

The Role of Women in Orthodox Judaism

The role of women in traditional Judaism has been grossly misrepresented and misunderstood. The position of women is not nearly as lowly as many modern people think; in fact, the position of women in halakhah (Jewish Law) that dates back to the biblical period is in many ways better than the position of women under American civil law as recently as a century ago. Many of the important feminist leaders of the 20th century (Gloria Steinem, for example, and Betty Friedan) are Jewish women, and some commentators have suggested that this is no coincidence: the respect accorded to women in Jewish tradition was a part of their ethnic culture.

In traditional Judaism, women are for the most part seen as separate but equal. Women's obligations and responsibilities are different from men's, but no less important (in fact, in some ways, women's responsibilities are considered more important, as we shall see).

The equality of men and women begins at the highest possible level: G-d. In Judaism, unlike traditional Christianity, G-d has never been viewed as exclusively male or masculine. Judaism has always maintained that G-d has both masculine and feminine qualities. As one Chasidic rabbi explained it to me, G-d has no body, no genitalia, therefore the very idea that G-d is male or female is patently absurd. We refer to G-d using masculine terms simply for convenience's sake, because Hebrew has no neutral gender; G-d is no more male than a table is.

Both man and woman were created in the image of G-d. According to most Jewish scholars, "man" was created in Gen. 1:27 with dual gender, and was later separated into male and female.

According to traditional Judaism, women are endowed with a greater degree of "binah" (intuition, understanding, intelligence) than men. The rabbis inferred this from the fact that woman was "built" (Gen. 2:22) rather than "formed" (Gen. 2:7), and the Hebrew root of "build" has the same consonants as the word "binah." It has been said that the matriarchs (Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah) were superior to the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) in prophecy. Women did not participate in the idolatry regarding the Golden Calf. See Rosh Chodesh below. Some traditional sources suggest that women are closer to G-d's ideal than men.

Women have held positions of respect in Judaism since biblical times. Miriam is considered one of the liberators of the Children of Israel, along with her brothers Moses and Aaron. One of the Judges (Deborah) was a woman. Seven of the 55 prophets of the Bible were women (they are included in the list of biblical prophets).

The Ten Commandments require respect for both mother and father. Note that the father comes first in Ex. 20:12, but the mother comes first in Lev. 19:3, and many traditional sources point out that this reversal is intended to show that both parents are equally entitled to honor and reverence.

There were many learned women of note. The Talmud and later rabbinical writings speak of the wisdom of Berurya, the wife of Rabbi Meir. In several instances, her opinions on halakhah (Jewish Law) were accepted over those of her male contemporaries. In the ketubah (marriage contract) of Rabbi Akiba's son, the wife is obligated to teach the husband Torah! Many rabbis over the centuries have been known to consult their wives on matters of Jewish law relating to the woman's role, such as laws of kashrut and women's cycles. The wife of a rabbi is referred to as a rebbetzin, practically a title of her own, which should give some idea of her significance in Jewish life.

There can be no doubt, however, that the Talmud also has many negative things to say about women. Various rabbis at various times describe women as lazy, jealous, vain and gluttonous, prone to gossip and particularly prone to the occult and witchcraft. Men are repeatedly advised against associating with women, although this is usually because of man's lust rather than because of any shortcoming in women. It is worth noting that the Talmud also has negative things to say about men, frequently describing men as particularly prone to lust and forbidden sexual desires.

Women are discouraged from pursuing higher education or religious pursuits, but this seems to be primarily because women who engage in such pursuits might neglect their primary duties as wives and mothers. The rabbis are not concerned that women are not spiritual enough; rather, they are concerned that women might become too spiritually devoted.

The rights of women in traditional Judaism are much greater than they were in the rest of Western civilization until the 20th century. Women had the right to buy, sell, and own property, and make their own contracts, rights which

women in Western countries (including America) did not have until about 100 years ago. In fact, Proverbs 31:10-31, which is traditionally read at Jewish weddings, speaks repeatedly of business acumen as a trait to be prized in women (v. 11, 13, 16, and 18 especially).

Women have the right to be consulted with regard to their marriage. Marital sex is regarded as the woman's right, and not the man's. Men do not have the right to beat or mistreat their wives, a right that was recognized by law in many Western countries until a few hundred years ago. In cases of rape, a woman is generally presumed not to have consented to the intercourse, even if she enjoyed it, even if she consented after the sexual act began and declined a rescue! This is in sharp contrast to American society, where even today rape victims often have to overcome public suspicion that they "asked for it" or "wanted it." Traditional Judaism recognizes that forced sexual relations within the context of marriage are rape and are not permitted; in many states in America today, rape within marriage is still not a crime.

There is no question that in traditional Judaism, the primary role of a woman is as wife and mother, keeper of the household. However, Judaism has great respect for the importance of that role and the spiritual influence that the woman has over her family. The Talmud says that when a pious man marries a wicked woman, the man becomes wicked, but when a wicked man marries a pious woman, the man becomes pious. The child of a Jewish woman and a gentile man is Jewish because of the mother's spiritual influence; the child of a Jewish man and a gentile woman is not. See Who Is a Jew? Women are exempted from all positive mitzvot ("thou shalts" as opposed to "thou shalt nots") that are time-related (that is, mitzvot that must be performed at a specific time of the day or year), because the woman's duties as wife and mother are so important that they cannot be postponed to fulfill a mitzvah. After all, a woman cannot be expected to just drop a crying baby when the time comes to perform a mitzvah. She cannot leave dinner unattended on the stove while she davens ma'ariv (evening prayer services).

It is this exemption from certain mitzvot that has led to the greatest misunderstanding of the role of women in Judaism. First, many people make the mistake of thinking that this exemption is a prohibition. On the contrary, although women are not required to perform time-based positive mitzvot, they are generally permitted to observe such mitzvot if they choose (though some are frustrated with women who insist on performing visible, prestigious optional mitzvot while they ignore mundane mandatory ones). Second, because this exemption diminishes the role of women in the synagogue, many people perceive that women have no role in Jewish religious life. This misconception derives from the mistaken assumption that Jewish religious life revolves around the synagogue. It does not; it revolves around the home, where the woman's role is every bit as important as the man's.

The Role of Women in the Synagogue

To understand the limited role of women in synagogue life, it is important to understand the nature of mitzvot (commandments) in Judaism and the separation of men and women.

Judaism recognizes that it is mankind's nature to rebel against authority; thus, one who does something because he is commanded to is regarded with greater merit than one who does something because he chooses to. The person who refrains from pork because it is a mitzvah has more merit than the person who refrains from pork because he doesn't like the taste. In addition, the mitzvot that were given to the Jewish people are regarded as a privilege, and the more mitzvot one is obliged to observe, the more privileged one is.

Because women are not required to perform certain mitzvot, their observance of those mitzvot does not "count" for group purposes. Thus, a woman's voluntary attendance at daily worship services does not count toward a minyan (the 10 people necessary to recite certain prayers), a woman's voluntary recitation of certain prayers does not count on behalf of the group (thus women cannot lead services), and a woman's voluntary reading from the Torah does not count towards the community's obligation to read from the Torah. The same is true of boys under the age of 13, who are not obligated to perform any mitzvot, though they are permitted to perform them.

In addition, because women are not obligated to perform as many mitzvot as men are, women are regarded as less privileged. It is in this light that one must understand the man's prayer thanking G-d for "not making me a woman." The prayer does not indicate that it is bad to be a woman, but only that men are fortunate to be privileged to have more obligations. The corresponding women's prayer, thanking G-d for making me "according to his will," is not a statement of resignation to a lower status (hardly an appropriate sentiment for prayer!) On the contrary, this prayer

should be understood as thanking G-d for giving women greater binah, for making women closer to G-d's idea of spiritual perfection, and for all the joys of being a woman generally.

The second thing that must be understood is the separation of men and women during prayer. According to Jewish Law, men and women must be separated during prayer, usually by a wall or curtain called a mechitzah or by placing women in a second floor balcony. There are two reasons for this: first, your mind is supposed to be on prayer, not on the pretty girl praying near you. Second, many pagan religious ceremonies at the time Judaism was founded involved sexual activity and orgies, and the separation prevents or at least discourages this. Interestingly, although men should not be able to see women during prayer, women are permitted to see men during prayer. This seems to reflect the opinion that women are better able to concentrate on prayer with an attractive member of the opposite sex visible.

The combination of this exemption from certain mitzvot and this separation often has the result that women have an inferior place in the synagogue. Women are not obligated by Jewish law to attend formal religious services, and cannot participate in many aspects of the services (traditional Jewish services have a very high degree of "audience participation" -- and I'm not just talking about community readings, I'm talking about actively taking part in running the service), so they have less motivation to attend. Woman's obligations in the home (which are the reason why women are exempt from time-based mitzvot like formal prayer services) often keep them away from synagogue. In several synagogues that I have attended, the women's section is poorly climate controlled, and women cannot see (sometimes can't even hear!) what's going on in the men's section, where the services are being led. This has improved somewhat in recent years, but men: if you think I'm lying, ask your wives.

But as I said before, this restriction on participation in synagogue life does not mean that women are excluded the Jewish religion, because the Jewish religion is not just something that happens in synagogue. Judaism is something that permeates every aspect of your life, every thing that you do, from the time you wake up in the morning to the time you go to bed, from what you eat and how you dress to how you conduct business. Prayer services are only a small, though important, part of the Jewish religion.

Source: www.jewfaq.org