

# TORAH AT THE CENTER

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### Dear Teacher of Torah,

*You stand this day, all of you, before the Eternal your God—you tribal heads, you elders, and you officials, all the men of Israel, you children, you women, even the stranger within your camp, from woodchopper to water drawer, to enter into the covenant of the Eternal your God... I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone, but with those who are standing here with us this day before the Eternal our God and with those who are not with us here this day.* (Deuteronomy 29:9ff)



In his valedictory address, Moses, who had claimed he was a man of few words (Exodus 4:10) addresses himself to the catholic Israel, *Knesset Yisrael*, carefully including people of every status, life stage and gender across time and space. We are addressed in the perpetual present and commanded to accept the conditions of the *brit*, the covenant between the children and the God of Israel. Even if we become lost in the minutiae, in the thicket of mitzvot, in the language of reward and punishment that permeates the Book of Deuteronomy, we should find ourselves at home in its overarching message of universality. At the inaugural public recitation of Torah, the address was poignantly inclusive. “[Ezra] read from it, facing the square before the Water Gate, from the first light until midday, to the men and the women and those who could understand; the ears of all the people were given to the scroll of the Teaching.” (Nehemiah 8:3)

We are the ones who make distinctions between people of different age, gender, race and status. We are the ones who differentiate, who discriminate not only “between” but also “against” each other. God, however, is capable of transcending these all too human conventions. One way we can imitate God is by aspiring to see and appreciate that which unites us as more compelling than that which divides us. We hope to make a compelling case for this “divine” perspective as it relates to gender and Judaism.

This issue of *Torah at the Center* lives up to its name, and we hope you will agree that it also lives up to its promise, putting Torah at the center of an issue that is as timely as it is timeless—gender. Apparently, Torah is of at least two minds on the subject, as are we: “God created the human beings in [the divine] image, creating [them] in the image of God, creating them male and female.” (Genesis 1:27) and “God Eternal took one of the ribs and closed up the flesh in that place. Now God Eternal built up the rib taken from the man into a woman and brought her to the man.” (Genesis 2: 21b-22)

These two verses seem more in opposition than in apposition, more in conflict than in concert, and yet they coexist. Rather than having two concepts of gender as an either/or proposition, Torah proposes that two incommensurable stories of human creation need to be side by side, living in a tension that has yet to be resolved. We may have progressed since *B'reishit* in many domains, but our understanding of gender may have regressed.

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GENDER AND JEWISH EDUCATION GENDER AND JEWISH EDUCATION GENDER AND JEWISH EDUCATION

# Torah at the Center

## From “Queen” to “Nobody”: A Language for Discussing Healthy Relationships

By Dr. Shira D. Epstein, Assistant Professor of Jewish Education, Jewish Theological Seminary, New York

*A sixth grade synagogue school class reads aloud verses from M'gillat Esther describing Vashti's refusal to come at the king's demand and the resulting royal edict stating that Vashti shall never again enter the presence of the king. Students inquire, "What happens next to Vashti?" The teacher instructs them to create a midrashic interpretation depicting Vashti's fate, and they excitedly set to work showing her as "dead." One girl, Tamar, interjects, "No, she's not dead. She lost her status, we need to show that." She says firmly, "She was a queen...now she's a 'nobody.'" They ultimately display Vashti as begging in the marketplace, ignored and alone.*

Tamar's naming of Vashti's lost status was not an accident; it resulted from prior class activities. As the teacher-researcher, I had facilitated drama exercises in which students depicted images of what they perceived as high/low status pairs (beggar and businessperson; popular and unpopular student). We had discussed what it feels like to be labeled by another as "low status" and had explored body language for feeling powerful vs. nonpowerful, weak vs. strong. Tamar used the language of status to describe Vashti's fate when she lost agency in her relationship with the king.

I often introduce this Purim text to initiate discussions with young people about the dynamics of gender in relationships. As educators, we need to introduce a vocabulary for talking about relationships of all kinds, including friendships. In Jewish Women International's *Strong Girls* curriculum, the Genesis verses describing Sarai and her maidservant Hagar are used as an entry point in exploring what it feels like to be "lowered in esteem" by a peer and to discuss popularity as connected to status. I find that "status" is an indispensable word for helping teens to offer their perceptions of power and control, as well as to describe the positive elements of equality in everyday interactions with peers.

In her book *The Soul of Education*, Rachael Kessler explains that while certain subjects may appear extraneous to religious education, attention to socio-emotional learning, "caring about the inner lives of our students," complements the overarching goal of spiritual education. (p. 159) Rabbi Eric Yoffie, asserts that Jewish educators support teens by

"apply[ing] the insights of our tradition to the real issues that they confront." (*Reform Judaism Magazine*, Spring 2006) Our texts can be used as entry points to dialogue about the critical factor of partnership in relationships, and educators can integrate curricular pieces that emphasize modern Judaism's value of relationships of equality, self-respect and mutual respect. *Schoolgirls* author Peggy Orenstein explains that self-esteem stems from self-knowledge; as learners name aloud the characteristics they believe make them special, they are better prepared to recognize when they are in a relationship that leaves them consistently feeling lowered in esteem, as "low status." When they are guided to develop a mental image of their strongest selves, they then can surround themselves with people who value the unique inner qualities they possess.

Young people need opportunities to talk about their experiences in peer and dating relationships, as well as to understand the elements of abuse that can manifest. Jewish education initiatives that tackle the subjects of healthy and unhealthy relationships have gained more prominence in the last few years: *Sacred Choices* (URJ); *Strong Girls* and *When Push Comes to Shove* (JWI); *It's No Longer Love* (Tzelem, a project of Yeshiva University's Center for the Jewish Future's: *Life Values and Intimacy Education*); *Love Shouldn't Hurt* (Shalom Bayit); and *Yad B'Yad* (Faith Trust Institute). Each of these curricula emphasizes the core idea that young people can be educated within formal Jewish education to choose relationships of partnership.

Jewish educators can play a key role in extending learning beyond the subjects that traditionally taught to further Jewish literacy; Hebrew language study, exploration of ritual practice, social-action projects and *b'nei mitzvah* prep can coexist alongside an effort to help young people gain a language for talking about the qualities of healthy relationships. By mindfully drawing upon the resources that exist and integrating entry points for these difficult discussions, we send the explicit message to adolescents that Judaism is connected to learners' daily lives. We emphasize that Jewish education values discussion of the challenges that our students face, and we recognize that interpersonal growth is the counterpart to spiritual development.