

# Response to Aranoff

Chaim Rapoport

In a recent article in *Le'da*, 'Why women are exempt from positive time-bound commandments: Is there a true Torah view?', I endeavoured to survey the multi-faceted dialectic of Jewish literature in this regard. Ms Aranoff presupposes that the purpose of my paper was merely to explain the *halachah* 'in a manner that accords with' the 'sensibilities' of a perceived audience ('modern orthodox feminists') rather than engage, in 'pure' scholarship ('the Bet Midrash enquiry'). It is this premise that serves as the basis for much of her critique. In truth, however, the objective of the article was twofold: firstly, as stated explicitly, to explore the 'pluralistic' nature of Jewish philosophy on this subject (- academic); and secondly, to seek out a rationale that may be meaningful to **some** contemporary men and women (- inspirational).

In this context, citing such axiomatically opposed views – as those of Gersonides and R.

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suggest, as Aranoff does, that I ought to 'reject out of hand any view pointing to an inferiority in the mental, spiritual or corporeal nature of women' is untenable in **any** academic article. To do so where the aim is to demonstrate the absence of a 'monolithic' system of thought would only undermine one of the purposes of the study. Moreover, the citation of such 'radical' views counters the predominant trend of apologetics – a trend which is intellectually stifling and often aborts meaningful discourse – and serves to illustrate the 'novelty' of the other, more understandable views.

Aranoff accuses the article of paying 'meagre

attention to the view of those who might find this exemption difficult' and painful, but surely the entire article was predicated on such difficulties. Nor did it seek to eliminate all the inherent difficulties for, as stated (p.64, n.47), 'the exemption of women from time-bound positive commandments must be seen as a "Divine decree" and therefore ... it is ultimately not contingent upon any reason.'

Aranoff seems concerned about the fact that I did not present an extensive critique if not 'rebuttal' of the opinions of the Rablag and Rabbi Teitelbaum. However, I maintain that the difficulties in such views are self evident and hardly need articulating. It is for this reason that I acknowledged in the article that contemporary people are unlikely to find such ideas meaningful.

Aranoff is troubled by the fact that, notwithstanding my remarks about the views of Gersonides *et al*, I maintain an approach of 'qualified reverence' to the proponents of such views and the works they have authored. Aranoff herself is equivocal about the 'limits of qualified reverence' and how they may 'affect the study of our texts'. Studies on subjects such as '*lo ba-shamayim hi*' and '*eilu va-eilu divrei elokim chayim*' would do much to accentuate Aranoff's questions and possibly provide some meaningful answers, but fall beyond the scope of my article. At any rate, it is undoubtedly an Orthodox attitude to assert that the bearers of our tradition are – to paraphrase Aranoff – 'too holy and meaningful' to 'scoff at', and that, therefore, we cannot allow ourselves any compromise in our reverence for such great people even when their ideas are unfathomable.

The rationale with which my article identifies is, briefly, that women are able to perform the *mitzvot* from which they are exempt, on a voluntary basis. These are not imposed upon women as a mandate due to their crucial role as *ikeret habayit*, and in the same way that the woman performs her role on behalf of her spouse, so does her spouse perform the *mitzvah of tefillin*, for example, on her behalf. Aranoff has several difficulties with this idea.

**Aranoff's objections**

1. 'Rabbi Rapoport discriminates against single women and men ... it can only be deeply hurtful and alienating to read that 'thus even single people are not "complete" people in their own right.'
2. 'There is a lack of correlation ... men do not rely upon women in a corresponding way ... I cannot imagine a feminist ... who would accept that she needed a man to perform some *mitzvo*t on her behalf.'
3. The exemption of women from certain *mitzvo*t disqualifies them from 'taking leading roles in the prayer service'. When a family celebrates 'the male members usually receive *aliyo*t to the Torah ... women are excluded from this communal activity. This is perhaps the main difficulty with the exemption.'
4. 'This model presumes that every man and woman is in a relationship with a member of the opposite sex.'

**My responses to her criticisms**

1. Last year, I published an article in which I stated that it is 'theologically challenging to accept that Divine Providence has deprived the blessings of marriage ... from so many people'. I, like Aranoff, assert that 'most single people are not single by choice' and that, therefore, people should not – God forbid – be penalised for their marital status. Every 'single' person is an *olam maley* and must be encouraged to realise his or her personal potential and unique destiny. However, we cannot rewrite the script of our tradition in order to accommodate for singles. The Bible, Talmud, Midrash and subsequent literature all assert that male and female are **in certain ways** 'incomplete' without each other; the article certainly did not innovate this doctrine. I am sure that it would be soothing for many modern people to hear that this is no longer the case, but – as one rabbi put it – 'Judaism is what it is, not what people would like it to be'. No one is suggesting, as Aranoff seems to think, that the 'spiritual life' of singles 'should be put on hold until they get married'. On the contrary, it was suggested that even prior to marriage the two halves – operating independently – contribute to one joint cause.

2. As Aranoff acknowledges (note 19), the term 'feminist' has assumed a broad range of meanings. I acknowledge that a feminist who, for example, believes that 'a woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle', will not accept that she requires the input of a male for almost anything in her life. However, this does not mean that the idea of 'two halves of one whole' is not able to 'engender a more affirmative attitude toward' the exemption of women from certain *mitzvo*t for other more 'broad-minded' women and men.

It is true that men do not rely on women in the **same way** that women rely upon men; this does not mean that they are unequal in their spiritual status. Arguably, the fact that the role of *akeret habayit* was entrusted to women – and for this men do rely upon them – is symptomatic of female superiority, at least in this context. Aranoff does not dismiss the role of the *akeret habayit* altogether, but says that she 'cannot accept another person dictating to' her the details of this vocation. I am not sure as to whom the alleged dictator is. If, however, it refers to the 'Torah' as understood by certain classics, then one cannot reasonably dispute the fact that the Torah 'imposes' certain duties and roles upon men and women respectively. As Aranoff herself says, the tension created by the dictates of *halachah*, 'between what one feels and what one is commanded to do, is part of the

foundation of an observant Jewish life'.

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3. The primary reason why halachic authorities would not allow women to receive *aliyo*t and similar honours is not because they are exempt from time-bound commandments, but because this would be considered a breach of the principle of modesty and related aspects (see Moshe Meiselman, *The Jewish Woman in Jewish Law* (New York: Ktav 1978) p.141ff). It is likewise such considerations that to a great extent have barred women from occupying positions of communal leadership, despite their certain spiritual superiority (see J. David Bleich, *Contemporary Jewish Problems* (New York: Ktav 1983) vol.2, p.266). To be sure, many modern

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people have difficulty with such a notion but, inasmuch as it is not a direct corollary of the exemption from time-bound *mitzvot*, this issue, once again, falls beyond the scope of my article.

4. Aranoff acknowledges that I toil with the problem of applying the model of two halves to unmarried people. She quotes my reliance on the mystical doctrine that even single people have another half – whom they will, hopefully, eventually meet – ‘somewhere on the globe’. However, she asserts that this idea ‘begs the question whether the woman receives the benefit of the man in her life, if he has not yet entered her life’. Since we are dealing with a mystical concept, it would be impossible to demonstrate ‘scientifically’ whether the respective *mitzvot* of the two separated halves unite in the metaphysical realm. In such esoteric spheres. I am compelled to rely upon the voices of the kabbalistic tradition – rather than on any autonomous logical argument – to

the effect that even prior to marriage the *mitzvot* of the male and female complement each other.

In addition to her arguments, Aranoff insinuates that I am insensitive to the ever-increasing number of single people in the Jewish community:

If Jewish community leaders fail to support their single members by making them feel welcome and appreciating all they contribute, aside from all the great personal pain that will ensue, we will stand at risk of alienating a large number of our people.

In answer to this, it is my hope that the views which I advocate in the forthcoming book *Judaism and Homosexuality* and endeavour to implement in my own community – in part by the foundation and guidance of a singles group – will dispel any fears which Aranoff may have about the attitudes I espouse with regard to this most important area of communal concern.