

The Importance of Women in Judaism

What does Jewish tradition say about women? Answers below.

The women lead in Torah observance

When God gives the Torah to the Jews, He uses the following preamble:

וּמֹשֶׁה עָלָה, אֶל-הָאֱלֹהִים; וַיְקַרָּא אֵלָיו יְהוָה, מִן-הָהָר לֵאמֹר, כֹּה תֹאמַר לְבֵית יַעֲקֹב, 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. Our Sages said:

- “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:

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

Note that the women are listed first. The Midrash then goes further:

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. [Also,] 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 them.

A popular French saying is, « Ce que femme veut, Dieu veut. » (Whatever woman wants God wants.)

-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" (first word in quote) 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.

How did the women distinguish themselves in the Torah?

Women distinguished themselves in four 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, they were not a party to the sin of the spies. The Torah says:

The Lord spoke to Moses and to Eleazar the son of Aaron the priest, saying, “Take a census of all the congregation, from twenty years old and upward... who are able to go to war in Israel...” In this [census] no man survived from the original census of Moses and Aaron, for the Lord had said of them, “They shall surely die in the wilderness.” And there was not a single man them left. [Num 26:64-5]

The census mentions men only. Why were the women not counted? Because they were not subject to the decree against the spies, as they loved the Holy Land.

-Third, 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]

-Fourth, 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]

The women of the Exodus

The story of the Exodus abounds with righteous women working behind the scenes to foil the evil plans of men. Both the Talmud and the Midrash say:

Rabbi Avira [some say Rabbi Akiva] expounded: The Israelites were delivered from Egypt as a reward for the righteous women who lived in that generation. [Sotah 11b; Ex. R. 1:12]

Who are these women? There are the midwives Shifrah and Puah; Moses' mother Yocheved; Moses' sister Miriam; Pharaoh's daughter Bitya; Jethro's seven daughters; Moses' wife Tziporah; Aaron's wife Elisheva; and all Israelite women as a group. Let's examine their contributions one by one.

First, the Israelite women as a whole. They give birth to a lot of babies.

The Torah says:

And the children of Israel were fruitful, and proliferated, and multiplied, and grew very, very strong. [Ex. 1:7]

The Midrash quantifies this statement:

[This means each woman] would give birth to six [children]: Fruitful, one; proliferated, two; multiplied, three; grew strong, four; very, very; five and six. [Midrash Tanchuma; Rashi]

The Midrash tells us how Pharaoh planned to reduce the Jewish birth rate:

Pharaoh [made the Israelites build bricks without straw] and commanded that they should not be allowed to sleep in their homes... He reasoned: If they are not allowed to sleep in their homes [with their wives], they will not be able to give birth to children. [Exodus R. 1:12]

But the Talmud tells us how the women devised a strategy to thwart

Pharaoh's plan:

When [the Israelite women] went to draw water, the Holy One, blessed be He, arranged that small fishes should enter their pitchers, which they drew up half full of water and half full of fishes. They then set two pots on the fire, one for hot water and the other for the fish, which they carried to their husbands in the field. They washed [their husbands], anointed them, fed them, gave them to drink. After eating and drinking, the women took bronze mirrors and looked at them with their husbands. The wives said "I'm prettier than you," and the husbands replied, "I'm more beautiful than you." In this manner they aroused themselves to desire, had intercourse and were "fruitful and multiplied"... After the women had conceived they returned to their homes, and when the time of childbirth arrived, they went and were delivered in the field beneath the apple-tree... The Holy One, blessed be He, sent down someone from the high heavens, who washed and straightened the limbs [of the babies] as a midwife would... When the Egyptians noticed [the babies], they went to kill them, but a miracle occurred so that [the babies and their mothers] were swallowed in the ground, and [the Egyptians] brought oxen and ploughed over them... After they had departed, [the Israelite women with their babies] broke through [the earth] and came forth like the grass of the field... and when [the babies] had grown up, they came in flocks to their homes... At the time the Holy One, blessed be He, revealed Himself by the Sea of Reeds, they recognized Him first, as it is said [in the Torah]:

This is my God and I will praise Him. [Ex. 15:2]

[Sotah 11b; Midrash Tanchuma, Pikudei 9]

The Midrash adds in connection with that incident:

When God told Moses to make the Tabernacle, the whole people stood up and offered whatever they had -- silver, gold, copper, etc. Everyone eagerly offered their treasures. The women... brought [their]... mirrors... Moses... was furious... What do I need mirrors for? Then God said to Moses, "Moses, these you

despise! These mirrors produced all these babies in Egypt! Take them, and make of them a copper basin with a copper stand for the priests to sanctify themselves.” And it is said [in the Torah]:

And he made the basin of bronze, and its pedestal of bronze, from the mirrors of the women. [Ex. 38:8]

[Midrash Tanchuma, Pikudei 9]

Second, **Shifrah and Puah**, the Egyptian midwives, are ordered by Pharaoh to kill all male Jewish babies. They don’t, saying:

The Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women. They are lively, and deliver before we midwives arrive!

Therefore God dealt well with the midwives, and the [Jewish] people multiplied, and became very mighty. And it came to pass, because the midwives feared God, that He made them houses [that is, a distinguished descendance]. [Ex. 1:19-21]

They knew what was morally right and had the courage to act on it.

So, having failed with the midwives, Pharaoh resorts to Plan B:

And Pharaoh charged all his people, saying: Every son who is born you shall throw into the river, and every daughter you shall let live. [Ex. 1:22]

The Talmud tells us that Moses’ father, Amram, reacts by saying “Then we will all divorce our wives and stop having children altogether!”

But his daughter **Miriam**, Moses’ sister, successfully argues with him and makes him reverse his decision:

Amram, Moses’ father and head of the Sanhedrin, said that it was useless for the Israelites to beget children. So he stopped having intercourse with his wife Yocheved, and even divorced her, even though she was pregnant [with Moses]. Then, all the Israelites arose and likewise divorced their wives.

Then his daughter Miriam said to him: Your decree is more severe than Pharaoh’s decree: Pharaoh’s decree affects only the male children, but your decree affects males and females alike. Pharaoh’s decree affects only this world, but yours also affects the World to Come, because babies born and killed will enjoy the afterlife, but unborn babies will not. Besides, since Pharaoh is wicked, there is some doubt whether his decree will be fulfilled, but you are righteous and your decree will definitely be fulfilled.

So he took his wife back and was followed by all the Israelites, who also took their wives back. [Ex. R. 1:13; Sotah 12a]

Then, **Yocheved**, Moses’ mother, gives birth to Moses, and three months later puts him in a basket on the river, hoping someone finds him and saves him from Pharaoh’s decree.

Bitya, Pharaoh's daughter, saves the baby, defying her father's wishes.

The Midrash tells us that her maidens object, and God strikes them dead:

They said to her: "Your Highness, it is the general rule that when a king makes a decree, his own family will obey that decree even if everyone else transgresses it. But you are flagrantly disobeying your father's command." Whereupon [the angel] Gabriel came and smote all of them [but one] to the ground. [Ex. R. 1:23]

Miriam, Moses' sister, watches the scene and offers to get a Hebrew wet nurse for Baby Moses, and gives the job to his own mother, Yocheved!

Now, Pharaoh must have found out, in time, what his daughter did. Why did he allow her to raise a Hebrew child in his own house? The Midrash answers: Against all expectations, Pharaoh liked Moses!

Pharaoh also used to kiss and hug [Moses]. [Ex. R. 1:26]

Maybe he expected him to grow up hating his own people, adding insult to injury.

Later, Moses rescues **Jethro's seven daughters** at the well. They introduce him to Jethro, who helps him:

And the priest of Midian [Jethro] had seven daughters. They came and drew water, and filled the troughs to water their father's flock. And the shepherds came and drove them away. But Moses stood up and helped them, and watered their flock.

And when they came to... their father, he said, "How is it that you have come so soon today?"

And they said, "An Egyptian delivered us from the hand of the shepherds, and also drew enough water for us, and watered the flock."

And he said to his daughters, "And where is he? Why is it that you have left the man? Call him, that he may eat bread."

And Moses was content to dwell with the man, and [Jethro] gave him his daughter Tzipporah [in marriage]. [Ex. 2:16-21]

A son is born to **Tzipporah** and Moses. Tzipporah saves Moses' life when he fails to circumcize their son on time:

The Lord met [Moses] and sought to kill him. Then [Moses' wife] Tzipporah took a sharp stone, and cut off the foreskin of her [newborn] son... So [God] let [Moses] go... [Ex. 4:24-26]

Aaron's wife **Elisheva** enjoys high highs and endures low lows on the same day. The Midrash tells us:

Elisheva did not enjoy happiness in the world. True, she experienced five joys in one day: Her brother-in-law [Moses] was [like] a king, her brother [Nachshon] was a prince, her husband [Aaron] was High Priest, her two sons [Nadav and

Abihu] were Deputy High Priests, and her grandson Pinchas [was Deputy High] Priest to lead in battle... But her sons entered to offer incense and were burnt [to death], and her joy was changed to mourning. [Lev. R. 19:2, Song of Songs R. 3:13, Eccl. R. 2:3, Zev. 102a]

Women never “get over” the loss of a child.

Rabbi Isaac Luria, known as the Arizal, a top Jewish mystic of 16th-century Israel, predicted:

The future redemption will follow the pattern of the Exodus, and so will also come as a result of the merit of the righteous women of that generation.

The “value” of women

The “value” of women is discussed directly in the Talmud through this line in Genesis:

V'Avraham zaken ba bayyamim, v'Hashem berach et Avraham bakol.
And Abraham was old, and well advanced in days, and the Lord had blessed Abraham with everything. [Gen. 24:1]

'Bakol' is translated as 'with everything'. The Sages of the Talmud asked, "What does it mean, 'Abraham was blessed with everything'?"

-One rabbi said Abraham was blessed because he had no daughter. [Bava Batra 16b] because a daughter is a source of constant anxiety. [Sanh. 100b]

-A second rabbi said Abraham was blessed precisely *because* he had a daughter, and her name was 'Bakol'! [Bava Batra 16b]

-A third rabbi said that this is no proof that [a daughter] is better than a son. [Bava Batra 141a].

-A fourth rabbi said: [If] that daughter was the center of [Abraham's] household, [how come the Torah does not mention her explicitly and] no blessing is recorded of her? [Genesis Rabbah 59:7]

So there was clear disagreement on the value of women.

The Talmud reports another exchange:

A daughter was born to Rabbi Shim'on, the son of Rabbi, and he felt disappointed. His father [consoled him and] said to him: Increase has come to the world, [because women bear children.]

Bar Kappara said to him: Your father has given you an empty consolation. [Yes,] the world cannot do without either males or females. Yet happy is he whose children are males, and alas for him whose children are females. The world cannot do either without a spice-seller or a tanner. Yet happy is he whose occupation is spice-seller, and alas for him whose occupation is tanner. [Bava Batra 16b]

...Rabbi Hisda said: [If a] daughter [is born] first, it is a good sign for the children. [Why?] Some say, because she rears her brothers. Others say, because the evil eye has no influence over her [because a girl is not the subject of envy.] ...To me, however, daughters are dearer than sons. [Bava Batra 141a]

Did he mean that as it sounds? It's not clear, because his three daughters married prominent rabbis [Tosafot]. So he may have meant it as: If you have an attractive, capable, intelligent daughter, you can choose your son-in-law, and hence your descendants, but if you have a son, you are limited.

Collective judgments on women

Collective judgments on women in the Talmud are a mixed bag:

-On the positive side, it mentions their superior compassion (Megillah 14b), their charity (Taanit 23b), their faithfulness (Eruvin 21b), their piety (Sotah 11b), their understanding (Niddah 45b), and their primary role in educating their children and keeping their husbands from transgressing the Torah [Yevamot 63a].

-On the negative side, it mentions their predisposition to idle curiosity (Taharot 7:9), their propensity for excessive talk (Berachot 48b), their belief in superstitions (Sanhedrin 67a), and their weak will (Shabbat 33b).

Let's examine these alleged characteristics one by one.

-On women being more compassionate than men, the Talmud tells us that Hulda, a Jewish prophetess and a relative of the prophet Jeremiah, was summoned before King Josiah for a prophecy. Why did the king ask for Hulda rather than Jeremiah, his chief prophet? The Talmud responds: Because women are compassionate [and might prophesy to a kinder decree from heaven]. [Megillah 14b]

However, Hulda could not change the tenor of the prophecy: The Israelites will be defeated because of their transgressions and the Temple will be destroyed. But she adds a feminine comforting touch. She tells the king:

Because your heart is soft and you humbled yourself before the Lord...you will go to your grave in peace, and your eyes will not see all the evil that I will bring upon this place. [2Kings 22:19-20]

-On women being more charitable than men, the Talmud says:

[Abba Hilkiyah said:] A wife stays at home and gives bread to the poor, which they can enjoy immediately, while I give them money, which they cannot enjoy immediately... Also, I prayed that certain thieves in our neighborhood might die, but she prayed that they might repent [and indeed they repented]. [Ta'anit 23b]

-On women being more faithful than men, the Talmud says:

The daughters of Israel... close their doors [to anybody but] their husbands. [That is, they are faithful.] [Eruvin 21b]

-On women being more pious than men, the Talmud tells us about the piety of the righteous women who lived in the generation of the Exodus from Egypt. It argues that the deliverance from slavery in Egypt was a reward for that piety, and would not have happened without it. [Sotah 11b] As we mentioned, it also says that the women did not worship the Golden Calf: Only the men did, and they incurred the wrath of God.

Note, in passing, that all four matriarchs came from families with dubious ethical standards, yet were not corrupted by them. Of the three patriarchs, only Abraham did.

-On women being more understanding than men, the Talmud says:

The Holy One, blessed be He, endowed the woman with more understanding [binah] than the man. [Niddah 45b]

-On women having the primary role in educating their children and keeping their husbands away from transgressing the Torah, the Talmud says:

Rabbi Eleazar said: Any man who has no wife is no proper man. Rabbi Hiyya [said]... It is sufficient for us... that [our wives] raise our children and deliver us from sin. [Yevamot 63a-b]

Greater is the promise made by the Holy One, blessed be He, to the women than to the men... Rab said to R. Hiyya: How do women earn merit? By making their children go to the synagogue to learn Torah and their husbands to the House of Study, the Beth Hamidrash, to learn Mishnah, and waiting for their husbands till they return from the Beth Hamidrash. [Berachot 17a]

-On the other hand, on women being more predisposed to idle curiosity, the Talmud says:

Women... uncover their neighbor's pot to find out what she is cooking. [Taharot 7:9]

-On women talking too much, the Tanach recounts this story. The future King Saul asked some young girls by a water well: "Is the prophet Samuel here?" Here is what the girls answered, verbatim from the Bible:

He is. Behold, he is before you. Make haste now, for he came today to the city; for there is a sacrifice of the people today in the high place. As soon as you come to the city, you shall find him, before he goes up to the high place to eat; for the people will not eat until he comes, because he blesses the sacrifice; and afterwards those who are invited eat. So therefore go up; for about this time you shall find him. [1Sam. 9:12-13]

The Talmud asks [Berachot 48b]: "Why did they make such a long story of it?" And it gives three answers.

-One rabbi said: Because women are fond of talking.

-A second rabbi said: So that they might feast their eyes on Saul's good looks, because the Bible tells us:

[There was not among the people of Israel a more handsome person than Saul;] from his shoulders and upward he was higher than any of the people. [1Sam. 9:2]

-A third rabbi said: It was because Saul was not meant to be king until a certain moment, and the girls delayed until that moment came.

The Talmud adds:

Ten measures of speech descended to the world. The women took nine [and the men took one]. [Kiddushin 49b]

-The Talmud also says that women are more superstitious than men and more likely to engage in witchcraft, which is prohibited. [Sanhedrin 67a]

-On women being more weak-willed than men, the Talmud record the story of Rabbi Shim'on bar Yohai, who was sentenced to death by the Romans.

He and his son hid in the House of Study, and his wife brought him bread and water. But after a while, he said to his son, 'Women are of unstable temperament. She may be tortured and expose us.' So they went and hid in a cave. [Shabbat 33b]

Facts about women in Judaism

-There is no doubt that traditional Judaism is patriarchal: Men officially make decisions, although women can (and do) influence them.

-Judaism is transmitted only through the mother.

-Men and women have different and complementary roles, but the woman's role is presented as supporting. Indeed, the Torah says:

And God said, It is not good for man to be alone. I will make for him a helpmate opposite him [*'ezer k'negdo*]. [Genesis 2:18]

-The fifth of the Ten Commandments requires honoring mother and father. They are equally entitled to this honor, because the father is listed first when the commandment is first given in the book of Exodus [Ex. 20:12], but the mother is listed first when the commandment is repeated in the Book of Leviticus [Lev. 19:3].

-On Shabbat eve, at the dinner table and before the meal, it is traditional to sing '*Eshet Chayil*' a poem from the Book of Proverbs extolling women and their indispensable contribution to making a Jewish home:

A woman of valor, who can find? For her price is far above rubies. The heart of her husband safely trusts in her, and he shall have no lack of gain... [Prov. 31:10-31]

-At first men could have several wives, but Rabbenu Gershom ended polygamy about 1000 years ago. But it had long fallen into disfavor. There is no record of any of the rabbis of the Talmud having more than one wife at a time.

-A woman must agree to her marriage. Indeed, the Torah says:

And they said, "Let us call the maiden [Rebecca] and ask her."

And they summoned Rebecca, and they said to her, "Will you go with this man [to marry Isaac]?" And she said, "I will go." [Gen. 24:57-8]

The Midrash concludes:

From here we learn that we may not marry off a woman except with her consent.
[Gen. Rabbah 60: 12]

-Likewise, she is also not divorced unless her husband signs the *get* AND she agrees to the divorce.

-Many of the traditional restrictions on women are custom, not halacha. Examples are earning a living, delivering a d'var Torah, studying Torah extensively, and even becoming rabbis. Indeed, many Biblical women were judges and prophetesses.

-In the traditional morning blessings, men thank God for not making them Gentiles, slaves, or women. In non-traditional movements, men thank God for making them Jews, free, and men.

Logically the two statements are identical. The Talmud explains the reason for the traditional phrasing: It thanks God for giving free Jewish men more commandments to follow and is not a value judgment. More mitzvot are better because mitzvot are an opportunity to connect with God.

Now Gentiles, slaves and women have fewer commandments to observe: Gentiles have only the seven Noahide laws, women are not obligated to perform time-bound positive commandments, and slaves are only obligated to follow negative commandments. That's why traditionalists thank God for not making them like them.

Note that the author of the traditional phrasing is same Rabbi Yehudah who said Abraham was blessed because he had a daughter! [Menachot 43b]

-For religious services, a minyan of ten Jewish men is traditionally required. Women "don't count". Why? Since women are more spiritual than men, they don't need services as much as men do. The challenge is finding ten *men* to come, as most prefer to be doing something else.

Traditionally, there is a mechitza, a barrier separating men from women in services. Why? Because men find it hard to concentrate with women right

next to them. Women too may find it hard to concentrate next to men, although less so.

In non-traditional egalitarian congregations, women count the same as men for a minyan and sit with them. But “egalitarianism” with a respect for tradition would suggest that a minyan must consist of ten men AND ten women? It is not cynical to suggest that the reason is that many non-traditional congregations have difficulty finding ten *anything* to come to services.

-The commandment to "Be fruitful and multiply" [Gen. 1:28] applies to men only, not to women. Perhaps this is because most women *want* to be mothers, and the Torah usually does not command anything that most people would do naturally, on their own accord.

Golda Meir, one of the founders of the State of Israel, once said:

This women's liberation is just a lot of foolishness. It's the *men* who are discriminated against. They can't bear children. And no one is likely to do anything about that.

Conclusion

On the whole, Jewish tradition views women very positively, but restricts them to a supporting role. The Midrash says:

He who has no wife, dwells without good, without help, without joy, without blessing, and without atonement. [Bereshit Rabbah 17:2]

It also says:

It once happened that a righteous man was married to a righteous woman, and they did not produce children. They said, 'We are of no use to the Holy One, blessed be He', so they divorced each other.

The man went and married a wicked woman, and she made him wicked.

The woman went and married a wicked man, and she made him righteous.

This proves that everything depends on the woman. [Bereshit Rabbah 17:7]

So, are women as a whole truly more righteous than men, or are the rabbis simply building them up to defend themselves against charges of misogyny in a patriarchal society? I believe the former. At the risk of being accused

of reverse sexism, I venture to say that if the world were run by women, it would be a better place. At least, women are not prone to violence.