

MALE/FEMALE DICHOTOMY: SOME RESPONSES FROM SOME READERS AND SOME COMMENTS

by Rabbi Ephraim D. Becker, Ph.D.

With thanks to Jeffrey, and others, who have tried to relieve me of my limitless ignorance in the matter of Antigone, Creon, Oedipus and Company, I would like to pursue the male/female dichotomy a bit further.

1. We each have within ourselves maleness, femaleness and childness (why aren't those words??).
2. The male aspect decides that which is ultimately in the best interests of all involved. (Long-term goals over short-term needs; these may be communal or individual considerations.) The female aspect shares the stress associated with those who are impacted by the male decisions. The child aspect petitions for (demands) the satisfaction of its short-term needs.
3. The male aspect is independent; deciding based on larger values. The female aspect is dependent, necessitating confidence that the decisions made by the male aspect are not impetuous (child-like) and take into account the stress which those decisions create as a (but by no means the only) factor in the decision. The short-term needs of others may be overridden, but not negated. If you wish to discuss it further, you will find that stress which is negated leads often to repression; whereas stress which is overridden (compassionate but firm) yields healthy suppression.]
4. The child aspect is the object of both the male's decisions and the female's sharing. The child is entirely dependent and is subject to a good deal of stress (this stress might be referred to as education; whereby the adult has overridden the short-term needs in favor of long-term goals).
5. In summary, the child and female aspect must have confidence that the male aspect is exactly that, and not a "bigger, tougher" child masquerading as maleness. When that is established (!), then the child aspect accepts (albeit with dissatisfaction) the decisions, and this respect for the maleness eases the burden of the female aspect when sharing the stress of the child aspect in absorbing the constraints of the decision.
6. The above model may be applied to the following relationships: Person to G-d (I am child until I internalize or submit to the Divine Will, at which point I assume some of the role of female and, if pursued, even of male); Husband-Wife (the wife can submit to the husband's decision only if confident that the decision is, indeed, male and not child); parent-child (clearly) and within oneself (since all these aspects are at play within the self).

While there is much to be said in clarification of the above - let me leave it at this and respond to your comments and questions. That strikes me as a better way to learn than to "lecture."

Best wishes,
edb

Comments are welcome!

A reader wrote:

Husband-Wife (the wife can submit to the husband's decision only if confident that the decision is, indeed, male and not child); >> assuming that the husband and wife both possess [male] decision-making powers does it necessarily mean that only one decision is correct and the other is childish.

1. At issue is not male/female decision making powers; rather the issues are adult/child decision-making and the chain of command.
2. If two people have a disagreement which is based in the "sechel" (rational understanding) then the dispute is enduring and valuable (Chapters of the Fathers 2), regardless of the practical outcome. If, however, one or both positions is being promoted because of a bias or character flaw (bad middos), then the opinions are not valuable and not enduring, again, regardless of who "wins."
3. The Torah places the husband at the "buck stops here" in the chain of command. This necessitates, however, that his decisions are "sechel-based" and that his wife has a confidence that her input has been respected and valued, and that he has enough reverence for the will of Heaven (yiras shamayim) that he will not make a hasty decision based on insufficient information. This is quite similar to the confidence that a petitioner must have when submitting a question (shaila) to a decider of Jewish law (posek).
4. As a practical matter, several clues are offered by the Rabbis:
 - a. A smart husband (as with any decision maker) takes his cues from those who are most familiar with the matter under discussion. That means, in most cases involving the household, his wife.
 - b. A smart wife knows that she increases the overall maturity of the decisions being made in the house by indeed relying on her husband.
 - c. In an era characterized by the proliferation of (and idolization of) immaturity (there are even philosophies written to put the patina of respectability on juvenile behavior and thought), it is hard to look at this model as other than the wistful ideal. However, to the extent that it gently nudges oneself towards that ideal, it remains useful. From a Torah perspective, we are never entitled to lose sight of the ideal, even when it seems buried under a mountain of reality.

5. I appreciate the following story submitted by Joseph Skibell who wrote:

I'm reminded of a story I heard about a Rabbi David Siegal who was marrying the granddaughter of a remarkable woman named Fania. When Fania lived in Stalinist Russia, she and her village were moved by the authorities. Everybody was allowed to take two bags. While the others in the village packed their jewels and valuables, Fania insisted that her family each take two bags of potatoes, and only potatoes.

By the time the village arrived to where it was being sent, everybody was starving. But under Fania's orders, her family fought off all the starving villagers long enough to plant the potatoes in the ground and soon there was enough food for everybody in the village.

So when Rabbi Siegal was about to marry Fania's granddaughter in America, he thought it best to get some advice on life and marriage and women from this remarkable woman. And so they went for a walk on the beach.

Rabbi Siegal asked her, at one point, what makes for a good marriage.

She answered him: "Always remember one thing and one thing only -- the man is the head of the household!"

This surprised Rabbi Siegal. Such an anti-feminist view from such a strong and capable woman. But she repeated it to him a second time: "Always remember -- the man is the head of the household."

And they walked along for a while in silence, until Rabbi Siegal thought to ask, "And Fania, if the man's the head, what is the woman?"

She answered: "The woman is the neck. It moves the head."

Best wishes,

Ephraim