

The Jewish Woman

I. Role of the Jewish Woman Under the Law of God

The dissemination and encouragement of misconceptions and false notions have come primarily from the cavalier manner in which untruths and half-truths are constructed from premises that in themselves are true. Hasty conclusions that hold good only for a limited number of people or special circumstances are proclaimed as universally applicable and are used to place the imprint of supposed truth upon notions that are very far from the original premise and whose very essence would resist such distortions. The natural sciences and social and historical studies suffer equally from such morbid distortions of logical judgment. The premise on which the conclusions are based may be true, but the conclusions themselves are false. But if such pseudo-scientific conclusions can be made to support notions that happen to enjoy popularity at a given moment, these conclusions will be passed from hand to hand like so much small change; they will be automatically accepted into the treasury of accumulated popular notions and prejudices, and no one will go to the trouble of testing the quality of the time-flattened coin to see whether its value really accords with the value of the denomination stamped upon it. The coin may be made of the most inferior alloy in the world, but what does that matter? The coin is accepted for the value stamped upon it and it gets us what we want. What more, then, do we need to know?

Not a few notions and prejudices current in Jewish life today, which are being passed from mouth to mouth and from book to book, owe their coinage and acceptance to similar irresponsible modes of creation and dissemination. [Unjustified conclusions about Judaism are being formed on the basis of certain general characteristics:] Judaism has a Bible and a tradition; Judaism has priests and a Temple; it had its origins in the East; and today it is split into parties debating which of its traditions should be changed and which preserved. The fact that these external features occur also in some other religions is considered

sufficient justification for automatically applying to Judaism and its various manifestations all the characteristics of Bible and traditions, priesthood and Temple that went into the formation of other religious faiths. The tendency is to interpret Judaism in terms of all the notions that have taken root among modern Europeans as regards Oriental life and customs and as regards the strife that is now taking place in other religions. It apparently does not occur to the disseminators of these notions that in Judaism the significance of the Bible and tradition, priesthood and Temple is entirely and markedly different from what it is in any other religion, that the Orient may have been the birthplace of the Jewish people but not of its customs and of the Jewish way of life. It is these customs and that way of life, emanating directly from the Law of God, that have made the Jews a nation set apart from all the others in the Orient of old and in Europe today. The innermost essence of the issues that are dividing Israel today into opposing parties has nothing in common with the questions that serve as party slogans in the camps of other nations.

No Jewish concept has suffered more from such distortions than the present-day notions of the position accorded in Judaism to the Jewish woman. Even though every page of the Jewish Bible, every word of Jewish tradition, every leaf of Jewish history, indeed, every Jewish home, past and present, bears unambiguous and eloquent testimony to the contrary, current popular notions about the position of women in the Orient have been exploited to help spread the most baseless fantasies about the degradation and subordination of womanhood in Israel. The modern era is glorified, above all, for its efforts to deliver Jewish womanhood from the yoke of Oriental degradation. Is this not an ingenious bait to dangle before Jewish women in order to win their favor for efforts at Jewish religious reform? In this process only one small consideration has been overlooked: The effort to win Jewish women for the Israel of the future is in itself an eloquent refutation of all the notions about the degradation of women in Judaism; as a matter of fact, it gives most impressive proof of the high position and profound influence enjoyed by the Jewish woman in Israel. The reformers apparently believe they can win their case only if they win over the women to their cause.

Let us attempt to outline the terms in which the Word of God expresses the role of the Jewish woman. Let us examine the Jewish laws that regulate her position, the realities of Jewish history in which

she has been a figure, and the statements of the Sages of Judaism that set forth the Jewish view of womanhood. The resulting biographical portraits and character sketches might then dissipate the much-vaunted European notions and fancies about the subjugation of women in Judaism like so much glistening haze before the rays of the rising sun.

ויברא אלקים את האדם בצלמו בצלם אלקים ברא אתו זכר ונקבה ברא אתם. ויברך אתם אלקים ויאמר להם אלקים פרו ורבו ומלאו את הארץ וכבשה ורדו בדגת הים ובעוף השמים ובכל חיה הרמשת על הארץ His image; in the image of God He created him: male and female, He created them both. And God blessed them both and God said to both of them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and exercise dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky and every living thing that moves upon the earth' " (Genesis 1,27-28).

Note the change in the subject of the first verse from the singular to the plural, which we have also sought to convey in our rendering of this Scriptural passage. Occurring as it does in the very first introduction of man and woman in the story of Creation, this change most significantly expresses the complete equality, indeed the close union, of man and woman as human beings created in the image of God. The concept of man created in the image of God embraces both sexes; together, male and female comprise the term "human." God has created them both equally close to Him and for the same active purpose according to His Will: זכר ונקבה ברא אתם.

The Hebrew term for "male" is זכר; the Hebrew for "female" is נקבה. The male is זכר; this means that he functions as the depository for the revelations of God and the intellectual and spiritual achievements of mankind. The male has been entrusted with זכרון, the preservation of the traditions of the human species as reflected in the developments of mankind. The male is זכר, the bearer of history; within him the link is formed that binds together, in a full circle, the beginning and the end of the story of mankind. The work and creativity of the male are not to be affected by transient influences. As he performs the functions assigned to him, the male must always remember [זכור] the duties and traditions he has received from God and from the past. It is by wedding these with the phenomena and the conditions of his own lifetime that the male continues the work of Creation, the constant process of adding links to the chain of historic tradition. Thus, the work of the male is a determining factor in shaping the course of history.

The female is נקבה שנוי עלי (נקבה—fixed; cf. Genesis 30,

28; אשר פי ה' יקבנו, Isaiah 62,2. Cf. also the forms אנכה, etc.*). Woman *receives* her purpose in life and accepts it. The male *chooses* a vocation and thus creates a position for himself. The female, on the other hand, receives her vocation and position in life by entering into a union with a man and identifying with the vocation he has chosen and the position he has created for himself. The Jewish maiden becomes a mature human being, a full-fledged adult Jew, only once she has a husband. Only through her union with her husband does she receive her own uniqueness, entering the more narrowly defined sphere of human endeavors in which she, too, united with her husband, is to fulfill her own purpose as a human being and as a Jew through the vocation and position she has received as the result of her marriage. And precisely because she is not required to choose a vocation and attain a position on her own can the woman function as the nurturer of all that is truly human in mankind.

Consider the momentous words with which the Father of all mankind, the Educator and Guardian for the course of human history, has proclaimed the ultimate healing and ingathering of mankind from the vagaries of their experiments in history-making: כי ברא ה' חדשה בארץ: "It is God Who creates the new [things] on earth; woman encircles the man" (Jeremiah 31,21). The male must strive to attain a vocation and a position for himself as defined by his specific lot in this world, through which he is to make his personal contribution to the fulfillment of the purpose common to all mankind. But as he struggles for success and achievements, he runs the danger of losing himself; he may come to regard his endeavors, which in fact are only means toward an end, as ends in themselves, as the all-absorbing purpose of his life, forgetting his larger purpose, his task as a human being, which all his material achievements are only meant to help him accomplish. Indeed, he may in time come to subordinate and sacrifice the truly human aspects of his life to these endeavors. This error probably accounts for virtually all the errors and delusions that have marked the history of mankind. It is the woman who can lead the man back to true humanity. The enigma of history can be solved when one considers the dominant role of the female. The male is "encircled," i.e., he is kept within the sphere of purely human existence and activity by the female, who has been entrusted with safeguarding the nobler aspects of life. That is how

* See Hirsch Commentary, Genesis 1,27. (Ed.)

the male can revert from being merely a prestigious public figure to the pristine state of a human being in accordance with the Will of God.

That is the reason why the blessing and the vocation expressed in the words *פרו ורבו ומלאו . . וכבשה* was accorded equally to both male and female. These four words sum up the purpose of the human species and create the moral basis for the institutions of marriage, the family, the state and personal property.

פרו refers to marriage, the union of the two sexes for the purpose of begetting offspring that will continue the noblest and the best of all the godly and human qualities of their parents, *בדמותם כצלמם*, resembling their parents not only in body but also in spirit. The male quality of the father, directing and shaping the destinies of the family, and the female quality of the mother, receiving and accepting the directions given to her, will unite in their children to form new individuals, thus contributing to the endless variety of human personalities.

רבו refers to the family. You are to nurture and educate the offspring you have produced so that they may grow up in your image, replicating the best that is within your own selves. Without care, without the proper education, your offspring will become morally stunted and will run wild. The one-time act of giving birth to a child is not sufficient to fulfill the commandment of multiplying the human species or to replicate the parents on earth. This endeavor requires a continuing process of creation on the part of both parents, a constant, united effort of the father and the mother in the care, the rearing and the education of the child. This effort is nothing else than the continuing transfer of the noblest and best of the godly and human qualities of the parents to their children, with the result that the parents are then truly replicated in their offspring.

The wealth of profound ideas inherent in Jewish etymology can be seen, among other things, from the fact that the Hebrew term *רבה* denotes not only the concept of "multiplying" but also the concepts of "training" and "education." The work of child-rearing is the fruit of the union of the two parents, male and female. The female parent produces and nurtures the human being; the male produces the citizen of the world outside, the bearer of God-ordained and man-sanctioned tradition. The seedbed and nursery of human education is the home, the family. Only from the fact that the commandment *רבו* makes child-rearing the object of *פרו* does marriage, the union of the two sexes, derive its moral significance and its great, Divine purpose, which is to help build and develop the world.

מלאו refers to society, to the state. The fact that every married couple is told **מלאו**, fill the earth, see to it that the earth becomes and remains filled with its noblest contents, an abundance of human beings, implies that the parents' task extends beyond the intimate sphere of their own home. Every parent is required to contribute his or her share in the establishment and preservation of as many human families on earth as possible. Every parent is responsible for the survival and prosperity of all these human beings.

וכבשה: This Divine commandment justifies and hallows the acquisition of personal property. Note, however, that this commandment comes only after the commandment dealing with marriage, family and society. The implication is that the acquisition of personal property is humanly and morally justifiable only if it is regarded as subordinate and conducive to the advancement of the purposes of marriage, family and society.

The blessing and the fourfold commandment dealing with marriage, the family, society and the acquisition of personal property is addressed to **זכר ונקבה**, male and female alike. It is true that, according to our Sages, the "defective" spelling (**כתיב חסר**) **וכבשה** implies that the commandment to make a living, to procure the material means required for marriage and for the establishment of a home, is addressed to the male alone. It is the God-ordained function of the male to work so that he may subdue the earth for the purposes of mankind. Thus, the commandment to marry and to establish a home is categorically binding only upon the male. Nevertheless, the fact that these commandments are actually directed to both sexes implies that the accomplishment of mankind's task to build up the world requires the harmonious cooperation of male and female on a basis of complete equality. If the female is exempt from the task of acquiring money and property, from the hard labor of "subduing the earth," it is only so that she may be free to devote herself to the nobler aspects of human life, the endeavors more closely related to the purposes of true humanity. It is the function of the female to manage and utilize what the male has acquired through his labor for the human and moral purposes of home and family. It is the female who makes the gains of the male's labor usable for their true purpose, and who sees to it that they are employed only to advance human welfare.

אדם מביא חיטין חיטין כוסס פשתן פשתן לובש: The man brings home the wheat, but does he chew the wheat? He brings home the flax, but does he clothe himself in it? This argument is recorded in the Talmud (**יבמות**)

סג) as proof that, with respect to one's livelihood, the nobler aspects of human endeavor must be credited to the woman.

Initially, the Word of God (Genesis 1,27) introduces man and woman together into the work of creation as human beings, both of them created equally in the image of God and designated as His representatives on earth, their positions and tasks being assigned to both of them together. A subsequent Scriptural passage (ibid. 2,18) clearly makes a point of addressing itself particularly to the relationship between man and his wife in order to impress upon the man the paramount value and significance of his wife for every aspect of his own personality and for the fulfillment of his vocation and his life's purpose. As the "subduer of the earth" and as the winner of the material means enabling him to marry and establish a home, the man could easily come to view himself as the only real and indispensable factor on earth and, under the spell of this illusion, to act toward his wife in an overbearing manner. It seems that precisely for this reason the word of God seeks to make man aware of how helpless and joyless he would be without his wife, even in the midst of Paradise, no matter what his own strength and insight, and that only his wife can give him the support he needs to make him whole.

"It is not good that man should be alone" (Genesis 2,18). Man's purpose could never be adequately fulfilled by individuals acting alone. The momentous task that God has set for human beings is too great for any one person to carry upon his shoulders; it requires the collaboration of two human beings who share the labor and complete it by complementing one another. "I wish to create for him עזר כנגדו, a fitting helper." עזר (cf. אור, אצר, עור, עורה, עורה) denotes the kind of help that, by taking over a portion of the partner's share of the work to be done, enables that partner to concentrate his own energies on the work specifically assigned to him. In this manner each of the two partners enables the other to accomplish the aspects of the work specifically entrusted to him. As a result, it becomes possible for both partners, together, to accomplish the sum total of the work. This is division of labor, pure and simple.

Now if both partners, each in his own sphere of activity, are to achieve total satisfaction in their joint endeavor and are to make the best use of their personal energies and potential, thus ensuring the consummate accomplishment of that endeavor, then their division of labor presupposes that each of the two partners should be different

from the other in strength and potential. However, at the same time, the two should be bound together by such strong bonds of solidarity that they will complement one another and the weaknesses of the one partner will be compensated by the strengths of the other. This thought is expressed most significantly by the apposition **בנגדו נגד**. **נגד** assigns to one subject a position which is different from that of the other, but which nonetheless is determined by the other's position. The word **נגד** clearly places the woman on the same level as the man, while at the same time giving each a distinct position of creation and endeavor. The male cannot assume the position of the female; conversely, the female cannot occupy and hold the position of the male. But both of them are stationed, and working, on an equal level; working hand in hand, their functions interlock, as it were, with each doing his or her own share of the task that both must accomplish together as human beings. Also note that this division of labor between male and female was not a matter of convenience or accident. From the very outset, the female was created **בנגדו**, in such a manner that she could complement the work of the male. Man and woman were fashioned for each other, and both of them together were created for one and the same purpose. The man regards his wife as part of his very own being but at the same time as a creature distinct from himself. He calls her **אשה** because she was "taken from **איש**." She belongs to him. It is she that makes him whole; without her, his existence is only half a life. "For this reason a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh" (ibid. 2,24).

Here, then, we have the profound significance of marriage as an institution established by God.

II. Eve

The wife's position in relation to her husband is clearly reflected also in the story of the first fateful misstep of the first human couple in their life together. "She also gave some of it to the man [who was] with her and he ate" (Genesis 3,6). Adam then explains, "The woman whom You put at my side gave me of the tree and I ate" (ibid. 3,12).

It was neither greed on the part of Adam nor any gift of persuasion on the part of Eve that made Adam eat of the forbidden fruit. He ate of it because Eve herself had eaten from it and because she had given him

of the tree. Eve's behavior and Eve's judgment were decisive for her husband in his choice. He attempted to justify his act not with an excuse to the effect that he had been tempted by the fruit, or that Eve had persuaded him to eat of it, but with the fact that Eve had given him of the tree. He considered Eve's action sufficient justification for partaking of the forbidden fruit himself. After all, Eve was the creature whom God Himself had put at his side. Was Adam not supposed to cling to her, to become "one flesh," one single creature with her in all his endeavors and aspirations? If so, then they should remain united not only in their desires and aspirations but also in bearing the consequences of their actions. And now God's sentence closed the Paradise on earth to Adam and Eve and to their descendants over thousands of years to come. Man's expulsion from Paradise opened a new stage for the development of mankind through trials, purification and character training.

Let us see how God's sentence has established the position of woman during the course of mankind's journey through the ages, and how woman's position, even after the expulsion from Paradise, reflects the lofty significance of her life's purpose.

It has become customary to interpret the Biblical verse (Genesis 3, 16) **בַּעֲצָב תֵּלְדִי בָנִים** as a condemnation: "In pain shall you bear children." But even a cursory examination of all the relevant Scriptural passages should be sufficient to note that the root **עצב** is never used in Scripture to denote physical pain. **עצב** is a phonetic modification of **עזב** [to leave behind, to forsake, to let go, to relinquish]. Hence (as implied in the sharp **צ** sound) this verb has the connotation of parting from, or leaving, something with reluctance. It would thus be equivalent to "renunciation," and it is in this connotation that Scripture uses it most significantly to describe the newly-decreed destiny not only of the woman but also of the man. Of the woman it says: **אֵל הָאִשָּׁה אָמַר ה' הָרְבָה בְּעִצְבוֹן תֵּלְדִי בָנִים וְאֵל אִישׁךָ תִּשְׁוָקֶתְךָ אֲרַבָּה עֲצֻבוֹתָ וְהָרְגָה בְּעִצְבוֹן תֵּלְדִי בָנִים וְאֵל אִישׁךָ תִּשְׁוָקֶתְךָ** (ibid. 3,17). The use of the past tense in the two verses **אֵל הָאִשָּׁה אָמַר**, and **וְאֵל אִישׁךָ תִּשְׁוָקֶתְךָ** stresses that God spoke to the woman before He spoke to the snake, and to the man before He spoke to the woman.* Before telling the woman **הָרְבָה בְּעִצְבוֹן תֵּלְדִי בָנִים**, God had first told the man **וְאֵל אִישׁךָ תִּשְׁוָקֶתְךָ**. This fact should contribute significantly to our proper interpretation of the words addressed by God to the woman.

* See Hirsch Commentary, Genesis 3, 14–15. (Ed.)

בַּעֲצוֹן: “renunciation.” This is the element of training that will henceforth be the distinguishing feature of man’s mental and moral work upon himself. Paradise on earth was lost through greed; only through renunciation can it be regained. The Paradise on earth will be opened only to those who have learned to renounce it and are capable of renouncing it. To renounce the gratification of sensual impulses and cherished desires for the sake of a higher purpose, to perform one’s duty in a spirit of renunciation and to find one’s happiness in so doing—that is the task through which human beings are henceforth to mature into men and women, and through which both man and woman are to preserve and demonstrate the Divine qualities inherent in them. The gates of Paradise will be locked to them in order that they may go through this training course. The earth will assume new forms in its relationship to man; henceforth, the destiny of the man, who was initially appointed to “subdue” the earth, will be בַּעֲצוֹן תֵּאֱכֹלָהּ, “you shall eat of it in resignation.” You will have to do without many things in order to earn just the bare bread of your existence.

This change in nature’s attitude toward man, in that nature will no longer gladly offer him its fruit without his working for it, will affect the woman no less than it will affect the man, for this particular Divine sentence to a life of renunciation includes the wife no less than her husband. However, the woman will be called upon to bear an even greater burden of renunciation than her husband. Her whole life will become an act of selfless devotion to the wellbeing of others, above all to the wellbeing of her husband and children. The true woman personifies duty gladly performed. She will take pleasure in the practice of עֲצוֹן; she will find her personal happiness in self-abnegation, in self-sacrifice for the happiness of her husband and children. Thus, the true woman, the true wife, is the noblest embodiment of the human being created in the image of God.

Having said to the man בַּעֲצוֹן תֵּאֱכֹלָהּ, God said to the woman הִרְבָּה עֲצוֹנֶיךָ וְהִרְבָּה אֲרָבָה עֲצוֹנֶיךָ וְהִרְבָּה בְּנֵיִם. “I will multiply your renunciation to even greater lengths,” and the same will apply to הִרְבָּה, your pregnancy, which will be a continuous surrender of your own life’s strength and energies to the existence and wellbeing of another person. בַּעֲצוֹן תֵּלְדִי בְּנֵיִם: in renunciation will you bear children. And we would say, “bear *and raise*” children, because the act of childbirth and the subsequent raising of the child is one continuous הִרְבָּה for the mother. (Phonetically, הִרְבָּה is a modified form of עָרָה, the state of being exposed, without cover

or protection, to outside impressions and influences. It is a condition which, in its most extreme form, ends in חרה, destruction by fire, complete consumption by an overwhelming force.)

God says to the woman further: ואל אישך תשוקתך והוא ימשל בך. "Your longing shall be for your husband and he will rule over you." The word תשוקה (from שוק, "leg," and שוק, "the market place" to which all men direct their steps and to which all roads lead) has the connotation of a strong movement toward an object of attraction. Your entire being and all your aspirations will be directed toward your husband. You will do everything in your power to win his love and approval and to make him happy. You will allow him to rule over you; you will submit to his will and allow him to guide you. This surrender on the part of the wife to her husband is a basic prerequisite for the unity of husband and wife. The husband cannot be the one to submit to his wife because the husband, in his position as זכר, is the upholder of the Divine and human traditions which are put into practice in the home through the institution of marriage and to which both husband and wife, together, should dedicate their united energies.

The very first commandment from God not to eat from the עץ הדעת was addressed to the man and, through him, also to the woman. Therefore, Adam should not have disobeyed God's commandment for the sake of Eve. Rather, Eve should have subordinated her own desires to the Will of God as communicated to her through Adam. So, too, the husband shall henceforth act as spokesman for the vocation decreed by God for all human beings, and shall see to it that these God-ordained tasks should be discharged also in his own marriage and in his own home. The subordinate role of a wife to her husband became more evident after nature's relationship toward man was changed (ארורה האדמה בעבורך) and the resulting reliance on man's labor for the maintenance of home and family.

But, contrary to the long-cherished popular notion that death was first brought to earth through the action of a woman, Adam perceived his wife as the mother of life. "Adam called his wife חיה because she had become the mother of all living" (Genesis 3,20). Adam viewed his wife as the upholder and instrument of immortality on earth and of the perpetuation of the parents in their children. That is why Adam called his wife חוה, not חיה (cf. יחוה דעת, the giver of spiritual life). She was not merely חיה, the giver of physical existence to her children; she was

the nurturer of her children's spiritual lives. This, indeed, is the unique, lofty vocation of every true mother, אַם כּל חַי.

Therefore it was also Eve, not Adam, who named the first male child to be born on earth. All her exultation and sense of self-pride are evident from the triumphant manner in which she shouted out the name she had chosen for her first-born. (קַיִן, from קָוַן and קָנָה; cf. צִיד from צוּר and צִדָּה. There is a conceptual relationship between קָוַן, the expression of grief or pain over the loss of a possession, and קָנָה, or קָנָא, to vindicate the right of ownership.) קִינִיתִי אִישׁ אֵת ה' "I have acquired a man with God!" Eve proudly exclaims (Genesis 4,1). This child is mine! I have acquired him jointly with God by sacrificing my own heart's blood and my own life's strength! Could this exaggerated self-confidence (probably based on a mixture of motives) with which Eve carried and nurtured her child beneath her heart have had an adverse effect on the temperament and attitudes of her son, with dire consequences in his later life? This is a question every mother would do well to consider.

It was also Eve, the mother who, following the murder of her second son by his own brother, named her third son Seth, "replacement," because she regarded him as a God-given substitute for the son she had lost.

III. Sarah

From the mother of all mankind we now turn to the mother of the Jewish people. At the very outset let us state that all the momentous tests and acts of self-surrender with which Abraham demonstrated his awareness of God, his trust in God, his loyalty and obedience toward God, and his love of mankind took place in close union with his wife, Sarah. Indeed, Abraham could hardly have gone through any of these trials if Sarah had not been his faithful companion in his long wanderings through life, if Sarah, too, had not been inspired by the spirit that moved her husband, and if Sarah had not shared his every good endeavor and aspiration as his close and faithful companion. The spiritual and moral halo that crowned Abraham's head was also an eternal diadem, an everlasting ornament, on the forehead of Sarah. For when Abraham left his native country, his birthplace and his family to follow the call of his God, isolating himself from the world around him for the sake of his God, Sarah, too, left her loved ones and, for