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One of the things that modern Jews struggle with is the sometimes vast distance between the biblical or early rabbinic understandings of gender roles and our own modern views. Sometimes, though, the distance between the two is not as great as it would appear at first glance. An example can be found in an explanation of how the law was given to our people at Mount Sinai, the central event in this week's parshah.

The *midrash*, the folk wisdom of our tradition, explains that God told Moses to first go to the Israelite women and explain the Torah to them, then to go to the men. The midrash gives three reasons for doing so: First, the experience with Adam and Eve in Eden taught God that telling the men without telling the women could lead to transgression. (God told Adam not to eat the fruit, but not Eve.) Second, since women are more scrupulous about observing religious precepts, they would ensure that the men would be as well. Third, the women could be counted on to teach the laws of the Torah to their children.

This tradition makes certain assumptions about women and their role in family life. God had learned the lesson that it was a bad idea not to include women in the process of revelation and, to take that a step further, God assumes that women are not only permitted to know Jewish tradition, but that they must know it in order to keep their husbands from transgression. In addition to their role as the conservators of Jewish tradition, the midrash also sees them as transmitters of the tradition to the next generation. In all these ways, this ancient midrash reads more like a modern feminist approach than a traditional one, yet it dates to no later than the ninth century, and is possibly much older. Like so many other commentaries, the midrash complicates, and deepens, our understanding of Torah. In doing so, it collapses the distance we sometimes feel between the time of the original revelation at Sinai and God's ongoing revelation in our own time.

Shabbat shalom