

The Relationship Between Woman and God as Seen in Torah

In this presentation, I want to address the complex subject of how woman's relationship with God is seen in the Torah, both the written Torah and in Yeshua as the living Torah. The inspiration for this short study comes out of my encounter with the weekly Torah portion (parashat hashavua). The subject is enormous and to do it justice would require many volumes. For the purposes of this paper, I've chosen to limit the discussion to a small number of cogent points and examples. Firstly, I will look at the passages in the Pentateuch that explicitly define and describe the contours of woman's relationship with God. Secondly, the issues identified from the Torah will be set against the background of Yeshua's encounters with women with the aim of seeing how he embodied the Torah and set the parameters of relationship within that framework. To conclude, I will suggest ways in which the understandings gained can be applied in my life as a Messianic Jewish woman.

My approach is founded on two main premises. One is the essential importance of relationship as the lens through which to view interaction between mankind and God. Two is the position that the "teachings of Yeshua" regarding Torah are illustrated by and embodied in his relationships. He is the living Torah. He demonstrated the truth of the Torah in his actions no less than in his teachings. As the living word, he embodied eternal truth for all generations.

Women and God in the Torah

Torah – the creation narrative

By the words "in his image," the creation narrative of Gen. 1 expresses the divine intention to endow mankind, male and female with the imprint of God himself. There is no distinction as to priority of rank or significance in the brief sentence that contains these words (Gen 1:27). Rather, as the narrative continues, what is seen is the Creator's intent and command that the two, male and female, assume a joint, equal¹ role and responsibility to care for the rest of creation. The commands given to "man" are plural and they are indicative of God's intent that male and female are equally called, authorized, and gifted for their joint role. In verses 26-28 of Genesis 1, there are ten plural references in the creator's words to and about man, male and female. From the first day of mankind's creation, it was the creator's intention that man and woman be in relationship with him. At the close of the sixth day of creation, God declared all that he had done as "very good." There is no hint of hierarchy or exclusion in this narrative. This is Torah's seminal teaching concerning mankind's relationship with him. For our subject, we can say that this is the Torah's formative stance concerning woman's relationship with God. This first creation narrative describes the scene of creation in broad terms that are explicated in the second creation narrative in chapter two.

Genesis 2 fills in the details of the narrative without contradicting or reducing the terms laid out in the previous narrative. The narrative here is striking in that the creation of humanity is described in detailed fashion. Man as male is from dust, whereas man as female is a construct of dust already formed as bone. Both are unique, formed individually by God's hand, and to quote Psalm 139, both are "fearfully and wonderfully made." The intricate care God took with each concretizes his concern for each one individually.

¹ Equal does not imply identical.

Woman's creation was in the context of the divine judgment that it was not good for man as male to be alone (Gen. 2:18). To rectify the situation, God sovereignly created woman to be a helper fit for man. Man had no part in woman's creation, he was in a deep sleep. Helper, *ezer* in the Hebrew, is used in several ways: God is the helper of Israel who creates and also saves,² *ezer* is also a proper name for a man.³

By itself it does not specify positions within relationships, more particularly, it does not simply imply inferiority. Position results from additional content or from context. Accordingly, what kind of relationship does *ezer* entail in Gen. 2:18, 20? Our answer comes in two ways (1) the word 'neged', which joins *ezer*, connotes equality: a helper who is a counterpart. (2) the animals are helpers, but they fail to fit Adam.⁴

The differentiation is not a hierarchal distinction nor does the fact that one was "taken out" of the other imply subordination. God who cannot be seen and is essentially imageless has imprinted what can be seen of himself on man. The image of God endows humanity with intrinsic value that is based on God alone. It distances woman and man from biological utilitarianism and ultimately defines humanity in terms of divine choice and calling. That calling contained two major elements - being in relationship with him and caring for his creation.

The Patriarchal Era

The bulk of what has been written about relationship between man and woman during this era has placed it in a perspective of male dominance and female subjugation characterizing the period as sexist, primitive and unenlightened. When the society of ancient Israel is compared to the surrounding societies during the same era, this view is not credible. For our subject, women's relationship with God as expressed in Torah, this is especially the case. Throughout this era of biblical history, there are many instances of God interacting with women, including engaging in direct conversation with them.

The wives and of the patriarchs each had their own interaction with God. He spoke with Sarah, sent an angel to Hagar in the wilderness, gave Rebekah direct, privileged information about the future of her twin sons, Esau and Jacob (Genesis 25:22-23), God heard and answered the prayers of Leah. Exodus 15:20 names Miriam a prophetess. The role of a prophet/ess is one who speaks for God and represents him to the people. The "prophet" proclaimed the message given to him. (See Num. 12: 6-8) Thus, a prophet was a spokesman for God; he spoke in God's name and by his authority (Ex. 7:1) Miriam functioned in this role. In addition, we see her engaged in worship, singing and dancing in praise of God. It is evident that Miriam had direct access to God and she boldly took a position of leadership among the women of Israel.

Numbers 27 relates an incident involving the five daughters of Zelophehad. The incident of Zelophehad's daughters portrays God as being particularly responsive to woman's demand for justice, rather than maintaining a dogmatic male dominance position in regards to inheritance and land. Sometime during the forty years in the desert, their father had died without having begotten sons. His five daughters,(Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah), petitioned for inheritance rights. According to God's decree, the promised land was to be apportioned according to the "number of names" of members of the second generation counted in the census

² Ps. 121:2, 124:8,146:5,33:20,115:9-11; Ex. 18:4, Deut. 33:7, 26,29

³ 1 Chron. 4:4, 12:9, Neh. 3:19

⁴ Phillis Trible, "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation," in *The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives*, ed. Elizabeth Koltun, (New York, Schocken Books:1976) pp. 222-223.

recorded in Numbers 26 (see 26:5-56). Since the census only included males, Zelophehad's daughters would have been left without an inheritance. They came forward to appeal this regulation (Num. 27:2) and argued that their father's name (lineage) should not be cut off from his clan only because he had no son, and that they should be permitted to inherit his land portion (v. 4) and thereby avoid potential injustice to their father's name and property. God accepted the daughters' claim and provided legitimation of a limited right of Israelite women to inherit land; the same right of inheritance as was given to sons.

The land symbolized the covenant relationship between God and Israel and each family was given a portion of the land together with a promise of God's eternal care. However, because of a legal detail, Zelophehad's daughters were in danger of losing their inheritance and having their father's name disappear from the register of Israel.

This struck at the heart of the Abrahamic covenant, which promised not only land but also the continuing relationship of God with Abraham's descendants (Gen 15:18; 17:7). Faith in God's promise and obedience to his commands kept the covenant in effect. If Zelophehad had not been dishonorably cut out from the covenant community, then the God of the covenant was still the God of his family. They remained heirs of the covenantal promises. Zelophehad's daughters expressed their faith in God's promise to keep his covenant, and they had every right to hold him to it. If Zelophehad's name disappeared, then God had not preserved the covenantal relationship and the daughters had no part in the covenantal community.⁵

Zelophehad's daughters considered God and his law to be just and therefore they were not hesitant to point out the injustice of their situation. Their bold action resulted in a change of a law given on Sinai. For the five daughters, God was not inaccessible, he was approachable and could be trusted.

Women and God in Torah Law

The Torah regulations regarding matters related to cultic issues that specify women are relatively few in number. They are, however interesting in that the issues specifically mentioned include taking of vows⁶, tabernacle offerings⁷, confession of sin⁸, punishment and judgment⁹, praise and rejoicing before God¹⁰, receipt of honor and issues of ritual purity¹¹. With several of these matters the injunction or the authorization is given to "each man and woman" כל איש ואישה. Indeed it was these verses that first caught my attention as they clearly specify areas in which men and women are individually and equally responsible for their own relationships with God. Space does not allow for a thoroughgoing study of all the modes of relationship between God and woman in Torah. We will examine four of the most significant examples. Note that these examples are not given in any particular order and do not imply that one is more important than the other.

First, women were able to take a Nazarite vow of separation to God in exactly the same way as men. "The Lord said to Moses, "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'If a man or woman

⁵ Dean R. Ulrich, "The Framing Function of the Narratives About Zelophehad's Daughters," JETS 41/4 (Louisville: December 1998) p. 535.

⁶ Numbers: 6:1-2

⁷ Exodus 35:20, 29, 36:6

⁸ Numbers 5:6-8

⁹ Deuteronomy 17:2-7, Deut. 29:18, Lev. 18:6, Lev .20:27

¹⁰ Num. 13:12,18, Deut. 16:14

¹¹ Lev. 15:18, 23 both ritually unclean. 19:3 equal honor given to father and mother , Lev. 25:6

wants to make a special vow, a vow of separation to the Lord as a Nazarite ... (Num. 6:1-2). Reasons for taking this vow are not delineated in the text but the conditions/requirements of the vow and its consummation are defined. The vow was completed by offering sacrifices in the tabernacle. According to the regulations laid down in Torah for ritual sacrifice, women did not themselves offer sacrifices. The Nazarite vow represents an unusual practice even as it grants women the possibility of dedicating themselves to God in a special manner. The passage indicates that women offered sacrifices at the completion of their Nazarite vow.

Second, Women were responsible to confess and make restitution for wrongs. “The Lord said to Moses, “Say to the Israelites: ‘When a man or woman wrongs another in any way and so is unfaithful to the Lord, that person is guilty and must confess the sin he has committed. He must make full restitution for his wrong, add one fifth to it and give it all to the person he has wronged. (Num. 5:5-7).” Wronging another was seen as being unfaithful to God. Woman just as man could choose either be faithful or not. Here again the relational aspect of God to man is illustrated by the person to person relationship. Male or female is not the issue here, right relationship with God is the focal point. That relationship was equally open and desirable for both men and women.

Third, at the time of the building of the tabernacle, the entire community of Israel was challenged by God to become participants in the preparation of the place of worship. Free will offerings were sanctioned by God and could be given by women and men alike, the condition was their willingness. “All the Israelite men and women who were willing brought to the Lord freewill offerings for all the work the Lord through Moses had commanded them to do (Ex.35:29), and “...everyone who was willing and whose heart moved him came and brought an offering to the LORD for the work on the Tent of Meeting, for all its service, and for the sacred garments. All who were willing, men and women alike, came and brought gold jewelry of all kinds: brooches, earrings, rings and ornaments (Ex. 35:20).”

Fourth is the issue of ritual purity and uncleanness. Numbers 5 and 6 deal with issues of attitude and ritual impurity that can infect the camp of the Israelites while Leviticus 11-16 comprehensively outlines the regulations for cleansing from ritual impurity. Without exception, when either a man or a woman became ritually impure they were barred from going into the tabernacle to worship God. Access to the tabernacle meant access to God. Depending on the cause of the ritual uncleanness, the process for purification was the same for both male and female. This strongly indicates the sameness of the connection man and woman had with the tabernacle (the place of God’s dwelling). In matters of “emissions” whether semen or blood the procedures for purification from ritual uncleanness were the same for both man and woman.

The text of Numbers 5:11-31, the sotah text, defines the way in which a woman suspected of adultery is to be examined for innocence or guilt. This is a particularly difficult text, to the extent that the Talmud devotes an entire tractate to the subject. Briefly, jealous and suspicious husbands may bring their wives to the priest with a “grain offering of jealousy, a grain offering of remembrance, bringing iniquity to remembrance” (5:15). The text specifies every detail of a unique ceremony that includes a grain offering, an oath, a curse, and a drink with dirt and ink residue from the written curses. The woman is placed before the Lord, with her hair unbound, and the priest obliges her to drink the water with dust from the tabernacle floor, and the ink of curses that have been immersed in the “water of bitterness” that “brings the curse” (vss. 18, 19,

23, 24, 27). If the woman is guilty, her womb will drop, she will be unable to conceive and she will face ostracism; if she is innocent, she will be able to conceive.

The majority of interpretations of this text, both Jewish and Christian, view it through the lens of a patriarchal society where women had few rights, did not speak for themselves and were controlled by men. Another way to understand the text is to see that the ordeal places the decision in God's hands, and thereby protects women against capricious human action. The Sotah represents a kind of enlightened legal innovation: “. . .the community and, especially, the overwrought husband may not give way to their passions to lynch her.”¹² It has also been pointed out that the Sotah ritual was an effective way to protect women from the violence of jealous men since it placed the punishment for infidelity in divine or priestly hands.¹³

Implications

To this point, when examining woman's relationship with God, I have limited myself to passages from the Torah. The Torah is foundational, is the source and contains in seminal form all that follows in the Tenach and New Testament Scriptures. Regarding women and God, the stance of Torah is definitive and commands authority. Additional narratives from scripture bear out and expand the principles first evidenced in Torah.

From the selective overview of woman's relationship to God as seen in the Torah, a number of inferences can be drawn. One – God intentionally created humanity as male and female to be joint bearers of his image. It seems as Jewett phrases it “The primal form of humanity then is the fellowship of man and woman.”¹⁴ This fellowship stems from the relational quintessence of the Godhead whose desire it is to further extend himself in the creation. Two – women have the same access to God as do men. Three – God desires relationship with women no less than with men. Communication between God and woman was mandated to be unhindered as God both hears and answers women's prayers. Four – God's just character provided for a recognition and protection of women's rights in a strongly patriarchal era. Five – Women were an integral part of the covenant community of Israel. In general, in terms of woman's relationship to God, the Torah describes a high view of women and reveals surprising levels of equality between men and women.

Yeshua, the Living Torah, and Women

This paper is primarily a reflection on how women relate to and interact with God through Torah. The larger context of Torah observance in terms of mitzvot is not my main focus. However, for the reflections and observations in this paper to be of practical value, the principles derived from this examination of the written and the living Torah are helpful for us in our quest to live authentically as Jewish followers of Yeshua, and in particular as women.

¹² Jacob Milgrom, ‘The Case of the Suspected Adulteress, Numbers 5:11-31: Redaction and Meaning’. In *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader*, edited by Bach, Alice. (New York: Routledge. 1999) p. 480 cited in : Britt, Brian. 2007. ‘Male jealousy and the suspected Sotah: Toward a counter-reading of Numbers 5:11-31’. *The Bible and Critical Theory* 3 (1). pp. 5.1–5.19. DOI: 10.2104/bc070005.

¹³ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, ‘The Strange Case of the Suspected Sotah’. In *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader*, edited by Bach, Alice. (New York: Routledge.1999) pp. 463–474, cited in: Britt, Brian. 2007. ‘Male jealousy and the suspected Sotah: Toward a counter-reading of Numbers 5:11-31’. *The Bible and Critical Theory* 3 (1). pp. 5.1–5.19. DOI: 10.2104/bc070005.

¹⁴ Jewett, Man as Male and Female, p. 36.

Yeshua embodied Torah in his teachings, actions and in his relationships. Through the lens of his relationships with women we can begin to determine the parameters of relationship and how they can best be lived out today. Yeshua interacted with many women. Their almost ubiquitous presence in the gospel narratives signals a purposeful change in the first century status quo in regards to women, their role and function in society, and in relationship to God. By engaging with the texts, we can identify, clarify and summarize the fundamental teachings of Torah with relevant application to our lives today. Luke 8:1-3 describes the inner circle of Yeshua's followers as 12 male disciples and an unspecified number female supporters (Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna and "many others.") From this, it would appear that perhaps half of his closest followers were women.

It is not possible to categorize Yeshua's relationships according to any external standard. The internal standard of God's inherent relationality and love for humanity should be the gold standard by which we measure the essential truth of relationships, be they between people or between God and man. We can, however categorize Yeshua's relationships according to principles we extract from the texts themselves.

Yeshua's Interactions with Women

Yeshua's interactions with women deposed many centuries of Jewish law and custom. He consistently treated women and men as equals, stretching numerous Old Testament regulations that appeared to specify gender inequality. Nor in his interactions with women, did he follow the behavioral patterns established by the main religious groups of his day.

It was not so much in what he said as in how he related to women that Jesus was a revolutionary. In this relationship his life style was so remarkable that one can only call it astonishing. He treated women as fully human, equal to men in every respect; no word of deprecation about women, as such, is ever found on his lips.¹⁵

One of the striking phrases in the gospel narratives is "he (Yeshua) saw." Yeshua saw women,¹⁶ He recognized their presence, took them seriously, and responded to them where they were, frequently taking action to meet their need. Often, as disadvantaged, marginalized members of society, mainly confined to domestic roles; being recognized, responded to and honored was unusual, even scandalous to some. From his historical, cultural context the ease with which Yeshua interacted with women from a broad spectrum of society was extraordinary. His relationships with women ranged from women from high social levels, such as Johanna the wife of Herod's steward (Luke 8:3), to an unnamed village woman of the Galilee (Luke 7:37).

In contrast to the usual pattern of male female interaction, Yeshua allowed and even encouraged women to study. Jewish tradition at the time was not to permit women to be taught. A first century Rabbi, Rabbi Eliezer is attributed as saying, "Rather should the words of the Torah be burned than entrusted to a woman...Whoever teaches his daughter the Torah is like one who teaches her obscenity."¹⁷ Sirach, from approximately 180 BC further sets the cultural frame in which first century women lived.

¹⁵ Paul K. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female*, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans:1975) p. 94.

¹⁶ Luke 7:11-15, Luke 21:1-4, Matt. 8:14, Luke 12:12-13, John 11:33, John 19:26

¹⁷ Mishna Sotah, 3.4

Do not look upon any one for beauty, and do not sit in the midst of women; for from garments comes the moth and from a woman comes woman's wickedness. Better is the wickedness of a man than a woman who does good; and it is a woman who brings shame and disgrace.¹⁸

In sitting with women and teaching them, Yeshua deposed centuries of tradition. Luke 10:38-42 shows Mary "sitting at Yeshua's feet" while he expounded the law. This was a position that was reserved for male disciples yet Yeshua not only tolerated Mary's position, he lauded her for "having chosen the better part." Yeshua engaged in theological discussions with women. The gospels record that he engaged in these discussions with both an Israelite woman, Martha the sister of Mary, as well as with a woman from an outsider community. John 4:7 to 5:30 describes his conversation with a woman of Samaria.

In the gospel of Luke, Yeshua opposes the prejudice and misuse of organized religion against women. Luke 20:47 shows that Yeshua defended widows against the greed of the Pharisees. His advocacy for women is highlighted in Luke 13. On the Sabbath, in the synagogue at Capernaum, he healed a woman. When Yeshua took the scroll of the Law and began to teach from it, he saw a crippled woman in the back of the room. She was bound by an evil spirit. A number of elements in this narrative testify to the fact that Yeshua's concern for women took precedence over the usual cultural norms. Firstly, Yeshua called her from the back to the front of the room interrupting his teaching from Torah to minister to a woman. Secondly, He broke cultural norms by speaking to her. Thirdly, he touched her. Fourthly, Yeshua affirmed her worth in society by saying. "This woman is worth far more than any animal you might have. She is a "daughter of Abraham" (Luke 13:16). By saying this, He honored her and validated her place in the covenant community of Israel. He called her a daughter of Abraham, thus implying that she had equal status with sons of Abraham. The expression "son of Abraham" was commonly used to respectfully refer to Jews, but "daughter of Abraham," was an unknown phrase and this is the only occurrence of the term in the scriptures. This episode is particularly important because Yeshua risked his own honor and reputation for the sake of a woman. He humiliated his opponents by his teaching. They would have known that they themselves had violated Torah by watering their animals in the Shabbat. The issue was not the Shabbat. Yeshua's regard for people, men and women, took precedence over tradition. Showing sensitivity, kindness, and mercy to a woman was more important than tradition. In this incidence, Yeshua emphasized that men and women should see one another as fellow heirs with Abraham of God's promises.

Yeshua's attitude toward female ceremonial impurity is in view in the narrative of the hemorrhaging woman in Luke 8:43-47, Mark 5:25-34. This woman would have been continually ritually impure for twelve years. According to Lev. 15:25-42, any person or object she touched would also be ritually unclean. She would have been cut off from normal social interaction as well as from community religious life. Her isolation and consequent suffering are difficult for us to imagine. By pushing her way through a crowd of people and touching Yeshua, she risked much. This narrative is an example of how Yeshua understood the issues of ritual purity and holiness. Until Yeshua, the prevailing understanding of holiness was based on the concept of separation. Holiness needed to be protected and it was fragile. Uncleaness was transmittable and even contagious. Therefore, separation was necessary so as not to become polluted.¹⁹ In this episode of the hemorrhaging woman, the ritual impurity not only did not affect Yeshua, rather

¹⁸ Sirach 42:9-14

¹⁹ John E. Phelan Jr., *All God's People*, (Chicago. Covenant Publications: 2005) pp. 42-43.

his holiness transformed her uncleanness. His holiness had the power to transform and heal the afflicted woman.

Yeshua repeatedly exhibited concern for widows. The Gospel of Luke alone contains 6 references to widows: (Luke 2:36, 4:26, 7:11, 18:1, 20:47 and 21:1) In the biblical world, widows were marginalized and vulnerable members of society.

By definition, a widow was outside the normal social structure of the community and could therefore be easily victimized and quickly reduced to destitution. ...Without male protection the widow found it hard to survive; her position in the community was considered inferior. ...Powerless and often stigmatized, they served as personifications of a misfortunate state because they had no family to protect them.²⁰

In Matthew 5:28-29 Yeshua says, “Every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away; it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell.” With this statement, Yeshua forcefully condemned, with the threat of hell, all forms of pornography and the entire enterprise of commercializing the female body. Yeshua is defending women and protecting them from attacks against their personhood. Women are not objects, they are individuals who bear the image of God and therefore are to be honored and respected.

At the beginning of this section, the constant presence of women in Yeshua’s life was noted. Women were present not only in his life but also at his death and resurrection. Matthew 27:55-56 and Mark 15:40-41 relate that many women who followed Jesus from Galilee were present at his crucifixion at a time when the men, with the exception of John, had fled. Women were the first witnesses of his resurrection and received the commission to declare his resurrection to the male disciples. Women were his companions during his life, they remained with him through his death, and they were the first witnesses to and proclaimers of the resurrection.

In all Yeshua’s interactions with women presented here (and this by necessity is a limited presentation), it is evident that he, as God and as Torah incarnate; honored, cared for, and loved women. He advocated for them, standing against the prevailing patterns and entrenched traditions of his day. Yeshua as the living Torah shows us today how women have access to God. It is through Torah that relationship is possible. Yeshua expanded the boundaries of relationship to enable women (and men) free, unrestricted access to God.

Implications

Women’s relationship with God as mediated through Torah must be seen in the context of the life of Yeshua who incarnated Torah. His interactions with women and men express openness and free access for all, including the marginalized, the vulnerable, and the stigmatized of society. As a Messianic Jewish woman, my relationship with God is in and through Yeshua. As a member of the covenant community of Israel, living the Torah is a joyful acceptance of the freedom made possible by all that Yeshua was and did as he walked the earth. Since he is eternal and ever the same, in him I am privileged to be able to move to the heart of Torah – the love of God who wishes blessing for his people.

²⁰ Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel*, (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press: 2001) p. 53.

I began with this reflection with words the words “each man and each woman” that recur in the weekly Torah portion. In the framework of the covenant community of Israel, each man and each woman is granted the possibility of relationship with God through Torah. For me as a Messianic Jewish woman this implies an increasing engagement with both the written Torah and the living Torah. Together they express and invite each one into deeper relationship and intimacy with God. Torah has many faces that ultimately resolve into one composite image comprised of God’s unfathomable love.

“The Torah of the Lord is perfect reviving the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the Lord are sure and altogether righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb. By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward” (Psalm 19: 7-11).

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