

# THE JEWISH MOTHER - A HAIR-RAISING RESPONSIBILITY

*by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann*

The construction of the Mishkan (Tabernacle) was performed by the most skilled and wisest of men. However the women also had a role in its construction. "All the women whose hearts inspired them with wisdom spun the goat's-hair. (35:26)" While no doubt the spinning of the goat's- hair was a critical element of the Mishkan, why does the Torah imply that it required some special measure of wisdom? Skill and dexterity perhaps - but wisdom?

Rashi explains that an extraordinary level of craftsmanship was required to spin the goat's-hair, because the women would spin their threads from the fleece on the backs of the goats before it was shorn - i.e. straight off the goat! Sforno explains that after fleece is shorn, the hair loses more of its lustre each time it is handled. By combing and spinning the fleece straight off the goats while it was still growing, they were able to preserve much of the lustre that would have otherwise been lost.

This explains the extra level of wisdom required in spinning the goat's- hair, but it still doesn't adequately resolve why this special craft could only be performed by women. Aside from this one anomaly, all other aspects of the Mishkan's construction were performed by men. Surely there were men who were equally capable of performing the "extraordinary craft" of spinning the hair. Not that we begrudge the women their part in the building of the Tabernacle; it's just that if the Torah dictates that one specific aspect of its construction was performed exclusively by women, there must be something more to it than just practical considerations.

The great and wise Shlomo Ha-melech (King Solomon) advises: "Listen, my child, to the rebuke of your father; and do not forsake the Torah of your mother. (Mishlei/Proverbs 1:8)" We all know the scenario: Father comes home from a long day at work; mother is standing by the door to greet him. The look on her face tells him he hasn't come one moment too soon. Before even removing his galoshes, he's already been briefed; little Shmueli has been sent to his room for fighting with his sister, and awaits father's homecoming - in order to receive the thrashing with which he's been threatened. Thus it comes as no surprise that the prophet associates "rebuke" with the father. But why does he connect Torah to the mother? Isn't it the father's mitzvah to teach his son Torah?

Mefarshim (commentators) explain that while it is indeed the father's role to educate his child in the study of Torah and its laws and ordinances, it is the mother who creates the atmosphere that permeates the very walls of the Jewish home. It is her duty to see to it that the atmosphere be one of Torah, kedushah, and shalom - an environment which encourages love of Torah and dedication to mitzvos.

In many families, the father spends the majority of his time away from home; it is the mother who ultimately bears the burden of ensuring that her children, who spend far more time with her, constantly experience a life brimming with the love for Torah and mitzvos that they will later be taught by their fathers and teachers. Observing the attitudes and reactions of a parent to the daily hustle and bustle of a Jewish home is a far more powerful and influential source of education than any lesson learned from a book, and it is this "Torah of your mother" to which King Shlomo refers.

A Russian oleh (immigrant) to Israel approached a Beis-Din (Jewish court) with concern: He knew that his mother was Jewish, but he had no recollection of ever being told whether he was a Kohen, a Levi, or a Yisrael. His nondescript family name gave no clue as to his tribal origin.

Perhaps, asked the Beis Din, he had some memories of his childhood in Russia which would offer a glimpse into his lineage? He remembered very little; but - yes - there was one thing that stood out in his mind. On the eve of every Yom Tov, his mother would take the children to a local dry-goods store to buy a brand new pair of socks for their father. He still remembered the special look on his mother's face when she would buy the socks; it almost glowed. Later, they would go home, and wrap up the socks, and wait for his father to come home. When he did, they would all gather around, and his mother would excitedly present him with his new socks. "I never understood why she always chose to buy him socks - you would have thought she might have bought socks one Yom Tov, a shirt for the next, and maybe pants or shoes after that. We never questioned her, though; she always bought socks, and the glow on her face was always the same. I remember it as if it were just yesterday."

Without hesitation, the Beis Din ruled that the man was a Kohen. While in Israel the Kohanim offer the priestly blessings (Birkas Kohanim) daily, in the Diaspora they do so only on the Yamim Tovim. One of the requirements of Birkas Kohanim is that the Kohen take off his shoes while he blesses the congregation. No doubt, Beis Din reasoned, his mother wanted to make sure that this special mitzvah was performed in a special way, so she made sure that each Yom Tov her husband, a Kohen, should have new socks to wear as he stood and blessed the congregation.

How remarkable. The man, it seems, had no memory of his father performing the priestly blessings, although he surely must have accompanied him to shul. But he vividly remembered the anticipation of his mother as she went out of her way on a busy Erev Yom Tov to honour a mitzvah in her own special way.

Perhaps this is why the women were charged with the craft of spinning the fleece directly off the backs of the goats. All other aspects of the Mishkan's construction involved taking raw materials - gold, silver, copper, wool, etc. - and using them as the building blocks for the Tabernacle and its holy vessels. The men were given these tasks, just as it is their responsibility to take a child - the raw material - and make him holy by educating him in the laws and lessons of the Torah.

The spinning of the goat's-hair was the only task that required the materials to be formed, moulded

and infused with holiness at their very source - straight off the backs of the goats. The mother of the house is referred to in the Holy Tongue as the "Akeres Ha-bayis - the source of the household," for it is she who brings a aura of kedusha, love for Torah, and respect for mitzvos into the very foundation of the Jewish home. Only the women could take responsibility for such an essential and critical task, which, when performed with wisdom, preserves the lustre of the Jewish soul.

Have a good Shabbos.

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