

The Second Sex
Parashat Tazria
March 28, 2014

Two weddings I attended, with two different Orthodox rabbis, two weekends in a row years ago, ended with the exact same line. It was an attempt at humor, I suppose. As the groom was about to break the glass and step forward into a new life, the rabbis solemnly advised the men: “Put your foot down now, or you’ll never be able to again.” I didn’t laugh.

Now, of course, just as there are two rings in non-Orthodox ceremonies, we offer bride and groom alike the chance to step on the glass. For reasons related more to footwear than philosophy, many brides decline the opportunity, but not all. And often, with two women under the chuppah, all calculations of traditionally expected roles are, well, turned on their head.

Those traditional roles are woven into the fabric of our society, and come at us through the often hidden assumptions and unstated attitudes in many of our ancient sources. But what we find in the Torah portion this week is anything but subtle. It is about as blatant a description of gender difference as you can find anywhere: “*Isha ki tazria v’yalda zachar...* a woman who gives birth to a boy... she shall be impure for seven days... and she shall remain in a state of blood purification for thirty-three days. *V’im nekeiva teiled...* if she gives birth to a girl... she shall be impure for two weeks... and shall remain in a state of blood purification for sixty-six days.” Whatever impurity meant, whatever blood purification signifies – and it is hard to know those things now,

and that is probably directly relevant to what this time differential meant in the ancient world -- first thing that jump out to modern readers is this core distinction. Restrictions on the activity of a new mother, constraints on her return to societal life... are twice as long if she gives birth to a girl. Even if you make the argument that this is somehow in the mother's interest, that the longer time is somehow a good thing -- and who knows, now? -- still, the gender difference is clear, it is stark, and it just doesn't tell us why.

Much has been written about these verses, in academic and ideological circles alike. We will skip most of that now, because on most levels, for most of us I think, our reaction to this passage is probably fairly similar. It is this: **“separate but equal” wasn't right, and didn't work with race. It is not right, and no longer works for gender, either. And while there are differences, of course, between men and women -- basic morality in the modern world demands that those differences need to emerge from an individual, out, rather than from a society, down.**

Sometimes I think we have reached a kind of détente on gender issues in our society, with so much progress made and so much acceptance of people in all their forms of self-expression. But then I remember -- these have been tectonic shifts, seismic realignments in the past century... or less, actually -- it has only been since 1920 that women could even vote in this country, with many other nations coming on board significantly later. (In Switzerland women

did not vote until 1971; in Liechtenstein it was 1984.) Things have changed so much, so fast, that there are echoes and reverberations still.

Along with the Torah portion, we were reminded of these echoes this week. Tonight I am going to speak with you about a court case, a new book, and the choices we make in our lives.

A court case. Alright, so John Stewart made fun of the name. But I am worried. And whatever the outcome, whichever way the verdict goes I have a feeling that *Sebelius v. Hobby Lobby Stores* is one of those cases we will be speaking about for many years to come. Here we have, basically, a question about whether a for-profit corporation has the same rights as an individual, in ways which would allow it to proclaim religiously-based objections to generally applicable laws. But the particular issue in question is the Affordable Health Care act's mandate that health insurance cover contraception. And so the facts of this case, if the plaintiff's position is upheld, would allow the beliefs of some to take precedence over what is viewed by others as a basic aspect of women's health.

There are many complex issues here, and the implications of a ruling, either way, will be huge. Corporations could raise religious objections to almost any imaginable kind of law: child-labor protection, immunization requirements, anti-discrimination enforcement, taxation in general... anything. Taking this issue at face-value – rather than a clever ploy merely meant to undermine the Affordable Care Act -- what we have here is a conflict between

different kinds of rights. It pits spiritual beliefs against physical bodies. As such it fits an age-old pattern of gender conflict, absorbing the ancient distinction between soul and body, ascribing the first to the male realm and the second to the female, and valuing the first above the second.

And the potential result? As with the Torah portion: twice as long for a woman. It costs more, it takes more time, it is more complicated. Male-ness remains the norm; to be a female is to be treated as “different.”

This past week, as well, a former president came out with a new book. Since I so very much disliked Jimmy Carter’s book about Israel and Palestine, I thought, in fairness, that I should keep an open mind about this one. I have not yet read *A Call to Action: Women, Religion, Violence and Power*, but in interviews he makes some powerful points. He asserts that "the most serious and unaddressed worldwide challenge is the deprivation and abuse of women and girls", which he says is "largely caused by a false interpretation.... and a growing tolerance of violence and warfare.”

I was particularly impressed by his discussion of selective reading of Biblical texts, interpreted “almost exclusively by powerful male leaders within the Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist” religious traditions. He notes that quotations from the Bible can be used to argue for both equality and the inferiority of women. "You can pick out individual verses throughout the Bible that show that the verse favors your particular preference, and the fact that the Catholic church, for instance, prohibits women from serving as priests

or even deacons gives a kind of a permission to male people all over the world, that well, if God thinks that women are inferior, I'll treat them as inferiors. If she's my wife, I can abuse her with impunity, or if I'm an employer, I can pay my female employees less salary," he said.

"This claim that women are inferior before God spreads to the secular world to justify gross and sustained acts of discrimination and violence against them," writes Carter. At a time when we are trying to determine how to handle sexual assault in the military, at a time when this country and other nations remain gripped by inconsistency and uncertainty regarding how they handle sexual harassment – one past president of Israel in jail and presidential hopeful just this week probably tainted as inappropriate for reasons of morality and character -- President Carter, in taking on this topic, offers an important contribution to an ongoing conversation.

Gender issues manifest themselves at work. And they are formed, in part, from our faith tradition. But the place they begin is, of course, at home. The families into which we are born are the first and most important school we ever attend. The gender interactions we learn there are, in most cases, the first lessons we learn in power, politics and personal expression.

Many of us are parents; all of us are or once were children. How we raise our children is the place where on the one hand our unexamined assumptions often play out, but, also, where there is the most hope for the future.

Like the tradition itself, the choices we make are both subtle and obvious. If you have multiple genders among your offspring, or your siblings, are there ways in which things were handled differently, even in the same family? In the old days it might have been academic or vocational expectations; today it might be extra-curricular activities, or even, still, attitudes towards dating. If we have only boys what message do we send about girls? If we have only girls do act differently? How do we balance the impulse towards independence versus the instinct to be protective? Are we fair, and equal, and just, in what we do at home?

Some of you know that before Benjamin was born, Julie and I had an argument over the concept of a naming. We chose, in that case, not to know the gender in advance. So here is how the conversation went: one of us said that if the child was a boy, family members would change their plans, and come from all over the country to our home on the eighth day – and that we should therefore plan on doing that for a girl as well. After all, equal is equal. The other one said: Jewish tradition allows some flexibility here. A real woman will have just given birth. As long as we make the ceremony equal and do a celebration for a girl in ways which are comparable to that which we would do for a boy, we should take advantage of the flexibility and schedule the naming at our convenience. Which position would you have taken? And which one do you think was my position? I actually took the first view. And we, obviously... did the second.

We learn from the portion, and we learn from life, that yes, men and women are different. At the same time, we are also the same. We learn from living now... that the world will be a far better place... when differences are seen as self-expression, and are not imposed from above.

There is a lot of work yet to do. We're not there yet. But it is a blessing to women, and a blessing to men, that our voices, today, can be our own. That we can all put our own feet... on the path we want and are meant to travel.

Shabbat Shalom.