



The Torah of Kindness and Truth

a thought for Shavuot

With thanks to Sefaria for collating the sources with the transcript of this original shiur

Coming up to Shavuot, let us look at one tiny detail of the Rabbinical understanding of *Z'man Matan Torateinu*, the actual event of the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. One little detail which, as it were, was lying there in the tradition and only in much more recent times has it had significant impact. This is an interesting dimension of the understanding of the event, and also one that explains something very important that's happened to Judaism in the past century.

Before God could reveal the Torah to Israel at Mt. Sinai, Moshe had to propose the covenant to the Israelites, and only after their acceptance could *Matan Torah* proceed:

The end of the third verse contains a tautology, or double language. Why is the same idea repeated twice, in different words? Rabbinic tradition examines this repetition:

שמות י"ט:ג-ו'

וּמֹשֶׁה עָלָה אֶל־הָאֱלֹקִים וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו ה' מִן־הַהָר לֵאמֹר כֹּה תֹאמַר לְבֵית יַעֲקֹב וְתִגִּיד לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: אַתֶּם רְאִיתֶם אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי לְמִצְרַיִם וְאֲשָׂא אֶתְכֶם עַל־כַּנְּפֵי נְשָׁרִים וְאַבָּא אֶתְכֶם אֵלָי: וְעַתָּה אִם־שָׁמוּעַ תִּשְׁמַעוּן בְּקוֹלִי וְשָׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת־בְּרִיתִי וְהִיְתֶם לִי סֻגְלָה מִכָּל־הָעַמִּים כִּי־לִי כָּל־הָאָרֶץ: וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ־לִי מִמְּלַכְתּוֹת כֹּהֲנִים וְגוֹי קָדוֹשׁ אֵלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר תִּדְבֹּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Exodus 19:3-6

And Moses went up to God. The Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, **“Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel:** ‘You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Me. Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, but you shall be to Me a kingdom of Priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the children of Israel.”

מכילתא דרבי ישמעאל י"ט:ג'א'

כה תאמר לבית יעקב, **אלו הנשים**; ותגד לבני ישראל, אלו האנשים. [ד"א כה תאמר לבית יעקב, בזכות יעקב; ותגד לבני ישראל, בזכות ישראל] ד"א כה תאמר לבית יעקב, אמור בלשון רכה, אמור ראשי דברים לנשים; ותגד לבני ישראל, ותדקדק עמהם ואמור להם

Mechilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 19:3:1

"Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob" — **the women**, "and speak to the children of Israel" — the men. "Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob" — "gently"; "say" — Give the women the basic ideas. "...and speak to the children of Israel" - "speak" in detail to the men.

This early Midrash, which comes from the same time as the Mishnah, claims that God told Moses to first give the Torah to the women, before giving it to the men.

But why do the Rabbis say this? They didn't have to make this argument. Another Midrashic tradition explains:

שמות רבה כ"ח:ב'

דָּבַר אַחַר, לָמָּה לְנָשִׁים תְּחִלָּה, שֶׁהוּן מִזְדָּרוֹת בְּמִצְוֹת. דָּבַר אַחַר, כְּדֵי שֶׁיְהוּ מְנַהֲיגוֹת אֶת בְּנֵיהֶן לַתּוֹרָה. אָמַר רַבִּי תַחֲלִיפָא דְקִיסְרִין, אָמַר הַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא כְּשֶׁבְרָאתִי אֶת הָעוֹלָם, לֹא צִוִּיתִי אֶלָּא לְאָדָם הָרִאשׁוֹן, וְאַחַר כֵּן נִצְטְוִית חַוָּה וְעָבְרָה וְקִלְקְלָה אֶת הָעוֹלָם, עֲכָשְׁיוּ אִם אֵינִי קוֹרָא לְנָשִׁים תְּחִלָּה, הוּן מְבַטְלוֹת אֶת הַתּוֹרָה, לְכֹךְ נֶאֱמַר: כֹּה תֹאמַר לְבֵית יַעֲקֹב

Shemot Rabbah 28:2

Another explanation: why were the women first? Since they are keen with mitzvot. Another explanation, so that they could accustom their children to Torah. Rabbi Tachlifa Dekeisarin ["kingmaker"?) said, the Holy Blessed One said 'When I created the world, I commanded only the First Man; and after that Chava was commanded, and she transgressed and corrupted the world. Now, if I do not call to the women first, they will nullify the Torah.' So it says, "So say to the House of Jacob".

There are three ideas presented: The first is that women are generally more punctilious about mitzvot. Alternatively, perhaps it is because women are enablers, and will bring their children to study Torah. Finally, a third opinion explains that the first commandment ever was given to a man, and it was a woman who transgressed. This time, God gives the mitzvot to women first, to ensure that they are on board.

While these three opinions differ greatly on reasoning, there is no doubt presented in this Midrashic tradition about the fact that women received the Torah first. Yet the legal tradition does not pick up on this Midrash.

משנה תורה, הלכות תלמוד תורה א' י"ג

אשה שלמדה תורה יש לה שכר אבל אינו כשכר האיש. מפני שלא נצטווית. וכל העושה דבר שאינו (יג) מצוה עליו לעשותו אין שכרו כשכר המצוה שעשה אלא פחות ממנו. ואף על פי שיש לה שכר צווי חכמים שלא ילמד אדם את בתו תורה. מפני שרוב הנשים אין דעתם מכוונת להתלמד אלא הן מוציאות דברי תורה לדברי הבאי לפי עניות דעתן. אמרו חכמים כל המלמד את בתו תורה כאלו למדה תפלות. במה דברים אמורים בתורה שבעל פה אבל תורה שבכתב לא ילמד אותה לכתחלה ואם למדה אינו כמלמדה תפלות

Mishneh Torah, Torah Study 1:13

A woman who studied the Torah has a reward coming to her but it is incomparable to the reward of a man **because she was not commanded to do so**, and whosoever does something which is not mandatory upon him to perform receives not a hire equal to the hire of him who is commanded to perform it but less than he. And, although she has a reward coming the Sages commanded that a man shall not instruct his daughter in the Torah, because most women have no set mind to be instructed therein, but, on the contrary, are apt to divert matters of the Torah to nonsensical matters, of course, in proportion to the inferiority of their mind. The Sages said: "Whosoever instructs his daughter in Torah does no better than if he instructed her in matters of profanity." (Sotah, 21b). These matters are thus spoken of only concerning the Oral Torah, but respecting Holy Writ it is best not to begin to instruct her therein but if he did instruct her it is not as if he instruct her in profanity.

Avodah Zarah, 3b; Kiddushin, 31a. C.

For the better part of 2,000 years, women were not given the same Torah education as men. This was how Torah-learning-Judaism functioned practically speaking until 1917.

Then, in 1917, Sarah Schenirer founded the first Bais Ya'akov school for women, and she named it after this verse that we have been examining.

Since then, women have risen in the ranks of Torah scholars. The Belzer Rebbe, a great Chasidic leader, and the Chofetz Chaim, the major Torah scholar of his generation, both blessed this endeavour. After World War II, in America, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik and the Lubavitcher rebbe promoted the role of women as students of Torah and teachers of Torah.

This was truly a revolution. From this revolution came thousands of new Torah teachers and hundreds of thousands of new Torah learners. And this revolution happened in part through permission granted by the *Gedolei Hador*, the greatest Rabbis of the generation, because they had the support and groundwork of the Midrashic tradition.

What did these Rabbis see to make them overturn generations of tradition that excluded women? The answer is: This Midrash, which was an under-utilised force until this revolution took place.

But why is this Midrash so insistent on the idea that women were offered the Torah before the men?
What is special about the women's voice in Torah?

Compare these two places in Tanach where Torah is discussed in conjunction with an abstract ethical term. The first is from the book of Malachi, the last of the Prophets:

מלאכי ב'ו'

תּוֹרַת אֱמֶת הָיְתָה בְּפִיהוּ וְעוֹלָה לֹא־נִמְצָא בְּשִׁפְטָיו בְּשָׁלוֹם וּבְמִישׁוֹר הִלַּךְ אִתִּי וְרַבִּים הָשִׁיב מִעוֹן:

Malachi 2:6

Proper rulings were in his mouth, And nothing perverse was on his lips; He served Me with complete loyalty And held the many back from iniquity.

This verse speak of men, but the second source, from the book of Proverbs, is about women:

משלי ל"א:כ"ו

בִּיהַ פִּתְחָהּ בְּחָכְמָה וְתוֹרַת־חֶסֶד עַל־לְשׁוֹנָהּ:

Proverbs 31:26

Her mouth is full of wisdom, Her tongue with **kindly teaching**.

If male-centric Torah is of "*Emet*" and female-centric torah is of "*Chessed*" now consider in the Torah what happens when those two values appear next to one another:

בראשית כ"ד:כ"ז

וַיֹּאמֶר בְּרוּךְ ה' אֱלֹהֵי ה' אַבְרָהָם אֲשֶׁר לֹא־עָזַב חֲסְדּוֹ וְאֱמֶתוֹ מֵעַם ה' אֲנֹכִי בַדְרֹךְ נַחְנִי ה' בֵּית אָחִי אֲדִנָּי:

Genesis 24:27

And he said, "Blessed be the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who has not withheld His steadfast faithfulness from my master. For I have been guided on my errand by the Lord, to the house of my master's kinsmen."

In the verse above, Abraham's servant is praying that he find an appropriate wife for his master's son, and praises God for God's "*chessed*" and "*emet*" - kindness, and then truth.

בראשית ל"ב:י"א

קִטְנִיתִי מִכָּל הַחֲסָדִים וּמִכָּל־הָאֱמֶת אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתָ אֶת־עַבְדְּךָ כִּי בְּמַקְלִי עָבַרְתִּי אֶת־הַיַּרְדֵּן הַזֶּה וְעַתָּה הֵייתִי לְשָׁנִי מִחֲנוּת:

Genesis 32:11

I am unworthy of **all the kindness that You have so steadfastly** shown Your servant: with my staff alone I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps.

When Jacob is about to encounter his brother Esau, and prays for God's assistance, he says that he is unworthy of both the *chessed*, kindness, and the *emet*, the truth or steadfastness, that God has shown.

שמות ל"ד:ו'

וַיַּעֲבֹר ה' עַל-פְּנֵי וַיִּקְרָא ה' ה' קַל רַחוּם וְחַנּוּן אַרְךָ אַפַּיִם וְרַב-חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת

Exodus 34:6

The Lord passed before him and proclaimed: "The Lord! the Lord! A God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, **abounding in kindness and faithfulness**

Finally, in this speech, known as the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy, which God shares with Moses, kindness is mentioned first, followed by "truth" or "faithfulness."

In Torah it seems "*Chessed*" always comes before, and takes precedence over "*Emet*." This is why women's Torah must come first. All along it seems there should have been more than the Torah of *Emet*. Only now it seems are we able to learn Torah as it should have been all along, as expressed in these verses that tell us that at Mt. Sinai, God chose to give the Torah to the women first, before the men.

Chag Shavuot Sameach

Jonathan Sacks



www.rabbisacks.org     @rabbisacks

The Office of Rabbi Sacks, PO Box 72007, London, NW6 6RW
+44 (0)20 7286 6391 • info@rabbisacks.org

© Rabbi Sacks • All rights reserved
The Office of Rabbi Sacks is supported by The Covenant & Conversation Trust