

Blessing the Daughters
Drasg By Joe Hample 12/21/07
Beth Chayim Chadashim, Los Angeles

My late mother was a scientist, and something of a feminist, so I was shocked to hear her say one day that she didn't think she could respect a woman rabbi. Wow, what was that about? Maybe it's generational. There weren't any women rabbis when my mom was young. It probably didn't feel traditional to her.

On the other hand, maybe we could blame the Bible. Take this week's Torah portion, the last days of Jacob, where he blesses his sons and grandsons. Does he bless his daughters and granddaughters? Unfortunately, the text doesn't mention that.

Now if Jacob had twelve sons, he must have had a bunch of daughters too. The Torah says his daughters comforted him when he thought Joseph was dead (Gen. 37:35), and his daughters went down to Egypt with him (Gen. 46:7). But only one of Jacob's daughters is named in the text: Dinah, victim of Shechem and heroine of The Red Tent. Only one of Jacob's granddaughters is named in the text: Serah (46:17), who – according to the Talmud (BT Sotah 13a) – lived to an extraordinary age and was still around in the time of Moses. Supposedly it was Serah who told Moses where Joseph's bones were buried, so Moses could return them to the Promised Land. Mom, if you're listening, a woman was the link between Joseph and Moses. Can you respect that?

It's a problem that our sacred literature is so male-oriented. But in rabbinical school I've been lucky enough to study with women scholars like Rachel Adler, author of *Engendering Judaism*, and Tamara Eskenazi, author of *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*. They've raised my consciousness about female characters in our text: such as the mythic m'vasseret Tziyyon, prophetess of Zion, in the book of Isaiah (40:9); and Yalta, the rebbetzin in the Talmud who spilled the wine when they wouldn't let her bless it (BT B'rachot 51b). There's an interesting role model!

I've also been lucky enough to read women scholars like Susan Ackerman of Dartmouth, and Charlotte Fonrobert of Stanford. Susan Ackerman says Deborah, in the book of Judges, was unmarried. The text calls her *eshet lappidot*, commonly translated wife of Lappidoth. But Lappidoth is a peculiar name, not otherwise mentioned: and the phrase could also mean a fiery woman. Deborah was a fiery woman. Charlotte Fonrobert claims the Talmud contains subtle gender ironies, as when a noted authority says wives cry more than their husbands (Bava M'tzi'a 59a), but then a story follows in which a husband cries and his wife tries to restrain him (59b). We do have strong women in our holy books! How about that, Mom?

When we confront male-focused texts, there might be a number of different ways to correct for gender bias. One way is simply to be conscious of where these texts come from and take them with a grain of salt as appropriate. The Talmud has a whole tractate on menstruation, *Niddah*, written by men. There's a built-in absurdity here: in what sense are men the experts on menstruation? It's important to notice the weirdness of that, and to reflect that male writing about women might be uninformed or self-serving.

Another strategy is to track down the occasional stories of specific women and spotlight them. There are more of those stories than you might think. Mothers, daughters, queens, women warriors, women peacemakers. Depending which stories you choose and how you frame them, they might undermine gender stereotypes or reinforce them. But in any case, a modern reader doesn't want to ignore those narratives.

Still another approach could be to tease out from the text various metaphors of female experience. When Moses tells his people, God is the one who bears Israel (Deut. 1:31), we have an echo of mothers bearing children. And since the Middle Ages the concept of Sh'chinah, the Divine presence, has usually been understood in feminine terms. Sh'chinah is what you might call God's nurturing aspect.

Our rabbis may have taken male privilege for granted, but they also believed men and women were both created in God's image. There's a contradiction there, and our sages knew it. In this parashah, when Jacob blesses his grandsons Ephraim and Menasseh, that sets the pattern for how parents bless Jewish boys unto this day: y'simcha Elohim k'Efrayim v'chiMnasheh. As for the girls, the rabbis supplemented the Biblical model by inventing a parallel daughter blessing: y'simech Elohim k'Sarah Rivkah Rachel v'Le'ah, a prayer that goes back centuries; it's not a Reform innovation. If our tradition is sometimes a little too masculine, it's also part of our tradition to seek gender balance. And my mentors have empowered me to uphold that tradition. Well, Mom, if you've been paying attention, I hope I've convinced you that women leaders do have a place in Judaism, past and present. If you were alive today, would you still say you couldn't respect a woman rabbi? Ah, who am I kidding. You never respected male rabbis either.