

10. WOMEN IN JUDAISM

Women occupy a fundamental and certainly not a secondary role in Jewish life. In fact, women are at the heart of Jewish life. They take care of the family – in the traditional model – and ensure that Judaism is practised in the daily lives of the younger generations, so that it will be passed on to future generations. In Jewish belief, women are not victims, nor are they denigrated or discriminated against. To understand the role of women in Judaism, it is necessary to start from the traditional sources, the text of the *Tanakh*, the Hebrew Bible, and from the most important rabbinical literature. It is a long and fascinating history that saw the transformation of women's condition over the centuries.

In the *Tanakh*, the woman is first and foremost a mother and a wife, but we also find her as queen, prophetess, judge, prostitute and stranger. The first woman in the Bible is, of course, Eve, who appears in the account of the creation of man and woman in Genesis: 1:27; 2:7; 2:18-24. At first, God created man and woman together, joined at the side, and later separated them. The Hebrew word *tsela*, which is traditionally translated as the rib from which God created Eve, actually refers not only to the rib, but to the whole of the side. The name Eve, (*Chava*), comes from the Hebrew word *chay*, the word for “life”, because the woman is life-giver. Seven prophetesses are mentioned in the biblical text, including a judge, Deborah. Women play a fundamental role in the Exodus narrative. There are several protagonists of these events: Miriam, the sister of Moses, the midwives, Moses' own mother, and *Bithiah*, the daughter of the Pharaoh of Egypt, who, contravening her father's law, saved a young Hebrew boy, Moses, from certain death in the Nile River. Two biblical books are dedicated to two women: Queen Esther, who exercised great influence in the political and governmental affairs of Persia under King Ahasuerus and successfully saved the Jewish people from annihilation at the hands of the perfidious minister Haman, and Ruth, celebrated for her admirable qualities.

In the rabbinic tradition, the sages paid considerable attention to the female world. One of the six orders of the Mishnah is entitled *Nashim* (Women). It is devoted to the study of the fulfilment of the marriage bond, the mutual obligations between spouses, including the laws of divorce, levirate, vows and their consequences, and alleged adultery. The difference between men and women with regard to the precepts to be observed is set out in the order. It should be noted that the legal status of women is different from that of men: some rules and principles are derived directly from the biblical text, while other aspects, dealt with by the rabbis over the centuries, have led to a substantial improvement in women's conditions. The most significant difference between men and women in Judaism lies in the fact that women are not required to follow the precepts linked to a specific time schedule, such as putting on phylacteries

(*tefillin*) every day by the prescribed time. These exemptions have often been interpreted as an affirmation of women's inferiority. But this is an interpretation that is limited at the superficial level of the problem. In fact, women are not required to fulfil the time-bound precepts because women, with their pregnancies, their children, their maternal instincts, do not need to be bound to the Lord any further. Conversely, man needs rules that plan his schedule and do not leave him at the mercy of his instincts. There are various exceptions to the general principle, some of which concern the core precepts, which, however, transcend the household domain in which a woman's role is carried out, and involve the public sphere reserved to men. One such exception is the study/teaching of the Torah, a precept not time-bound and yet 'spared' to women.

One of the most pressing requests in the Jewish world concerns allowing women to study the Torah and other traditional texts. The main issues in this debate were well expressed by Rabbi Gianfranco Di Segni: "Do they have an obligation to study as men do according to Jewish law? If not, do they have the right to do so? And if so, is it appropriate and recommended that they study, or is it discouraged? Although the answers to these questions may seem obvious in a society where women (theoretically) have the same rights as men, this has not always been the case in the past. However, it is interesting to note that at the time of the Mishnah and Talmud, there was a comparatively greater openness to women's studies than in later epochs."

Women who have chosen to devote themselves not only to family life, but also to studying the sacred texts, in order to express their religious faith more deeply and fully, are not unique to our own time. Two such cases from the 16th century can be found in Italy: Leona, daughter of Avraham Yehoshua Da Fano, and an almost unknown, probably fictional, Dina. The former exchanged letters with members of her own Fano family. It is in this correspondence that the female figure of the young woman emerges. Although she was certainly special, she was not alone in the Jewish landscape of her time: Leona studies the Torah with her brothers, she is an expert in ritual slaughter, and during the cleaning of the house before *Pesach* she complains that she does not have time to study like her brothers, who tease her about this. Leona enriches her letters with Talmudic and Halakhic quotations that testify to her extensive knowledge. She is also active in raising funds for her Torah teacher. Dina's letters became a rhetorical paradigm when they were included in a text edited by the famous rabbi and teacher Shemuel Archivolti (Cesena c. 1515- Padua 1611)⁸⁴. It is

84 Archivolti was an Italian writer, grammarian and poet who studied under Meir Katzenellenbogen (Prague 1475 - Padua 1565). He served as rabbi in the Jewish communities of Bologna, Venice and Padua, where he settled in 1568. He was highly regarded by his contemporaries, and his students included Leon Modena and Cardinal Marco Marini. His most celebrated writings were printed in Venice in the second half of the 16th century. These include the aforementioned *Mayan Gannim* and the Hebrew grammar text *Arugat Habosem* (The Scented Flower Bed), printed in 1602. For a bibliography on Archivolti, see R. Bonfil, *Rabbis and Jewish Communities in Renaissance Italy*, (translated from the original Hebrew, Magnes Press, Yerushalayim 1979) The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization Oxford 1990, pp. 92-94, 124-133; *ibid. Riflessioni su una prospettiva femminista nell'epistolario di Samuele Archivolti in La cultura ebraica a Bologna tra Medioevo e Rinascimento*, cit., 117-128; D. Di Segni, *Le donne e lo studio della Torà: uno scambio epistolare fra Dina e Rabbi Samuele Archivolti nell'Italia del Rinascimento*, "Rassegna Mensile d'Israel" 67 (2001), 151- 173.

the book entitled *Mayan gannim* (Fountain of gardens)⁸⁵. It was first printed in Venice in 1553 with the intention of composing an ideal epistle, consisting of five letters written in rhyme. It was intended to be a “template” for Archivolti’s students and for those who were to teach the art of writing after him. In response to a woman named Dina - probably inspired by someone he knew but who never really existed - who wished to devote herself to Jewish studies, traditionally the prerogative of men, Rabbi Archivolti granted her permission to study these subjects. He justified his decision on the grounds that Dina’s character and attitudes were different from those of the average woman of her time. Archivolti’s pamphlet was probably not widely circulated in contemporary Jewish circles, while quotations from the same letter became rather widespread in the 20th century.⁸⁶ Social and cultural transformations have recently sparked a debate in the Jewish world on women’s Torah study. Several female scholars, such as Nechama Leibowitz and Tamar Ross, have taken their teachings to the general public. In general, the number of women who devote themselves to the study of traditional Jewish texts in various capacities is steadily increasing.

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85 The title is drawn from the Song of Songs 4:15.

86 However, the publication was “rediscovered” thanks to a citation of Dinah’s letter by Rabbi Barukh Ha-Levi Epstein (Babruysk 1860- Pinsk 1941) in the *Torah Temimah* (“The Complete Torah”) in 1902. This citation led to the circulation of Dinah’s epistle in numerous modern texts on the subject, making it one of the few sources on which influential contemporary rabbinical authorities relied to endorse and promote women’s Torah study, and to encourage them to play a greater role in traditional studies. Thus, after almost five hundred years, a short letter contained in a volume by an Italian rabbi not particularly well known in the international Jewish community found its way down to us. And perhaps it is no coincidence that a rabbi from the Italian Jewish tradition contributed to the debate on equality between men and women in the scholarly realm.