

# UNDERSTANDING OUR PURPOSE, UNDERSTANDING OUR ROLE PART III

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*Adapted from a lecture by Rebbetzin Tziporah Heller*

Our previous class explored the connection between internal power in women, and the creation of Eve from Adam's rib. To summarize, in the same way the rib is a source of hidden strength for the entire body, the Jewish woman supports the Jewish nation from a seat of power that may be considered more "behind the scenes" than out front. While contemporary society tends to value the opposite type of power - that is, power of a more public type - Judaism assigns the same value to both internal and external power, and connects each of them to women and men, respectively. This gender-based type of assignment reflects ineradicable differences between the sexes, and is intended to bring out the unique potential of man and woman as both individuals and as a team.

Our current class will explore the nature of feminine power and influence, as well as several aspects of how male/female role differentiation plays out in Jewish life and in Jewish law.

Jewish law can be broken down into two categories - positive commandments, which entail things to which we are obliged (such as prayer and charity), and negative commandments, which involve restraint or abstention from certain forbidden activities ("don't steal, don't kill," and the like). Both men and women are bound to observance of the negative commandments in exactly the same way.

The positive commandments are where men and women have different obligations. Some of the positive commandments must be performed at a specific time, and this group is referred to as "time-bound". Judaism considers the "time-bound" framework necessary for a man's spiritual growth. Thus, men alone must observe these commandments. On the other hand, Jewish women are not obligated to time-bound commandments, because Torah does not see these laws as important for their spiritual development. A woman has her own inner time clock, established at birth, and this is one reason she does not need to use time-bound parameters in her quest for personal growth. Thus, her own internal sense of time is considered one of the most effective devices in her quest for personal growth.

A few examples of the time-bound obligations from which women are exempt include the commandment to wear tefillin and to pray three times a day. (It is worth noting that "exempt" does not mean, "forbidden." A woman may choose to take on certain commandments to which she is not legally obliged). Women are in fact obligated to pray, but not three times per day in a minyan, as are

men. A woman is to pray once a day, at a time of her choice.

In contrast to the laws of prayer which obligate men more than women, Jewish law obligates women further than men in the highly misunderstood area of "modesty" or, "tsniut." This fundamental aspect of traditional Jewish life expresses itself in dress, in the physical separation of men and women in synagogue, in places of study and at social gatherings. While modesty has a questionable reputation in contemporary society, Judaism views it as a virtue and as a critical aspect of a Jew's relationship with God. Modesty according to Torah is based on an inner connection to, rather than an outward show of who one is and what one does. Physical modesty, separation between the sexes and dress provide an environment in which the Jew is directed more towards the internal than the external.

People often ask why men in Judaism do not have the same modesty laws as women. In the real world, the fact is that percentage-wise, men exploit women more than women exploit men. This is an expression of the inherent external focus of men and internal focus of women. An example from today's world would be the tremendous budgets that advertising agencies have for researching which types of ads appeal to men versus women. If you want to sell a man a car, add a beautiful young woman to the ad. Ad agencies put thousands of dollars into campaigns of this sort, precisely because this approach works.

On the other hand, one of the most efficient ways to sell a product to women is to include a role model. The role model woman will differ according to the product. A computer ad in Ms. Magazine, for instance, will feature an important looking executive. The feminine message is, "I want to be her," whereas the masculine car ad would provoke a man to feel, "I want to have her" - two completely different approaches, which reflect the different fundamental natures of men and women.

The Torah acknowledges these G-d given differences. They are the origin of the separate laws that Jewish men and women follow in their quest for spiritual growth.

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