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יִתְרוֹ

Yitro

We All Stood at Sinai

All the people answered as one, saying, "All that Adonai has spoken we will do!" (EXODUS 19:8)

And [Moses] said to the people, "Be ready for the third day; do not go near a woman." (EXODUS 19:15)

Parashat Yitro includes the chapter on the giving of the Ten Commandments. As the Ten Commandments are revealed to the Jewish people on Mount Sinai, did God address women as well as men? The Torah is very explicit in describing the people's acceptance of God's revelation: "All the people answered as one, saying, 'All that Adonai has spoken we will do!'" Then why did Moses, serving as God's spokesman, add the phrase "do not go near a woman" when he gave the people instructions on how to prepare to receive revelation? Why did he exclude women from these crucial preparatory moments?

Parashat Yitro also raises many questions about the perception of women's leadership abilities during early biblical history. In the beginning of the *parashah*, Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, believes that Moses is accepting too much responsibility. He tells Moses, "The task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. Seek out capable

men to help you judge" (Exod. 18:17–21). Why didn't Jethro consider women as capable leaders? Miriam, for example, is described a few chapters before as a prophetess. Jethro's own daughter Tzipora had shown decisive action in the desert when she circumcised their son (Exod. 4:25). Why did Moses accept Jethro's implicit negation of women as leaders?

To begin to answer these questions, we look back to Exodus, chapter 18. Jethro advised Moses to seek help from other men when answering people's disputes: "You shall also seek out from among all the people capable *men* who fear God, trustworthy *men* who spurn ill-gotten gains. Set these over them as chiefs of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens, and let them judge the people at all times" (Exod. 18:21–22). Moses took his father-in-law's advice, and chose only men to be the "elders of the people": "Moses came and summoned the elders of the people and put before them all that Adonai had commanded him" (Exod. 19:7). Neither Jethro nor Moses chose women to judge the people, despite Miriam's example in leading the women as a prophetess. Both they and those who passed these stories on were limited by their society's understanding that women's primary roles centered on the home and children.

Evidence for this traditional role for women is shown in the teachings of the great medieval Bible commentator Nachmanides, elucidating verse 21: "Some scholars explain *anshei chayil* as men of physical strength and zeal, such as have the ability to stand in the king's palace (Dan. 1:4). Similarly, *ishet chayil* (Prov. 31:10) is a woman of strength and industry in the work of the home."¹ In response to this generally accepted view limiting women's role to the home, it is important to note that the Bible contains examples of women operating beyond that role. Deborah, for example, is a judge (Judg. 4–5). Her advice and military knowledge are sought by her

people. They were not even willing to go to war without her leadership and assistance. Thus, although the Bible does show women in leadership roles, in *Parashat Yitro*, Moses and Jethro are trapped by the patriarchal bias of their society, in which women's leadership abilities are overlooked. At Sinai, Moses' limited perspective, not God's directive, is clearly seen.

Through the use of plural nouns we can assert that women and men were both present at revelation. Several times in Exodus, chapter 19, God calls to the entire Israelite people, without distinguishing between men and women. God said, "Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel" (Exod. 19:3). Rashi taught that "the house of Jacob refers to the women and the children of Israel refers to the men."² God then continues with this charge: "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" (Exod. 19:6). In both verses, God includes not only men, but also women in the revelatory experience. Torah also relates, "Adonai 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'" (Exod. 19:9). God includes all the people, both men and women, in hearing God's revelation.

God continues, giving Moses specific commands for the people to help them prepare for this approaching intense spiritual experience. Both men and women are included in God's commands: "Go to the people and warn them to stay pure today and tomorrow. Let them wash their clothes. Let them be ready for the third day; for on the third day Adonai will come down, in the sight of all the people, on Mount Sinai. You shall set bounds for the people round about it" (Exod. 19:10–12). All the verbs and nouns used are plural, indicating the participation of the entire people.

God concludes the preparatory instructions with these words spoken to the total people: "When the ram's horn sounds a long blast, they may go up on the mountain." (Exod. 19:13). The verse ends reminding the entire people how they must act, both men and women, when they go up on the mountain.

These proof texts show that when God revealed Torah and commanded Moses, both men and women were equally included. Yet, Moses distinguished between men's and women's involvement in leadership and revelation. He first summoned only the elders, who were all men, and told them what God had commanded him. Later, after Moses came down from the mountain, he added the words that set men apart from women, "do not go near a woman" (Exod. 19:15). Rashi gives an explanation for Moses' addition: "This was in order that the women might bathe on the third day and be in a state of purity to receive the Torah."³ Rashi noticed that Moses added these words to God's original command, and justified their inclusion. These words were not part of God's original commands to the entire people of Israel. When Moses served as God's spokesman, he limited women's involvement both as participants in revelation and as elders. What a great loss for that generation.

We draw strength from Torah's teaching that the Israelites positively responded to God's call that they should be a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod. 19:6). Scripture relates the people's overwhelming acceptance of revelation with these immortal words: "All the people answered as one, saying, 'All that Adonai has spoken we will do'" (Exod. 19:8). Both men and women accepted God's command to observe God's covenant. All the people accepted God's covenant in one unified voice.

A feminist reading⁴ of *Parashat Yitro* teaches us that both men and

women were present at the giving and receiving of the Ten Commandments. We now understand that Moses was limited in understanding by the conventions of his day. He also believed that only men were elders whom one consulted for advice. Torah posits the spiritual message of *Parashat Yitro*: men and women were involved at this momentous occasion of revelation. We reclaim God's original command to our people, both male and female, striving together to be a holy nation fulfilling God's Torah.