

**Excerpt from *Turning Points in Jewish History* by Marc Rosenstein (The Jewish Publication Society, July 2018)**

**The 50% of the Jewish Nation Almost Completely Unmentioned in Jewish History**

For the vast majority of Jewish history, the 50% of the Jewish nation who are of the female gender are almost completely unmentioned. This glaring omission can be attributed to two factors:

1) Even being a “people that dwells apart,” the Jews have been influenced by their gentile environment in every age. For most of its history, human society has been patriarchal....and by and large Jewish life has reflected the male-dominated culture of surrounding societies.

2) Men also oversaw the recording and transmitting of information about history and social norms. Thus, regardless of women’s actual roles in life and leadership, the documents we have from and about the past were written by men, about men, and for men. The extent of women’s contributions may have been lost or suppressed along the way....

A number of Jewish women are often mentioned to exemplify women’s important roles in various periods. However, the list [here] is short, suggesting these are the exceptions that prove the rule:

- The Matriarchs (Genesis 12-35). Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah each played an important role in steering the historical drama of the first three Israelite generations; both Sarah and Rebekah, for example, upended the established patriarchal system by causing the younger son to be favored over the first-born in carrying the family spiritual inheritance (Genesis 21 and 27 respectively).

- The Hebrew midwives, and then Moses' mother and sister and Pharaoh's daughter, outsmarted Pharaoh's decree to kill all Israelite male babies, thereby saving Moses' life and playing a pivotal role in the redemption story (Exodus 1-2).
- Several prophetesses (as the Bible refers to them) play a leadership role in the biblical narrative. For example, Moses' sister Miriam leads the women in song after the miracle of the Red Sea (Exodus 15:20-21); and Deborah leads the people to victory in a war with the Canaanites (Judges 4).
- Two biblical books are named for their heroines: Esther, who courageously saved her people from genocide; and Ruth, a young Moabite widow whose loyalty to her Israelite mother-in-law led her to throw in her lot with the Israelite people.
- In several talmudic stories, Beruriah, shows herself to be wiser in applying the Torah to life than her husband, the renowned scholar Rabbi Meir (e.g., Babylonian Talmud Berachot 10a).
- In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Gracia Mendes Nasi, a wealthy merchant and communal leader, helped many *conversos* flee from Portugal and supported Jewish communities in Palestine.

The patriarchal nature of Jewish society also endured in the fabric of halachah and custom.... One of six orders of the Mishnah/Talmud and several additional tractates, as well as a vast corpus of later commentary and legislation, specifically addressed the legal framework of women's lives. At different times and places, how this framework was implemented depended upon the particular cultural context. For example, the Bible takes polygyny (meaning multiple wives; polygamy refers to multiple spouses of either gender) for granted, and gives men the

authority to divorce a wife at will. The Talmud went on to leave polygyny alone, but introduced the requirement of a *ketubah* (marriage contract) to provide some protection for women in marriage and divorce. In Muslim countries, where polygyny was standard, Jews continued the practice until modern times. However, in Christian Europe, monogamy was normative – and the first major halachic authority there, Rabbenu Gershom (11<sup>th</sup> century Germany), issued prohibitions against marrying multiple wives and against divorcing a woman without her consent.

When it came to structuring gender roles in Jewish practice, a key halachic concept was women's release from the obligation to perform positive, time-determined *mitzvot* (commandments), such as public prayer – ostensibly because their domestic duties would conflict with such scheduled religious acts. But since religious obligation was seen as a means to holiness, women's exemption was not a benefit, but a relegation to a diminished status. This principle, together with the perception of women as potential stimulants of male lust and even immorality, kept women out of scholarship, leadership, and governance roles, and led to valuing women for their modesty and domesticity. Women were not counted in the *minyan*, the quorum of ten required for public worship. Nor were women allowed to sit together with men in the synagogue; rather, they were required to pray in a separate section, often a screened balcony.

Within this overall patriarchal structure with its clear hierarchical separation between genders, some Jewish laws and practices did recognize women's rights. For example:

- The *ketubah*: The halachic marriage contract described in the Talmud, that served in essence as a required prenuptial agreement, protected the woman from being left without resources in

the case of divorce or widowhood. The husband was required to guarantee a sum for his wife's support in such circumstances.

- That contract also specified the woman's right to sexual satisfaction and material support by her husband. If these obligations were not met, she could appeal to the rabbinical court to force her husband to grant a divorce.
- This right to sexual satisfaction, in turn, served as the basis for a halachic derivation permitting the use of birth control. If a pregnancy might be dangerous it must be avoided – but the woman's right to sexual satisfaction still stands.
- In halachah, a mother's life overrides the general prohibition against abortion. If the mother's life is in danger, protecting the fetus is no longer the predominant concern—abortion is *obligatory*.

In each of these examples, the rabbis remained loyal to biblical law, but added mechanisms to mitigate its harsh treatment of women. The husband was still formally in control, but the wife's wishes and needs – for life, for sustenance, for sexual satisfaction – set limits on this control.

Over the past century, the rise of a view that calls into question patriarchal structures which have long been taken for granted around the world could not help but impinge on Jewish consciousness as well. In its wake the Jewish community now possesses a significant body of literature (Jewish feminist thought and commentary, gender-neutral liturgy, halachic innovation), impressive leaders and scholars such as theologians Judith Plaskow and Rachel Adler and historian Paula Hyman and innovative institutions of education such as Yeshivat Maharat in New York (offering Orthodox ordination to women).

The Reform movement, and later the secular Zionist movement, led the Jewish people in recognizing women's equality within Judaism, as they were the least constricted by loyalty to halachah and custom. Nevertheless, even they spent decades struggling with their response to feminism. While the Reform movement had introduced gender-mixed seating in synagogues as early as the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the Reform seminary, Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion, did not ordain a woman rabbi until 1972, more than a hundred years later. And while the socialist Zionists may have recruited young men and women to live and work together while building an egalitarian society, the diaries of women pioneers in Palestine bemoan their relegation to the kitchen and nursery....

From the perspective of gender equality, the Jewish world of today would be unrecognizable to a visitor from a century ago:

- In the liberal movements, more women than men are being ordained as rabbis and cantors
- Women serve as spiritual leaders within the liberal movements, as communal leaders from local to national levels, and as Judaica scholars.
- Women are considerably more Jewishly knowledgeable than their ancestors—some of them fluently reading and chanting from the Torah in congregations throughout the world.
- Many women observe the commandment to wear *tallit* (prayer shawl) and *tefillin* (phylacteries) – traditionally a male prerogative/obligation —during morning weekday worship.
- Feminist Jewish scholarship is a recognized and respected field, both in the Jewish world and in general academia.

- Gender-neutral and non-patriarchal language (such as avoiding male pronouns when referring to God) is standard in the most recent prayerbooks of the liberal Jewish movements.
- Both women and men participate in a variety of new rituals acknowledging women's participation in Jewish life, such as the *simchat bat* ("rejoicing for a daughter") naming ceremony for newborn girls; and placing a "Miriam's cup" of water on the *seder* table (to commemorate the midrash crediting Moses' sister Miriam with miraculously providing water for the Israelites in the desert).
- Traditional Jewish rituals have been changed or reinterpreted to recognize women's equality and spirituality. In particular, in wedding ceremonies it is now common to modify the traditional wording (which implied the groom's "acquisition" of the bride) to symmetrical, egalitarian language). Immersion in the *mikveh* (ritual bath) often now celebrates the spiritual impact of "living waters" rather than emphasizing women's biologically-based impurity, and has been adopted to recognize life cycle events such as divorce, miscarriage, and healing.
- Women's study groups and worship *minyans* (quorums) have proliferated. Communities of women gather to study and pray together on *Rosh Chodesh* (the first day of the Hebrew month – traditionally a minor "women's holiday" when women were exempt from work, perhaps based on a perceived parallel between the lunar and menstrual cycles). And on the holiday of Purim, they read the Scroll of Esther, a biblical book in which women are the protagonists.
- And within the Orthodox world, too, Orthodox feminism is a movement in its own right, and a growing number of women have Orthodox rabbinical ordination. A few communities have even engaged them as spiritual leaders. In 2016, the Ramban Synagogue in Jerusalem hired

as assistant rabbi Karnit Feintuch— the first woman rabbi to serve an Orthodox synagogue in Israel.

These changes are affording half of the Jewish people a new world of opportunities and challenges—and all of the Jewish people a new world of ideas and practices. Women as rabbis, cantors, text scholars, and lay leaders have brought innovative modes of interpretation, rituals, and approaches to spirituality that have enriched Jewish intellectual and spiritual life.

This transformation is still a work in progress. Among the challenges...

- Various divisions of Orthodoxy are still struggling to address the conflict between traditional forms of Judaism and the moral claim of equality. In some instances, a backlash against women's equality has led to restricting women's public roles more than ever. In Israel, certain Orthodox communities have begun to insist upon buses with gender-separate seating; others demand women's exclusion from singing at public musical events....
- The "traditional" Mizrachi culture in Israel values loyalty to traditional norms without reference to formal halachic authority. Thus, many Israeli Jews who do not view halachah as binding nonetheless believe that patriarchal hierarchy in Jewish practice is inviolable. They do not feel obligated to attend synagogue regularly, but will refuse to enter one where the seating is mixed and a woman officiates.
- The liberal movements have experienced a "feminization" of Jewish institutional life: As women have taken their place within it, many men have lost interest and pulled back from involvement. The same phenomenon has been observed in American Protestant denominations. It is not yet clear what this means and where it is going....

The feminist critique of patriarchy seems to be part of a larger critique of traditional assumptions about identity – gender, religious, ethnic, and racial. Will the demise of patriarchy lead to the demise of ascribed identity in general? And, if so, what will Judaism look like? The ordination of women, it seems, may not be a culmination, but an early marker of a long-term and deeply revolutionary turning point in Jewish life and thought.