

## Sermon: Understanding Ourselves and Our God(dess)

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Temple B'nai Chaim

Rabbi Rachel Bearman

Tonight we have prayed with words written by women and we have prayed to a God who we described in feminine language. On the surface, these changes might seem unremarkable, but, in reality, this kind of prayer experience – where women have shaped and are reflected in our prayers – is actually pretty miraculous. For the vast majority of Jewish history, the words of women have been excluded from synagogues. For hundreds of generations, the voices and bodies of women were seen as distracting to men and were therefore pushed out of the community's experience of public prayer. In the last two hundred years or so, courageous women and men have pushed our faith, our tradition, past these damaging restrictions and have opened up our sanctuaries to people of all genders. But, even still, for years and then decades, we celebrated the fact that women were now included in public worship, but we refused to change our texts in order for women to be able to see themselves reflected in the prayers.

In her book, *Engendering Judaism*, Rachel Adler explained how the absence of women in our texts can affect every aspect of the way that we perceive the Jewish tradition. She writes, "Relegating gender issues to women alone perpetuates a fallacy about the nature of Judaism. It presumes that Judaism is a body of gender-neutral texts and traditions, and that women constitute a special gendered addendum to the community of its transmitters. It further presumes that while women are represented in Jewish tradition, they are separate from it. Scholarship about their representation is classified as 'Women in...' or 'Women and...' and is regarded as nonessential knowledge of interest only to women."

Adler continued, "Men do not need to consider these special topics; they can simply study 'Judaism.' The truth is that, to paraphrase an old spiritual, all God's chillun got gender. There is not and never was a Judaism unaffected by the gendered perspectives of its transmitters and augmenters."

Let's pause now for a little background on Hebrew – it is a gendered language – every word is either grammatically masculine or feminine. When Jewish communities pray as a group, we almost exclusively use the masculine plural form. This has become the default for Jewish prayer language because it is the correct choice for any group of people to use as long as the group includes at least one man. Because public and communal prayer was built on the assumption that any gathering would include at least 10 men, the masculine plural form has become the default of all of our service language. Additionally, we use masculine nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs for the Divine throughout our prayer books. This format is not questioned as it has been the default way of addressing and describing God for thousands of years.

While our contemporary prayer books gloss over the gendered language of the Hebrew with “gender neutral” translations, for those paying attention to the Hebrew, it is impossible not to notice that every trip through our service reinforces the idea that men are the only ones praying and that the One to whom we pray is best described in masculine terms. Even something as simple and as fundamental as the blessing over the candles is completely shaped in gendered terms. If we swapped the God-language from masculine to feminine, the prayer would sound like this,

***B'rukha At Ya Eloheynu Ruakh ha-Olam asher kid'shatnu b'mitzvotaha v'tzivatnu l'hadlik neyr shel Shabbat.*** (To learn more- click [here](#).)

With all this in mind, we turn now to this week’s parashah. As so often happens, the Torah portion assigned to this Shabbat seems to be particularly appropriate given what is happening in the world around us. Tomorrow morning, thousands and thousands of people will gather in cities and towns all over our country to take part in the Women’s March. This Shabbat will be defined by the presence of so many people marching to shine light onto the reality that women in our country are all too often dismissed as, to use Rachel Adler’s words, “a special gendered addendum.” It is a beautiful coincidence that these marches will take place on the Shabbat when the Israelites time in Egypt is finally and painfully drawing to an end and the hope of a future of freedom is starting to form in their dreams.

The Exodus, the story of our people’s liberation, is not an account of one person’s miraculous actions. Fundamentally the Exodus is a story of an entire people looking around and declaring that they had not yet reached the place they were destined to reach. It is the story of a people who were dissatisfied with their lives and their situation and who chose to head into an uncertain future with the knowledge that while God would be with them as they traveled, they would be responsible for doing the work and for marching toward the freedom that they had been promised.

The journey toward that freedom was perilous and many times, one or more cried out that it was time to turn back, that their lives in Egypt had not been so bad, and that it was preferable to return rather than press forward. But, in spite of the dangers, the doubt, and the struggles, our Torah and our tradition teach us that they continued marching. They marched through a wilderness of challenges, and eventually their work, their desire, and their vision led them to the freedom that they had sought for so long.

Today, our journey toward freedom for all people will require much from each of us. To ensure that all are free and safe and equal, those with power will have to engage in *tzimtzum* – contracting – in order for those who have been dismissed to claim space in the conversation.

To ensure that all are free, each of us will have to ask ourselves who we pretend not to see in the name of expedience or ease.

To ensure that all are free, we will have to examine our language and our behavior- looking for the people that we have relegated to the shadows as we sought to see ourselves more clearly.

To ensure that all are free, we will need to link arms and support one another as we continue to journey – every day and in all places – toward the future that we have been promised and that we have promised ourselves.

These actions will not take us farther from our tradition. Instead, with these actions, we will be guiding the Jewish tradition back to its most central values – the conviction that each of us was created in the image of the Divine and the belief that all members of the Jewish family – past, present, and future – were all present when the Divine spoke at Sinai. Whether it is at tomorrow’s marches or in every day acts of allyship and respect – we owe it to the generations that we come from, the generations that will come from us, and to ourselves to continue to fight for and to pursue the freedom that our people have sought about since Moses told Pharaoh to let his people to go.

Lech Lecha.

L’chi Lach.

Let us go to the land that we’ve dreamed of.

Let us go together.

Let us go with speed.

Shabbat Shalom