

Yitro 5779

Addressing Gender and Other Imbalance within Society



Rabbi Aaron Goldstein
26 January 2019

Our Sages expounded on the verse:

Beeishit Rabbah 18:2

“And the Eternal one called to [Moses] out of the mountain, saying, ‘Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel...(19:3).”

God spoke to the Patriarchs, who are referred to as ‘the mountain,’ for it says “Hear, O you mountains, the Eternal One’s controversy (Micah 6:2).”

“And Moses went up to God...”

He went up in a cloud and descended in a cloud, the merit to the fathers amended and descended with him.

“Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob...”

This refers to the women (R. Yose refers to his wife as ‘his house.’). God says, ‘Tell them main outlines such as they can understand.’

“...and declare to the children of Israel.”

This refers to the men. ‘Tell them the precepts, for they are able to understand [them all].

Another explanation:

Why did God command the women first? - Because they are prompt in the fulfilment of the commandments.

Another explanation:

So that they should introduce their children to the study of the Torah.

R. Tachlifa of Caeserea said that God said: ‘When I created the world, I only commanded Adam [of what he could and could not eat of] and Adam passed on the message, with the result that Eve transgressed and upset the world [metaphorically she upset the state of obedience]; if I do not now call upon the women first, the Torah may be nullified. For this reason it says first, “Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob”

There are many more explanations of who God was speaking to and when during Matan Torah, the Giving of Torah or Revelation . The Sages - all male - give their particular spin with a number of examples above. However, the literal sense of the Torah has God giving Torah with full gender equality. Revelation was for all. God calls the Israelites with no differentiation, a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex 19:6)," and the people as a whole respond, "All the Eternal has spoken, we will do (Ex 19:8)."

Therefore, how do we deal with a statement in our Sacred Text that today we would see as blatant sexism?

"And [Moses] said to the People, "Be ready for the third day: do not go near [i.e. have sexual intercourse with] a woman Exodus 19:15."

This is a continuation of the bias that Moses and before him Jethro perpetrate - when seeking leaders it is only to men they turn. As Rabbi Julie Gordon notes (in 'The Women's Torah Commentary'), "Why didn't Jethro consider women as capable leaders? Miriam, for example, is described a few chapters before as a prophet. Jethro's own daughter Tziporah had shown decisive action in the desert when she circumcised their son (Ex 4:25). Why did Moses accept Jethro's implicit negation of women as leaders?" she asks.

Rashi, seeks to excuse Moses but does so with an explanation that is purely halachik perpetrating the patriarchal fear of female sexuality and menstruation.

But why does Rashi even need to seek excuse for Moses? He notes that God did not instruct Moses thus. It was only from Moses mouth it is reported that there was a limitation on women. Other medieval commentators do not challenge Rashi: there is no need to talk further of such matters. Another generation of men pass on their patriarchal power.

This past Shabbat, our Kabbalat Torah classes joined peers from seven other Liberal Judaism congregations. As well as a whole lot of fun, bonding and socialising, they went on a Liberal Judaism scavenger hunt around the West End culminating at the Montagu Centre - named after one of our Movement's founders, Lily Montagu. There, they learnt about Lily from Rabbi Jackie Tabick, the first female rabbi ordained in the UK. In their feedback forms, almost equal with a gangashalf event around the film Shrek - don't ask! - the popularity of their encounters with Lily Montagu and Rabbi Jackie Tabick soared. These women were a revelation to them all, girls and boys alike.

Be part of nurturing Jewish children who do not discriminate in the ways that generations might have done before - largely unintentionally, sometimes through societal constructs and occasionally enshrined in law - is one of the principles that drive my thinking in NPLS and Liberal Judaism. Why is Liberal Judaism championing thinking on transgender issues and those that some might see on the periphery of society? On the basis that we wish to enable all who wish to be part of a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation," and respond, "All the Eternal has spoken, we will do."