

Parasha Ekev

Why are Single Women Undervalued in the Torah?



Dear Rebbetzin Chana Bracha,

I would like to know your thoughts on the following: We all know that the ideal of “*Eishet Chayil*” applies to the Jewish wife and mother. But, what about the Jewish woman who became a *ba’alat teshuvah* (returnee to Judaism) later in life? What about the Jewish woman who is married, and who does not have children for one reason or another? What is her role in Jewish society, and in which way does she fulfill the role of “*Eishet Chayil*”? Perhaps, she has devoted her life to serve in areas other than home and family? What if, for example, she has spent her entire life taking care of the sick, or in improving the lives of others in various ways, but has never been blessed with the joys of her own family life? I’m eager to hear what you have to say on this topic, as I fear it is generally neglected, leaving a whole sub-population of Jewish women who are left out of home-centered observance feeling undervalued and lonely.

Liebe Weizman (name changed)

Dear Liebe,

You are asking a difficult but very important question. The situation of single women in the Torah world is not simple. Unfortunately, in the modern Western world, the phenomenon of older single women is increasing. The Torah world is no different. As you wrote, women often return to the Torah later in life. When one realizes that her biological clock is ticking, she wishes she had been less preoccupied with her career and had put more energy into establishing a family. Many women dedicated to the Torah in the highest degree yearn to realize their potential as wives and mothers. Not only do they feel a natural desire to fulfill themselves in these ways, the Torah also makes it clear that the greatest contribution and the highest ideal of a Jewish woman is to become an *Eishet Chayil* – described in the Torah as a wife and mother. So, how can we comfort and encourage single women to contribute to Jewish society and find a meaningful way to fulfill their Jewish potential?

The Role of the Jewish Woman to Build a Torah Family

If I were a single woman, I would feel that the Jewish religious community rubs salt in my wound from yearning for marriage and motherhood, with all its ‘home-centered observance.’ Women are exempt from the positive-time-bound mitzvot, so that they can fulfill their destiny of building the family home. It is the role of the Jewish woman to create and sustain the family, upon which our personal and national future is founded. For this reason, women are also exempt from the mitzvah of Torah study. Although women must learn Torah in order to live by its guidance, they are not obligated to study Torah for the sake of theoretical profundity, and comprehensive knowledge. In order to foster the family, the Torah exempted women from the mitzvah of Torah study and the positive time-bound mitzvot. What about the older single woman, who may never be able to have children of her own? How does all this relate to her? The very law that women are exempt from the mitzvah of Torah study and time-bound positive mitzvot suggests that women, by nature, have less of a need for those mitzvot and that they can achieve personal completion without them. Based on this, we can learn that even a woman who does not bear the burden of family is exempt from these mitzvot ([Rabbi Eliezer Melamed](#)).

The Image of G-d Refers to the Union between Man and Woman

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The Torah teaches that the human being is only a complete *tzelem elokim* (image of G-d) when the feminine and the masculine are united to become one complete being (*Bereishit* 1:27). This seems to imply that an unmarried person, be it man or woman, does not embody a complete image of G-d. In fact, any man who has no wife lives without joy, without blessing, and without goodness (*Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot* 62b). The Torah refers to the human being as complete and blessed only after G-d made male and female and brought them together, as it states “Male and female He created them and He blessed them and He called their name Adam” (*Bereishit* 5:2). Only men have the mitzvah to be fruitful and multiply, because women naturally desire the bond of marriage and motherhood. Therefore, the single woman may suffer more and feel a greater lack than the single man, especially in the traditional Jewish world, where so much emphasis is on women to be homemakers. Before Hashem created woman, He put Adam to sleep. It seems like in our time, prior to the final redemption, in the merit of the women that Hashem is creating women anew, while often, men are spiritually dormant. Women are engaged in various self-development movements and aspiring to perfect their character, whereas, many men do not exactly measure up. It has become increasingly difficult to find suitable matches for the accomplished Jewish woman. Many older single women complain that they are being matched up with weirdos. We must show great empathy and care to women who are in this situation. When I lecture about the *Eshet Chail* or related Women/Torah topics, I’m keenly aware that it is extremely important to show sensitivity to the older single women, some who may never experience the joy of motherhood.

Upholding the Single Woman

Just as the Torah teaches us the importance of protecting the orphan, convert and the widow, so is it a mitzvah to be kind to the single woman.

ספר דברים פרק י פסוק יח עֲשֵׂה מִשְׁפָּט יְתוֹם וְאַלְמָנָה וְאָהֵב גֵּר לְתֵת לוֹ לֶחֶם וְשִׂמְלָה:

“G-d upholds the cause of the orphan, the widow, and He loves the convert providing him with food and clothing” (*Devarim* 10:18).

The Hebrew term for widow is *אַלְמָנָה* / *Almana*,’ literally means, “without a portion.” This expression can be extended to include the older single woman, as she has no one to provide for her and protect her. In the past, a woman would remain in her father’s home until the day of her wedding, when her father would hand her over to the protecting hand of her husband. Today, things have changed. Torah observant women can make their own living, and rent an apartment on their own or share it with other women. This phenomenon has made the Jewish woman less desperate to get married. Perhaps in past times, a woman would settle for less, and marry someone – anyone – just to get out of her father’s house. I certainly do not want to blame single women claiming that they are too picky. I realize that there is a surplus of great beautiful religious Jewish women with excellent midot, for whom it’s really hard to find suitable husbands on their level.

The Highlights of Jewish Single Womanhood

We have to acknowledge that being a single Jewish woman is not the ideal. Yet, we need to have emunah that whatever situation we find ourselves in, has a purpose. Even if, objectively speaking, we are not in an ideal situation, such as being an orphan, not having financial means to support ourselves, not living in Eretz Yisrael, going through a difficult divorce, being unmarried etc., we need to believe that Hashem put us in this situation because this specific challenge helps us to rectify our soul. If you

are a single Torah-observant woman, there are still many ways that you can fulfill your potential and find purpose in your life. Rather than focus on what you are missing, it is important to engage in lofty activities and look for the positive. Instead of sulking and overeating to dull your loneliness, seize the opportunity to find yourself instead. When you're single, you can take stock, learn from your mistakes and work out what you want for the future. You are blessed with time at your disposal that marriage and motherhood preclude. This is your time to develop your skills, exercise your body, devote yourself to a meaningful job, engage in Torah study and most importantly engage in mitzvot that come your way. You don't have to feel like a failure or a second class citizen. One of the female Torah scholars whom I greatly admire is an older single woman who never had any children. Nevertheless, she is highly respected in Jewish communities the world over. She was able to apply the energy that she didn't need to expend in childrearing to deep Torah research. Through her books and Torah articles, she inspires both women and men, and helps many searching souls embrace the Torah lifestyle.

When is too Late to Find Your Soulmate?

There are various ways that a single Jewish woman can make the most out of her situation and provide valuable service to the community. There is a great need for Jewish female physicians, especially gynecologists, community leaders, therapists and more. While it is important to be happy with your portion, it is never too late to find your true soulmate. I personally know of more than one woman who married late and had her first baby after the age of 50. I also know of women who married later in life to men with children and who now enjoy raising grandchildren together. Before we were created, we were one big soul. Forty days before our conception, G-d took our "big soul" in His hands and split it into two pieces (*Babylonian Talmud Sotah 2a*). The work of finding our soul mate and truly becoming one with him is finding our missing half. So, how do we find our other half? We have to begin by perfecting our half. We have to really know ourselves and be the best 'half' we can possibly be. Our soulmate is out there, that's not the question. The question is, are we where we need to be to find him? We need to realize that we attract what we send out (Bary Lyman, *Meet to Marry*). While being happily engaged in various meaningful activities, we must not forget to put enough effort into meeting suitable matches for marriage. For those of us who are married, let us work on treating older single women with the utmost respect. If you are still single, I bless you to find self-value in your life while never giving up on finding your true soulmate! Perhaps, he is waiting for you to complete just one more rectification in your soul's journey to be your very best 'half,' ready to find your other half and embrace family life.