

LA DIFFERENCE

by Rabbi Avi Shafran

A conference of the National Bureau of Economic Research doesn't seem like the kind of gathering to yield a brouhaha, but Lawrence H. Summers, the president of Harvard University, managed to raise a considerable uproar at the recent symposium with his suggestion that there may be innate differences between men and women.

He was speculating, it was reported, about why there are so few women on science and engineering faculties at research universities, and put forth several hypotheses. Among them were: simple discrimination; the likelihood that women with children might not be willing to invest the time and energy necessary to achieve such academic stature; and the possibility that women's minds were not as geared to advanced mathematics as those of men.

That latter theory did not find favor with everyone present. Massachusetts Institute of Technology biologist Nancy Hopkins, for instance, shut her laptop in anger after Mr. Summers' remark and stormed out of the conference, later saying "I felt I was going to be sick... My heart was pounding and my breath was shallow." Her reaction didn't say much for her scientific objectivity, nor, as many a wag noted, did it do much to counter a common stereotype of women as emotional and rash. It did, though, reflect what emerged as a widespread reaction.

"I am offended and furious about your remarks," read one letter to Mr. Summers, from Maud Lavin, an associate professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, whose sentiments were echoed by numerous others. "Arguments of innate gender difference in math are hogwash," she continued, "and indirectly serve to feed virulent prejudices still alas very alive, and now even more so due to your ill-informed remarks."

I do not know if women on average are less capable than men of higher mathematical comprehension (that's certainly not the case in my home). But

what is intriguing, and telling, is the breadth and depth of the negative gut reaction to the very idea that there may in fact be gender differences beyond the obvious physical ones.

Judaism certainly implies that there are, assigning distinct roles to men and to women. Women, for instance, are exempt from some mitzvot, or commandments (generally, time-determined positive ones, although there are exceptions); and other mitzvot (like lighting the Shabbat candles or separating and burning the prescribed portion from a loaf of dough) are preferably to be performed by women.

What is more, the Talmudic tradition considers men to have more of a particular type of human perception (*da'at*) than women; and considers women to have more of another type (*bina*) than men. While the precise meaning of the Hebrew terms are beyond both this writer and the scope of an essay like this one, both forms of perception are clearly formidable - and different.

That there are deep differences in the respective psychologies of the genders is certainly not news to most parents who have children of both flavors. A story that Mr. Summers himself was reported to have told, about his own attempt to raise a gender stereotype-neutral daughter, likely brought a smile of recognition to many a mother and father's face. He recounted how he once bought his little girl two trucks to play with, and she quickly named them "daddy-truck" and "baby truck."

It would, likewise, take a determined and creative mind indeed to explain the fact that the overwhelming majority of violence in the world is male-generated, and the overwhelming majority of caregivers are female.

Innate gender differences, of course, should not preclude, or dissuade, women from being engineers or men from being nurses (or women from being race-car drivers, or men from asking for directions). But neither should they be dismissed as meaningless or insulting.

Such dismissal is, unfortunately, the entrenched attitude of much of the supposedly open-minded contemporary world, even of the Jewish one. And that is particularly lamentable, because it distracts us from the invaluable Jewish idea that life is about not uniformity but responsibility.

"Da'at," "bina," predilections, aptitudes - all are real and important things, but what should matter most to us is not what cards we may have been dealt but rather what we choose to do with the hand we hold. That, in the eyes of Judaism, is the great equalizer: We are judged in the

World-to-Come not by the abilities or psychologies or professions we had in this world but by what we did with them.

Whatever particular aptitudes we may possess, as men or women, engineers or artists, scientists or teachers or diggers of ditches, whether we choose to employ them in the service of our fellows and our Creator is, in the end, what makes all *la différence*.

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