

Already in the tannaitic literature, we encounter the notion that the women were approached before the men to accept the Torah. In the *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, it is stated, "Thus shall you say to the House of Jacob' (Exodus 19:3), speak softly, tell the women the main things; and declare to the children of Israel,' tell them the details."<sup>1</sup>

Midrashic sources offer an explanation for why women were addressed first. *Shemot Rabbah* gives the following reasoning:

R. Tahlifa of Caesarea said: The Holy One Blessed be He said: When I created the world, I commanded Adam first, and then Eve was commanded, and she transgressed and spoiled the world. If I do not now address the women first, they will violate the Torah.<sup>2</sup>

In this opinion, R. Tahlifa of Caesarea, an *amora* of Eretz Yisrael, draws a lesson from past experience: only if the Divine speech addresses both women and men equally can the possibility exist that those receiving the commandments will regard as binding the practical observance of the Torah.<sup>3</sup>

According to this approach, therefore, the Giving of the Law was not an event entirely disconnected from the

past. Rather, it drew on the primeval experience of Adam and Eve and the Tree of Knowledge. Addressing the women first was thus a positive attempt to mend the primordial wrongdoing. Being the first to receive and accept the living Torah at Sinai rectifies or provides a sort of compensation for the death that Eve is considered to have brought to the world.

Although *Shemot Rabbah* asserts that Eve was commanded not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge after Adam did, the parallel source in *Midrash ha-Gadol*, by R. David ha-Adani, a leading Yemenite scholar of the 13th and 14th centuries, offers a different opinion. This text states that Eve never was commanded not to eat from the tree, which causes her to mislead Adam and results in his transgression of the prohibition:

And why did the command to the women precede that of the men? Because the Holy One Blessed be He said, "When I created My world I commanded Adam, but not his wife Eve. She went and misled him and he transgressed My command. It is worthwhile to command the women first..."<sup>4</sup>

In his commentary on the verse, "Thus shall you say to the House of Jacob, and declare to the children of Israel," Rashi paraphrases the concept articulated above in the *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*. In his supercommentary on Rashi, R. Natan Shapira (d. 1577) refers, *inter alia*, to the view of R. Tahlifa of Caesarea in *Shemot Rabbah*. He points out that, if the Holy One Blessed be He had commanded the men first, the women could have reasonably claimed at a later time that they had not accepted the Torah of their own free will, but rather only to appease their husbands. He adds that a mishap of this sort had already occurred when the Holy One Blessed be He commanded Adam – but not Eve – regarding the Tree of Knowledge, and she enticed him to transgress God's command. Therefore, He commanded that the women be spoken to first, before the men.<sup>5</sup>

In his commentary on the Torah, R. Ya'akov, (circa 1269-1343), the son of the Rosh (R. Asher) explains the verse, "Thus shall you say to the House of Jacob, and declare to the children of Israel," in the following manner:

And the women came before the men, since Eve was not commanded by the Holy One Blessed be He concerning the Tree of Knowledge, she ate from it and

fed it to her husband. Therefore, at the Giving of the Law the women were commanded first. And since He paid the women this honor in placing them first, they didn't want to remove their earrings in the making of the calf.<sup>6</sup>

In the latter part of this commentary, R. Ya'akov draws a connection between two events that took place in close proximity: the call to the women to accept the Torah gave them both the strength and determination not to sin in the incident of the Golden Calf. Although this commentary explains why the women did not participate in the offense of the Golden Calf, it does not explain why that sin took place so soon after the Giving of the Torah and why it was the men who succumbed to wrongdoing.

It is possible to offer the following explanation, which expands on R. Tahlifa's notion in *Shemot Rabbah*. The theophany at Sinai was a corrective experience for the women. However, the men encountered and underwent a totally different experience at *Matan Torah*. Because they were second to receive the commandments, after the women, they were not inculcated with the inner fortitude to avoid sin. That is why, only a short while after the Giving of the Torah, they stumbled and erred in the incident of the Golden Calf. Only when the Divine command and revelation are offered simultaneously and equally to every individual, men and women alike, can God's will be realized in the world in its full majesty and splendor.

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- 1 *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Shemot Rabbah*, ed. H. S. Horowitz and I. A. Rabin (Jerusalem: 1970), *Yitro*, Tractate *ba-Hodesh* 2, 207.
- 2 *Shemot Rabbah* (Vilna: 1878), 28:2, 40a.
- 3 See the commentary *Matnot Kehunah on Shemot Rabbah* 28:2 (cited in note 2) beginning, "And she spoiled it." "For it was wrong in her eyes that He had not commanded her first."
- 4 R. David ha-Adani, *Midrash ha-Gadol, Sefer Shemot*, ed. M. Margalio, (Jerusalem: 1957), Exodus 19:3, 377. See also below the opinion of R. Ya'akov, son of the Rosh.
- 5 R. Natan of Horodno (Grodno), *Bi'urim al ha-Eshel ha-Gadol Rashi z"l* (Venice: 1593), *be-Shalah*, 77a-b.
- 6 R. Ya'akov ben ha-Rosh, *Peirush al ha-Torah* (Zholkva: 1706), Exodus 19:3, 53a-b.



KETUBAH FOR SHAVUOT  
Western Europe, c. 1950

The 2 partners to the contact-Israel and Torah-are highlighted.

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