



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Yitro

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Yitro - 22 Shevat

**Woman: The Hidden
Foundation**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

What is invisible but invincible?

Why was Moses instructed to speak first to the women and then to the men in preparation to Mattan Torah?

The answer reveals for us the powerful feminine mystique – the invisible but invincible power of women in Judaism and in life. As such, they serve as the foundation to Sinai and to all of existence, charged with modeling to the world how to fulfill the purpose of life.

This sermon examines the very meaning of “foundation” – as evidenced by the first commandment of the Ten Commandments (*Anochi*), which contains the other nine within it and indeed the entire Torah.

Who controls a structure? The one who occupies all its floors and rooms, or the one who has access to the foundation? Who has more impact on an audience – the person with a louder voice, better jokes, smoother language, or the one who touches the heart of the listeners? Who has more impact on a child – the one who can command and drive fear into a child’s heart, or the one who gains the child’s trust and confidence with love and care?

There are people who know the price of everything but the value of nothing. In contrast to the superficial and the artificial, *Anochi* – and women – teach us the secret of touching the essence: When you grasp even a very small part of it, you grasp it all.

Included are several inspirational stories about the wisdom of women and about their role in bringing about the final Redemption, especially as modeled by Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka whose 25th *yahrzeit* we honor today.

WOMAN: THE HIDDEN FOUNDATION

Honoring Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka's 25th Yahrzeit

1. Ladies First

A journalist had done a story on gender roles in Kuwait several years before the Gulf War, and she noted then that women customarily walked about 10 feet behind their husbands.

She returned to Kuwait recently and observed that the men now walked several yards behind their wives. She approached one of the women for an explanation. "This is marvelous," said the journalist. "What enabled the women to achieve this reversal of roles? Replied the Kuwaiti woman: "Land mines!"

A young boy asked his father, "Dad, how did the phrase 'ladies first' start?"

His father put down his newspaper, turned to his son and replied, "Well, son, in ancient days, when a couple came back to the cave, the cave had often been invaded by a wild animal. Hence the phrase, 'ladies first.'"

In stark contrast to these and so many other contemporary chauvinistic jokes and expressions putting down women, this week's Torah portion turns the tables: Moses is instructed by God to first speak to the women and then to the men. "So shall you say to the house of Jacob – these are the women, and tell the sons of Israel – the men."¹

We will now focus on the great virtue of the woman, especially as we honor the 25th *yahrzeit* of the Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka today, the 22nd of Shevat.

¹ Exodus, Yitro 19:3. *Shemot Rabba* 28:2. Rashi on the verse.

2. The Forgotten Wife (Inspirational Story)

Why the women first?

We will understand this with the following story:

A young couple working in Jewish outreach came to see the Rebbe to request a blessing for their work.

In the course of their conversation, the Rebbe made a point of encouraging the wife to see herself as an equal partner with her husband in their holy work of disseminating vital information to Jews who had been deprived of their heritage.

Reticently, she answered, "I try my best, but to be very frank, most people don't appreciate the hard work I invest in this effort. For example, any given Friday night we will have many guests for Shabbat dinner, and they will usually thank and compliment my husband. Rarely does anyone remember to mention me."

The Rebbe replied: "That is absolutely wrong of them. But you need to know that we live in a superficial world in which people value externals and not the core foundation. For example, you will see visitors to a home complimenting the nice furniture, carpets, lamps or paintings. But you will never hear anyone say: 'My, how beautiful is the strong foundation this home stands upon!' This is because the foundation is out of sight and people forget about it, even if it is, in fact, the basis of the entire structure."

3. Women at Sinai

The woman is the foundation of the home and of Jewish life. This is why, in the encounter at Mount Sinai – about which we read in this week’s Torah portion – God spoke to the women first.

Matan Torah – the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai – was a most monumental event. It established the Jewish people as God’s nation – as “a kingdom of priests and a holy people”² – and as the standard-bearers of the divine mandate. As such, they were charged with modeling to the world how to fulfill the purpose of life and the purpose of all existence.

Since this was the foundation of all that would follow, God instructed Moses to build it well. God told Moses to speak to the women first because the women are the foundation of the home and the foundation of life – the primary cornerstone upon which existence rests.

4. Uniquely Equipped (Optional)

Women are uniquely equipped for this task, as documented in *The Female Brain* by Louann Brizendine, a neuropsychiatrist and the founder of the Women’s and Teen Girls’ Mood and Hormone Clinic in San Francisco.³

All human beings, she writes, start out with a brain that looks female. But around the eighth week in the womb, testosterone surges through male brains, killing cells in some regions (communications) and growing cells in others (sex and aggression).

By the time they are three months old, girls are, on average, much better at making eye contact with other people and picking up information from faces. During play, girls look back at their mothers, on average, 10 to 20 times more than boys, to check for emotional signals. Girls can also, on average, hear a broader range of sounds in the human voice, and can better discern changes in tone.

² Exodus 19:6.

³ The following summary has been adapted from “Is Chemistry Destiny?” by David Brooks, *New York Times*, Sept. 17, 2006.

Later, girls are much more likely to use sentences that begin with “Let’s ...” while playing: Let’s do this or Let’s do that. They are more likely to take turns. As a result girls are inclined to pursue certain goals: for example, to forge connection and to create community. In other words, to build a home.

These sorts of stark sex differences were once highly controversial, and some feminists still refuse to accept them. But biologists take them for granted. There is too much hard evidence to argue otherwise.

It seems that God did make men and women different and equipped them for different purposes.

5. Women’s Wisdom

It’s true that men and women, husbands and wives, are meant to be *partners* in building and maintaining the home and the family. But the women are considered the foundation.

Says the Talmud: “If a man brings wheat, does he chew the wheat? If flax, does he put on the flax? Does she not, then, bring light to his eyes and put him on his feet!”⁴

The man may tame the elements and harvest the wheat, but the woman turns it into edible bread. The man may build a house of bricks and mortar, but the woman turns it into a home.

Says the Book of Proverbs: “The wisdom of women builds the home.”⁵

⁴ *Yavmot* 63a.

⁵ Proverbs 14:1.

6. The Wisdom of One Woman (Optional)

Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka – whose 25th *yahrzeit* we honor today – would often visit her elderly mother. One day she pulled up with a handful of bags following a shipping trip. As she was walking into the building, an eight-year-old Chassidic boy approached her and offered to help her with the bags. The Rebbetzin gave him one or two of the bags and together they made their way to the elevator, which would take them to floor where her mother lived.

As they approached the elevator, the Rebbetzin noticed that the boy had a cast on his arm, which he had broken in a fall. She immediately asked him back for the bags, not wanting to impose upon him. But he shook his head and said it wasn't a problem and insisted on carrying the bags for her.

After they arrived at her mother's apartment, the Rebbetzin told the boy to wait by the door. She entered and returned momentarily with a long roll of chocolate coins. But the boy declined the gift, explaining (with characteristic non-apologetic innocence of an eight year old): "Rebbetzin, I come for a Chassidic home, where they taught me that when you do a favor for a Jew, you don't take payment for it."

The Rebbetzin gave him a smile from ear to ear and replied: "I think that I too come from a Chassidic home and I was taught that when you are given a gift you take it, especially if it's a good chocolate!"

7. The Vital Role of Women

Besides being the wiser one, the woman also contributes the lion's share, for she bears the children. The man provides the seed, but the woman is the womb – nurturing and nourishing and sheltering the growing infant. In fact, biologists grudgingly concede that the human race could go on without men, but not without women.

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.⁶

Professor Hampikian further notes that – even when men are present – their contribution is infinitesimal. The male seed contains a tiny packet of DNA, less than one-millionth of the embryo’s mass. It is the mother who contributes the entire body of the baby.

Consider the difference: 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.

And this is why the women are so important – indeed the foundation is everything.

8. The Foundation of Torah

The foundation that is a woman – which is why Moses spoke first to them – is also reflected in the opening of the Ten Commandments.

The very first of the Ten Commandments is the foundation for the other nine, indeed for the rest of the Torah.

⁶ *The New York Times*, August 24, 2012: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/25/opinion/men-who-needs-them.html?_r=1

And this is what it says: *Anochi Hashem Elokecho*, “I am the Lord your God.”⁷

All the commandments of the Torah are included in the Ten Commandments, which in turn are all included in the first commandment, better known by its first Hebrew word as *Anochi*.

Indeed, the Prophet Habakkuk distilled the entire Torah down to this one commandment. In so doing, Habakkuk taught us that *Anochi* – which in essence means “faith in God” – is the foundation of everything else.

Indeed, the Talmud⁸ states that *Anochi* was the only commandment the Jews heard from the mouth of God, while the others were passed on through Moses. That’s how important it was.

Why so?

The great 12th century Jewish scholar, the Rambam (Maimonides), states⁹ that even if we ever fulfill only one commandment in life – but we do it properly, with the right intention and love – we can merit the World to Come.¹⁰ This is true, says the Chassidic Master, Baal HaToldos, because each commandment is infused with the essential faith of *Anochi*, and therefore, anytime a person fulfills a commandment with “love and faith” his or her act acquires the all encompassing potency of *Anochi* – the first of the Ten Commandments which contains the other nine and all of Torah within it.

In other words, each mitzvah then is not just a single mitzvah; it contains the power of every other mitzvah.

⁷ Exodus 20:2.

⁸ *Makot* 23b-24a.

⁹ In his commentary on the Mishne end of *Makot*.

¹⁰ See also Zohar III 124a; and the opinion of Reb Yochanan in Sanhedrin 111a (cited and explained in this piece from the Toldos Yaakov Yosef), that by doing even one mitzvah a person is protected from Gehenem.

How this works can be better understood by the teaching of the 18th century founder of the Chassidic Movement, the Baal Shem Tov, that the secret of Divine Unity is such that when we grasp one part of it, we grasp all of it.¹¹

Since all the commandments emanate from Divine Unity, when we fulfill even one commandment properly, we connect with all that there is – we grasp the entirety of Divine Essence.

9. What Are We Grasping?

A humorist once said: There are people who know the price of everything but the value of nothing.

In our daily lives we continuously encounter and “grasp” many things – most of them quite superficial. We clutch our handbags, suitcases, Blackberrys, iPhones and Ipads. We are a touching species – we touch and feel things around us, we touch each other.

We are also an acquiring species. We love to purchase and own things. We are grabbers – grasping and acquiring anything that catches our attention and tickles our fancy.

But the big question is: How *much* are we actually acquiring? How *much* are we actually grasping?

Materialism by its very nature is a composite made up of separate pieces and parts, one disconnected from the next. When you grasp and acquire one piece, you only own and have control of that piece and nothing more. Which explains the phenomenon of greed: Greed is the natural outgrowth of a fragmented materialism. Since an acquisition only gives you access to the piece you have acquired, you always are hungry for more. And nothing is ever enough. As much as you grab and grasp, you are never satisfied. Whoever loves money will not be sated with money.¹²

¹¹ *Yaavet*”z Avos 4:2. Charedim end of *maa’ reches mitzvos ha’teluyos ba’eret*z.

¹² Kohelet 5:9.

In the material world, which is governed by the fixed and inherent divisions of space and time, when you grasp (or in any other way experience) a physical object or phenomenon, in most instances, you get only what you touch (and sometimes not even that). And nothing more.

10. To Touch the Essence

Then there are life experiences in which you have the opportunity to touch the Divine Essence, the Divine Unity – to touch something that is the core root of all existence. And then even when you touch just a small piece of it, you grasp all of it.

Take a building for example. It consists of different floors, rooms and sections. It also rests on a foundation. Who is controlling the building? The one who occupies all its floors and rooms, or the one who has access to the foundation?

You can own the entire edifice and occupy every square foot. But someone who controls the foundation – even just a small part of it – can bring down the entire structure.

A subtler example:

Who has more impact on an audience or an individual – the person with a louder voice, better jokes, smoother language, or the one who touches the heart of the listeners?

When you move someone's feelings, even minutely, you capture the entire person. Whereas if you do not touch the heart – even if you command and control the person – you have not grasped him or her at all.

Words from the heart enter the heart. Words from the mind or mouth go into one ear and out the other.

Take children: Who is more powerful and has more impact on a child – the one who can command and drive fear into a child's heart, or the one who gains the child's trust and confidence with love and care?

The former may seem more in control for the moment; but it's only for the moment and only under limited circumstances. The latter grasps and shapes the entire essence of the child's life, now and forever.

Same with students: The most brilliant teacher may affect the mind of a student. His genius may even overwhelm the disciple. But the sensitive mentor, with a few key words, can change a person's entire life.

We can spend all our lives searching for the truth. Here and there we may get a glimpse. But then there are moments of truth: experiences when we touch the core essence. And they change us forever.

This is the lesson of *Anochi*, the very first of the Ten Commandments.

Anochi teaches us the power of one word, of one mitzvah. A mitzvah that grasps even a small part of the essence – an act of faith – grasps the entire essence.

Think about it. The power of one word. One mitzvah. But one that carries the essence forever. And when you grasp even a part of the essence, you grasp it all.

That is the cardinal rule, the foundation of the entire Torah.

And this is also the power of woman – the foundation of the home, and the foundation of life itself. Feminine power is very subtle, not as aggressive and obvious as brute masculine energy. But in its subtlety, in its modest discretion – “the dignity of the king's daughter is within”¹³ – it has the invincibility of the essence.

Moses prepared the people to grasp the Divine Essence of *Anochi* by first speaking to the women, who carry the mystique of experiencing the essential foundation that is mostly concealed from the naked eye.

¹³ Psalms 45:14.

11. Recreating the Moment

As we read how all Jews stood at Sinai – and how Moses prepared them by first speaking to the women and then the men – we are inspired to recreate this momentous event in our lives today. We remember the gifts we were given and recommit to use them to the fullest.

All Jews today deserve to know of the great gift we were given some 3,300 years ago, which transformed the universe and changed the course of history ... not just to be aware of this fact, but to do something about it:

To intensify our study and practice of the Torah, and to bring its light to illuminate all those we come in contact with. Today, just as then, the Torah has the power to transform our lives and bring personal and global redemption.

This is true for all of us, but especially so for the women of our generation, in whose merit the redemption from Egypt came and whose merit the final redemption will come.¹⁴

12. The Ari's Challenge

There is this story about the great 16th century master of Kabbalah, the Ari.¹⁵

It was late in the afternoon, just before Shabbat, and – as was their custom – the Ari and his disciples went out to the outskirts of Tzfat (Safed) to greet the Shabbat Queen. In the midst of their singing, the Ari turned to them and said, “My friends, would you like to go to Jerusalem now so we can spend Shabbat there?”

Some of the students said yes, while others wanted to go home first and inform their wives.

¹⁴ *Soteh* 11b; Yalkut Shemoni, Ruth 606.

¹⁵ Related in *Shiochei HaArizal*.

When the Ari heard this, he trembled greatly and struck his hands together in anguish. He said, “Woe is us, that we did not have the merit to be redeemed. Had you all replied that you wanted to go, unanimously and joyfully, the entire Jewish people would have been redeemed, as it is now an auspicious time for the redemption. Since you refused, the exile has been re-imposed because of our many sins.”

The Rebbe once cited this story and concluded that when the Messiah is ready to come in our days, he will notify the women first, just as God instructed Moses to do at Sinai.

And the women will surely respond immediately, without waiting to consult their husbands. And their husbands will surely come scrambling after them...

13. One Special Woman (Conclusion)

Let us close by remembering Rebbetzin Chaya Mushka, whose 25th *yahrzeit* we honor today (22 Shevat 5748, February 10, 1988). In her silent way she was the partner and foundation of all the Rebbe’s work, which became sadly obvious when she passed away.

[Optional:] Till this day I vividly remember the Rebbe’s sadness walking behind the Rebbetzin’s coffin on that cold and trembling Wednesday...

Never had anyone seen the Rebbe grieve as he did, in a most revealed manner. He moved his entire office and operation to his home that year (1988). He changed the course of all his activities, and he prayed for her three times a day (though there is no obligation for a husband to do so). On the very day of her burial, the Rebbe established a charity fund in her name, which continues to this day to serve a variety women’s social and educational purposes.

No *farbrengen* or talk passed without his advocating action in her honor. The Rebbe established new programs and funds in her honor. He established the custom to celebrate one’s birthday, and many other new initiatives.

As sad as it was to see the Rebbe weep for his lifelong partner, we also witnessed the unbelievable respect and regard the Rebbe had for his wife, and the dedication he showed to her even after her passing.

It teaches us volumes about the treatment and respect for our wives – the foundation of our homes, families and lives.

The last talk the Rebbe delivered in honor of her *yahrzeit* (in 1992) was dedicated to the critical role of the woman in Judaism. Elaborating on how the entire purpose of creation is to “build a home for God in this lowest of worlds,” the Rebbe explained how the Rebbetzin’s name, Chaya Mushka – which means life (Chaya) and beautiful perfume (Mushka, like muscat) – reflects the key elements in building a Jewish home:

To construct not merely a house, a shelter, a roof on top of your head, but to create a vibrant environment saturated with life (Chaya), warmth and beauty (Mushka).

This teaches us that in building our home for God, we ought not just build the minimum shelter from the storm, but to beautify it in every possible way, as Maimonides eloquently puts it:

Everything given for the sake of the Almighty who is good ... should be of the most attractive and highest quality. If one builds a house of prayer, it should be more attractive than his own dwelling. If he feeds a hungry person, he should feed him from the best and most tasty foods of his table. If he clothes one who is naked, he should clothe him with his most attractive garments. If he consecrates something, he should consecrate the best of his possession. So the Book of Leviticus [3:16] states: “All of the superior quality should be given to God.”¹⁶

¹⁶ *Hilchos Issurei Mizbeich* at the end.

Women know how to do this better than the rest of us. So today, women ought to lead the way in building a divine home in this universe, and use their unique skills and talents to inspire others in the same direction.

On this Shabbat – when we read about the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai – let us resolve to do this. So that through the small act of our women lighting Shabbat candles, we can all merit the great act of lighting the menorah of the Temple, and witness the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the final Redemption ... speedily in our days. Amen.