



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## GENESIS > Bereishit

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

---

October 13, 2012

Bereishit

**Are Women Superior?**



# Meaningful Sermons

“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”

GENESIS > Bereishit > Are Women Superior?

October 13, 2012

## ABSTRACT

Does the Bible support the male chauvinist, giving him the power to dominate the world and subjugate women?

Today, we begin reading the Torah anew, starting with its undoubtedly most famous chapters, which relate how God created the world in six days, concluding with the creation of His masterpiece – the human.

Myths abound around this so-called “archaic” and “sexist” account, with the popular stereotype being that man – that is, the male – is the superior center of creation, with the woman merely being his adjunct, his “helper/accessory.” Or – as some would have it – his “temptress” or his “nemesis.”

Indeed, if you ask most people about the biblical perspective on the woman, their knee-jerk reaction will be that she is a “second class citizen.” (This is certainly the impression we have based on the position taken today by some religious fundamentalists, who deprive women of many human rights, hiding them behind *burkas* and treating them as nothing more than male accessories and tools of procreation.)

But, a close reading of the account of creation shows that nothing could be farther from the truth. Indeed, one could more easily conclude that, according to the Torah, woman is superior to man! Which seems to go well with a slew of studies lately making the case that men are merely accessories to women, if not outright unnecessary. There is even a new book out entitled *The End of Men*.

But which is it truly?

## ARE WOMEN SUPERIOR?

### 1. Starting Anew

Today, we begin reading the Torah anew, starting with its undoubtedly most famous chapters, which relate how God created the world in six days, concluding with the creation of His masterpiece – man.

Myths abound around this so-called “archaic” and “sexist” account, with the popular stereotype being that man – that is, the male – is the superior center of creation, with the woman merely being his adjunct, his “helper,” his accessory. Or – as some would have it – his “temptress” or his “nemesis.”

Indeed, if you ask most people about the biblical perspective on the woman, their knee-jerk reaction will be that she is a “second class citizen.” (This is certainly the impression we get based on the position taken today by some religious fundamentalists, who deprive women of many human rights, hiding them behind *burkas* and treating them as nothing more than male accessories and tools of procreation.)

But, a close reading of the account of creation shows that nothing could be farther from the truth. Indeed, one could more easily conclude that, according to the Torah, woman is superior to man!

So let’s take a fresh look.

### 2. Amazing Progression

When we open the Book of Genesis, what do we immediately see?

That there is an amazing progression in the creation account:

On day three, God creates vegetation. On day five, He creates the creepy crawlies – insects – and then moves onto fish and birds. On day six, it’s time for animals – livestock and the various beasts of the earth.

And then, when all is ready – when the banquet table is fully set, as the Talmud<sup>1</sup> puts it – comes the special guest, the crown jewel of creation, the epitome of it all ... man.

Right? Wrong!

The epitome of it all – the last being to be created is not *man* ... it is *woman!*<sup>2</sup>

So who is superior now?

Why did God make men first and then decide to do the female human?

Because everyone knows that first we experiment and then comes perfection.

### 3. Serious Question

You laugh, but I am asking a serious question, and uncomfortable as it may be for some, there is additional proof in the Torah – besides the order of creation (which clearly progresses up the ladder and ends with woman up on the top rung).

For example, just consider how the first couple is created. He is made from the dust of the earth<sup>3</sup> – a mud pie come to life.

She, on the other hand, is made from a piece of him – some say his side, some say his rib<sup>4</sup> – and improved upon.

He is called *Adam*, which in Hebrew means “dirt” (from the word *adamah* or “soil/earth”). She is called *Chava*, which in Hebrew means “mother of all life.”<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> See below for discussion of the creation of the first human being as one androgynous creature made up of male and female parts attached back to back. But even in that scenario, when God later separated them, first came the male and then the female.

<sup>3</sup> Genesis 2:7.

<sup>4</sup> While some say that the Hebrew of Genesis 2:21, *mi-tzalotav*, means “side,” others say it means “rib.” See Bereishit Raba 17:8.

<sup>5</sup> *Em Kol Chai*, Genesis 3:20.

And the Torah doesn't stop there.

Comes Abraham's conundrum with his unruly offspring Ishmael, and God tells him:

"Listen to the voice of [your wife] Sarah."<sup>6</sup>

Comes the time of the slavery in Egypt, and the men are willing to give up, but the women apply all manner of wiles to keep bearing children and holding up hope. (And because of this merit, the Jews are redeemed from Egypt.<sup>7</sup>)

Comes the encounter at Mount Sinai, and God tells Moses to speak to the women first, to ensure that the Torah would be preserved. Women, the Midrash adds, are expeditious in the performance of mitzvot.<sup>9</sup>

And sure enough, when the men build the Golden Calf, women won't have anything to do with that debacle.<sup>10</sup>

And the list goes on and on.

#### 4. The Forbidden Fruit

Now, I know some of you are thinking: What about the forbidden fruit? Didn't the woman give it to the man and got us all thrown out of the Garden of Eden?

Well, the Midrash says it was all his fault.

God told Adam not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil,<sup>11</sup> but when Adam related the command to Eve, he embellished on it - he told her not to touch it.

---

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 21:11.

<sup>7</sup> *Sotah* 11b.

<sup>8</sup> Exodus 19:3. Mechilta, Rashi on the verse.

<sup>9</sup> *Shemot Rabba* 28:2.

<sup>10</sup> The men offered their jewelry to build the Golden Calf, but the women refused. Exodus 32:2-3, and *Pirkei D'Rebbi Eliezer* ch. 45. *Tanchuma* Ki Tissa 21.

<sup>11</sup> Genesis 2:17.

So then, when the snake tried to get her to eat the fruit from the Tree, she – in all innocence – told the snake: “God said, ‘Do not eat from it and do not touch it, else you will die.’”<sup>12</sup>

Of course, the snake immediately showed her that by touching the Tree nothing would happen. Clearly, he maintained, she had it all wrong. Thus fooled, she took the fruit.

The Midrash says that the transgression happened because God spoke first to Adam, and Eve heard it only afterwards (from Adam). Had she heard it first, she would have gotten it straight and never transgressed. That’s why at Mount Sinai God told Moses to first speak with the women, to ensure that the Torah would be abided.<sup>13</sup>

## 5. Biological Proof

Now, there are some among you – men, of course – who are thinking this is all nice, quaint biblical stuff, but *it doesn’t convince me!* Where is the biological proof which undoubtedly will say that men are stronger, smarter, the hunters and providers? When is the last time a woman speared a lion?

Yeah, okay – but when is the last time you did?

Actually though, biology is not helpful when it comes to supporting men. In fact, biology says that men are just about irrelevant compared to women.

Lately a number of studies and articles are making this case – take for example an article in September’s *Atlantic* entitled, *Are Fathers Necessary?*<sup>14</sup> There’s even a new book out, called *The End of Men!*

---

<sup>12</sup> Genesis 3:3.

<sup>13</sup> *Shemot Rabba* 28:2. See Maharal (Rabbi Yehudah Loew), *Derush al HaTorah*, Shuv Omar Ko Seimor.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2010/07/are-fathers-necessary/308136/>.

Greg Hampikian, biology professor at Boise State University, sums it up in the *New York Times* as follows:

Women are both necessary and sufficient for reproduction, and men are neither. From the production of the first cell (egg) to the development of the fetus and the birth and breast-feeding of the child, fathers can be absent. They can be at work, at home, in prison or at war, living or dead.<sup>15</sup>

Professor Hampikian continues in this vein, stacking proofs a mile high:

He notes that the father contributes an infinitesimally small packet of DNA, less than one-millionth of the embryo's mass. And by the time the baby is born, it is the mother who has contributed all its weight. In contrast, the father's 3.3 pico-grams of DNA comes out to less than one pound of male contribution, counting from the creation of Adam and Eve and the birth of some 100 billion babies since then.

Concludes Professor Hampikian:

If a woman wants to have a baby without a man, she just needs to secure sperm (fresh or frozen) from a donor (living or dead) ... If all the men on earth died tonight, the species could continue on frozen sperm. If the women disappear, it's extinction.

Just to thicken the plot, there are recent studies finding that all fetuses begin as females, and then the male chromosome kicks in, which some see as a mutation...

Got it?

---

<sup>15</sup> *The New York Times*, August 24, 2012: [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/25/opinion/men-who-needs-them.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/25/opinion/men-who-needs-them.html?_r=1)

## 6. Advice of the Rebbe

The Jewish sages were long aware of this natural state of affairs and counseled men to treat women with the respect they deserve.

A couple who was having communication problems once came to see Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Rebbe of Chabad. The woman said that her husband was consumed with his work, and that when he finally found time to speak with her, he criticized her and ordered her around. The husband said that his wife had no respect for him and didn't listen to any of his suggestions.

"Why do you think your wife should listen to you?" the Rebbe asked.

"Because a woman must listen to her husband," he replied.

"But why should a woman listen to her husband?" the Rebbe asked.

"Because the man is the master of the house."

"No," said the Rebbe. "The first thing that you as a man must follow is the [Talmudic] edict that 'a man should honor his wife more than he does himself.'<sup>16</sup> And then the righteous woman will have a husband she can respect and love. If the man does not fulfill his role, then it is the woman who must respectfully bring it to his attention."

At another time the Rebbe declared: "After thousands of years of male dominance, we now stand at the beginning of the feminine era, when women will rise to their *appropriate prominence* - as discussed in the Kabbalah<sup>17</sup> - and the entire world will recognize the harmony between man and woman."

Note the Rebbe's take: It's time to end the idea of male dominance and give the women their just due. *But* - and this is a big *but* - it's all about harmony between the sexes.

<sup>16</sup> *Yevamot* 62b. Rambam *Hilchos Ishus* 15:19.

<sup>17</sup> *Torah Ohr*, end of *Parshat Vayigash*. *Likkutei Torah, Shir HaShirim* 48b.



## 7. The Real Skinny

Up to now, I have been intentionally provocative, in the interest of giving this important issue the airing it deserves ... and in the interests of looking at this matter with fresh eyes.

In truth, since God created both men and women, it should be clear that both are absolutely necessary and indispensable. Yet, due to the many myths and stereotypes mentioned earlier – and the long history of male domination – our perspective has been distorted. It is time to get beyond that and today – when we read about the creation of the first couple – it is time to set the record straight.

So now, let's examine another Midrash about the creation of Adam and Eve.

This Midrash focuses on the cryptic verse in Genesis which reads: "God created the human being in His image. In the image of God, He created *him*, male and female He created *them*."<sup>18</sup>

The great sage, Rabbi Shimon Ben Gamliel explains this lapse in grammar thus: "When the Holy One created the first human being, He made it with two faces. [Adam on one side, Eve on the other, attached back to back.] And then He separated them, and created two backs, a separate back for each."<sup>19</sup>

In short, it is not about the male being superior (as he has claimed from time immemorial) nor of the female being superior (as I have playfully suggested earlier). It's about the whole, neither dominant, neither superior or inferior, both together as one.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Genesis 1:27.

<sup>19</sup> *Bereishit Rabba* 8:1. See also *Talmud, Berachot* 61a.

<sup>20</sup> "Both together are called a person" (Midrash, *Bereishit Rabah* 17:2). See Zohar III 7b. Maharal, *Chidushei Agadot*, Bava Batra 74b

## 8. Through God's Eyes

In order to understand the essential nature of man and woman, we must do away with human subjectivity and look through God's eyes.

Man and woman represent two forms of divine energy, for they are the male and female elements of a single soul.

And each was created for the same purpose – to make themselves and their world better and holier.

In their service of God, there is absolutely no difference between a man and a woman; the only difference is in the way that this service manifests itself.

Men are physically stronger. By nature, they are usually more aggressive and externally oriented. In contrast, women usually embody the ideal of inner dignity. Some people confuse such subtlety with weakness; in truth, it is stronger than the most aggressive physical force imaginable. True human dignity does not shout; it is a strong, steady voice that speaks from within. The nature of a woman, while subtle, is not weak. And the nature of a man, while aggressive, is not brutish. For man and woman to be complete, they must each possess both energies.

The answer is not for men and women to try to be alike. All men and women must be *themselves*, realizing that God has given each unique abilities with which to pursue their goals, and that their primary responsibility is to take full advantage of those abilities.

## 9. Reality of Today

Today's reality is that we live in a male dominated hierarchy, and women are trying to level the playing field, and rightly so.

Men, simply because of their physical position and physical strength have had the upper hand for too long. And that is not at all healthy.

Indeed, according to this week's Torah reading male dominance is actually a "curse," an aberration – which resulted from the sin of the Tree of Knowledge.<sup>21</sup> This is the root of the distortion in our society, which worships physical strength and aggression – and one of the many terrible repercussions of that first sin.

It is our mission to correct this imbalance by realigning the material world with its spiritual purpose, and reconciling the divine roles and powers of both men and women.

For, from a mystical and psychological perspective, the male psyche, the female psyche, overlap – indeed everyone has a male and female side.

The female side is more of an inward energy – we could call it the majestic element of humanity, for it projects an inner dignity, an inner force.<sup>22</sup> The male side is more of an outer force, more expressive, more aggressive.

But both are necessary for every human being to function in this world.

## 10. Psycho-Spiritual Explanation

All this is discussed at length in Kabbalah and other spiritual traditions, as well as in psychology. It is called yin and yang, it is called male and female, it is called receptive and communicative.

In some ways the manifestation of inward energy is about the power to listen, the power to step back from your own ego, the ability to receive, to take in something greater than yourself. While the manifestation of the outward energy is about giving.

As noted every human being expresses both, and we do so in various ways throughout our development cycle. For example, in our younger years, we're more in the state of receptivity. We are impressionable, we listen, we receive, we absorb. Later in life we begin to give, to return.

---

<sup>21</sup> Genesis 3:16.

<sup>22</sup> "The dignity of the king's daughter is within" (Psalms 45:14).

Obviously, it's not exclusive, but in the educational years, we're studying or we're sitting in a class or we're reading a book.

Any intelligent person knows that there's a necessity for receptivity or else we'll never learn anything new. If we're always smarter than who we're reading or listening to, then, just like a full cup that can't be filled, we can't grow.

But receptivity is not a passive state at all, in a way it's a very aggressive state, except it's aggressive silence. It's like we are intentionally willing to absorb at this point. That is a feminine energy in its quintessential form.

After we have absorbed and internalized whatever it is, we then choose to express it to someone else. As they say, good speaking is always good listening. Knowing how to listen well, we now know how to speak well.

If we never listened to someone, we haven't really earned the right for anyone to listen to us, no matter how wise we might be.

## 11. The End of Men? (Optional)

Living in a materially aggressive society – one overly dominated by male energy – we need today more than ever to reintroduce and appreciate anew the inner feminine mystique, the subtle spiritual energy of the woman.

We stand at the threshold of a new age [as the Rebbe said]: “After thousands of years of male dominance, we now stand at the beginning of the feminine era, when women will rise to their *appropriate prominence ...*”

What does this mean practically? It means that – just as God spoke to the women at Sinai first – we too must speak first to the feminine energy within us all (women and men). For by so doing, we will awaken the spiritual (feminine) revolution – a new appreciation of subtlety, dignity, of listening and absorbing, of inwardness and intimacy.

So, what about all the studies about the disappearance of men and their power? Frankly, if the material world insists on dominating with sheer aggression and brute power (male energy), instead of through love and sensitivity (feminine energy), then it has written its own obituary, as the studies show. Rule by the sword; fall by the sword.

But when we embrace the feminine approach – when the power of love will be stronger than the love of power – then both energies together, feminine strength coupled with the harnessed male power, will transform the world and each one of us into perpetual forces of light and warmth.

## 12. An Exercise

[So now an exercise for all of you who are listening to me ...]

Let's all separate these two forms of energy from the ideas of man and woman that we are familiar with. Let's look at them objectively.

And now let's look at ourselves and compare, asking ourselves the following:

"Where do I stand in my ability to receive? Where is my inner dignity? Am I overly dominant and aggressive? Am I inward and quiet. Is that healthy?"

Having analyzed ourselves, let's recognize the necessity for a balance. The imbalance that exists in society today is a direct result, in a subtle form, from the misalignment that happened when Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge.

Since that time, humanity no longer had mutual respect – the feminine and the masculine acted like separate entities, each on its own.

But the fact is that men and women need each other. We were created that way, and it's high time we recognize the need for more harmony between the sexes.

Our Rebbes tell us that the way we establish ourselves on *Shabbat Bereishit* determines the course of our entire year. So today, as we read the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis and come to terms with our true selves, let's resolve to end this battle of the sexes, and let's return to the state that is our true way of being, and the only way we can truly be happy – together as one.

As we begin a new year let us commit to investing all we have in building healthy and nurturing homes permeated with domestic harmony (*sholom bayit*), and to improving our relationship with our spouses, so that together – as partners – we will turn our homes into beacons of light that will illuminate all our surroundings and all whom we touch. Amen.