner space; from the interactions between humans in the intimate community.

Women's liberation is not only the leading social movement of the day; it is also society's greatest challenge. The way society responds to the challenge of Women's liberation may decide the face, or facelessness, of the future. The specific Jewish response must see the issue not only in narrow, parochial terms, but also in terms of the effect the Jewish stance would have on society at large. The Jewish stance should entertain quite seriously reorienting the focus or inner space, and vigorously work to bring self-exiled man back to where he belongs.

One Jewish feminist claims that "the challenge of feminism, if answered, can only strengthen Judaism."<sup>43</sup> This observation may

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be correct, but the answer might not be what feminists expect.

From a halakhic, psychological, and societal view, the Jewish answer may very well be: "to feminism, no; to women in their full uniqueness and authenticity, absolutely yes!"<sup>44</sup>

### NOTES

1. George F. Gilder, *Sexual Suicide*, New York: Bantam Books, 1975, p. 7.
2. Jessie Bernard, "The Paradox of the Happy Marriage," in *Women in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness*, edited by Vivian Gornick and Barbara K. Moran, New York: New American Library, 1972, p. 149.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 153. The weakness in this argument resides in its drawing conclusions from the "sick" rather than "healthy" model.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 154.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 157.
6. Phyllis Chesler, *Women and Madness*, New York: Avon Books, 1973, p. 282.
7. Sidney Abbott and Barbara Love, "Is Women's Liberation a Lesbian Plot?" in *Women in Sexist Society*, p. 621. In other words, the new society would be able to manage all its pleasures and turn-ons without men. Lest one think that this is a new twist to the social structure, long ago such practices seemed to abound. In the Biblical admonition to keep away from the abominations of Egypt and Canaan, the observation is made; "and what did they (in Egypt and Canaan) do? The man would marry a man and the woman would marry a woman" (*Sifra*, Vayikra, 18:3).
8. Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, New York: Random House, 1974.
9. Gilder, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
10. Chesler, *op. cit.*, p. 299. Recently it has been found that many expectant fathers experience nausea, dizziness, heartburn, headache, abdominal cramps, etc., during their wives' pregnancies, all of which mysteriously disappear after delivery. But none of these fathers has actually had a baby. Ironically, the Talmud (*Shabbat* 53b) reports a situation in which a sexual juxtaposition took place. A man whose wife had just died and could not afford nursing fees miraculously grew breasts and fed his child. There are differing reactions of admiration and contempt for the fellow, but even admiration would not obtain if the person himself makes biological changes rather than it being caused miraculously.
11. Clara M. Thompson, *On Women*, New York: New American Library, 1971, p. 41.
12. Gilder, *op. cit.*, p. 22. One of the key points in Gilder's work is that there are no human beings, but men and women, and they commit sexual suicide if

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they reject their divergent sexuality.

13. Benjamin Spock, *Decent and Indecent*, Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Publications, 1971, p. 54.

14. Gilder, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

15. Gilder, *ibid.*, p. 259.

16. Chesler, *op. cit.*, p. 301.

17. Jean Baer, *How to be an Assertive (Not Aggressive) Woman in Life, in Love, and on the Job: A Total Guide to Self-Assertiveness*, Scarboroughs, Ontario: New American Library, 1976, p. 236.

18. Saul J. Berman, "The Status of Women in Halakhic Judaism," *Tradition*, Vol. 14, No. 2, Fall 1973, p. 9. Berman claims that it is becoming more difficult for women to accept the idea that their religious potential is exhausted in enabling their husbands and children to fulfill commandments, as expressed in the Talmud (*Berakhot* 17a).

In another place, the Talmud asserts that "One who causes others to do good is greater than the doer." (*Baba Batra* 9a) Clearly any enabling is lauded\* and praiseworthy. What is unwelcome is the chauvinism bred into the male who expects, even demands this enabling from his wife, to the extent of it being a put-down, if not worse.

19. Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, New York: Washington Square Press, 1968, p. 175.

20. See the author's "Divorce: The Problem and the Challenge," *Tradition*, Vol. 16, No. 1, Summer, 1976, pp. 127-133, where self-centeredness is shown to be a primary cause of marital breakdown and immersion in the other (partner) is considered vital not only for proper sexual expression but also to ensure a healthy, viable and lasting human relationship. It is another instance where clinical function and philosophical truth coalesce.

21. Judith Plaskow, "The Jewish Feminist: Conflict in Identities," *The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives*, edited by Elizabeth Koltun, New York, Schocken Books, 1976, p. 4. The reader will notice that "plaskow" does not capitalize *halakhah*, *aggadah*, even "bible." She does not see the Bible as a Divine document; it is a book written by men. There is an obvious theological issue at hand here. Surely plaskow would not accuse God of being sexist, as then anything contrary would go against God. The feminists would like to believe that God is on their side, so that it is better to make the Bible a work of men and thus explain away the sexism in it. The firm belief of Jews in the Divine origin of Torah remains unshaken, and what plaskow calls the sexism of the Jewish written tradition is placed into proper perspective further along in this article.

22. Daniel I. Leifer and Myra Leifer, "On the Birth of a Daughter," *The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives*, pp. 21-30.

23. Cherie Koller-Fox, "Women and Jewish Education: A New Look at Bat Mitzvah," *op. cit.*, pp. 40-41.

24. Daniel I. Leifer, "On Writing New Ketubot," *op. cit.*, pp. 50-61.

25. Arlene Agus, "This Month is For You: Observing Rosh Chodesh as A Women's Holiday," *op. cit.*, pp. 84-93.

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26. Aviva Cantor Zuckoff, "Jewish Woman's Haggadah," *op. cit.*, p. 95.
27. Mary Everett Gendler, "Sarah's Seed: A New Ritual for Women," *Response*, Winter, 1974-75, No. 24, p. 73.
28. Paula Hyman, "The Other Half: Woman in the Jewish Tradition," in *The Jewish Woman, New Perspectives*, p. 109.
29. *Berakhot* 20b.
30. Berman, *op. cit.*, p. 17. The basic thrust of this paper indicates that the Biblical-Rabbinic "programming" correlates quite decisively with what is crucial for developing a humane society. Ultimately, any visions of global redemption must start and concentrate on the basic category of human existence, the home. It is the sum of these vital parts which really dictates the flow of society.
31. Berman, *op. cit.*, p. 9.
32. *Bereshit Rabbah* 44:1; *Vayikrah Rabbah* 13:3.
33. In this context, the famous Talmudic statement "One who is commanded and fulfills is greater than one who is not commanded and fulfills" (*Kiddushin* 31a) takes on added meaning. Since commandments are to raise the person to a more exalted level, its ultimate purpose is perceived more in those to whom the commandment is addressed rather than to those for whom the commandment was not considered necessary. Those fulfilling the precept though not obliged indulge in the redundant exercise of reaching a plateau which Halakhah perceives they have already reached.
34. Montagu, *op. cit.*, p. 159.
35. Montagu, *ibid.*, p. 216.
36. Gilder, *op. cit.*, p. 264.
37. Gilder, *ibid.*, p. 77.
38. Gilder, *ibid.*, p. 113.
39. Gilder, *ibid.*, p. 59.
40. Rabbi Schneur Zalman, in explaining the verse "A virtuous woman is her husband's crown" (*Proverbs* 12:4), says that in Messianic times the majesty of woman will no longer be hidden and will be the crown clearly visible on the head of man. When, under the *huppah*, we pray for the time the voice of the *Kallah* will be heard and conclude "Who makes the groom to rejoice with the bride," this indicates that in the future the voice of the bride will be the main one. (*Seder Tefilot Mikal Hashanah*, New York: Kehot Publishing Company, 1965, pp. 276-277.)
- Rabbi Schneur Zalman's views are consistent with the view proposed here that the abundance of *mitsvot* directed to men do not indicate superiority and actually indicate the reverse.
41. Margaret Mead, *Male and Female: A Study of the Sexes in a Changing World*, New York: Dell Books, 1968, p. 110. *The New York Times* of June 27, 1977, p. 31, which reported my remarks at the Rabbinical Council of America convention upon which this paper is based, said I had "unearthed" a quotation from Margaret Mead, referring to this quotation. Actually, Margaret Mead did the unearthing, and what she says indicates that the approach of society in trying to mediate the male-female dispute is as unfair to women as it is to society in general.

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42. *Baba Batra* 9a.

43. Paula Hyman, "The Other Half: Women in the Jewish Tradition," *op. cit.*, p. 112.

44. *The New York Times*, in the same article, reported that several women were insulted by my remarks. It is left to the reader to decide whether these remarks are insulting at all, and if so, whether in fact it is the men who are the target.