



ICJW Bea Zucker Online Bible Study Program

“The Five Books of Moses: Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

Session 17 Yitro – In and Out of Revelation

שמות יט

א בח' דש השלישי לצאת בני-ישראל מארץ מצרים ביום הזה באו מדבר סיני. ב ויסעו מרפידים ויב' או מדבר סיני ויחנו במדבר ויחן-שם ישראל נגד ההר. ג ומ'שה עלה אל-האל'הים ויקרא אליו יהוה מן-ההר לאמר כ'ה ת'אמר לבית יעקב ותגיד לבני ישראל. ד אתם ראיתם אשר עשיתי למצרים ואשא אתכם על-כנפי נשרים ואבא אתכם אלי. ה ועתה אם-שמעו תשמעו בק' לי ושמרתם את-בריתי והייתם לי סגלה מכל-העמים כי-לי כל-הארץ. ו ואתם תהיו-לי ממלכת כ'הנים וגוי קדוש אלה הדברים אשר תדבר אל-בני ישראל. ז ויב'א מ'שה ויקרא לזקני העם וישם לפניהם את כל-הדברים האלה אשר צוהו יהוה. ח ויענו כל-העם יחדו וי'אמרו כ'ל אשר-דבר יהוה נעשה וישב מ'שה את-דברי העם אל-יהוה. ט וי'אמר יהוה אל-מ'שה הנה אנ' כי בא אליך בעב הענן בעבור ישמע העם בדברי עמך וגם-בך יאמינו לעולם ויגד מ'שה את-דברי העם אל-יהוה. י וי'אמר יהוה אל-מ'שה לך אל-העם וקדשתם היום ומחר וכבסו שמל'תם. יא והיו נכ'נים ליום השלישי כי ביום השלישי ירד יהוה לעיני כל-העם על-הר סיני. יב והגבלת את-העם סביב לאמר השמרו לכם עלות בהר ונג'ע בקצהו כל-הנ'גע בהר מות יומת. יג ל'א-תגע בו יד כי-סקול יסקל או-יר'ה יירה אם-בהמה אם-איש ל'א יחיה במש'ך הי'בל המה יעלו בהר. יד וירד מ'שה מן-ההר אל-העם ויקדש את-העם וכבסו שמל'תם. טו וי'אמר אל-העם היו נכ'נים לשל'שת ימים אל-תגשו אל-אשה. טז ויהי ביום השלישי בהי'ת הברק ויהי ק'ול ת'וברכים וענן כבד על-ההר וק'ול ש'פר חזק מא'ד ויחרד כל-העם אשר במחנה. יז ויוצא מ'שה את-העם לקראת האל'הים מן-המחנה ויתיצבו בתחתית ההר. יח והר סיני עשן כלו מפני אשר ירד עליו יהוה באש ויעל עשנו כעשן הכבשן ויחרד כל-ההר מא'ד. יט ויהי קול הש'פר הולך וחזק מא'ד מ'שה ידבר והאל'הים יענו בקול. כ וירד יהוה על-הר סיני אל-ר'אש ההר ויקרא יהוה למ'שה אל-ר'אש ההר ויעל מ'שה. כא וי'אמר יהוה אל-מ'שה רד העד בעם פן-יהרסו אל-יהוה לראות ונפל ממנו רב. כב וגם הכ'הנים הנגשים אל-יהוה יתקדשו פן-יפר'ץ בהם יהוה. כג וי'אמר מ'שה אל-יהוה ל'א-יוכל העם לעל'ת אל-הר סיני כי-אתה העד'תה בנו לאמר הגבל את-ההר וקדשתו. כד וי'אמר אליו יהוה לך-רד ועלית אתה ואהר'ן עמך והכ'הנים והעם אל-יהרסו לעל'ת אל-יהוה פן-יפר'ץ-בם. כה וירד מ'שה אל-העם וי'אמר אליהם.

Exodus 19

¹ On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone forth from the land of Egypt, on that very day, they entered the wilderness of Sinai. ² Having journeyed from Rephidim, they entered the wilderness of Sinai and encamped in the wilderness. Israel encamped there in front of the mountain, ³ 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: ⁴ 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me. ⁵ 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, ⁶ 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."

⁷ Moses came and summoned the elders of the people and put before them all that the Lord had



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commanded him.⁸ All the people answered as one, saying, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do!" And Moses brought back the people's words to the Lord.⁹ And the Lord said to Moses, "I will come to you in a thick cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after." Then Moses reported the people's words to the Lord,¹⁰ and the Lord said to Moses, "Go to the people and warn them to stay pure today and tomorrow. Let them wash their clothes.¹¹ Let them be ready for the third day; for on the third day the Lord will come down, in the sight of all the people, on Mount Sinai.¹² You shall set bounds for the people round about, saying, 'Beware of going up the mountain or touching the border of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death:¹³ no hand shall touch him, but he shall be either stoned or shot; beast or man, he shall not live.' When the ram's horn sounds a long blast, they may go up on the mountain."

¹⁴ Moses came down from the mountain to the people and warned the people to stay pure, and they washed their clothes.¹⁵ And he said to the people, "Be ready for the third day: do not go near a woman."

¹⁶ On the third day, as morning dawned, there was thunder, and lightning, and a dense cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud blast of the horn; and all the people who were in the camp trembled.¹⁷ Moses led the people out of the camp toward God, and they took their places at the foot of the mountain.

¹⁸ Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke, for the Lord had come down upon it in fire; the smoke rose like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled violently.¹⁹ The blare of the horn grew louder and louder. As Moses spoke, God answered him in thunder.²⁰ The Lord came down upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mountain, and the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain and Moses went up.²¹ The Lord said to Moses, "Go down, warn the people not to break through to the Lord to gaze, lest many of them perish.²² The priests also, who come near the Lord, must stay pure, lest the Lord break out against them."²³ But Moses said to the Lord, "The people cannot come up to Mount Sinai, for You warned us saying, 'Set bounds about the mountain and sanctify it.'"²⁴ So the Lord said to him, "Go down, and come back together with Aaron; but let not the priests or the people break through to come up to the Lord, lest He break out against them."²⁵ And Moses went down to the people and spoke to them.

Context

Moshe's father-in-law, Yitro, his spouse, Yocheved, and sons, Gershom and Eliezer meet Moshe on his way from leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. Yitro offers advice to create a hierarchy of judges to off-load some of the excess burden that Moshe is shouldering. Journeying on, the Israelites enter the Sinai Desert, and prepare for the divine revelation. Moshe acts as an intermediary, interpreting God's instructions to the people. At the carefully boundaried mountain, amidst smoke, thunder, lightning, and trembling, the Children of Israel hear the divine words and



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receive the ten commandments. The final divine message to Moshe in the parasha emphasizes the prohibition against making gold or silver idols, and commands the use of an earthen or stone altar for sacrifices.

Explorations

The question of the participation of women in the covenant between God and the Jewish People arises in the Torah’s account of the preparations and actual experience of the revelation at Sinai.

The following verses quote God's instructions and make no mention of men or women.

And God said to Moses, “Go to the nation and sanctify them today and tomorrow, and they should wash their clothes. And they should be ready for the third day, because on the third day God will descend before the eyes of the whole people to Mount Sinai.”
Shmot 19:10-11

The verses are phrased in the collective masculine form, presumably intended for all of the people. Passing on the message, Moshe adds an extra instruction,

And Moses went down from the mountain to the nation, and he sanctified them and they washed their clothes. And he said to the people, “And you should be ready for three days – do not approach a woman.” Exodus 19:15

In the text, we find Moses apparently reformulating God's messages for the people's preparation. To God's command for sanctification and preparation, Moses adds his own addendum—not to go near a woman. Moshe's remark seems to stigmatize women in two ways. Firstly, the preparation to meet the divine precludes contact with women. The verse prompts a question—what's the problem with women that men must avoid us? Secondly, women are the object spoken about in the verse, not people whom the verse addresses. Apparently speaking only to the men, Moshe seems to exclude women at his own initiative.

This passage in Exodus is one of the places in the Tanakh where women's silence is so deeply charged, so overwhelming, that it can provoke a crisis for the Jewish feminist. As Rachel Adler says, “We are being invited by Jewish men to re-covenant, to forge a covenant which will address the inequalities of women's position in Judaism, but we ask ourselves, ‘Have we ever had a covenant in the first place? Are women Jews?’”⁶ This is a question asked at the edge of a deep abyss. How can we ever hope to fill the silence that shrouds Jewish women's past? If women are invisible from the first moment of Jewish history, can we hope to become visible now? How many of us will fight



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Judith Plaskow premises her classic work of Jewish feminist theology—*Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (1990)—on the view that the biblical revelation is tainted by the exclusion of women from the human encounter with the divine (quote from p. 26). Building on the analysis of Rachel Adler—another important Jewish feminist, Judith sees the need to question the core assumptions about women's place in Judaism on the basis of the Sinai scene.

Judith Plaskow calls for women's voices of interpretation, for feminist midrash, for a renewal of the covenant. Her call has an answer from unexpected historical voices.

The medieval French commentator Rashi works tirelessly on the Sinai scene to bring women fully into the experience of the revelation. Following an ancient tradition, Rashi comments on the words commanding Moshe to instruct about the covenant, “So you should say to the house of Yakov-*beit Yakov* and tell the Children of Israel-*b'nai Yisrael*” (Shmot 19:3). Making sense of what appears to be doubling of language, Tannaitic (early rabbinic) sources, interpret *beit Yakov* to refer to the women, and *b'nai Yisrael* to refer to the men, for why would the Torah mention both *beit Yakov* and *b'nai Yisrael* unless to include both genders in God's revelation to the people? (See Mekhilta of Rabbi Yishmael, Yitro; Midrash Tanchuma, Metzora 9; and Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer, 40). Quoting this tradition, Rashi contends that the divine will speak in gentle terms to the women, and about strictures and punishments to the men (Rashi on 19:3). Regardless of his time-bound gender stereotyping, Rashi clearly states that God intends to address both women and men, each as worthy in her and his own right to receive the revelation.

Rashi further comments about the offensive command not to approach a woman (on Shmot 19:15).

Do not go near a woman: for all these three days [of preparation], in order that the women may immerse themselves on the third day and be ritually pure to receive the Torah. If they have intercourse within the three days, the woman might excrete semen after her immersion and become ritually impure again. After three days have elapsed [since intercourse], however, the semen has already putrified and is no longer capable of fertilization, so it is pure from contaminating the [woman] who emits it. [based on mishna Shabbat 9:3, also gemarra Shabbat 86A]

In his explicit and detailed account, based on the text of the Mishna in tractate Shabbat, Rashi interprets the purpose of Moshe's prohibition: to enable women to immerse in purifying water in order to be ready to receive the Torah. As we shall learn in Leviticus (15:16-18), after sexual intercourse the Torah obligates both men and women to immerse in water to purify from male discharge, semen, and wait until sunset. The Tannaim discuss how it is not sufficient for women to wait for sunset of the same day to perform the purification ritual immersion because women retain semen within the vaginal canal for as



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long as 72 hours after intercourse (in addition to tractate Shabbat, see Miqvaot 8:3). According to this logic, the women at Mount Sinai would not be ready to enter the sacred realm at the appointed time if they have sex within the three-day period before the revelation. Therefore, explains Rashi, Moshe orders the men not to have sex with the women for three days so that the women will be ready to meet God and receive the Torah. Specifically commenting on the words that appear to *exclude* women, Rashi *includes* women in the preparations for the covenant.

Rashi's comments are complicated. Based on earlier traditions, he makes a bold move to assert that God addresses both women and men, and both participate fully in the revelation scene. According to Rashi, women and men are informed of God's desire to enter a covenant with them, and both are to prepare to receive the covenant in a state of ritual purity. However, like the traditions upon which he bases his views, by affiliating Moses' statement, "do not go near a woman," with God's statement about the days of preparation, Rashi avoids explaining the difference between God's and Moshe's instructions by attributing to both the same intention. For an unstated reason, the Torah does not explicitly credit God with the idea that sanctification requires male abstinence from contact with women.

Commenting on the same matter, the Babylonian Talmud discuss Moshe's inclination to abstain from sex--

[W]e have learned in a Tannaitic source, "Three things were done by Moses on his own authority, and the Holy One, blessed be S/He, agreed. They are: He added one day (to the period of sanctification), he separated himself from a woman, and he broke the tablets into pieces." ...

What was the object of Moses in separating himself from a woman? He applied the order given to the Israelites (to separate themselves from their spouses) to himself to a much more severe degree. (Shabbat 87a)

Here Tannaitic sages acknowledge that Moshe initiates extreme abstinence from sexual relations with his own spouse. The ground for his abstinence from sex is his constant contact with God. The sages claim that God *accepts* Moshe's idea, however, it is still not clear that God *wants* women and men to separate.

Questions for Discussion

- Read more of Judith Plaskow book (it is readily available in libraries, and [by order](#)), consider her views, and discuss your experiences of inclusion and exclusion in the Torah covenant in the light of the discussion above.
- The Torah and rabbinic commentaries are explicit about the body and our intimate relationships. The verses we studied appear to indicate an incompatibility between sexual intimacy and sacred encounter. How do you understand the relationship between holiness and sexuality? We shall discuss this topic more later.



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- What, if any, reason might there be for addressing women and men differently and/or separately? For what reasons ought we *not* to address women and men differently and/or separately?
- How do we understand the importance of reading women into and out of a central text of the covenant? How is ambivalence to women’s full inclusion and participation in the covenant expressed today in both our religious and secular communities? Pick an area of Judaism that you feel is currently not gender equal. Evaluate the gender proportion of ritual honors, the language and metaphors of God-language, liturgy, and leadership in the community, for example. Explore ways to make Jewish practice more gender-inclusive and post them [here](#) on the forum so that we can all benefit from each other's insights. To get started, Shavuot is one opportunity....
- Based on a midrash that the Children of Israel slept the night before revelation and had to be woken up to receive the Torah, many communities observe a *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* during which people study Torah through the night of Shavuot in order to correct the sleepiness of our ancestors. How can you incorporate a gender-*tikkun* (correction/repair) in your community’s *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* to express the full and equal participation of women in the covenant?

Study Links

The Torah introduces the revelation scene with a quick account of the Exodus using an inspiring image of God flying us out of exile on the wings of eagles.

[I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me \(Shmot 19:4\)](#)

This verse became affiliated with the modern aliya of Jews from Yemen and later, from Ethiopia to Israel. [Here](#) is a music video of a song from 1953 with images from the labor in the fields of Israel that speaks of how the Yemenite Jews awaited the messiah for a long time, and that the immigration is a sign of the days of redemption. Consider how these Jews regarded their hard labor as the fulfillment of redemption.

In [this essay](#), the late Lubavitcher Rebbe interprets the importance of the revelation to women. Evaluate whether you consider these views to be apologetic and/or feminist.

[Here](#) is a poem by Merle Feld about being at Mount Sinai with her brother.

Summary of Issues

From the verses describing the preparations, a question arises as to whether and to what extent the revelation addresses women. We find a medieval French commentator picking up an ancient thread and ingeniously interpreting the scene with gender-inclusive sensibility. Rashi is in anachronistic agreement with a contemporary feminist theologian.



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Methods & Observations

The participation of women in the revelation at Mount Sinai shows how complex it is to transmit divine intentions via human agents. Often this kind of “broken telephone”—messages changing as they move along the line—happens between the Torah and the layers of interpretation and commentary that flow from it. Here in our parasha, the transmission varies between verses in the same chapter, drawing attention to our human role and responsibility for transmitting the Torah onward.

Contact

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