Language, Gender and Religion

Abstract

This chapter examines Judaism and liturgical Hebrew from the perspective of gender. It reveals the attitude towards women as reflected in prayers written in different places during Mishnaic and Medieval periods, and emphasizes attempts to introduce changes in liturgical formulae. While such changes were made in all periods, they were more salient in the last century due to the development of new religious movements that strove to espouse a more egalitarian attitude along with general feminist activities.

Men and Women in Judaism

According to the Mishnah, Jewish tradition was clearly passed down from generation to generation by men. Thus, in Pirqe Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) we read:

(1) moše qibel tora misinai umesarah liyehošua' viyehošua' lazqenim uzqenim lanevi'im unevi'im mesaruha le'anše kneset hagedola
'Moses received the Torah from Sinai, and he delivered it to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets delivered it to the men of the Great Congregation' (Aboth 1:1).

This important saying not only reflects the mindset at the time it was written, but also serves as a base for religious praxes in Orthodox communities to this day, where women are excluded or segregated from men in most ceremonies.

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, traditional Jewish texts clearly show preference for men as the active participants and leaders of the community. Religious precepts dictate that men must keep many more precepts, mitzvot, than women. This originates in the Mishna, as we read:

(2) vexol mitsvat 'ase šehazman geramah ha'anašim xayavin vehanašim peturot
'And every positive precept which is time-dependent men are obligated and women are exempt' (Kiddushin 1:7).
However, the stipulation that women are exempt from keeping many precepts is not always viewed positively or as something that makes life easier, but rather as a means of exclusion.

Men are also those who lead Jewish ceremonies, including prayers conducted in public. Prayers were first introduced in the Mishnaic period to replace the sacrifices that were offered to God before the destruction of the Temple. Society at that time was clearly led by men, and only they participated in liturgical events. It is not surprising then, that women were not included in prayers and that they were originally written only in masculine forms.

Sons, and not daughters, are mentioned in the Bible as those who are commanded to remember God and fulfill Jewish precepts. For instance, we read:

(3) \textit{vehigadeta levinxa bayom hahu lemor ba’avor ze ‘asa ‘adonay li betseti mimitzrayim}
‘And thou [MASC] shalt tell thy son in that day, saying: It is because of that which the Lord did for me when I came forth out of Egypt’ (Exodus 13:8).

This verse is only addressed to men, and the precept refers to their sons and not to their daughters. As a symbol of remembering God, men are instructed to wear \textit{tefillin} (‘phylacteries’) on their arms and foreheads while praying. The aforementioned verse is inscribed on the scrolls of parchment they contain, and the obligation of wearing tefillin is based on the next verse:

(4) \textit{vehaya lexa le’ot ‘al yadexa ulezikaron ben ‘enexa}
‘And it shall be for a sign unto thee [MASC] upon thy [MASC] hand, and for a memorial between thine [MASC] eyes’ (ibid.: 9).

Thus we can conclude that only men are responsible for remembering God.

The most basic and important prayer recited by Jews is known as \textit{Shema Israel} (‘Hear, O Israel’). It is recited in the morning and evening, as well as in dangerous situations and upon death. The entire prayer is formulated in the masculine:

(5) \textit{šema’ yisra’el ‘adonay ‘elohenu ‘adonay ‘exad. ve’ahavta ‘et ‘adonay ‘elohexa bexol levavxa uvxol nafšexa uvxol me’odexa. vechayu hader-}
\textit{varim ha’ele ‘ašer ‘anoxi metsavxa hayom ‘al levavexa. vešinantam levanexa vedibarta bam bešivTEXA bevetexa uvlextexa baderex uvšoxbexa uvqumexa. uqšartam le’ot ‘al yadexa vechayu letotafot ben ‘enexa. uxtavtam ‘al mezuzot betexa uviš’arexexa}