

Women on Pesach

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I have always suspected that Pesach, Passover, is a cunning plot to so overburden Jewish women with exhausting preparation and mind-numbing confusion over the most improbable and irrational rituals that they end up so worn out and confused that there could be no chance whatsoever of their even thinking of challenging male authority. After all, if the demands of religion are this excessive, it must all come from God—because no human could possibly think it all up. Alternatively, it could show that the male world view is such a ridiculous one that there is no point in even trying to engage with it. That is why so many suffer stoically and often their resentment finds other outlets.

On the other hand, and there always is another hand, in this affluent age of cruises and hotels many women are fortunate enough to have a Pesach of self-indulgent idleness, just like their men folk (though I gather this year all bookings are down, surprise!).

And yet the more one considers it, the female element in Passover is crucial and too often overlooked. It may sound too obvious to say that without women the whole show would never have got on the road because without women there would be no men, no show, full stop and vice versa of course but too much of our cultural narrative comes from a male perspective. But here is the case I want to present to challenge what, I am afraid, remains a persistent thread of male chauvinism in parts of Judaism.

Look the women in the Passover narrative. The nation of slaves was only saved from extinction by the intervention of the two midwives, Shifra and Pua, who defied Egyptian authority, ignored the royal decrees, and found ways of keeping male children alive. This is no small issue. There is no other record of male Hebrews defying Egyptian authority in the same way until the very end of the process. One thinks of isolated cases of individuals in more modern situations, like the Bielski brothers of the film [Defiance](#), refusing to give up without a struggle. But here we have a coordinated campaign right under the noses of a power no less ruthless than the Nazis in cruelly and remorselessly executing its wishes. And they seem to have dealt with the Gestapo like interrogation with incredible guts and sangfroid. (They were obviously fans of Tim Roth's new series [Lie to Me](#) in which facial expressions give everything away. They knew how to get away with it.)

The role of Pharaoh's daughter in defying her father knowingly is another remarkable feature of the narrative. Where did she get the audacity and the independence from? To allow the child to be nursed by a Hebrew was a double defiance of her father. The secondary roles of Moses' sister Miriam and mother Yocheved are remarkable too. A young girl was audacious enough to approach and engage an enemy princess, a mother willing to suckle and then part with her child, none of these emotional hurdles should be minimized or underestimated.

Later on, as a grown man, Moses himself would not have survived without another female intervention. On his way down to Egypt he neglects to take care of his domestic rituals, and had it not been for his wife Zippora coming to his rescue he would have been snuffed out before even getting within spitting distance of Egypt ([Exodus 4:25-26](#)).

The role of Miriam as a national leader is rarely given sufficient emphasis. She is described as a prophet. No other female is explicitly called a prophet in the Five Books, though tradition accords this title to the Mothers. She leads the women in a specifically religious song and dance. And we see that her words are echoed by the men as well as the women, because the Hebrew word for “them” used in “she answered them” ([Exodus 15:21](#)) is in the form that is inclusive of both sexes.

The role of women in the Golden Calf crisis is recorded in the Midrash time and again but it is implicit in their refusal to hand over their gold. Their contribution is explicit in the creation of the Tabernacle where their skills, devotion and contributions are repeatedly emphasized. And of course they contribute to the establishment of new legislation in the case of the five daughters of Zelophehad.

The mere fact that the Bible records and emphasizes these events, in itself, attests to their significance. In a record of overwhelming male genealogy the references to females have added significance.

Of course none of this will make a ha’penny of difference to an unreconstructed male chauvinist just as much trying to redress the balance will never go far enough for others. But somewhere along the line we did go wrong. If it was possible for Deborah to be both judge and prophet, for Hulda to be a prophetess, for Salome Alexandra to rule successfully in two separate stints (repairing the damage of her first husband Aristobolus and then her second husband Jannaeus did to the body politic, and ruling with the approval of rabbinic leadership under Shimon Ben Shetach, no less), then one is bound to ask why by the time we get to Maimonides, living under Islamic culture, does he say, “All appointments must be male,” if no one said it explicitly before him?

No civilization can survive effectively if it disenfranchises fifty percent of its talent potential. We have allowed thousands of years of distorted, alien, male-dominated theological cultures to insidiously undermine our intrinsic values. After all, it was the single biggest innovation of Sinai legislation to overturn Egyptian law and the Hammurabi code and give women equality in civil law.

I am not suggesting Biblical values were all egalitarian, or that religion should not recognize difference and varied paradigms. There have always been separations and groupings that were specific not only in gender—think of the differences between priests, Levites, and common and garden Israelites—or privileges of ages (e.g., after twenty, until forty). Certainly women were disadvantaged, as were the poor and the alien. But remember we are talking three thousand years before Switzerland gave women the vote!

It is true that individual women of distinction and talent were able to rise and overcome disadvantage and it is consistent with our ancient tradition to encourage and facilitate this. But we should now be in a situation where female involvement and equality should be the norm (if not necessarily identical to that of males). Pesach should remind us as much of the slavery of gender as it does of the slavery of labor.