

**THE JEWISH WOMAN —
LIBERATED OR ENSLAVED?**

Park Avenue Synagogue

50 East 87 Street, New York, N. Y.

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If it is strange for you to be sitting there and looking at me, it is even stranger for me to be standing here and looking at you. For fifteen years, I have sat and listened to words of Torah and sounds of prayer emanate from this pulpit, and now I am in the unenviable position of attempting to shed some light on an important subject. Actually, I am the last member of my immediate family to have the privilege of standing here. In addition to the man who spends so much of his time here, my three daughters were *Bat Mitzvah* from this pulpit and I even had the rare pleasure of listening to my son-in-law last June when he was the spokesman for his graduating class upon his ordination as a rabbi from the Jewish Theological Seminary. So now I am about to do something I said I never would do — namely, occupy this pulpit. I do it out of deference and respect for our Sisterhood President whose invitation to me was as sincere, gracious and warm as she is herself.

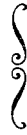
An Age of Revolution

The subject of the status of women today is of great importance. In every periodical and magazine there appear articles and treatises about the women's revolution — for this is the age of revolutions — the Black revolution, the revolutions of millions of oppressed peoples throughout the world, and the women's revolution. What is the thesis of the Women's Liberation movement? Very simply stated, it is that women are an oppressed group. They do the work that men don't want to do. They don't have their own identities. Hence, consciousness raising groups have sprung up all over the country, to heighten our sensitivity to the image of the woman, to look upon woman as a person, and not as a prisoner of her sex. Naturally, this movement has created a great stir, with vociferous adherents on one hand and outspoken critics on the other. But, like all such movements, one of its prime accomplishments is bringing the problem out in the open and making people take a new and fresh look at 51% of our population.

The Woman in Judaism

How about Judaism and the Jewish woman? How has she been regarded in Judaism? Judaism is a very old religious civilization. Its writings, its laws, its injunctions as embodied in the Bible and Talmud were formulated by our scholars and sages while they lived among other peoples, other cultures, other ways of life. At a time when slavery was an accepted norm, Jewish teachers

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wove into their laws elaborate provisions for the treatment of slaves — how they were to be paid, how long they should work, how they must be treated. This *must* be regarded as a lesson in progress. Instead of either accepting slavery blindly, or abolishing it as an institution of society, which would have been impossible, Judaism "raised consciousness", so to speak, concerning the problem. Their great contribution was that they recognized it as a problem and not as a condition of life to be accepted without doubts, qualms or questions. In the same way, we cannot ignore the fact that the status of women at that time could not even be discussed as being status. Women were virtually chattel, to be used and misused by men who were their lords and masters. In this situation too, the position of the Jewish woman was many notches above that of her non-Jewish counterpart. But inequities were not completely abolished. They were modified, perhaps, but not nullified. Hence, Jewish women could not own property, could not initiate divorce proceedings, could not be witnesses in a religious court, and were not really free human beings. Besides, there grew up an attitude of "a time and a place" for women based on the very complex pattern of the *halakhalah* — of Jewish law. It was not merely a matter of cultural attitudes; it became a matter of law based on certain basic concepts — such as observance of the *mitzvot* and what was incumbent upon the Jewish male to fulfill and not upon the female. To put it very simply, the 613 *mitzvot* in the Torah had to be observed by Jewish males, since the law is a complicated set of rituals which must be performed at certain specified times. These took precedence over all else. The reason advanced for liberating the woman from observing these *mitzvot* is that her prime function in life was rearing her family, which took precedence over all else. Therefore, tending to the needs of her children was more important than praying at a designated time and she was freed from such obligations.

The Woman of Valor

Since our Jewish sages and teachers were, by and large, sensitive souls, what did they do to rectify this condition? Actually, they tried to remedy the situation of unequal rights and duties by exalting the role of the woman as the noblest of souls, pure of heart and purpose and the creator of the Jewish home and molders of the Jewish souls. She became the instrument whereby Judaism would be transmitted to future generations, notably to men, so that they in turn could contribute their share of wisdom to the world. Hence, the great emphasis on the Jewish home, which has been synonymous with truth, beauty, stability and peace. Jewish learning was for men — handicrafts for women, judgment for men — acquiescence for women, creativity for men — submission for women, daring for men — modesty for women. We have but to look to the *Aishet Hayil* — the Woman of Valor, that paean of praise to the Jewish woman, to see the truth of this assertion.

"A woman of valour who can find:
For her price is far above rubies.
The heart of her husband doth safely trust her
And he hath no lack of gain . . .
Her husband is known in the gates
When he sitteth among the elders of the land . . .
She looketh well to the ways of her household
And eateth not the bread of idleness.
Her children rise up and call her blessed
Her husband also, and he praiseth her . . ."

Clearly, the ideal Jewish woman is she who serves her husband and her children and is the instrument for their fulfillment.

Then and Now

Now, generations have come and gone and we find ourselves in the year 1972 which bears very little resemblance to the Biblical or Talmudic periods. Humanity has gone through a period of cataclysmic changes in science and technology. It has witnessed social upheavals and revolutions in many places at many times. But old attitudes die hard. And now in this supersonic age of jets and newborn states, of lunar travel and great discoveries, we are asked to be modern and progressive in all areas save one — in our attitude towards the rights, privileges and tasks of the modern Jewish woman.

Now we come to the nub of the problem. Do we throw out the baby with the bath? In our anxiety to raise the status of the Jewish woman to be an equal partner to men, shall we nullify all our teachings regarding the Jewish woman? Do we say the home has no value, ritual no meaning and raising children a task to be delegated to others and looked upon with a derisive sneer? The answer must be an emphatic no. We are zealous for the reputation so painfully gained about the pristine beauty of the Jewish home. We remain convinced that the attention paid to the proper rearing of children in a moral and spiritual sense is a value we cannot afford to dispense with. We assert that, especially during times of moral upheaval and confusion such as ours, the Jewish home is a rock of strength and security which gives young children the sense of identity and belonging which the world cries out for.

And it cannot be overstated that when the Jewish woman kindles her Sabbath lights and observes the laws of *Kashrut*, she is contributing to the beauty and significance of Jewish family life.

A New Look at The Jewish Home and The Woman

But, at the same time, the Jewish woman can no longer "look to the ways of her household" alone. I might add here that it is not my purpose to discuss marriage versus career. That is an individual choice to be made by each person. The important thing to remember however, is A. D. Gordon's phrase, *Dat Ha-Avodah*,

the religion of labor. This founder of labor Zionism stressed the sanctity of labor, a thought we should ponder seriously today. It matters not what work we do, but that we respect it and rejoice in the doing thereof. The word housewife has come under fire recently and women squirm inwardly when they are so described. But the creation and maintenance of a beautiful Jewish home is no mean achievement and the woman who is the creator of such a home need feel nothing but pride in her work. It all depends on how we view what we do and what our self image is. However, she is part of the larger world and is no longer shut in her house tending her hearth. Her eyes and mind are open, her ears hear the tumult of the street and the marketplace. And our Jewish tradition, whose greatest strength has been in making Judaism a living faith and not a relic, must take these things into account. We cannot educate our daughters in the wisdom of Jewish teaching and expect them to accept the *Halakha* regarding marriage and divorce that was formulated in a by-gone age. We cannot foist upon them laws that degrade their status as women. We should not open the treasures of Jewish learning and ritual for them and tell them they do not count as persons when ten men must constitute a *minyan*. Why shouldn't we acknowledge the fact that a person has two parents when he or she is called up to the Torah and is not the son or daughter of a father alone? If we give this problem the serious consideration it deserves, we face a glaring contradiction here. Whereas, in ancient times, the Jewish woman far outstripped her non-Jewish neighbor in recognition of her worth as a human being, today the situation is reversed. Among the many changes which have accompanied human history these past centuries, the position of the woman has gradually evolved from one of blatant inferiority to equality. It has been a slow and painful process, but it has produced results. Women have gained the right to vote and to hold public office. They have entered many professions previously closed to them; they own property and have climbed the ladder of economic and political success. Jewish laws regarding women, however, have been congealed in a frozen state and relegated the Jewish woman to a status far below that of her non-Jewish neighbor. Therein lies the contradiction. Judaism, which has always been known for its liberal and humane viewpoints has regressed by virtue of a standstill in *Halakha*. Of course we know that the word *Halakha* means literally, movement or a going forward. To be true to its real nature, Jewish teachers will have to restore the spirit of change to the *Halakha*, a spirit by which it has always been characterized.

Changes in Commitment

Is it not also true that the level of education and commitment among Jewish men have waned during the past years, and conversely, Jewish women have exhibited a greater thirst for knowledge and commitment to Jewish life and causes? They are the readers of Jewish books, the students at adult education classes, the dedicated builders of Jewish institutions. Yet the expectations for Jewish men presuppose a greater degree of religious commitment

among them without taking the realities of life into consideration. We are faced with the strange situation of sitting in a chapel with nine men and one highly knowledgeable Jewish woman and sending out for the Jewishly illiterate policeman on the beat to constitute the *minyan*. This is demeaning to so many women, and our daughters are not encouraged to participate in religious worship which denies their worth as human beings.

New Horizons for The Jewish Woman

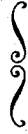
I believe the time has come for us to acknowledge the fact that we cannot have our cake and eat it too. We cannot hang on to our old prejudices about women and give them an equal education. Their minds and spirits will rebel at this, as indeed they have. Voices are being heard and will have to be listened to. Questions are being asked and will have to be answered. Why shouldn't educated Jewish women be in the field of Jewish education in positions of leadership? Why should educated Jewish women be relegated only to women's organizations and not be an integral part of decision making bodies in our community? To borrow an excellent suggestion made by Dr. Trude Weiss Rosmarin, why shouldn't qualified women serve in the decisive positions of *Hillel* directors on college campuses? And, of course, the question that is most irritating to so many — why shouldn't a woman study for and enter the rabbinate if she is so inclined? Recently a prominent Orthodox rabbi explained that women should not be trained for the rabbinate for a variety of reasons. Of course, the obvious ones come to mind such as the reluctance of the congregants to accept a woman instead of a father figure. But more, he claims that the true nature of the rabbinate is not that of a profession at all. Rabbis are merely educated Jews and such duties as preaching and solemnizing marriages and the like are really non-essential elements in the Rabbinate. I find it difficult to believe that he is serious when he says this. For it is a fact of life that the function of a rabbi today bears little resemblance to that of the traditional *Rav* of the *Shetl*. Preaching is certainly essential, especially since that particular rabbi, along with all others, preaches each Sabbath and holiday. He suggests that we give our daughters exactly the same Jewish education afforded our sons and, after they have acquired it, they could serve as knowledgeable fund raisers. Would such a suggestion dare be made about an ordained rabbi? Of course not. We will have to wrestle with these problems and many more as time goes on and human rights continue to be the issue of the day.

Liberation Is Not A Gift

Passover is a few days away and it is the holiday of liberation. The Jewish people in reality were not liberated — they liberated themselves. All the efforts of Moses would have been in vain had not the people wanted liberation more than life itself. They had to be willing to work and to suffer in order to earn it. It was only then that their self image was changed. They had to feel like

free men — nobody could give that to them, except they themselves. History has a habit of repeating itself. The story of the return of the Jewish people to the land of Israel is a saga in liberation history. The phrase that best describes the entire Zionist movement is the one used by Leon Pinsker in his important work *Auto Emancipation*. Only when the Jewish people worked on emancipating themselves as Jews, could the Zionist movement succeed. Liberation is not a gift — it is the prize at the end of the road and it is reached only after a long and hard struggle.

If I may be permitted a homiletical twist, the expression used for Passover is *me'avdut leherut* — from slavery to freedom. I would rewrite it *al y'dai avodah leherut* — through labor to freedom, for it is only as the result of hard and unrelenting work that people have ever achieved any freedom they have sought. As Jewish women we cannot expect to sit by while others liberate us from superstition, fear and prejudice. Liberation must be worked for, sacrificed for, struggled for. We cannot be satisfied with others giving us the right to an occasional token *Aliyah* without ourselves taking an active role in synagogue affairs. We cannot be given the right to read the Torah unless we become educated women, Jewishly speaking. In short, like our ancestors, we might have to wander in the desert for forty years before we reach our Promised Land. But the important steps have already been taken and the long march has begun.



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