

# QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ON WOMEN IN JUDAISM

*by Rebbetzin Leah Kohn*

This week, "Women in Judaism" presents responses to course material from our diverse cyber-space student body. We have also included our return comments. Please feel free to write us with your own reactions to the following correspondences:

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**Dear Mrs. Kohn:**

In regard to your class entitled "Sarah's Accomplishment: An Inheritance for Every Jew"...

Please, explain why Sarah was heroic in Egypt.

Was a time sequence given for her length of stay with the pharaoh, so that her virtue could be better realized pertaining to endurance?

Also, is Hashem another word for G-d?

Thank you,

Miriam

**Dear Miriam:**

To answer your question about Sarah's heroism...her accomplishment was in not being immediately seduced by Egyptian culture. To have remained unaffected by a society so dedicated to immediate gratification is best understood within the context of today's "consumer" culture. In both cultures, once someone takes a second look, the less desirable underside of the culture becomes apparent. But at first, one is hard put to resist its pleasures. Not only did Sarah resist, she did not even experience an iota of desire for the surrounding culture.

You also inquired about the name Hashem. "Hashem" literally means "the name," and is a common way to say "God" in both conversational Hebrew and in Jewish books (not including the Bible). The term expresses the fact that we do not know the essence of God, and can only refer to Him in a more general way. It's also a term of respect, in the same way one would address a king as "his majesty".

Best Regards,

Leah Kohn

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**Dear Mrs. Kohn:**

Apparently I was wrong when I thought the Old Testament was the same as the Torah. Can you

please clarify the difference?

Thank You,  
Marilyn

**Dear Marilyn:**

Thank you for your email inquiry re. Old Testament vs Torah. The word "Torah", in its literal sense, refers to the 5 Books given to Moses at Mount Sinai (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy), often called the "Chumash". The word "Torah" is also used in its broadest sense to describe all of Jewish wisdom. For a good English translation of the Chumash see the "Stone Chumash" published by Artscroll.

Best Regards,  
Leah Kohn

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**Dear Mrs. Kohn:**

(In regard to your class on Body Image, Feminine Beauty & Torah)...it seems as if you are saying a Jewish woman should take great care with her personal beauty/image, so as not to defame the name of Jewish womanhood; and also that this dwelling on her beauty can cause anorexia, etc. This is a very sore topic, as you know. The groom should be the most learned; the bride should be the most beautiful: so goes the shidduch routine. We don't choose him because he's handsome; we do choose her because she is beautiful, and that doesn't usually mean beauty of soul, although this can, of course, come into play. So why are you skirting around the issue instead of calling a spade a spade? Beauty does, of course, count. It's good for the Jews for a woman to be beautiful. If she's not, it's not good for the Jews. This is reality. Beauty of soul may count if a person gets to know one; but first, one has to get by the outer appearance -- in males as well as females...

Thank You,  
Danielle

**Dear Danielle:**

Thank you for your email response to our class on beauty in Judaism. From the focus of our article, I had hoped it would be clear that, while our emphasis is on spiritual beauty, we Jews live in the physical world and as such appearance counts, too. I now see that perhaps the article was not explicit, and I appreciate your having brought this to my attention via your comments.

Certainly, the Jewish community struggles, alongside the secular world, with the dangerous consequences of obsession with physical appearance. You are probably aware that anorexia, bulimia and associated disorders have become an issue, particularly amongst young Jewish women. In addition, you are right that when it comes to shidduchim, one's inner beauty is not as immediately apparent, compared to looks. Ideally, we are asked by Torah to maintain a healthy perspective and balance between physical and spiritual beauty.

Best Regards,  
Leah Kohn

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**Dear Rebbitzin Kohn,**

(In regard to your essay entitled, " The Story of Chana: Prayer With a Purpose")...

I am both troubled and inspired by your story of Chana. I think I am most troubled by your attempting to "prove" that women's parity with men, or indeed their superiority regarding matters of prayer is acknowledged and accepted by the Sages. I wish I could buy it, but long and bitter experience shows me that it would be a foolhardy purchase!

But ultimately I am left with a deep sadness. Chana's entire energy was channelled into conception and birth and ultimately she prayed for a male child not simply a child.

She must have known, that in the ethic and the culture of her day, if God opened her womb and gave her a female child it simply wouldn't have been enough. I know that the resultant blessing was great indeed. A Samuel doesn't come along too often. But I also know that his maleness was paramount to his being able to be the influence he was.

Please, don't hit me with Hulda or Dvora. I have studied these, and other remarkable women in our tradition and hope to continue to do so. (I learn from the Hebrew text - Midrash, Chumash and Gemarrah) with wonderful teachers. I suppose I am asking you simply to be aware of the pain and difficulty of being a modern woman attempting to straddle the secular life and the Orthodox world of my people. Simplistic revisionism is not enough. Nevertheless, I look forward to your continued teaching.

Susan

**Dear Susan:**

My thanks and much respect for your ability to articulate the frustration of many women who inhabit both orthodox and secular worlds. You raise several painful issues, which I will try to address in this correspondence. Nonetheless, I invite you to telephone me toll free at the Jewish Renaissance Center 1(888) CLASSES, should my response feel superficial, given the limitations of email.

The essay on Chana did not purport to prove women's superiority to men in prayer. Rather, it set out to prove that the value of prayer lies in its content and intention. Purity of heart and devotion are the barometers of accomplishment in prayer. Chana was special in this regard. Her outpouring established a new vernacular for prayer that altered our relationship to the Almighty for all time.

In response to your observation that Chana prayed for a male child, Chana's generation anticipated through prophecy the birth of a leader called Samuel. Thus, every pregnant woman prayed for a boy, who would fulfill that prediction and each new baby boy was named Samuel. Your frustration, if I understand it correctly, is that this explanation may be satisfactory insofar as it pertains to Chana,

but it still leaves unresolved the question of why so many women throughout Jewish history have specified male offspring in their prayerful requests.

Based on this question I am compelled to go further, in an attempt to offer you a deeper response. The reality is that Hashem did in fact give men a greater number of mitzvot. Our sages tell us that men enter the world less spiritually complete than women and, for this reason, they have been given quantitatively more commandments with which to grow. Women come into the world spiritually more complete than men. They have less to accomplish in this regard and, therefore, they have fewer mitzvot. Being that we aspire to have as many opportunities as possible to serve God, a woman might pray for a son who would come into the world with the longest possible list of commandments with which to serve his Creator.

If we go a step further, however, we realize that the playing field is more level than it might seem. First, despite the fact that a man has more mitzvot, neither man nor woman is able to complete his or her list of duties in this world. Therefore, it would be a mistake to take a list of potential opportunities and use them as a basis for actual spiritual accomplishment. We are each here to serve Hashem in a distinct way, through the mitzvot we have been assigned. This setup does not favor men or women, since neither is able to study, develop and accomplish the entire array of life's tasks.

And herein lies the source of each Jew's happiness, regardless of how many mitzvot he or she has been given. Serving God wholeheartedly, with inspiration and effort, engages us in a process of connecting with the Divine. Through this we each gain a specific share in a universal totality that is gratifying, in part, because it is so much bigger than any single one of us. In order to fully participate in this project, we must accept our own limitations - as men, as women, as mortals. Contemporary society is anathema to these prerequisites. But as Jews, they are key to our spiritual growth and they remain at the heart of our self-esteem.

The process of spiritual growth never ends for either a man or a woman. In terms of enriching one's understanding, enthusiasm, intention and the overall quality of life's spiritual journey, one can remain well engaged. Men and women, therefore, were granted equal opportunity to invest in their relationship and enhance their connection to Hashem. Nonetheless, each individual's opportunity is unique in character. The challenge we face is to focus on our own work and to understand what is essential to our own mission. One of the pitfalls in this realm involves taking on challenges that are not assigned to us specifically. This, in fact, was the mistake of first man who was asked by God not to partake of what the tree had to offer.

In serving Hashem, it is our job to trust in His infinite wisdom, rather than in our own assessment of what is best for us. Division of tasks has been a reality in the Jewish Nation throughout history, as is evident in the breakdown of duties between levites, kohanim, and the other tribes as well as between kings, judges, leaders and amongst men and women. To desire another's position or role is

in essence to challenge God's wisdom.

As regards women, we have the opportunity to be as fulfilled in our roles as any other members of the Jewish people. It is up to us to create meaning, within the parameters given by God. This may take some effort, especially since men's obligations are so clearly delineated, whereas those assigned women are often more internal and less public. Nonetheless, it is worthwhile to keep in mind the matriarchs, on whose merit we rely to this day. These were women of great accomplishment in their female roles, not to be upstaged by the patriarchs. When we ask God for assistance, we ask Him to remember us in the name of both our foremothers and forefathers.

I hope I have been helpful.

Best Regards, Leah Kohn

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