

Parashat Shemini

When EmunaHealers and Shamanic Hebrew Priestesses Meet

My Experience with Women Reading from the Torah Scroll

Our recent Emunahealing retreat at the Isabella Friedman Jewish Retreat Center was quite an experience. We were such an interesting mix of 26 women – from Chabad to Litvish; some with a strong Brooklyn accent; ladies of Russian background and those who recently discovered their Jewishness. There was such an accepting atmosphere among the bewigged, those wearing pants and women with flowing scarves, like myself. We all came together to strengthen our emuna and recharge our spiritual batteries in order to serve Hashem with more zeal and vigor. A few days prior to departing on my North American, whirlwind tour, I discovered that our weekend-retreat was scheduled to take place during *Parashat Zachor* when we have the obligation to hear this Torah portion read from a Kosher Torah scroll (*Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim* 685). I immediately inquired of the Isabella Retreat Center if they had a man, perhaps the *mashgiach* (kosher supervisor) who could read *Parashat Zachor* for us. While they did have a kosher *Sefer Torah*, there was no man available to read it for us. So, “In a place where there are no men, you must make an effort to be a man” (*Pirkei Avot* 2:5). This is what the Rabbi, my husband, ruled: since women are obligated to hear *Parashat Zachor*, when it is not possible to hear it read by a man, a woman may read it from a kosher *Sefer Torah* to the group. I, personally, do not know the cantillation notes well enough to feel comfortable reading from the Torah scroll. So, I asked Hashem, and He sent me a candidate via email, who practiced for the entire week to read *Parashat Zachor* at the EmunaHealing retreat. However, someone questioned my choice, as this woman was single. With much deliberation, and the desire to keep the Torah law in the very best way and consideration for everyone’s feelings and concerns, the most suitable candidate was found to read from the actual Torah scroll while everyone else had the option to follow in the Chumash or recite it with her. The next job was to roll the Torah to the right place, which occurred with much trepidation since it was the first time for most of us handling a *Sefer Torah*. When we had almost found the place, somehow who seemed to really know, told us, “You need to roll it much tighter!” so we started over again, I stood at one end of the table unrolling while another married woman stood at the other end rolling so tight I was afraid that the Torah scroll would tear. Baruch Hashem the Torah scroll survived our unexperienced hands without any injuries. My husband later told me it doesn’t have to be rolled tightly.

Are there any Restrictions for Women Touching a Torah Scroll?

Although the Talmud, Rambam and subsequent Halachic authorities rule that the Torah is not susceptible to receive *tuma* (impurity), (*Babylonian Talmud B’rachot* 22a), (Rambam, *Laws of Tefillin, Mezuzah and Sefer Torah* 10:8), in order to do the right thing according to all opinions, we made sure that only a married woman handled the Torah scroll and read from it. This was in order to respect the view that a woman who is *niddah* (has not immersed in a *mikvah* after her menstruation) should not touch sacred objects or look at the Torah scroll (Magen Avraham, *Orach Chayim* 88:2), also cited by *Mishna B’rurah* 88:6). This custom derives from the *B’raitah* of tractate *Niddah* 1:2, which states that a woman who has her period must not come into the synagogue or

Life Lessons from Rebbetzin's Heart

touch any sacred object. Nevertheless, this is only a custom and not the halacha (Torah law) as *Shulchan Aruch* explicitly teaches:

שו"ע יורה דעה - סימן רפב

כל הטמאים, אפילו נדות, מותרים לאחוז בס"ת ולקרוא בו. והוא שלא יהיו ידיהם מטונפות או מלוכלכות:
All those who are impure, even a *niddah* are permitted to hold a Torah scroll and read from it, as long as their hands are not filthy or dirty (*Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah, 282:9*).

I still recall the sense of awe and compassion filling me as we took of the small *tallit*- wrapped Torah from the ark, removed its burgundy velvet ribbon and opened it to reveal the animated black letters on its yellowing parchment. It felt like a newborn baby to our tender touch and very much alive. I didn't give anyone an *aliyah* to the Torah to recite the blessing "*Asher bachar banu* (who has chosen us)..." as I didn't want to be associated with feminist women's prayer groups- whether on or off the Wall.

The Priestesses' Shabbat Drumming

What distinguished our women's Torah service from that of the many feminist groups prevalent in our time? We, too, prayed together as women and read from the Torah scroll.

I believe the subtle difference is in the intention. We were not coming from a place of wanting to prove that women can read from the Torah just like men. Our intention was to fulfill our mitzvah to hear *Parashat Zachor* and we had no other way than to read it ourselves. Our mellow Shabbat prayer service contrasted with the loud drumming which exuded from another room, a considerable distance away. The Isabella Friedman Center had once again chosen to host our group together with a group called *Hebrew Priestess Institute* or *Kohenet* – supposedly a female version of Kohen. I guess Isabella Friedman believes our two groups are compatible since they scheduled us together for the second time in a row. By now, I had familiarized myself with the philosophy of *Kohenet*, founded in 2005 by Rabbi Jill Hammer and Taya Shere. *Kohenet* trains and ordains women as *Kohanot* – Hebrew Priestesses to officiate at weddings, burials and other lifecycle events, facilitating transformative ritual for mixed-gender communities. *Kohenet* employs "archetypes of the ancient Hebrew priestesses, [such as] ...the Shamaness, the Lover, and the Fool."

Priestesses to Whom?

Kohenet has somehow succeeded to attract spiritually seeking young women, the type who would do very well at Midreshet B'erot Bat Ayin. Most of them are "captured babies" who do not have the Torah background to be able to decipher *Kohenet's* many principles that go against the Torah. Whereas, I have nothing personal against any of the individual women adherents, I disagree strongly with the philosophy of *Kohenet*. First of all, there is no such thing as Kohenesses! The Torah clearly bequeaths Aharon's priesthood to his sons (*Rambam, Biyat HaMikdash 9:1*). A Jewish woman can be a daughter of a Kohen but never a Kohen. We women are the Priestesses of our home, and that is no less important than the Temple service and certainly more vital than officiating at the wedding of an intermarried or gay couple. I only have pity for women who feel that their self-worth is dependent on fulfilling masculine roles in the Torah. Moreover, the shamanic elements of *Kohenet* and their altar rites, borders on outright idol-worship.

Kosher or non-Kosher Renewed Ways of Serving Hashem?

This week's Torah portion about Aharon's sons, who sacrificed "a strange fire," anticipates such spiritual seeking "priestesses." "Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aharon, took each of them his firepan, and put fire in it, and laid incense on it; they offered a strange fire before the Eternal which He had not commanded them" (*Vayikra* 10:1). Aharon's sons were spiritual to the highest degree. They wanted to express their desire to come close to the Divine in their own creative ways. The only problem was that their way of service consisted of a strange fire that G-d had not commanded. In our New Age era, there is a strong surge to serve Hashem in innovative and creative ways. This is because we are at the verge of the final redemption with renewal in the air. While some of the renewed ways of Torah ritual which are being rediscovered such as *techelet* (sky-blue thread) in the *tzitzit* (prayer fringes), or *Tu beShevat* Seders must be encouraged, the tragic death of Aharon's sons teaches us the dire consequences of overstepping the boundaries of Kosher ways of serving Hashem.

The Strange Fire of Deliberately Opposing Hashem's Commandments

The crux that makes the difference between life and death is whether we desire to fulfill Hashem's commandments or allow our own desires to dictate our Divine service- even that "which He had not commanded." One of the priestesses that I spoke with, interrupted our conversation by saying, "Sorry, I have to go because we are making Havdalah." When I informed her, "Shabbat only goes out in another seven minutes," she blatantly responded, "Our Havdalah is now, we don't keep halacha!" In other words, the *Kohenet* movement deliberately chooses to go against Hashem's commandments in their "Divine service." Aharon's sons, at least, were not aware that their fire was strange. Their devotion and zeal to serve Hashem with utmost love brought them beyond the Torah boundaries.

Holy Fire of Unity

We had requested to take our meals in our private learning room in order to facilitate personal sharing around the meals. Yet, in order not to appear anti-social, we decided to join *Kohenet* in the dining hall for the third meal on Shabbat. Last year, they were a great majority and dominated the atmosphere, but this year the tables had turned. Their reduced group amounted to little more than half of our number. This gave us confidence to create an atmosphere of Torah and *Kedusha*. Several of the EmunaHealing facilitators stood up and spoke words of Torah to the entire group in the dining hall. We then lead everyone in the traditional third meal Shabbat *zemiroth*. One of the great highlights of the entire retreat was when we spontaneously got up to dance with every woman in the dining hall, to the enthusiastic singing of *Mi'shenichnas Adar*, and *Hine ma tov...* The power of the unity of all forty or so women holding hands, and circling around the room as our voices meshed in tender, loving song and reverberated to the expanding walls of Isabella Friedman. The energy was especially high since it broke through and melted away the many differences and disagreements between us. Priestesses, Emunahealers or Rebbetzins? When it comes down to it, we are all just daughters of Hashem!