

## Parashat Mishpatim

### Does the Torah look at Women as Sex Objects?

#### Why Can't Women hold Prominent Positions in our Synagogue Service?

For a young girl from an egalitarian Jewish family in New York, our synagogue services here in Bat Ayin may seem rather male chauvinistic. The men take up most of the 'stage,' while the women only get to peek from a crack within the curtain above the shoulder length wooden partition. This is the experience of one of my family members from the USA, when she attended my son's bar mitzvah several years ago. "Why are women relegated to the back? It seems like women can never get prominent positions in the Jewish society such as becoming rabbis, cantors, sextons etc. They can't even get an Aliyah to the Torah!" she complained. One of my readers asked a similar question about the original Temple service in Jerusalem: "I feel very hurt when I read that Hashem wanted only the 'males' to come to the Temple during the *Shalosh Regalim* (the three pilgrim festivals: Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot). The word used is *zachar* – male. It doesn't even state, *B'nei Yisrael*, which may include females."

Marina is correct. The expression, *יִרְאֶה כָּל זָכוֹרְךָ* / *yeraeh kol zechurcha* – "all your males shall be seen" (at the Temple) appears three times in the Torah (*Shemot* 23:17, 34:23, *Devarim* 16:16). The first mention is in this week's parasha.

**ספר שמות פרק כג פסוק יז** *שְׁלֹשׁ פְּעָמִים בַּשָּׁנָה יִרְאֶה כָּל זָכוֹרְךָ אֶל פְּנֵי הָאֱדֹן הַשָּׁמַיִם:*

"Three times a year all your males shall appear, before the Sovereign L-rd, Hashem" (*Shemot* 23:17).

These Torah verses obligate every Jewish man to appear at the Temple at the prescribed holiday times with their *Korban Re'eyah* (sacrifice of appearance). It seems like women are completely excluded, as if Hashem is not interested in seeing women at His Holy Temple. So how can I, an intellectual, liberated woman find meaning in these kinds of 'archaic' Torah verses that seem to denigrate women? How can I find meaning in the Torah lifestyle where women are relegated to the backstage of the synagogue?

#### Where is the Center of Jewish Life?

Outside of Israel, the Synagogue is often the center of Jewish life. The majority of Diaspora Jewry, both men and women, are busy, hard at work in their various careers. Their main time to cultivate their Jewishness is in the Synagogue, especially on Shabbat. If you look at the Synagogue service as representing Judaism, it certainly seems like women get the short end of the stick. Here, in Israel and in certain communities in the diaspora, it is the Synagogue that is relegated to the backstage of Judaism and Jewish observance. The Torah teaches us that our purpose in this world is to keep Hashem's mitzvot:

**קְהֵלֶת פֶּרֶק יב פֶּסוּק יג** *סוֹף דְּבַר הַכֹּל נִשְׁמַע אֶת הָאֱלֹהִים יִרְאֵה וְאֶת מִצְוֹתָיו שְׁמֹר כִּי זֶה כָּל הָאֲדָמָה:*

"The end of the matter, when all is said and done, revere G-d and keep His commandments, for this applies to all mankind (*Kohelet* 12:13).

## Life Lessons from Rebbetzin's Heart

Rashi explains, "All of humanity was created for this purpose." It is, therefore, not the synagogue but rather the Jewish home that is the central place where we have the most opportunity to perform mitzvot and thus fulfill the purpose for which we are created. It is in the home that we put a mezuzah, welcome guests, keep and honor Shabbat, conceive children, bake challah, celebrate the festivals, educate our children, give tithes of our produce, recite grace after meals etc. The synagogue is mainly for prayer, which is only one of the 613 mitzvot. Furthermore, this mitzvah can also be fulfilled in the home, especially for women, as our prayer is more personal and less communal. We learn this from Chana – the Mother of Prayer. Although, she invented our central prayer, the *Shemone esra* – the most important prayer in the synagogue today – she prayed alone, after all the people had left the Tabernacle. If we change our perspective to regard the Jewish home as the center of Jewish service, then women clearly occupy the most prominent role, allowing the men to serve under her authoritative direction.

### Hashem's Presence is Revealed Wherever We Serve Him

"Our entire purpose, and the purpose for which we, and all the worlds, both upper and lower, were created: is that G-d should have a dwelling-place here below" (Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, *Tanya, Likutei Amarim*, chapter 33). This Divine dwelling place is not limited to the synagogue or even the Temple as we learn from next week's parasha, "Make me a sanctuary and I will dwell within you" (*Shemot* 25:8). It didn't state, "I will dwell within it (the Tabernacle or Temple) but "I will dwell within you." Hashem's *Shechina* is revealed wherever we serve Him, especially in our home. As director of an institution, I have learned to delegate different domains to the most suitable people. One Elana is in charge of the "home" – staff and student affairs. Another Elana, as director of public relations, is in charge of the outside domain. The Torah made a fair delegation of responsibilities when it charged women with the internal sphere of the home and men with the external sphere outside the home, including the synagogue. For women, the mitzvot of the home, therefore, override more external mitzvot, including the obligation to participate in a minyan of the synagogue. I am happy to have been created in Hashem's will as a woman- exempted from synagogue services. I'm liberated to pray with my own words, in my own way, at the time and place that suits me best. When I do enter the men's domain of the synagogue, I happily accept the 'back stage seat,' as after all, this is not my main place of service where I get most spiritual fulfillment.

### Women are not Excluded from Appearing at the Temple

In truth, the synagogue service is not supposed to be a stage where some people get a central role and others are the spectators. It is only when you look at the service as a performance, that it becomes important to secure 'a good seat.' We may actually fulfill our purpose of serving G-d even more by giving up our seat to someone else. Regarding the obligation to appear at the Temple three times a year, women are exempted for practical reasons, for example, she could be just after birth, or she may be unable to leave a sick child. This explains why only males are obligated to bring the 'Appearance Sacrifice' at the Temple mount during the prescribed festival times. However, exemption from the obligation to visit the Temple at prescribed times, does not exclude women from appearing when they are able. Women are not denied the opportunity to bring free will offerings, which can be brought during holiday times. She also participates in the peace offerings, as *Sefer HaChinuch* teaches, "*Shelamim* offerings are accepted from both, men and

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women..." The meat from these offerings, is enjoyed by the whole family at the Temple mount. Moreover, women are obligated to bring a sacrifice to the Temple after giving birth – a special opportunity that men are denied. Women are also required to appear, "At the end of every seven years, at an appointed time, in the Festival of Sukkot [following] the year of *Shemita*, when all Israel comes to appear before Hashem...to read the Torah before all Israel... [as it states], assemble the people: the men, the women, the children" (*Devarim* 31:10-12). The fact that the Temple included a special Women's Courtyard which contained a balcony reserved for women, testifies that women were not excluded from appearing at the Temple.

### Serving His Wife in Bed

In the Jewish home, the woman occupies a most central role. She is not only in charge of the physical welfare of the home. She determines, moreover, its emotional and spiritual energy. It is in her merit that the Divine Feminine Presence – the *Shechina* rests in the home. Marital intimacy is one of the main mitzvot of the home, which brings the *Shechina* to rest between husband and wife. In Judaism, contrary to the perception of the world, it is not the woman who is a sex object. Rather, sexual intimacy is one of the three things a husband is obligated to provide for his wife. In this week's parasha, we learn that even if a man marries his Hebrew maidservant, who holds the lowest rank in Jewish society, he is prohibited from withholding food, clothing or sex from her, even if he also marries a more prominent woman:

**סַפֵּר שְׂמוֹת פְּרָקָא כֹּא (ו) אִם אַחֲרַת יִקַּח לוֹ שְׂאֵרָה כְּסוּתָהּ וְעֹנֵתָהּ לֹא יִגְרַע:**

"If he takes another wife for himself; her sustenance, her clothing, and her conjugal rights he shall not diminish" (*Shemot* 21:10).

The obligation to provide these three things for his wife are the main tenants of the *Ketubah* – the Jewish marriage contract, which the groom gives to his bride during the wedding ceremony. In Judaism, sex is not something a woman gives to her man, but rather it is the husband's obligation to give his wife pleasure and not the-other-way-around. I believe this is because women's sexuality is more refined than that of men. For a woman, the enjoyment of sex is nearly always linked to feelings of love and emotional closeness. Therefore, we never hear about women going to prostitutes. The Jewish husband is required to elevate his more physical sexual inclination by serving his wife in bed. The Hebrew word for sex- *tashmish* (to serve) testifies to this concept. Even if in the outer, public spheres of Jewish life such as the synagogue, the man plays a more prominent role, the woman is the queen in the inner, private spheres. The sacred nature of her supremacy in the privacy of her home does not tolerate publicizing. For the woman who cares about serving Hashem, the receiving of external recognition of her hidden power is moreover, totally irrelevant.