

“Blessed art Thou, Lord our God, who hast not made me a woman”

RACHEL ELIOR

Over the millennia Jewish tradition has preserved holy scripture, halakhic works, a rich juristic legacy, legends, poetry and liturgy, Kabbalah and homilies. It recalls and sanctifies laws and customs rooted in ancient historical memory, while constantly shaping a complex frame of reference, reflecting its efforts to adapt to changing reality. Looking at the various aspects of Judaism's multifaceted written tradition, one cannot help but notice the striking fact that it was entirely created, written, edited, studied and preserved exclusively by men. In the thousands of volumes that constitute the literary corpus of the “People of the Book,” there is not one Hebrew book written, edited or published by a woman prior to the 20th century.

This lacuna is of great significance, because it attests to a decisive fact: Women have not participated in shaping the norms that have governed their lives, nor have they taken part in the creative cultural process conducted in the public arena, producing the laws, customs, values and standards, and reflecting in legend and *Halakhab*, in story and song, ethics and education, sermon and vision, the foundations of the common space of meaning of a specific cultural community. Moreover, their voices were never heard, their experience not considered, their perspective, aspirations, fears, priorities,

unique standards and values, ideas and memories, all were plunged into the abyss of oblivion, absent from written memory.

Women had no part in the Holy Tongue or in the world of education – the fundamental Jewish value of “Torah study” – since they remained within the confines of home and family, excluded from the institutions of learning and kept away from the loci of knowledge and leadership, which were always in the male public domain. Written and spoken Hebrew, which established and defined the legal and cultural space of meaning in which relations between men and women were conducted – by virtue of its status as the Holy Tongue, the language of reading and writing, *Halakhah*, law and ritual, justice and instruction – was created in its written form and preserved in the totality of cultural endeavors, entirely by men. The traditional male view concerning the place of women in the world of study, knowledge and creativity, is reflected in the resounding words of Rabbi Elazar: “May the words of the Torah be burnt rather than given to women” (JT, *Sotah* 3, 4), and in the categorical statement: “he who teaches his daughter Torah, it is as if he has taught her nonsense or indecency” (*Mishnah*, *Sotah* 3, 4) – establishing a benchmark regarding the general unsuitability of women. Other common sayings restrict the range of female understanding to housework: “A woman’s wisdom lies only in the spindle,” and a woman’s purpose in life to bearing children: “women are solely for the sake of [bearing] children” (*Mishnah*, *Ketubot* 6). Statements such as these, or for example, “The voice of a woman is indecent” (*Kiddushin* 70a) – which prohibited the active participation of women in all public forums and prevented women from making their voices heard – created a situation of exclusion and a sense of inferiority, reflecting both the theory and practice of the patriarchal order. These excluding voices, present to this day in written and oral teachings, have made their mark on male consciousness through the generations, and have served as justification for a worldview that relegates women to ignorance, confines their

wisdom to handicrafts, shuts them up at home, behind the walls of modesty and control, compels them to serve the family, and associates them with concepts of indecency, impurity, subservience and service.

Jewish tradition does not recognize equality between the sexes – as clearly evidenced by the personal status laws reflecting relations between men and women as presented in the Torah, Talmud, Midrash and halakhic literature of all periods. *Halakhab* asserts that “the lives of men take preference over those of women” (*Mishnah, Horayot* 3, 7) – further elaborating upon the nature of relations between men and women from the very beginning: “A rib was taken from Adam, and he was given a handmaiden to serve him” (*Sanbedrin* 39b). Relations between men and women were determined by God’s curse to Eve: “and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee” (Gen 3:16), interpreted in detail in halakhic literature and rulings governing relations between the sexes: “The fruits of her labors belong to her husband [...] and she must serve him” (Maimonides, *Hilkehot Ishut* 21, 1–4). This perception of the relationship between men and women – master and handmaiden, husband and attendant, lord and serf – sealed the fate of women and sentenced them to a limited existence, the entire essence of which was subordination to male proprietorship – including childbearing, indenture to serve fathers; brothers, husbands and sons, who in turn ensure that “the glory of the king’s daughter is within,” forbidding women to go out, acquire knowledge and independence, and be sovereign human beings. Subordination to a husband and the satisfaction of his needs were sanctioned by law, and required of women, regardless of their opinions and desires. When necessary, they were even imposed by force: “for a woman who fails to perform any of the tasks required of her, is compelled to do so, even with a whip” (Maimonides, *ibid.*).

Liturgical commentator David Abudraham encapsulates the situation as follows: “a woman is indentured to her husband to

fulfill his needs" (*Perush Hatefilot*, p. 25). This concept of enslavement was the deciding factor in determining the status of women, even though wrapped in ceremony and custom, poetry and mythology. It must be acknowledged that the diversity of life was immeasurably greater than that afforded by narrow halakhic definitions; and within the home many Jewish women enjoyed respect and protection, and were far better off than their non-Jewish sisters. However, the patriarchal approach – in all its legal, cultural and social manifestations – held exclusive sway over relations between the sexes, determined the boundaries of role and value, licit and illicit, terms of entry and exit in both private and public domains, freedom and sovereignty, personal status and freedom of expression.

Women were seen as property and tools: as a valuable resource in terms of fertility and continuity, and attendants bound to perform all household chores. They were excluded from the realm of spiritual and intellectual, denied education and freedom, sovereignty, independence and knowledge – in order to enable them to fulfill only their traditional role. Consequently, women were barred from the arena of cultural creativity, public expression, study and knowledge, discussion and debate. For millennia, women were destined to realize only one dimension of their existence – the physical, natural dimension of sex and procreation – and to express themselves only within the confines of the home. In other words, in various societies women were denied dignity, freedom and sovereignty as human beings, perceived rather as the property of their fathers until marriage, and their husbands after marriage. They were denied any existence beyond their bodies and their homes, including spiritual existence and social independence.

These fundamental positions were rooted in law, scripture, myth and behavioral norms, including means of enforcement and punishment. This state of affairs, determined by biological differences and the balance of power between the sexes, was the lot of

women in various cultures and religions throughout history, although the manner in which each society defined, established, interpreted and justified it in law, myth, language and custom, varies from culture to culture.

Concern for the continuity and fertility that depended upon the female body, made that body a valuable resource, a desired possession and object of exclusive ownership, guaranteed through legal means that denied women independent existence and sovereignty over their bodies and spirits. According to ancient tradition, the vestiges of which can be seen in various cultures to this day, a woman belongs to her father, from whom she is bought in return for a bride-price, and she pays her husband-redeemer a dowry, and becomes his exclusive property. The talmudic tractate of *Ketubot* puts it succinctly: “A woman is acquired by means of money, contract or cohabitation.” This acquisition is the result of commerce between men, at the end of which the woman is transferred from her father’s to her husband’s domain, taking his name and becoming his property.

In (Hebrew) linguistic memory, women are portrayed as chattel, permanent goods, fertile land, soil, sown earth, Eve, Mother Earth, abundant vines, homes, patrimonies, estates and other realties. Men, on the other hand, appear as land-owners, sowers, farmers, owners of homes, flocks and women. The words “husband” (*ba’al*), “sir” (*adon*), “mister” (*mar*), “man” (*gever*), express the ownership, mastery, lordship and dominance typical of the male condition, and in keeping with the wedding and bedding – acquired through money and sanctioned by law – associated with sowing, fertility and property, and affording control over women’s bodies and spirits.

These subject-object relations were instituted in religious law, based on God’s words soon after creation: “and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee” (Gen 3:16), in which Adam was established as Eve’s superior, lord and master. Women’s

loss of sovereignty and their subjugation as possessions are manifested in divorce proceedings, which are conducted entirely according to the will of the husband and owner, who casts out his possession. According to Jewish religious law, “a man divorces only of his own will, and a woman is divorced against her will” (*Mishnah*, Yevamot 1, 14) (Rabbi Gershom decreed however, that a woman cannot be divorced against her will). In any event, a woman cannot divorce, but can only be divorced. She cannot act, but can only be acted upon, as she is not a sovereign human being with equal rights, but is rather indentured to her husband, and hence only able to divorce with his consent: “A man who divorces is unlike a woman who divorces, for a woman is divorced willingly or unwillingly, and a man divorces only of his own volition” (*ibid.* 112b).

The clear connection between a woman’s exclusive childbearing role and her loss of sovereignty as a human being is stated explicitly in the Talmud: “women are solely for the sake of [bearing] children” (*Mishnah*, *Kutubot* 6), further declaring that a woman who remains childless for ten years must be divorced (*Mishnah*, Yevamot 64). Responsibility for fertility and infertility, associated with divine grace, is placed entirely upon the woman, and if she is unable to fulfill her destiny, her marriage is pointless, and she is divorced.

This order of things, whereby fathers and husbands are exclusive masters over women and slaves, sheep, cattle and lands, and whereby men head all institutions and control all positions of power, is called patriarchal – from the Latin “*pater*” (father), and is illustrated in the Bible, *Halakhab* and legends. This order, based upon inequality and upon a fundamental cultural and legal distinction between men and women, whereby – as noted above – a woman is subordinate to her husband, and is considered his property, lies at the very core of society and culture throughout the traditional world. It is reflected in metaphorical expressions of the relations between men and women as man to earth, spirit to

matter, soul to body, culture to nature. This classification created a distinction between those spheres of activity identified as male – culture and spirit (creative Man) – and those identified as female – nature and the body (created Man). Culture, spirit, creativity and freedom are the exclusive province of men, while nature, the body, passivity and subjugation are the province of women.

Attitudes toward nature, as represented by woman, are ambivalent, as a result of its being the source of life and fertility, beauty and passion, as well as posing mortal danger and threatening the boundaries of culture and human sovereignty. The ambivalence is reflected in the meanings of the Hebrew word "*rehem*" (womb), which signifies both the source of life and the place in which it is created, and a tomb, the place in which life is extinguished (*Mishnah, Ohalot* 7, 4; Even Shoshan, *Hamilton Hebadash*, under entry "*kever*"). It is also reflected in the image of Mother Earth, mother of all living things and the source of fertility, as well as the place of interment, to which we return in death. Biology itself reflects this ambivalence, through the involuntary monthly cycle of ovulation, associated with life (pure blood, representing the promise of life and continuity) and death (impure blood, representing the failure to conceive and death). Through this uncontrolled creation and termination, women became associated with the cycle of nature, and were seen at the same time as being different, "other," frightening and mysterious, threatening and helpless, therefore requiring restraint and seclusion, safeguarding and taming, supervision, purification and isolation. Men however, not being subject to any fixed cycle of physiological change, not being connected to the cycle of life and death, and not being subject against their will to nature every month, were seen as powerful and free. Subjection to the cycle of ovulation and creation associated with blood and birth and the eternal cycle of nature, was perceived as weakness and helplessness, since Man has no control over it. This subjection was associated both with the hope and

divine blessing of continuity of life ("the blessing of breasts and womb"), and with fear and the curse of heaven, due to the mortal danger involved (infertility and extinction).

This complexity was expressed in religious terms of purity and impurity, indecency and menstrual uncleanness, blessings and curses, affording women ambivalent status with regard to life and death, fertility and extinction.

The relationship between culture and nature became a dialectic of interior and exterior, with women – subject to the cycles of nature – remaining within the protected privacy and modesty of the home, under the protection or subjugation of their husbands; and men – free of subjection to natural cycles and the bonds of subordination, modesty and silence imposed upon women ("the voice of a woman is indecent"; "the glory of the king's daughter lies within"; "a woman should not leave her doorstep") – appropriating the public domain, independence, a voice, speech, education, power and freedom, knowledge and culture, and all of the consequent privileges ("Public," "society" and "community" all refer to the presence of a minimum of ten men. Women are not counted. "The world," "public dignity," "public domain" and "quorum," are all concepts that refer exclusively to men).

Expressions of culture – **language and voice**, law and calendar, letter and number, book and story, sacred and study, knowledge and creativity, judicature and authority, rule and memory – were the province of men. The **silent, voiceless, languageless, letterless, numberless** essence of nature, in all its ambivalence of life and death, blessing and curse, beauty and fertility, seduction, danger and passion, uncleanness and indecency, was associated with women.

Male culture, with its exclusive voice, was associated with power and potency, mastery, taming, government and control, dignity and self-restraint, establishing ownership and order. Expressions of male sexuality identified with power and potency were

treated positively and highly regarded: potent-potential (the opposite of impotent), virile, manly, as well as the connection (in Hebrew) between [sexual] desire (*yetzer*) and creation (*yetzirah*).

Female nature on the other hand, was associated with sex and unbridled passion, and uncontrolled female sexuality was identified with indecency and shame, impurity and uncleanness, weakness and disgrace – requiring the sanctification of marriage, purification, immersion and quantification, in order to render it fit for pregnancy and fertility within the realm of ownership and culture. Women’s nature was perceived as desirable, threatening and uncontrollable, hence requiring taming and restraining, isolation and modesty, linked as it was with arousal and breach of order. Women – representatives of nature and subject to its cycles – were seen until very recently as objects of control and supervision (modesty, honor), under male authority. The suppression of female sexuality unless under male control, or in the service of fertility within the framework of husband and family, is clearly evident in the linguistic distinctions between indecency, shame, weakness, disgrace, harlot, strumpet, prostitute; and wife – an honorable woman, whose honor is linked to that of her husband, and whose sexuality is sanctified by ritual. It is noteworthy that the derogatory terms referring to female sexuality (in Hebrew) have no masculine equivalents.

The patriarchal approach lies at the root of the social order in many cultures. The treatment of women that derives from this approach may be variously explained and interpreted as a punishment for some sin, as measures taken for their own good and protection, or as representing values of honor and modesty. All such societies however, have been equally coercive in its application. Women were restricted to the confines of their own bodies, homes and families, bound by the shackles of modesty and family honor, prevented from coming and going as they pleased, acquiring an education, sharing in the joy of study, engaging in various fields

of activity, realizing their individual talents and abilities, taking on roles of public leadership, jurisprudence and legislation, and being a part of public decision-making.

The fact that such concepts as “*tana*,” “*amora*,” “*hakham*,” “*rabbi*,” “*dayan*,” “*sofer*,” “*talmid hakham*,” “*ga'on*,” “*parnas*,” and the like, have no feminine equivalents in the ancient Hebrew language attests to the absence of women from spiritual and communal life. These roles and the values associated with them were the exclusive province of men, deriving from the sphere of study or communal affairs, and from freedom and sovereignty within the Jewish world, of which women never had the benefit. The value concepts associated with women were “*virgin*,” “*modest*,” “*proper*,” “*abundant vine*,” “*woman of valor... the fruits of her labors belong to her husband*,” “*joyful mother of children*,” “*a woman's honor is within*,” “*a help mate for him*,” and so forth – relating to modesty, pregnancy and fertility, property controlled by the husband, compliance with the social order.

Women had no public voice, their opinions were not considered when it came to matters outside the home. They were barred from the study halls and the religious courts, schools and synagogues (except for the “*women's gallery*,” which confines and isolates women from the precinct in which the ritual is performed). They were not allowed to vote or be elected to office, testify in court, discuss and dispute with others. Women could not go and come as they pleased, and they were unable to acquire knowledge, authority and status. They were little more than still lifes, “*as a sheep before her shearers is dumb*,” “*a woman of valor*” managing her household and serving her husband – who would recite the blessing “*Blessed art thou, Lord our God, who hast not made me a woman*” every morning, following the blessing “*who hast not made me a slave*.”

Throughout history, women have been present-absent, nameless, voiceless and unrecorded. Memory was exclusively male, while

women were destined to oblivion and anonymity, their existence confined to the ownership of their bodies and their ability to bear a son to carry on their husband's name. This attitude to women is apparent throughout the ages, from “the book of the generations of Adam” (Gen 5), which recounts how men begat men, without a single woman worthy of mention by name for many generations; through the wife of Noah, the wife of Manoah, the daughter of Jephthah, the concubine in Gibeah, the wife of Job, Lot's wife, Lot's daughters, the great woman of Shunem, and the wise woman of Tekoah – all anonymous women, lacking names and existence in their own right, referred to by the name of a father, husband, or place, whose stories are told from a male perspective, and not in their own voices, their experiences wiped out and their names lost in the depths of oblivion; to the lists of founding fathers and pioneers in the Palestine colonies, which enumerate the founding fathers, farmers and pioneers, but ignore the founding mothers.

Such is also the case in many other areas: women are absent from books and libraries, memorials and chronicles, lists of the enfranchised, of elected and appointed officials, of persons of authority and eligibility, of leaders, laureates and title-holders, certain political parties and many religious institutions.

Were such things merely a matter of history, we might simply have speculated upon the scope of this historical wrong and the extent of social injustice, closing with an expression of shock and sorrow at the loss incurred by excluding half of the human race from the public domain, from the arena of knowledge and education, creativity and leadership, freedom and sovereignty. However, despite the decisive change in the status of women in the first half of the 20th century, when they were deemed worthy of education, independence, equality and sovereignty in the eyes of the law, there are still significant areas of life that have retained the stamp of the patriarchal order.

Contemporary Israeli society, perceived as modern and committed to the principles of liberal and egalitarian democracy, in many ways continues to conduct its affairs in an atmosphere dominated by past traditions, wholly unacquainted with the concept of equality between the sexes. The Jewish religion, which reflects a male perspective of reality, plays a crucial role in Israeli social interaction and political discourse, and takes a central place in gender relations – contingent upon the personal status laws that affect the entire population. Religious family law applies to all permanent residents of Israel, according to the respective rites of the various religious communities, regardless of personal beliefs or lifestyles. The personal status laws which govern marriage, divorce, levirate marriage, deserted wives and women who are denied divorce, questions of assets, inheritance, financial relations and property rights in the context of marriage and its dissolution – thus apply to all women in Israel, religious and secular alike. They are all subject to patriarchal methods of determining their personal status, since the norms in this area were established and continue to be established by various religious methods exercised by exclusively male institutions. Women are thus unable to participate in the process of determining the norms to which they themselves are subject.

It is not only the law pertaining to relations between the sexes however, that is influenced by religious-patriarchal mores, but also a significant part of the surrounding culture, since the Hebrew language – imbued with Jewish concepts and traditional culture – forges the world view that directly and indirectly affects gender relations. The language embodies social values and sustains thought patterns and lifestyles. All speakers of Hebrew – which developed as a language, culture, religion and world of meaning, both explicit and implicit, over thousands of years, within the confines of traditional society – are heirs to religious, patriarchal thought, whether they know it or not. The legacy of patriarchal

thought can be found in all areas of language, in varied written and spoken expressions, in law and convention, custom and imagery, manifest culture and hidden expectations, in the fundamental perceptions of sanctity and life, in association and in myth. All of these things affect the field of meaning established in personal and public life, and the balance of power between the various parts of society, as well as individual and general conduct with regard to sovereignty, freedom and equality.

Expressions and terms that reflect an unequal, male-dominated and male-oriented perception, such as: “the voice of a woman is indecent”; “blessed art thou, who hast not made me a woman”; “I find women more bitter than death”; “a woman is acquired by means of money, contract or cohabitation”; “he hath found some uncleanness in her”; “virginal blood”; “divorcée”; “a woman is divorced willingly or unwillingly, and a man divorces only of his own volition”; “deserted wife”; “divorce-denied woman”; “housewife”; “battered woman” and many others – reflect contemporary reality, and not just past eras. In many areas of life, women are still denied equal rights and opportunities for sovereignty, freedom and dignity, a share in responsibility and a fair division of rights and obligations, joint property, resources and advantages. The absence of women in many fields clearly proves the continuing pattern of present-absenteeism, whereby women are present when it comes to home and family, but absent from the sphere of spiritual and creative pursuits, culture and leadership. The absence of women judges in the rabbinical courts, before which their personal status is decided; their absence in the *yeshivot*, in which the fundamental norms of the religious world are discussed; their absence in the public performance of ritual; their absence among those counted for a prayer quorum; their complete absence in the *haredi* political leadership (there are no women on the Haredi parties such as Shas or UTJ Knesset lists); their absence in positions of rabbinical authority and instruction, as well as social

and professional functions in the religious world, from halakhic authorities to religious court judges, from *keashruth* supervisors and circumcisers to community leaders; their absence in the military-defense leadership and in many roles in the IDF and security services; the small number of women in the government and Knesset; the small number of women mayors and women in various leadership tracks; their small number among the country's economic leaders; their small number at the highest levels of academia – as compared with their decisive presence among low-wage-earners, recipients of National Insurance benefits, and their infinitely high number among the victims of violence, illustrates the influence exercised by the old norms.

Even today, in many places, women are concealed and excluded from the public domain, through various modesty laws: in certain communities and institutions, they are still prevented from voting or being elected; they are still barred from many jobs; and in many institutions, they may neither teach nor study. They are still forbidden to make their voices heard in religious public for reasons of “public dignity,” and they are not allowed to go out without a veil, head-covering or wig, or to wear clothing deemed “immodest” by men. A significant number of Israeli women are denied education (for example, among Beduin, rural Muslim communities and *haredi* communities in which girls are restricted to all-girl institutions) and freedom of movement (*haredi* society does not allow women to learn to drive, and restricts the movements of girls). Integration into society and the ability to choose a profession are naturally limited when women are denied sovereignty over their bodies and spirits, and when limitations are imposed upon their access to education, freedom of movement and freedom of expression. This is not about a specific community or prohibition, but about society as a whole, based on an assessment of the role of women in making decisions that affect their lives, their level of participation in finance, power and religious authority, the kind of

access they have to the public arena, and the amount of influence they exert on processes of change in various areas of traditional and modern life.

In recent decades, many of these spheres of activity have witnessed a revolution, inspired by changes in the West regarding such concepts as human dignity, liberty and equality, and influenced by cultural pluralism, which recognizes the multiplicity of values, tastes and lifestyles that reflect the variety of human experience. In the religious world, women have begun to study, and to criticize the basic concepts that have determined the relationship between the private and the public domains, the inside and the outside. In the secular world, an increasing number of women are studying, taking part in education and cultural criticism, changing fundamental patriarchal and sexist values in many fields. Education, freedom and equality, and their incorporation in legislation have expanded the meaning of human dignity and liberty, making it possible to take part in public, cultural, social and professional activities striving to extend the boundaries of liberal-humanist thought, recognizing equality between the different, and not just equality between the like.

Men and women who oppose the traditional patriarchal norms must examine the roots of these norms, as well as their various expressions in law and practice, while critically assessing the presence and absence of women of all aspects of life, in every field, and the influence women exert in effecting change and in the decision-making process. They must seek out that which requires change, and act to achieve greater equality, deeper human dignity, sovereignty and freedom for all who are created in God's image.

Linguistic, legal, religious and cultural criticism, as well as an understanding of the interaction between them – as reflected in custom, *Halakhab*, the religious courts, ceremony, and daily language, vis-à-vis precincts of permitted and forbidden presence, voice and silence; defining the boundaries of the sacred and that

which is taken for granted in the traditional world, as well as a significant part of the prevailing norms in the modern world – sharpen awareness of the existing disparity between theoretical recognition of the right of women to equality and freedom, sovereignty and dignity, and its practical application.