

Thank God for Sisterhood (December 2007)

It's a commonly accepted notion that the Hebrew Bible is written from a decidedly male perspective. Of the men, by the men, and for the men. Abraham. Moses. David. It was a man who stood on top of Mount Sinai and received the Torah. It was the men who were counted in the census. It was men who were formally entered into the covenant community through the ritual of circumcision. (The latter rite has periodically been debated as to whether or not it should be considered a privilege.)

There is, however, another way to look at the role of women in the Torah. While it is true that women appear to assume the junior role in the Bible's narratives, always seeming to play second fiddle to those dominant male characters, it is not—I think—an accident that much of the text's central plot lines are dependent upon the essential actions of the Bible's female protagonists.

On first look, Rebekkah is presented as a manipulative mother and wife, intent on getting her favorite child the family blessing. But, in fact, she is merely acting on a private prophecy that it is Jacob who is fated to be the father of the Jewish people. She is taking destiny into her own hands (because her husband Isaac certainly won't). So, too, with Tamar, who deceptively seduces her father-in-law Judah in order that her husband's name (and lineage) should not be lost to perpetuity. She not only salvages Judah's failure to fulfill his responsibility of levirate marriage, her proactive deed establishes a line that will ultimately lead to King David and the Messiah. The truth is that the Tanakh is filled with this common motif of women who orchestrate the course of sacred history—Pharaoh's daughter, Tziporah (Moses' wife), Deborah, Yael, Esther, even Eve. Especially Eve. Simply put, without them and their willingness to act, God's plan would never come to be.

None of this is to suggest that men or women are more or less important than the other. It is simply to take note that our Biblical tradition seems to be acutely aware of the integral role played by women in the actualization of what is best for the Jewish people. It is the same way today.

This month, on Shabbat Hanukkah (December 7), we will honor the women of Sisterhood (and their predecessors) without whom Temple Ner Tamid would not exist. It was women who 90 years ago gathered together to form Camp B'nai Zion, a summer program designed to awaken the nascent Jewish identities of their children. That camp would morph into a religious school,

then to a synagogue, that would give rise to another synagogue, both of which would reunite into what we now call Temple Ner Tamid. But there is more. For all those years when synagogue leadership was restricted to men, it was the Sisterhood that sustained the heartbeat of the congregation's soul, particularly through its financial support of education and Shabbat celebrations. And as those gender barriers began to dissolve, it was those same women who rushed to assume the mantle of community leadership. I really don't have to go on, do I?

But you do. Your presence at this celebration is not simply requested, it is required. It is mitzvah. In the truest sense of the word, it is mitzvah, it is 'imperative' that the community present itself to affirm and show gratitude for all that these women have done for us and our children. Sometimes the greatest mitzvah is just showing up.

Of course, what the Sisterhoods of Temples Ner Tamid, B'nai Zion and Menorah have done is profoundly more than "show up". On the contrary, they—like the mothers of Torah—willingly accepted the sacred charge as Malachei Elohim, Messengers of the Most High. Thank God. And thank them.