



What is Women's Portion in Torah?

Women's Torah Renaissance

During the last four decades, Torah learning for women has received more than a renaissance. When I became a new *Ba'alat Teshuva* (returnee to Judaism) in 1979, there were only two Torah learning centers available for me. Today- wow!!! There are more Yeshivot for women than cereal boxes in the supermarkets of the US! One of these being my own little [Midreshet B'erot Bat Ayin: Holistic Torah for Women on the Land](#). In addition, more and more Torah books are published by women as women's Torah erudition increases daily. Today, women are delving into deep esoteric Kabbalistic Torah, something completely unheard of even just half a century ago. Everywhere I teach, whether in Israel or abroad, women are craving deep, kabbalistic insights as though they were chocolate bars. In a recent student evaluation sheet, a student praised teachers that "make complex Kabbalistic concepts extremely accessible for students still learning basics." Experiencing the current Torah thirst and learnedness of Jewish women stands in strong contrast to many reliable, classical Torah sources such as Rambam and Rabbi Yosef Karo, who describe women as having weak minds, and consequently exempting women from the mitzvah of Torah learning. Could it really be Hashem's will that Jewish women, rather than delving deeply into Torah, read women's magazines, or get a Ph.D. in English literature, for example?

Classical Torah Sources Limiting Women's Capacity for Torah Learning

The *Shulchan Aruch* based on the Rambam (*Hilchot Talmud Torah*, Chapter 1 Halacha 13), clearly states that a woman is not commanded to learn Torah:

"A woman who learned Torah gets reward, but not the same reward as a man because she is not commanded. Although she does get rewarded, the Rabbis commanded that a person should not teach his daughter Torah, because most women are not fit to be taught, but they exchange the words of Torah for words of nonsense due to their weak mind..." (*Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah, Chapter 246 part 6*).

Although the inline Ashkenazi commentary by Rabbi Moshe Isserless modifies the *Shulchan Aruch* slightly, "In any case, a woman is obligated to learn the laws that apply to her" (Rema Y. D. 246), it doesn't remove the harsh statement of the *Shulchan Aruch*. Its source is in *Mishna Sotah* 3:4, commenting on the ritual performed with the suspected adulteress, described in *Parshat Naso* (*Bamidbar* 5:12-31). A woman who was witnessed secluding herself with a man other than her husband, in violation of her husband's warning, can be taken by her husband to the Temple, where, she drinks water in which Hashem's name is erased. If guilty of adultery, the woman and her illicit partner die by the hand of G-d. The Mishna explains that specific merits can suspend the Divine punishment of the adulteress, for some time.

...From here Ben Azai infers: A person is obligated to teach his daughter Torah, so that if she drinks [the *sotah* water], she will know that the merit [of the Torah] suspends [her punishment]. Rabbi Eliezer says: Anyone who teaches his daughter Torah is as if he teaches her תַּפְלוּת / *tiflut* – 'licentiousness'... (*Mesechet Sotah, Chapter 3 Mishna 4*).

The Lost Light of the Moon Reflects Women's Lost Torah Perception

It is not our experience today that women's minds are any weaker than the minds of men. Much less does it resonate with us to say that women "exchange the words of the Torah with the words of nonsense." With the greatest admiration for the Rambam, and while holding by the *Shulchan Aruch* and accepting the Divine authority of the Mishna, how do we reconcile their derogatory statements about women's limited Torah perception with the reality of today's women's Torah scholarship and desire for deep Torah knowledge? My friend Devorah Feistag in her book, *The Lost Light of the Moon* addresses this question. The change in the nature of women explains the contradiction between statements in traditional texts and our present-day reality. The descriptions of women by the sages were generally accurate at their time, although there have always been exceptions of learned woman. Women's limited Torah perception in past generations reflected the diminishment of the light of the moon (*Babylonian Talmud, Chulin 60b*) as a result of the first woman, Chava's eating from the Tree and sharing it with her husband. The lost light of the moon represents the loss of women's spiritual perception and abstract understanding. Before the sin, Adam and Chava possessed unimaginable spiritual perception. When eating from the Tree of Knowledge, they both lost much of their perception. Yet, Chava, who initiated the sin and convinced Adam to go along with her, lost more perception than Adam did. As a result, we find many descriptions of women as lacking in intellectual understanding and unsuited for Torah study. It was not Torah law that caused women's lowered status. Eating from the tree, changed the nature of most women from being abstract to becoming more concrete types. Since then, women's primary job is the repair of the damage caused by the sin to the physical world by using the physical world to attain a spiritual purpose. Thus, the sages' exemption of women from the mitzvah of Torah learning reflected the nature and capabilities of women during their time. Were a person to lose 80% of his vision, and as a result, be denied a driver's license, would we call this unfair discrimination?

Predictions in the Words of the Prophets and Sages of Women's Torah Transformation

What happened between the era of our sages up to the *Shulchan Aruch's* time in the 16th century and today when women's Torah reality has so obviously changed? We live in the very exciting Messianic period, when eating from the Tree is being rectified as we come closer and closer to the heart of the final redemption. The change of women's Torah perception during redemption times has long been predicted by our prophets:

ספר ירמיה פרק לא פסוק כא עד מתי תתחמקין הבת השׁוֹבֵבָה כִּי בָרָא הַשֵּׁם חֲדָשָׁה בְּאֶרֶץ נִקְבָּה תִּסּוֹבֵב
גִּבּוֹר:

"How long will you turn about, O you wild daughter? For Hashem has created a new thing on the earth, *nekevah tesovev gever* – a woman shall encircle a man" (*Yirmeyahu 31:21*).

Targum Yonatan from the Mishnaic time explains that "the new thing" is that "the people of the house of Israel will study Torah." Whenever "the house" is mentioned in the Torah its known to refer to the woman as explained by the first Mishna of *Yoma* on *Vayikra 16:6*. The book *Kol HaTor* by Rabbi Hillel of Shklov, in the name of the Vilna Gaon, quotes the following Zohar:

"In the 600th year of the 6th millennia [5600 since creation written in Hebrew as תר/Tor – 1840 CE], the upper gates of wisdom will be opened as well as the wellsprings of wisdom below. This will prepare the world for the 7th millennia like a person prepares himself on Friday for Shabbat..." (*Zohar* part I, 117a).

According to *Kol HaTor*, the power of *nekevah tesovev gever* – the rise of women’s Torah perception – is part of the opening of the upper gates of wisdom mentioned in the *Zohar*. When the power of *nekevah tesovev gever* started affecting the world, women began to regain their abstract capabilities. Since then, women have become more and more capable of various abstract pursuits, including the most important one, learning Torah. As a result, not all women today can be fulfilled only through assisting our husbands’ and sons’ Torah learning. Our own souls must be directly fed.

Yearning to Experience a Direct Connection with Hashem

We are in a childbirth-like transition. Hashem returned the abilities and interests to women for abstract learning in order that we apply them in Torah. Preventing women from learning Torah delays the redemption, while women’s Torah learning brings the *Geulah* closer. Returning to our Mishna in Sotah, Rambam explains Rabbi Eliezer’s position by saying that “most women’s minds are not attuned to being taught.” In that case, if a woman’s mind is attuned to being taught, the opinion of Ben Azai would apply, and such a woman should be taught Torah. Therefore, the increasing Torah learning institutions for women are a fulfillment of Hashem’s intention that Jewish girls and women delve into deep Torah learning. This is in accordance with the Torah ruling of Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg, a recent *posek* and *dayan* in Jerusalem:

...In our times we do not have to continue to follow the approach of Rabbi Eliezer, on the contrary we need to come closer to the approach of Ben Azai. There can be no doubt that the intentions of the women who learn is *l’shem shamayim*, and likewise the intention of those who teach them. One must teach them Torah to whatever extent the matter contributes to forming the woman’s Jewish education (*Tzitz Eliezer* part 9:3 and part 10:8).

Perhaps the natural enthusiasm of women for Torah learning is caused by our desire to experience the direct connection with Hashem, which we originally lacked in the Garden of Eden.

The Secret of Torah Education Begins with Women

The exemption from learning Torah *lishma* (for its own sake) spurs us women to desire and yearn even more for spirituality and Divine connection. Hashem rewarded this desire and enthusiasm by giving the Torah to the women first:

ספר שמות פרק יט פסוק ג ומשה עלה אל האלהים ויקרא אליו השם מן ההר לאמר כה תאמר לבית יעקב ותגיד לבני ישראל:

“Moshe went up to G-d from the mountain and Hashem called him from the mountain saying, ‘Thus you shall say to the house of Ya’acov, and you shall tell the sons of Israel’” (*Shemot* 19:3).

Rashi explains that Moshe was to give the Torah to the women first: **THUS YOU SHALL SAY** In this language and according to this order. **TO THE HOUSE OF YA’ACOV** - These are the women... The secret of all Torah education begins with women. Once the women have been taught, the men will follow, thus successfully transmitting Torah to the entire nation. At the final *geulah* all desires will be fulfilled, and women will also learn Torah *lishma* as alluded to in our morning blessings:

סדר תפלה - סדר השכמת הבוקר

ברוך אתה השם אלקינו מלך העולם אשר קדשנו במצוותיו וצונו לעסוק בדברי תורה: והערב נא השם אלהינו את דברי תורתך בפינו ובפיות עמך בית ישראל. ונהיה אנחנו וצאצאינו. וצאצאי עמך בית ישראל. כלנו יודעי שמך ולומדי תורתך לשמה: ברוך אתה השם המלמד תורה לעמו ישראל:

Blessed are You, Hashem, our G-d, King of the universe, Who has sanctified us with His commandments and has commanded us to engross ourselves in the words of Torah. Please, Hashem, our G-d, sweeten the words of Your Torah in our mouth and in the mouth of Your people, the family of Israel. May we and our offspring and the offspring of Your people, the House of Israel- all of us-know Your Name and study Your Torah for its own sake. Blessed are You, Hashem, Who teaches Torah to His people Israel (The blessings of the Torah in the morning prayers).

May we truly merit to learn Torah for the sake of heaven and return the lost light of the moon together with the Shechina – Divine, Feminine, Indwelling Presence!