

## Women in Israel's Religious Duties (adapted from Allen P. Ross)

The Rabbinic literature viewed men and women as equal under the law, but made specific allowances for the women. The Talmud<sup>1</sup> says, "Scripture places men and women on equality with regard to all the laws of the Torahs."<sup>2</sup> Yet for the sake of women, a distinction was made in the application of the law. All the laws can be divided into negative and positive precepts. Both men and women were required to obey all the negative commands, whether time-bound or not. If the law said, "You shall not," then all must be responsible to obey. This means, for example, both men and women were bound to the command to "not murder." But with respect to positive commands, women were only bound to observe those which are not time bound. Therefore a man would be required to attend the the yearly festivals, but a woman was not required to do so. This, of course, was because of the uncertainty of their ritual uncleanness. The Torah said that the menstruant woman could not enter the temple (a negative precept); if it happened that the law called for some festal service, she was not bound to obey, the negative taking precedence over the positive. The Mishnah elaborates with the following guidelines:

Kid. 1:7 "women are exempt from commands of 'thou shalt,' the observance of which depends on a definite point of time"

Although this was true in general, there were exceptions specified for this rule, especially in high holy days:

- Ber. 20b A woman should recite the Kiddush to welcome the Sabbath.
- Pes. 108a A woman should attend a Seder on Passover.
- Shabb. 23a A woman should participate in lighting the Chanukah candles.
- Meg. 4a A woman should listen to the book of Esther read at Purim.
- Kid. 29b A woman should study the Torah.

The reasons for the exemptions from certain commands is important. The Rabbis are attempting to keep the women from simply going through the ritual of the ceremonies in the Temple while missing the spiritual content. They would feel out of sorts and not be giving themselves to it. It was found to be easier all around if they were not required to attend.

Women were to be taught the Torah. The Talmud (c.f. Ned. 4:3 and Sot. 3:4) surfaces a debate on whether a man ought to teach his daughter Torah. The conclusion is that she can and should be taught. If she were taught Torah, she would then understand the rulings regarding her and her responsibilities (see further Hag. 1:1, Ber. 3:3, and Suk. 2:8).



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<sup>1</sup> The Talmud is the collection of authoritative teachings from Jewish Rabbis and the Aramaic discussions regarding each section of the Mishnah which is the topical application of Biblical laws.

<sup>2</sup> Baba Kama, 15a

Women were also actively involved in the rituals of the Temple. The offerings in the temple were usually for men to perform, but offerings could and did include women. The OT law does not negate her participation in ritual ceremony. The Mishnah sets forth the following principle:

*The leanings, and the wavings, and the presentations, and the kemitsot [individual handfuls of the meal offering, which the priest takes to be put on the altar], and the incense offerings, and the melikot [instances of utilizing a slaughtering method used for bird sacrifices, employing the thumbnail instead of a knife], and the sprinklings, and the collections of blood are practiced by men, but not by women, except for the meal-offering of the sotah and of the female Nazirite, that they wave [them].<sup>3</sup>*

The Talmud shows that she did have certain responsibilities: set aside the dough offering and light the Sabbath candles. Other religious duties are either allowed, or at least not legislated against. She was not prevented from saying the blessing over the wine on Friday night (although one dissenting view is expressed in Ber. 20b). Likewise, no legal argument prevented a woman from being called on to read Torah in the Sabbath service. That she did not often do it is explained by "dignity of the congregation" instead of Scripture (Meg. 23a). De Lange says, "Her presence certainly was welcome at services, and was necessary at most family celebrations, but her religious role was glorified and her involvement greatest in the seclusion of her home."

Her involvement in the worship was more than being present, depending largely on the interest of the woman. She could participate, apparently, but need not due to the legislation. The arrangement of the courts included a woman's court where women could focus their worship (Mid. 2:5). This was often the center of musical activity, especially with the singing of the Levites and the Alamoth. On occasion the sacrifices would be brought down the 15 steps so that women could receive the Shelemah.

Most women, however, worshipped in the synagogue. According to Tos. Meg. 4:3 and bMeg. 23a, women could read the Scripture lesson in the synagogue. In Scripture itself it appears that they could offer prayer in the Temple or synagogue (cf. I Sam. 1, Luke 1). Furthermore, there is no evidence that women were separated from men during Gospel times (cf. Acts 1:14) as they were in later centuries. (The later separation of men and women in the synagogue seems to come from the dominance of Islam in the Middle East.) Laments especially were composed and sung by women at funerals. These and other considerations gave rise to the proverb that blessings rest on a man's house only because of his wife.

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<sup>3</sup> Mishnah: Kiddushin 1:7