

Judaism and Women

Background

-In this week's Torah portion, *Chayye Sarah*, the only portion named after a woman, we read:

-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]

-Some Sages say Abraham was blessed because he had no daughter. Other Sages say Abraham was blessed precisely because he had a daughter. Some say her name was 'Bakol'. Details:

Talmud:

-A daughter was born to R. Shim'on, the son of Rabbi, and he felt disappointed. His father said to him: Increase has come to the world.
-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 without either a spice-seller or a tanner. Yet happy is he whose occupation is that of a spice-seller, and alas for him whose occupation is that of a tanner.
-On this point [whether a daughter is a blessing or not] there is a difference between Tannaim.
[It is written,] The Lord had blessed Abraham in all things [*bakol*] [Gen. 24:1.]. What is meant by 'in all things'?
R. Meir said: In the fact that he had no daughter.
R. Yehudah said: In the fact that he had a daughter.
Others say that Abraham had a daughter whose name was Bakol. [Bava Batra 16b]

Talmud:

...R. Hisda said: [If a] daughter [is born] first, it is a good sign for the children. Some say, because she rears her brothers; and others say, because the evil eye has no influence over them. [A couple whose first child is a boy is the subject of envy.]
R. Hisda said: To me, however, daughters are dearer than sons.
-Note: His daughters married great men: Raba, Rami b. Hama, and Mar Ukba b. Hama [Tosafot]

-Did he mean 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?

...It was taught. And the Lord blessed Abraham 'bako!'. [Gen. 24:1] R. Meir said, [the meaning is] that he had no daughter; [and] R. Yehudah said, [the meaning is] that he had a daughter whose name was 'Bakol'. It may be objected that [all] one may infer [from this is] that, according to R. Yehudah, the All Merciful did not deprive Abraham even of daughter. This is no proof, however, that [a daughter] is better than a son.

R. Yehudah [also said]: [It is taught that] it is meritorious to feed one's sons [since are engaged in the study of the Torah]. But how much more so one's daughters, so that they not be degraded [i.e., be forced to do degrading things for a living] [though there is no legal obligation to support either after a certain age]. [Baba Bathra 141a]

Midrash:

AND THE LORD HAD BLESSED ABRAHAM IN ALL THINGS.

R. Yehudah said: It means that God gave him a daughter. [Bava Batra 16b] Said R. Nehemiah to him: Then she was the center of the king's [Abraham's] household, yet no blessing is recorded of her! But AND THE LORD HAD BLESSED ABRAHAM IN ALL THINGS means that He had not given him a daughter at all. [A daughter being a source of constant anxiety;] [Sanh. 100b]] [Genesis Rabbah 59:7]

Soncino: If she was so important that on her account Abraham is described as blessed in all things, we might expect something to be related about her, showing how she was such a great blessing to him. This is the explanation given by Rashash of this passage, which all the commentators find very puzzling.

Collective Talmud judgments on women are a mixed bag

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

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

-Women are more compassionate

Hulda [the prophetess] was a near relative of Jeremiah, and he did not object to her [prophesying before the king]. But how could [King] Josiah himself pass over Jeremiah and send for her? The members of the school of R. Shila replied, Because women are compassionate [and might prophesy to a kinder decree from heaven]. [Megillah 14b]

-Women are more charitable

[Abba Hilkiah said:] A wife stays at home and gives bread to the poor which they can at once enjoy while I give them money which they cannot at once enjoy... Also, I prayed that certain robbers in our neighborhood might die, but she prayed that they might repent [and they did repent]. [Taanit 23b]

-Women are more faithful

The daughters of Israel... close their doors for their husbands. [They are faithful.] [Eruvin 21b]

-Women are more pious

Talmud discusses the piety of the righteous women who lived in the generation of the Exodus from Egypt, and argues that the deliverance from slavery in Egypt was a reward for their piety. [Sotah 11b]

-Note: Women did not worship of the Golden Calf

-Women are more understanding

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

-Women have the primary role in educating their children and keeping their husbands away from sin

-R. Eleazar said: Any man who has no wife is no proper man. R. 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 Beth Hamidrash to learn Mishnah, and waiting for their husbands till they return from the Beth Hamidrash. [Berachot 17a]

-Women are more predisposed to idle curiosity

Women... may be suspected of uncovering their neighbor's pot to find out what she is cooking. [Taharot 7:9]

-Women talk too much

Tanach:

[Future King Saul asked some young girls going out to draw water: Is the prophet Samuel here?] And they answered... "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. And therefore go up; for about this time you shall find him." [1Sam. 9:12-13]

Talmud's reaction:

Why did they make such a long story of it? Because women are fond of talking. [Rabbi] Samuel, however, says that it was so that they might feast their eyes on Saul's good looks, since it is written, '[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]

while R. Johanan says it was because one kingdom cannot overlap another by a hair's breadth. [Samuel's regime was destined to cease as soon as Saul's commenced.][Berachot 48b]

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

-Women are more superstitious

-Mostly women engage in witchcraft [Sanhedrin 67a]

-Women are more weak-willed

R. Simeon b. Yohai [was sentenced to death by the Romans]. He and his son went and hid themselves in the Beth Hamidrash [and] his wife brought him bread and a mug of water and they dined. [But] when the decree became more severe he said to his son, Women are of unstable temperament. She may be put to the torture and expose us. So they went and hid in a cave. [Shabbat 33b]

Facts about women in Judaism

-Traditional Judaism is patriarchal: Men officially make decisions, although women can influence them.

-Men and women have different and complementary roles. But the woman's role is presented as supporting:

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

-Judaism is transmitted only through the mother.

-The fifth of the ten commandments requires honoring mother and father. The father comes first in Ex. 20:12 and the mother comes first in Lev. 19:3, so both are equally entitled to honor.

-*Eshet Chayil*, praising women, is recited on Shabbat eve at the dinner table, before the meal

-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]

-Men could have several wives, until Rabbenu Gershom ended polygamy in 1000 for Ashkenazim, and today local laws forbid it

-Except in Muslim lands, but virtually no Jews live there

-A woman must agree to her marriage or divorce. [Rabbenu Gershom] But she is not divorced unless her husband signs the *get*.

-Note: See this week's portion:

-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]

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

-Many traditional restrictions on women are custom, not halacha.

-Examples: Earning a living, delivering a d'var Torah, studying Torah extensively, even becoming rabbis.

-Many Biblical women were judges and prophets.

-Morning blessings

-Traditionally, men thank God for not making them Gentiles, slaves, or women.

-Non-traditionally, men thank God for making them Jews, free, and men.

-Logically the two statements are identical.

-Traditional phrasing thanks God for giving free Jewish men more commandments to follow and is not a value judgment.

-Why is more mitzvot better? Mitzvot are an opportunity to connect with God.

-Gentiles only have the 7 Noahide laws. Women are not obligated to perform time-bound positive commandments. Slaves are only obligated to follow negative commandments.

-Author of traditional phrasing is same R. Yehudah who said Abraham was blessed because he had a daughter! [Menachot 43b]

-Services

-Traditionally, a minyan is ten men. Women "don't count". Why?

-Women are more spiritual than men, and don't need services as much as men do. The challenge is finding ten *men* to come.

-Mechitza: Barrier separating men from women in services. Why?

-Men find it hard to concentrate with women right next to them.

-Women too, although less so.

-Non-traditional: Egalitarianism says women must count same as men and sit with them.

-Wouldn't "egalitarianism" suggest a minyan is ten men AND ten women?

-Women are exempt from the duty to procreate. Why?

- "Be fruitful and multiply" was issued before Eve was created. [Gen. 1:28]

-Relies on fact that most women *want* to be mothers.

-Golda Meir: "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, Tradition views women very positively, but restricts them to a supporting role:

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

-It once happened that a pious man was married to a pious woman, and they did not produce children. Said they, 'We are of no use to the Holy One, blessed be He'. Whereupon they arose and divorced each other. The man went and married a wicked woman, and she made him wicked, while the woman went and married a wicked man, and made him righteous. This proves that all depends on the woman. [Bereshit Rabbah 17:7]