

The importance of women

In this week's Torah portion, *Yitro*, God gives the Torah to the Jews. Here is the preamble:

וּמֹשֶׁה עָלָה, אֶל-הָאֱלֹהִים; וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו יְהוָה, מִן-הָהָר לֵאמֹר, כֹּה תֹאמַר לְבֵית יִעֲקֹב, וְתִגִּיד לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

And Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying: "Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob, and declare to the children of Israel..." [Ex. 19:3]

Why the repetition? Nothing in Torah is superfluous. Reason:

-“The house of Jacob” (Bet Yaakov) refers to the women (because they are in charge of the house) and

-“The children of Israel” refers to the men. Indeed, a man's wife was frequently referred to as his “house”. The Mishna says:

His ‘house’ means his ‘wife’. [Yoma 2a]

The Talmud adds:

R. Yosei said: I have never called my wife “my wife”... [but rather] “my home”. [Shabbat 118b]

-Midrash:

Rabbi Pinchas said: On the eve of Shabbat, the Israelites stood at Mount Sinai, with the men and the women apart. [God] said to Moses, “Go, speak to the daughters of Israel [and ask them] whether they wish to receive the Torah.” Why were the women asked [first]? Because **it is the way of men to follow the opinions of women**, as it is said, “Thus shall you say to the House of Jacob” -- these are the women -- “and declare to the Children of Israel” -- these are the men. They all replied as with one mouth, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do and we will listen” [Ex. 24:7]. [Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer 41; also Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael]

-Another midrash:

Why did [God tell Moses to teach] the women first? Because they are prompt in fulfilling the commandments.

Another explanation: So they should guide their children along the path of the Torah.

Rabbi Tachlifa of Caesarea said: The Holy One, blessed be He, said: “When I created the world, I only commanded Adam, the first person. Afterwards, Eve, too, was commanded [by Adam], and the result was that she transgressed and

upset the world. So, if I do not now call out to the women first, they will nullify the Torah.” [Exodus Rabbah 28:2]

This means: If the women go second, they will be inclined to think the commandments are really for men, and be lax about their observance, and their husbands will follow.

-Rabbenu Bahya (11th-century Spain):

Note difference between “say” (*tomar*) to the women, a soft form of speech, and “declare” (*taged*) to the men, a stronger form implying firmness, even harshness. Moses was to express the commandments to the women in a manner suited to their compassionate, maternal nature. Women set the tone of the home and they are the ones responsible to inculcate the love of Torah in their children, a task to which their loving nature is best suited.

-Rashi (11th-century France):

“Thus” means “in these words and in this order”.

“Say to the house of Jacob”. These are the women: speak gently to them.

“Declare to the children of Israel”: These are the men: explain the punishments and the details to them, “declare” (*taged*) to them things that are as bitter as wormwood (*gidin*).

-Maharsha (17th-century Poland):

The verse should be understood as:

Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob, [that is, the women, so they can in turn] declare to the children of Israel [that is, her own children]...” [Maharsha on Sotah 21a]

So God wanted to inspire the women to be zealous in transmitting Torah to their children.

Women distinguished themselves in three ways in the Torah:

-First, they did not complain to God. Only the men complained:

Why has the Lord brought us to this land, to fall by the sword, that *our wives* and our children should be a prey? And they said to one another: Let us appoint a leader to return [us] to Egypt. [Num. 14:3-4]

“Our wives and children” indicates that only the men were talking.

-Second, the women were not a party to the sin of the Golden Calf. The Midrash says:

In that generation, women would repair what men tore down. When Aaron said, “Take off your golden earrings [to make the Golden Calf],” the women refused

and protested. [Ex 32:2-3]. They did not participate in making the Golden Calf.
[Midrash Tanchuma, Pinchas 7]

-Third, the women were particularly cheerful in celebrating the Exodus.

The Torah says:

Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women went out after her with tambourines, dancing. And Miriam answered them, "Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously..." [Ex. 15:20-21]

French proverb: Ce que femme veut, Dieu veut. (Whatever woman wants, God wants.)