

For Men Only?

Gendered Language in the *Aseret Ha-Dibrot*

By Rachel Furst

A sensitive reader cannot fail to note that the Ten Commandments, like many other legal passages in the Torah, are addressed explicitly to men. In accordance with the verses that begin the section on *Matan Torah*, in which Moses instructs the nation, “Be ready for the third day: do not go near a woman,” the Ten Commandments themselves are written in the masculine form: “You (masculine, singular) shall have no other gods besides Me. You (masculine, singular) shall not make for yourself (masculine, singular) a sculptured image”; “You (masculine, singular) shall not swear falsely by the name of the Lord, your (masculine, singular) God”; and so forth.¹

As several feminist scholars have observed, the Torah appears to have excluded women from the community that received the covenant at Sinai—or, at the very least, to have disregarded their presence.² Just as the restriction on interacting with women in the days leading up to *Matan Torah* could only have been directed to a male audience, so too does the masculine language of the commandments seem to indicate that the listeners were men. And yet, *Hazal* (*the Sages*), who transmitted and promoted a halakhic system that differentiated between men and women on a variety of planes, nonetheless found it inconceivable that women were absent at the moment of revelation or that they were left out of God’s covenant with the People of Israel. To compensate for the Torah’s male-centered language, the rabbis went to great lengths to read women into the text and to argue for their inclusion in both the moment and the message.³

To begin with, *Hazal* asserted that all negative commandments in the Torah are incumbent equally upon women and men.⁴ Thus, the rabbis never questioned women’s obligation with regard to the majority of the Ten Commandments, which are negative precepts, despite the Torah’s masculine language. To *Hazal*’s understanding, women were included automatically in the prohibitions to make graven images, to take God’s name in vain, to murder, to commit adultery, to steal, to bear false witness, and to covet a neighbor’s property.

In addition, the rabbis endeavored to demonstrate that the two positive commandments among the Ten—the *mitzvah* to observe *Shabbat* and the

mitzvah to honor one’s parents—were also intended for women, despite several mitigating factors.

The Mishnah in Tractate *Kiddushin* (29a) rules that, in contrast to the negative commandments, women are exempt from certain positive *mitzvot*, namely those that are classified as time-bound. *Shabbat* falls within the parameters of this category of “*mitzvot aseh she-ha-zeman geraman*” because that it is observed only once a week, and women should, thereby, be exempt. Yet *Hazal* declared that when a positive commandment is intrinsically linked to a negative one, women are equally obligated. Noting the distinction between the language employed in the Exodus rendition of the Ten Commandments—“*Zakhor et Yom Ha-Shabbat le-kodsho*” (Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy)—and that employed in the Deuteronomy version—“*Shamor et Yom Ha-Shabbat le-kodsho*” (Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy)—the rabbis suggested that the two terms were uttered by God simultaneously, in a single breath, and are, thus, inherently intertwined. The positive precepts of *Shabbat*, represented by the term “*Zakhor*,” are inseparable from the negative precepts of *Shabbat*, represented by the term “*Shamor*,” and *Shabbat* is, therefore, an exception to the rabbinic rule regarding time-bound *mitzvot*.⁵ Indeed, the Torah itself seems to taken women’s obligation for granted, instructing the reader to ensure the *Shabbat* observance of “you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, or your cattle, or the stranger who is within your settlements” but not “your wife,” implying that she herself is subject to the same commandment.⁶

The Torah is straightforward about a child’s requirement to honor both father and mother, leaving no question as to women’s status as recipients of filial devotion. Yet women’s obligation to mete out the requisite honor to their own parents is not as obvious. Although honoring one’s parents is a positive commandment that is not time-bound, the type of positive precept, which, according to *Hazal*, is incumbent upon women, a related verse from Leviticus complicates matters. Leviticus 19:3 states: “A man shall revere his mother and his father.”⁷ As the rabbis assert in a *baraita* that appears twice in the first chapter of

Tractate *Kiddushin*, the opening word of this verse, “*ish*”—“a man”—(and, one might add, the masculine pronouns for “his mother and his father”) suggests that only male offspring are obligated to revere their parents.⁸ “From where,” ask the rabbis, “[do we learn that] a woman [is similarly obligated]?” The *baraita* explains that despite the singular subject of the verse, “a man,” the verb “shall revere” appears in its plural form—“*tira’u*”—which serves to indicate that women are also included in the instruction.⁹ The very tone of the query posed in this source, which assumes women’s inclusion rather than questioning it, demonstrates that *Hazal* were convinced of women’s equal obligation—and this despite the verse’s explicitly gendered wording.

“...the rabbis went to great lengths to read women into the text...”

Although, from a rabbinic standpoint, women’s obligation in the Tenth Commandment is seemingly self-evident—“You shall not covet” is a negative precept—the wording of this *dibrah* is perhaps the most troubling from a feminist perspective. The Exodus rendition is the more difficult of the two versions of the Commandments, as it seems to implicitly relate to women as their husband’s property: “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house: you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male or female slave, or his ox or his ass or anything that is your neighbor’s.” (In the Deuteronomy rendition, wives are at least set apart from other forms of property: “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife. You shall not crave your neighbor’s house, or his field, or his male or female slave, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor’s”).¹⁰

Although it is unlikely that feminism was the guiding motivation behind *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai*’s commentary on these verses, I would suggest that the midrash nonetheless betrays a certain discomfort with the inclusion of women in the Torah’s list of assets. The midrash seeks to demonstrate that no item on this list is extraneous, rather, each clarifies a different point concerning the applicability of

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the commandment. The neighbor's wife is included, according to the *Mekhilta*, so as to exclude the neighbor's daughter, whom one could (assuming she is single) theoretically marry—in other words, coveting a connection with another human being is prohibited only when the desired relationship is in fact forbidden.¹¹ While this explanation does not overcome the patriarchal tone of the verse, it does suggest that the rabbis themselves felt a need to explain away, at least on technical grounds, the disconcerting appearance of women as objects, rather than subjects, of the central precepts of the Jewish religion.

To those of us Jewish women for whom it is both difficult and painful to consider the possibility that we were not present at Sinai, it may provide some comfort to know that the rabbis did not entertain such a notion.

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- 1 Exodus 19:15; 20:3–4; 20:7. All translations are from the Jewish Publication Society *Tanakh* (Philadelphia, 1985) unless indicated otherwise.
- 2 See, for example, Rachel Adler, “The Jew Who Wasn’t There,” in *On Being A Jewish Feminist: A Reader*, ed. Susannah Heschel, 12–18 (New York, 1983); and Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai* (San Francisco, 1990).
- 3 Without elaborating upon the various creative readings that the rabbis employed to demonstrate the presence of women at the Giving of the Law, it is worth noting that the Mishnah in Tractate *Shabbat* 9:3 cites the three days of required separation as proof that a woman who discharges semen on one of the three days following sexual intercourse is considered impure, since the semen is assumed to retain its potency. The implication of this read-

ing is that the men of the nation were instructed to avoid their wives for three days prior to *Matan Torah* not so as to preserve their own purity but, rather, to guarantee the purity (and, thus, the presence) of the women.

- 4 Mishnah *Kiddushin* 1:7.
- 5 BT Tractate *Shevuot* 20b.
- 6 Exodus 20:10.
- 7 Here I have deviated from the JPS translation, which renders the verse “You shall each revere his father and his mother,” because it obscures the gendered nuance.
- 8 BT *Kiddushin* 29a and, with slight variations, 30b.
- 9 The *baraita* goes on to explain that although both men and women are obligated to revere (and honor) their parents, the masculine “*ish*” at the beginning of the verse in Leviticus reflects the Torah’s recognition that a woman, who is assumed to be beholden first and foremost to the needs of her husband (and children), may not always be available to attend to her parents.
- 10 Exodus 20:14; Deuteronomy 5:18.
- 11 *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai*, 20:31.