Covenant & Conversation

BAMIDBAR • במדבר

FROM THE TEACHINGS AND WRITINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS זצ"ל

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THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

**With thanks to the Schimmel Family for their generous sponsorship of Covenant & Conversation, dedicated in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel.**
"I have loved the Torah of R' Chaim Schimmel ever since I first encountered it. It strives to be not just about truth on the surface but also its connection to a deeper truth beneath. Together with Anna, his remarkable wife of 60 years, they built a life dedicated to love of family, community, and Torah. An extraordinary couple who have moved me beyond measure by the example of their lives." — Rabbi Sacks

This year's series of essays were originally written and recorded by Rabbi Sacks zt"l in 5773 (2012–2013).
These timeless messages are accompanied by a new Family Edition created to inspire intergenerational learning on the Parsha.

# The Personal vs The Political

How are we to understand the differential roles of men and women within Judaism? On the one hand, Jewish identity is conferred by women, not men. The child of a Jewish mother is Jewish; the child of a Jewish father and non-Jewish mother is not. The source of this halachic rule goes back to the very first Jewish child, Isaac. Abraham already had a child, Ishmael, by Sarah's handmaid, (the Egyptian) Hagar. Yet God was insistent that only Sarah's son would continue the covenant. Maternity, not paternity, was the decisive factor.

On the other hand, status is conferred by men. At the very beginning of Bamidbar, there is a census (hence its English name, the Book of Numbers): "Take a census of the whole Israelite community by the clans of its ancestral houses, listing the names, every male, head by head." The men are counted, the women not. In this case the reason is obvious, as the next verse makes clear: "You and Aaron shall record them by their groups, from the age of twenty years up, all those in Israel who are able to bear arms." The census with which Bamidbar begins was to count those able to do military duty. Traditionally, men fight; women protect. War is a historically male pursuit.

But other forms of status also pass through the male line. A king is succeeded by his son. A Cohen is one whose father is a Cohen. A Levi is one whose father is a Levi. Family heritages are governed by paternity. That is implicit in the phrase "by the clans of its ancestral houses, listing the names, every male, head by head". One great counterexample occurs later on in the book of Bamidbar (ch. 27) in the story of the daughters of Zelophehad, whose claim to inherit their father's share in the land of Israel (since he had no sons) is vindicated by God

Himself. Yet in general in Judaism, identity is maternal, inheritance paternal.

It is with trepidation that one takes up the subject of gender differentiation. It is a sensitive topic, and awareness of the issues and sensitivities have heightened in recent years and are ever-growing... Despite the passion, perhaps even because of it, it is worth reviewing the Jewish tradition and its twin-track approach. R. Barukh Halevi Epstein (Tosefet Berakhah to Num. 1:2), makes the linguistic observation – based on midrashic and aggadic sources – that the two words *ben*, son, and *bat*, daughter, are both shorter forms of other words. *Ben*comes from the word *boneh*, a builder ("Call them not your sons but your builders"). *Bat* is a compacted form of the word *bayit*, a home. According to this tradition, men build buildings; women build homes. (He adds that the word *ummah*, a nation, comes from the word *eim*, a mother. National as well as personal identity is maternal).

Recent research has thrown scientific light on our understanding of gender differences, although often this necessitates generalising on the two genders. In 2002 Steven Pinker (*The Blank Slate*, pp.337-371) summarised the evidence thus: In all cultures, human males are more aggressive and more prone to physical violence than women. In all cultures, roles are distributed on the basis of sex differences: women tend to have greater responsibility for child rearing, while men tend to occupy most leadership positions in the public and political realm. There are, of course, notable exceptions, but the pattern is sufficiently universal to refute the idea that gender differences are "constructed" – products of culture and convention rather than biology.

In *The Essential Difference*, (2003) Simon Baron-Cohen, professor of psychology and psychiatry at Cambridge University, argued that the female brain is predominantly hard-wired for empathy; the male brain for system-building. Empathy is the ability to understand and relate to another person as a person, through sensitivity and emotional intelligence. System-building is the drive to analyse, explore and explain phenomena by discovering the rules that govern them. To empathise, you need a degree of attachment; to systematise, you need a measure of detachment. "Whilst the natural way to understand and predict the nature of events and objects is to systematise, the natural way to understand a person is to empathise."

Carol Gilligan, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School, argued in her *In a Different Voice* (1984) that men and women characteristically engage in different kinds of moral reasoning. Men tend to think more in terms of justice, rights and abstract principles; women more in terms of compassion, nurturing and peacemaking. She speaks of "two modes of judging, two different constructions of the moral domain – one traditionally associated with masculinity

and the public world of social power, the other with femininity and the privacy of domestic interchange" (p. 69). These and other studies were first popularised in the title of a best-seller: Men are from Mars, women from Venus (1992).

The Torah reflects these conventional differences. Our first matriarchs, Sarah and Rebecca both seem to understand better than their husbands which child will continue the covenant (Isaac, not Ishmael; Jacob, not Esau). Tanach contains many vignettes of "strong" women. In my Haggadah I tell the story of the "six women" of the Exodus who played key roles in the story of redemption: Yocheved, Miriam, Shifra, Puah, Zipporah and Pharaoh's daughter Batya. And there are many other female heroes in the pages of Tanach: Hannah, Deborah, Ruth, Chuldah and Esther among them. What characterises these women is their emotional-spiritual intelligence and the moral courage that comes from it.

There are only two cases known to me in Tanach where the word "Torah" is conjoined with an abstract noun. One occurs in Malachi's description of the ideal priest:

> "The law of truth (*torat emet*) was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin."
>
> *Malachi 2:6*

The other is the Book of Proverbs' famous description of the "woman of strength" (*eshet chayil*):

> She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the law of lovingkindness (*torat chessed*) is on her tongue.
>
> *Prov. 31:26*

The difference between the Tanach's ideas of the dispassionate search for truth (*torat emet*) and the passionate drive to lovingkindness (*torat chessed*) is precisely what Baron-Cohen and Carol Gilligan tracked in their research over 30 centuries later.

Hence the Torah's distinction between the public, social, political arena and the personal dimension of identity and relationships. Status and position within a hierarchy – areas in which the Torah privileges the male – are quintessentially social. They belong to the public domain. They are the gladiatorial arena in which the fight for power and glory takes place. What is unusual in the Torah, and what has always been Judaism's greatest strength, is its emphasis on the other, the personal, domain – where love, compassion and mercy are the covenantal virtues.

Hence the religious centrality and dignity of home and family within Judaism. I have called this the primacy of the personal over the political. That is why, in the Jewish faith, while social status follows

the father, personal identity follows the mother. In a public dialogue I once had with Steven Pinker, he made the point that the Torah's understanding of male-female differences is compelling, and supported by contemporary science. Carol Gilligan, near the end of her book, made the following sharp observation:

> The moral domain is . . . enlarged by the inclusion of responsibility and care in relationships. And the underlying epistemology correspondingly shifts from the Greek ideal of knowledge as a correspondence between mind and form to the Biblical conception of knowing as a process of human relationship.
>
> *In a Different Voice, p. 173*

So: when you want to know the strength of an army, as in the beginning of Bamidbar, count the men. But when you want to know the strength of a civilisation, look to women. For it is their emotional intelligence that defends the personal against the political, the power of relationships against relationships of power.