

"WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND RIGHT WOMEN"

1

My theme this morning is: The Jewish Woman. The subject is particularly relevant because of a number of reasons. First, the readings of Rosh Hashanah focus our attention on the Jewish woman. Sarah, Hagar, Hannah, to a lesser extent Peninah, and in tomorrow's Haftarah Rachel -- all stand before us, each in her unique way. Second, the role of woman has become more and more problematical in our times and, with the advent of contemporary militant feminism, controversial. Finally, the recent pronouncement by the Conservative movement announcing that women may be counted as part of the Minyan, makes it imperative that there be an Orthodox response.

I therefore address myself to the question of women's rights and right women. I shall offer a brief response to this disingenuous move to count women in the minyan, and then discuss the nature of woman and the role of woman as they emerge from the tradition of Torah and Talmud.

11

Unquestionably, Halakhah can be enriched by modern insights. But Halakhah is too sacred and too vital to our lives and our destiny to be truncated and outraged because of the pressure of passing fads engendered by political opinions or social theories.

It is against the Halakhah to count women as part of the minyan. The quorum for public prayer can include only those who are obligated to pray in public. A woman is obligated by the Halakhah to pray, but not necessarily three times a day, not specifically the formal prayers in our Prayer Book, and not in public worship. Therefore, while it is certainly commendable and meritorious for a woman, as for

any one else, to assume additional duties or mitzvot, the voluntary assumption of responsibility does not transform the act into one of obligation.

The question of whom to count in a minyan is one of obligation, not right. Thus, the Halakhah declares that an onen -- a man whose close relative has died but not yet been interred -- is released during this period from all the obligations to perform the mitzvot. Therefore, he cannot be counted as part of the minyan. Should there be nine adult men Jews waiting to pray, and an onen appears, there is no minyan, and the group may not recite any of the prayers that are specific only for a minyan.

It has been said that this not counting of women in the minyan is a sign that women are held to be inferior in Jewish law. That argument is meretricious, deliberately misleading, and a travesty. It is true that women suffer certain disabilities in the Halakhah, but that does not mean they are inferior. For example, the kohen also suffers certain disabilities -- he may not visit the cemetery in honor of friends or distant relatives, and he is severely circumscribed in his marital choices. Yet I have never heard of anyone concluding therefrom that the kohen is considered inferior and subordinate in Jewish Law!

The late Rav Kook maintained that various groups in Judaism are distinguished by different functions; some have more privileges in one area, some more privileges in another area. But when all come together, they complement each other and supplement each other, so that all together form one kelal Yisrael, the Community of Israel.

We have been told by non-Orthodox polemicists that the Halakhic practice reflects the patriarchal structure of the Jewish society. I agree. And, for reasons sociological, psychological, and historical as well as Halakhic, I believe that that is a good thing -- for women as much as for men, for the future as well as for the present. In contemporary times more than ever before, this fundamental patriarchal structure must be preserved for the health of the Jewish family -- and the Jewish family remains the most important element in the survival of the Jewish people and of Judaism.

But this must be said clearly: the patriarchal system in Jewish terms does not imply oppression or suppression of women. Who can read this morning's Torah reading about the patriarch Abraham, and conclude that our mother Sarah was powerless or unimportant, inferior or insignificant? The Torah clearly states that in her argument with her husband the Lord vindicated Sarah. The Rabbinic tradition ascribes to Sarah a greater degree of prophetic spirit than to Abraham. Yet -- Abraham remained the patriarch.

A colleague of mine (Rabbi Irving Rosenbaum of Chicago) has pointed out that most Jews live in suburban communities, where husbands must often travel long to and from work. When they return they are exhausted, and so too many Jewish husbands have abandoned their key roles in the Jewish family to the womenfolk. Similarly, their association with the Jewish community has been left to the wives. A number of suburban Temples have announced, ever so virtuously, that they are abolishing their "Sisterhoods" because they do not believe in segregating women. Yet, what has happened is that the whole Temple has, with few exceptions, turned into one big Sisterhood. The role of the man in organized Jewish religious life has become remarkably attenuated in these areas. Now is certainly not the time to whittle down whatever special relationship the male may still have with public worship -- for the good of their wives and their families as well. My friend concludes that, regardless of what is said in industry and commerce, this holds true: the man who signs over his religion in his wife's name is on his way to spiritual bankruptcy...

So our answer to the Conservative "innovation" must be ^{un}ambiguous. It is unacceptable, both because it is against the Halakhah and because the reasons adduced for it are either non-existent or unconvincing. There are far more serious items on the agenda of the Jewish people and the Jewish faith. But what has been given such wide currency in the public press must have this response.

111

What is the view of the Torah on the nature of woman? There are many statements reflecting many and diverse opinions in the great literature of Bible and Talmud and their commentaries.

It is futile to seek one consistent view for all talmudic rabbis. But permit me to present to you on this sacred day one luminous interpretation. It is given to us by a great Sephardic sage of the Middle Ages, Rabbi Isaac Arama, the author of "קצות חנניה". The author points to the Biblical tale of Jacob and Rachel. Jacob dearly and gently loved Rachel, the younger of the two sisters. His father-in-law Laban, in a ruse, gave the older sister, Leah, to Jacob. But Jacob loved Rachel more, and he worked for her for 14 years. Leah proved fruitful, and had child after child. All this while Rachel suffered in her barrenness, and her misery increased. Finally, exasperated and at the point of despair, she turned to her husband and said to him *הוּא אִישׁ אֱלֹהִים וְאֵין אִתּוֹ בָּרָק*. You are a man of God: Pray for me, do something, give me children, for if not I am as good as dead; I would rather die!

What would we expect of a Jacob in a situation of this kind? Surely, Jacob, the loving husband, ought to respond with love and tenderness and encouragement. One would think that his response would be similar to that of Elkanah to Hannah, in this morning's Haftorah: *לָמָּה אֲבַדְתִּי וְלָמָּה יָרָדְתִּי וְלָמָּה אֲבָרְכָה וְלָמָּה אֲשָׁרְרָה* -- why do you cry, why do you feel so badly, am I not better to you than ten sons?

Instead we find a shocking reaction by Jacob. He is irate, irritable, furious. He snaps at her: *וְלָמָּה אֲבַדְתִּי וְלָמָּה יָרָדְתִּי וְלָמָּה אֲבָרְכָה וְלָמָּה אֲשָׁרְרָה*. "And the anger of Jacob was kindled against Rachel and he said to her: Am I then in place of God who has denied to thee the fruit of thy womb?"

What kind of answer is that? Where is Jacob's love, his humanity, his understanding?

Rabbi Isaac Arama answers with a point of profound philosophical and sociological significance. He says that there are two conceptions of the nature of woman in the Bible, and they are represented by the two names that the Bible gives to the first woman. One was *חַוָּה* (Havah) or Eve, so called because she was *חַוָּה*, the mother of all living beings. The other name was *אִשָּׁה*, or woman: *"אִשָּׁה לְאִישׁ"* for she was taken from *Ish*, or man. The difference between these two is this:

Havah, symbolizes woman as a function-bearer, as one who is a mother or a wife or fulfills any other kind of function. She has a task, a job, a duty, and these define her womanly role. Ishah, however, stands for a woman per se, as an innate being, as one whose dignity is unconditioned by function, as a female human, created in the image of God no less than a male human, and whose worthiness does not depend on achievement or failure. Havah speaks of women's fulfillment through her functions, while Ishah speaks of women's inner value over and beyond any function. Both are important -- even as they are for men, who have their functions to fulfill in the orbit of family and society, and who have their inner and self-worth as well.

This is what Jacob meant when he was angry with Rachel. He was furious with her because he considered that she was guilty of a non-Jewish conception of womanhood when she said that if she could not be a mother she would rather die. Jacob was upset that she had restricted the meaning of womanliness to Havah alone, ignoring Ishah. He felt that she was not true to the teachings that he cherished, the teachings which considered that every human being, regardless of gender or sex, has innate dignity and worthiness, regardless of function. Of course, he wanted her to feel fulfilled as a mother. But he considered that her self was of infinite value, even if she could not find maternal fulfillment.

Such is the insight taught to us by Rabbi Isaac Arama, and it is true to the essence of Jewish teaching. And it is therefore not true that Judaism considers woman only an adjunct of her husband and her children.

Hence, I wish to repeat what I said from this pulpit several weeks ago. The Rabbis taught that ^{let's say} a man's home is really his wife. Without a wife, he merely has a place where he lives. But a home, with all the associations that that word implies, is contingent upon a wife. This implies that a woman's major responsibility is ^{to} her husband and children, to the home. But the Rabbis never stated the obverse, i.e., ^{let's say} that a wife is a home, as if there is no other value to womanhood than home-making. While her major duties should be towards her family, there is no reason for any woman of talent or interest to restrict herself to these exclusively. If her inner feelings and selfhood require

expression in other areas, and she can accommodate the two demands of Ishah and Havah, then she should be encouraged to do so. If this is an instance for "liberation," I am all for it.

Yet, before leaving this theme, let me say that despite the pressures of all kinds of militancy in our society, the proper Jewish attitude, whether for men or women, ought to be an emphasis on duties above rights. We have had, in recent years, too much insistence upon one's rights, and much too little emphasis on one's duties (a term which now sounds so quaintly old-fashioned). Women too must, as Jews, learn to stress the importance of being a right woman as well as attaining women's rights. I do not mean to deny that there are serious problems, whether in society or in Jewish law. But this must not become an obsession with us, the kind that distracts us from the duties, obligations, and moral responsibilities in life.

Now, duty is different for different people. Fathers as well as mothers have duties to children and family, in some ways identical and in some ways each playing a different role in the family. What is the woman's special role? Here we come to the third and final part of this discourse.*

1V

The Talmud (Yev. 63) relates a fascinating story of R. Yossi, who one day met the prophet Elijah (R. Yossi was wont to have such mystic visitations of the great prophet). Whereupon, R. Yossi presented to the prophet a simple question of the translation of a famous verse: *וַיֵּשֶׁב אִתּוֹ כְּבִי וְאִשָּׁה, אֵלֶיךָ זֶה*
כְּבִיב אֵלֶיךָ אִם עֲנִי תִּשְׁמַח? בְּמֵה וְאֵלֶיךָ זֶה אֵלֶיךָ זֶה?

It is written that God said, "I will make for him [Adam] a help-meet for him." How is a woman the helper of man?

אֵלֶיךָ זֶה וְאִשָּׁה, אֵלֶיךָ זֶה אֵלֶיךָ זֶה אֵלֶיךָ זֶה אֵלֶיךָ זֶה אֵלֶיךָ זֶה

The prophet answered: "if a man brings home wheat from the field, can he eat that wheat as it is? Does he not have to have someone to pound it and grind it and knead it and bake it for him? If a man brings home flax from the field, can he then wear it as it is, without a wife to prepare it for him?"

Hence, the wife is the helper, one who illuminates his eyes and put him on his feet."

One wonders: for such an interpretation of the function of a wife, for this we need the prophet Elijah? To make of her nothing more than a "chief cook and bottle washer?"

However, I believe that if we look at this dialogue a bit deeper we will find that we have here indeed a nugget of rare wisdom. What the Talmud is implying is that in order truly to be a helper, one who enlightens the eyes and places a man on his feet, the wife must take not only the raw material that her husband gives her, but the raw material that her husband is, and actualize every great potential within him, bring out every advantageous possibility that he possesses, transform his inchoate talents into creative realities. Just as nutritionally she converts the wheat into bread and the flax into clothing, so psychologically and spiritually she must draw out all his hidden abilities, and bring out the best in him. When she has done that, in the largest sense, then indeed she is the one who enlightens his eyes and places him on his feet.

In this sense, a wife is an עוזר, a helper to her husband; not in the sense of being a servant or an adjunct or an assistant or even an extra pair of hands. Rather, she is one who helps him to become himself. She is a catalyst of human character, who creatively elicits what is precious and valuable and enduring from within him; an artist, whose medium is the human personality; a civilizing agent for her husband and children. The wife is not only the restaurateur of the home, but a restorer of the heart; not only a caterer but a creator, not a cook in the kitchen but a conjuror who can locate qualities of character in the raw clay of personality, and evoke them into reality.

V

In a sense, this role of woman is an imitation of a divine mission. For when we stand before God, as we do now on this holy day, we ask Him to do for us what a good wife does for her husband and kin. We ask Him to be an עוזר, a help for us!

So said David: *הֲלֹא שֵׁן הָאֵל הַיּוֹמָה לִהְיוֹת יְהוָה עֲצָרָה ?*
I lift up my eyes to the hills, I raise my eyes to heaven
itself, and I wonder: from whence shall my help, my ezer,
come? And the answer is offered: *עֲשׂוּי אֱלֹהִים הוּא שׂוֹמֵר יְהוָה*,
my help will come from the Lord who is the Maker of heaven
and earth.

We offer to God all that we are. And that is not enough.
We must also offer to Him all that we can yet be, and
ask Him to help us develop it and realize it.

V1

The Rosh Hashanah readings confirm for us Judaism's conception
of both the nature and the role of the Jewish woman. And
when we hear the Shofar, we transfer that teaching into a
prayer to the Almighty Himself. We ask Him to be our *עֲזָרָה*,
to help us, to stir into life the goodness that lies within
the deepest recesses of our souls, to bring out from within
us that which may yet become precious, worthy and a blessing.