

learn with rigor, however, and in non-Orthodox settings women and men have learned the same material for many decades. Likewise, in modern Orthodox settings many of the most proficient teachers of Talmud and other rabbinic literature today are women. This shift in Jewish education has resulted in an “expansion of the palace of Torah,” as phrased by Tamar Ross. When the Torah is studied and taught by a broader portion of the Jewish people, when the experiences of people of different genders are included, then the conversation becomes enriched for everyone.

As we prepare to stand again at Sinai, to hear the revelation recited in our own communities, we recall the divine instructions to Moses, and then his own expansion, which were intended for the same purpose. We should stand together, expanding the circle of revelation until it includes every person who is prepared to study and to practice the holy ways of Torah.

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Expanding the Circle of Revelation

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Are women Jews? This shocking question, first phrased by the feminist scholar Rachel Adler, is linked by Judith Plaskow to our portion in her 1990 book, *Standing Again at Sinai*. When Moses descends from the mountain to prepare the people for revelation, he tells them, “Be ready for the third day; do not go near a woman” (Exod. 19:15). Sexual contact makes one temporarily impure, and God wanted the people to receive the revelation in a state of purity. As Plaskow notes, Moses could have said, “men and women do not go near each other,” but instead he addresses only the men. She writes, “In this passage, the Otherness of women finds its way into the very center of Jewish experience.” (25)

Because of the significance of this passage, it becomes paradigmatic of later Jewish writings in which women are often discussed as objects rather than speaking as subjects in their own relationship to the divine. The Talmud contains an entire division called “Women.” Much of it relates the actions taken by men to marry, divorce, or otherwise control the bodies of women. In the Jewish canon, women are rarely addressed by God, their voices are seldom heard, and their status is dependent, much like domestic servants, or even children. They are not required to study Torah and are relieved of responsibility for many positive commandments.

JTS professor emerita Judith Hauptman has persuasively argued that this exemption reflects their social subjugation. She writes, “A woman’s exemption from these acts has nothing to do with her household and child-rearing chores. She is simply a lesser person in the grand scheme of things, subordinate to her husband and ready to take orders from him” (*Rereading*

the Rabbis: A Woman's Voice, 237). If the definition of a Jew is someone who serves God through the study of Torah and the practice of mitzvot, then women are assigned an auxiliary status, not their own independent standing as Jews. This arguably confirms Adler's provocative question. There is profound truth to this critique of the Bible and its rabbinic exegesis, and yet Plaskow quickly acknowledges that it is an incomplete account of women in Jewish tradition. First, there is tension between the "holes in the text" and the lived experience of Jewish women, who have long felt and have been recognized as full members of the Jewish people. Second, even the ancient Rabbis were troubled by the implication that women were excluded from revelation. In fact, the Rabbis developed two substantial lines of interpretation specifically to include women in this formative event.

A few verses earlier, in 19:3, God tells Moses, "Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel." This verse contains a doubling or parallel structure typical of biblical poetry. Aren't "house of Jacob" and "children of Israel" synonymous? Not according to the Rabbis. In the collection of Midrash *Mekhilta Derabbi Yishmael*, "house of Jacob" refers to women, while "children (lit. sons) of Israel" refers to men. This Midrash claims that God spoke doubly and differently at Sinai: With the women God spoke in a gentle tone, while the men received a stern lecture. Elsewhere in midrashic literature the Rabbis propose other differentiations in the tone, but not content, of revelation for the old and young and other categories. We may or may not like this account of gender differentiation, but it asserts inclusion of both women and men in the Sinai revelation.

Another midrashic collection, *Shemot Rabbah* (Yitro 28), continues the theme of gender differentiation and adds that God took care to address the women before the men. Last time, when God spoke first to Adam, and only later to Eve, it didn't work out well. God, as it were, learned from experience and included women from the outset at Sinai.

While it is common to portray women as kind or merciful, and men as strong or judgmental, the medieval Kabbalah reversed this pattern. In the Zohar (Yitro 79b) the feminine aspect of God (Shekhinah) is associated with judgment, while the masculine aspect of God (*Tiferet*) is

associated with mercy. As Daniel Matt writes in his Zohar commentary, "at Sinai, each group was addressed accordingly" (Vol. IV, 432). Are women Jews? Yes, and they were first to hear the divine word, infused either with gentleness or strength, according to the Midrash or Kabbalah.

A second path of rabbinic interpretation about women at Sinai returns us to that line of Moses, "do not approach a woman." True, Moses was addressing the men, but why? According to classical Jewish law, after coitus men may return to a state of purity after washing and waiting a day. Women, however, might excrete live "seed" as late as the third day, and thus need more time to become pure. In verse 10 God told Moses to keep the people pure only for two days, but Moses added a third day so that the women would also be pure in time for revelation (*Avot Derabbi Natan A*, Ch. 2).

Why then did Moses address the men? Because he feared that they would be selfish, caring only about their own purity, and not that of their wives. In other words, the men required a warning not to keep the Torah for themselves, but to make sure the entire people was included. This midrash, which is restated by Rashi, inverts the exclusion of women, making their experience central to the timing of revelation. It does not undo the Otherness described by Plaskow, but it does show that at least the ancient Rabbis considered the presence of women at Sinai essential.

Just over a century ago, a Jewish seamstress in Krakow named Sarah Schenirer founded a school, and then a network of schools for Orthodox girls named *Bais Ya'akov*. This title refers to our verse in which women ("the house of Jacob") were addressed by God at Sinai. Schenirer was alarmed by the secularization of Jewish women and approached the most prominent Orthodox rabbis of her time, Rabbi Israel Meir Kagen, and the Hasidic rebbes of Belz and Ger, for their support. Even though women were traditionally exempted from Torah study, these rabbis recognized the same problem that Adler and Plaskow would later state so forcefully. Without a Torah education, Jewish girls and women were indeed in danger of not remaining Jews. They too needed to hear the divine voice, reverberating still from Sinai.

To be sure, the Bais Ya'akov schools do not educate girls in the same fashion as Haredi boys. They are not, in general, taught Talmud. They do