

Kol Ishah: A Woman's Voice

This is the third year of the Women's League *Divrei Hokhmah* initiative: engrossing material to be used at the beginning of a Sisterhood meeting as a *d'var Torah*. There is no better way to involve your women than to warm them up with a spirited discussion about issues of importance.

This *Divrei Hokhmah: Kol Ishah* unit is designed as a brief ten-minute (or less – or more!) prelude to your Sisterhood meetings. We have provided prepared texts and study questions to generate lively discussion and social interaction as an effective lead-in to your program. Additionally, women will be involved in the *mitzvah* of study, one of Judaism's most revered values.

New Format

- The format has been revamped and is designed so that anyone can lead the discussion.
- There are fewer questions, and they require very little prior preparation by the discussion leader.
- **It is imperative, however, that there be sufficient copies of the participants' texts so that women can read along.**
- Save unused material for another time. You can use it in a variety of venues.

Why Kol Ishah?

The concept of *Kol Ishah: A Woman's Voice* was initially derived from the 20th anniversary celebration of the Jewish Theological Seminary's investiture of female cantors. Commemorated by this year's Torah Fund pin, it was a deliciously ironic tribute to women whose voices were once banned from public ritual. It seemed a fitting selection for these *Divrei Hokhmah* mini-study units used to open Sisterhood meetings. After all, who better to speak for us, about us and to us, than Jewish women?

Contents of the Kol Ishah Mini-Study Packet:

- Introduction to the theme of *Kol Ishah*
- *Kol Ishah* Guidelines
- Leader's text containing text, questions and answers
- Member's text containing text and questions only

Before the Sisterhood meeting:

- At the beginning of the year, select the particular woman's voice you want to highlight at each meeting
- Assign someone to lead the discussion(s)
- If you have a different leader each month, give each a copy of the background material and guidelines
- **Before each meeting, make enough copies so that every participant will have her own text.** Do not rely on having one copy read aloud. Some of these passages are long, so it is important that women can read them while discussing the issues.

Order of Study:

Most of the study-units are interchangeable; only a few come with recommended months for their use.

General Guidelines for the Study Session

- Read over the lesson before hand and decide which questions you want to discuss.
- Keep your eye on the clock. Ten minutes goes by very quickly!
- Ask that answers be kept short, and that people not repeat what was already said.
- While we have provided answers, they are not the only ones, or even the best ones.
- Think up additional questions.
- Encourage discussion. In text study, there is room for interpretation.
- Always thank the participants for their enthusiasm, insight and wisdom.

The included women:

1. **Ray Frank:** Women's spirituality, first Jewish Women's Congress (1893)
2. **Prayer for an expectant mother** (16th c. Italy)
3. **Rosalyn Yalow:** Refusal to be named "woman of the year in science"
4. **Golda Meir:** Just like a Woman
5. **Miriam's Lament:** a second-class hero
6. **Emma Lazarus:** Statue of Liberty, a new interpretation
7. **Judith Hauptman:** brining a woman's perspective to the male's domain
8. **Bat Yiftah** (*Jephtha's Daughter*): Women Mourning Together
9. **Henrietta Szold:** On the Obligation of Reciting *Kaddish*
10. **Gluckel of Hameln:** Motherly Advice

Thank you for your participation in this new and exciting project. We would love to hear your comments (lkogen@wlcj.org).

Introduction to *Divrei Hokhmah: Kol Ishah*

We have, indeed, come a long way. The following story is from the Jerusalem Talmud:

JT: Sotah 3:16a

A certain lady asked R. Eliezer why the one sin of the golden calf was punished with three deaths. He said to her: "a woman's wisdom is only in her spinning wheel, for it is written "And any woman of a wise heart, with her hands she weaves (Ex. 35:25). His son, Hyrcanus said to him: Why did you not give her some proper answer from the Torah? Now you have lost me three hundred kur a year in tithes." He [Eliezer] said to him [Hyrcanus]: "Let the words of Torah be burned and not given to women." When she went out, the students said to him: "This one you got rid of, but what do you answer us?"

This is a story of a wealthy woman who was, apparently, providing some members of the rabbinic class with a yearly tithe; yet she dared to ask a question about theology and was told that she should stick to women's work!

This year, Women's League has selected *kol ishab, a woman's voice*, as our programmatic theme, a theme rich in irony. A woman's voice was once considered by rabbis as a source of sexual provocation [*kol ishab ervah*], and thus justified their prohibition against female participation in public life, especially public ritual.

Fortunately, that attitude belongs to the past. Today we are able to listen to women whose scholarly credentials permit them to speak with authority about Jewish tradition; we listen to our friends, mothers, sisters, and daughters who can offer a variety of professional expertise on many subjects. Through their single and collective accomplishments they have empowered women to listen to their own voices.

The mini study guides in this packet include a treasure trove of women's wisdom, insights, perspectives, and scholarship. Whether it is the 20th century Golda Meir's acknowledgment of her "feminine voice" or the biblical Miriam's sorrowful lament over her exclusion from the honors bestowed upon the men of her generation, there is much to talk about.

Bring these *divrei hokhmah*, spoken by Jewish women to your meetings. Listen to their voices and be inspired and enriched by their words. Discuss them and add your own voice. Be assured that it is through this process of study that we inspire and enrich each other, as well.

A Prayer for Pregnant Women

Leader's Introduction: Many of the stories about women in the Bible are concerned with issues of fertility and childbearing. Throughout our history, a woman's value was contingent upon her ability to provide children – male children in particular – to her husband.

While modern medicine has eliminated most of the dangers of the actual birthing process, it has not been able to reduce the concern of the expectant mother for her unborn child. Let's read this prayer recited by Italian Jewish women from hundreds of years ago.

The Matriarch's Prayer

Master of the entire world,
Lord of Hosts:
the eyes of all turn to you,
for in time of trouble our salvation is with you.

Even though I am not worthy to come before you in prayer,
I have strengthened myself like steel
and come to cast my plea before you:

Just as you took note of Sarah
and you listened to entreaties for Rebecca
and you looked upon Leah's suffering
and you remembered our holy mother Rachel
and you have listened to the prayers of righteous women forever,
so in your manifold mercy look upon my distress
and remember me,
and harken to the sound of my supplication,
and send the redeeming angel to support me
and help me during this pregnancy of mine.
And for the sake of your mercy,
save me and rescue me from all evil.

Study Questions

1. Who do you suppose is the writer of this prayer?
2. What is her the principal concern?
3. Why does she mention the Matriarchs? To what, specifically, does she allude to in her reference to the Matriarchs?
 - *Each of the Matriarchs was concerned with childbearing. Even today, an expectant mother can look to them for support and comfort.*

Leader's Conclusion (optional): It was a hallmark of feminine pietistic literature that women's prayers often addressed concerns specific to women. From time immemorial, women have looked to one another for spiritual and physical support.

Bat Yiftah: Jephthah's Daughter **Finding Voice Among the Nameless**

Leader's Introduction: The account of Jephthah's nameless daughter (*Judges 11:34-40*) is one of the most troubling of any story in the Bible.

Paraphrase of *Judges 11:29-40*

Jephthah, the Gileadite leader, leads Israel in war against the Ammonites. When the war was being lost, Jephthah vowed to the Lord that if Israel prevailed in battle he would sacrifice the first thing to emerge from his house upon his return home. The battle was won and when Jephthah returned home, his only child – his beloved daughter – came running out to meet him “with timbrel and dance.”

Jephthah told her of his vow – that could not be cancelled – she said, “Do to me as you have vowed, seeing that the Lord has vindicated you against your enemies, the Ammonites. But let this be done for me: let me be for two months, and I will go with my companions and lament upon the hills and there bewail my maidenhood.”

After two months she returned to her father and he did as he vowed.

Leader: The story is concluded with an often-ignored and very unusual postscript. It reads:

Verse 40

So it became a custom in Israel for the maidens of Israel to go every year, for four days in the year, and ‘tell stories’ or ‘speak about’ the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.

Leader: This story recounts two separate activities on behalf of this nameless young woman. What are they?

- *The period of mourning that she observed with her friends before she was sacrificed*
- *The yearly four-day memorial of the daughter of Jephthah by her friends*

Leader: We are not going to discuss the tragedy of this story, one that is essentially of blatant child abuse in its most horrific form. Rather, we will concentrate on it as a fragmentary story about the community of women – and how they observe events in their lives.

Discussion Question: What kinds of activities might we as Jewish women envision these women performing on a yearly basis, in memory/honor of their friend?

Suggested meeting: December/Kislev, Hanukkah

Golda Meir (1898-1978)
Thinking with her heart...

Leader's Introduction: Golda Meir, Prime Minister of Israel from 1969 to 1973, was the first woman to be elected as a head of state. Throughout her life she was conscious of her role as a standard-bearer for women in politics. At the same time, she acknowledged – and was often reminded – of differences in the way men and women reacted.

She was renowned for this dichotomy: leading a war council in her living room, while making and serving the tea herself.

Golda died on December 8, 1978, and her *yahrzeit* is, coincidentally the 8th of *Kislev*. This month, as we celebrate the festival of Hanukkah, we can look to the words of this modern warrior of Israel.

What does Golda say about the allegations of her “womanly” attributes?

It's no accident many accuse me of conducting public affairs with my heart instead of my head. Well, what if I do? ... Those who don't know how to weep with their whole heart don't know how to laugh either. (1973)

Discussion Questions:

1. What issue is Golda addressing in this statement?
 - *The prevailing opinion, still in the early 1970s, was that women tend to respond emotionally rather than rationally.*

2. How does she respond to this characterization?
 - *She acknowledges that it could be an accurate characterization.*
 - *She suggests that it allows for a full range of emotions – from grief to happiness, which could serve to strengthen her as a leader.*
 - *Rather than accepting the idea that “thinking with the heart”, is a sign of weakness or ineffectiveness, she regards it as a sign of strength of character, and an indicator of emotional health.*

3. If Golda were alive today, do you think she would respond in the same way?

Henrietta Szold
“Thank you for your gracious offer, but...”

Leader’s Introduction: Henrietta Szold, one of the early Zionist leaders in America, was renowned for many things: a commitment to *klal Yisrael*, her compassion for Jewish children and for Hebraic and rabbinic skills that were unparalleled among her female contemporaries. This letter provides us with a glimpse into the singular world of this Jewish proto-feminist – at a time when such a response was inconceivable to most women.

Letter to Haym Peretz on saying *Kaddish* for her mother (New York, September 16, 1916)

It is impossible for me to find words in which to tell you how deeply I was touched by your offer to act as “*Kaddish*” for my dear mother. I cannot even thank you — it is something that goes beyond thanks. It is beautiful, what you have offered to do — I shall never forget it.

You will wonder, then, that I cannot accept your offer. Perhaps it would be best for me not to try to explain to you in writing, but to wait until I see you to tell you why it is so. I know well, and appreciate what you say about, the Jewish custom; and Jewish custom is very dear and sacred to me. And yet I cannot ask you to say *Kaddish* after my mother. The *Kaddish* means to me that the survivor publicly and markedly manifests his wish and intention to assume the relation to the Jewish community which his parent had, and that so the chain of tradition remains unbroken from generation to generation, each adding its own link. You can do that for the generations of your family, I must do that for the generations of my family.

I believe that the elimination of women from such duties was never intended by our law and custom — women were freed from positive duties when they could not perform them, but not when they could. It was never intended that, if they could perform them, their performance of them should not be considered as valuable and valid as when one of the male sex performed them. And of the *Kaddish* I feel sure this is particularly true.

My mother had eight daughters and no son; and yet never did I hear a word of regret pass the lips of either my mother or my father that one of us was not a son. When my father died, my mother would not permit others to take her daughters’ place in saying the *Kaddish*, and so I am sure I am acting in her spirit when I am moved to decline your offer. But beautiful your offer remains nevertheless, and, I repeat, I know full well that it is much more in consonance with the generally accepted Jewish tradition than is my or my family’s conception. You understand me, don’t you?

Study Questions:

1. What is the subject of this communication?
 - *Szold has declined the offer of a man to recite kaddish on her behalf for her deceased mother.*

2. What is her argument?
 - *The Kaddish is the survivor's continuation of the role of the departed within the community; maintaining an "unbroken chain of tradition from generation to generation." It is thus the responsibility of the survivor, not a surrogate.*
 - *Szold maintains that the "elimination of women from such duties" was not the intention of the law; women should perform positive mitzvot if they were physically able to do so.*
 - *The Szold family had eight daughters and no sons. When their father, the revered Baltimore-based Rabbi Benjamin Szold, died their mother would not permit an outsider to recite Kaddish; thus Szold maintained that she should do the same for their mother.*

Discussion Question: Why is this considered such an extraordinary document in women's history?

Judith Hauptman Through the Looking Glass: A Woman in a Man's World

Leader's Introduction: Judith Hauptman, the first woman to be granted a Ph.D. in Talmud at the Jewish Theological Seminary, is a pioneer feminist on many fronts. In addition to being the first woman to achieve the highest academic rank in an entirely male field of study, her most recent scholarship provides an understanding of rabbinic texts – written only by men – as they affected the lives of women (using gender as an analytical tool).

While much of the earliest Jewish feminist writings focused primarily on women's complete and utter subjugation by men, Hauptman, in her groundbreaking work *Rereading the Rabbis*, introduces a more nuanced understanding of men and women in Jewish antiquity.

From the Introduction, *Rereading the Rabbis: A Woman's Voice* (1998)

My answer, stated succinctly, is that the Rabbis upheld patriarchy as the preordained mode of social organization, as dictated by the Torah. They thus perpetuated women's second-class, subordinate status. They neither achieved equality for women nor even sought it. But of critical importance, they began to introduce numerous, significant, and occasionally bold corrective measures to improve the lot of women. In some cases, they eliminated abusive behaviors that had developed over time. In others, they broke new ground, granting women benefits that they never had before, even at men's expense. From their own perspective, the Rabbis were seeking to close the gap that had developed over time between more enlightened social thinking and women's more subordinate status as defined by the received texts, biblical and rabbinic, without openly opposing such texts.

Discussion Questions

1. What does Hauptman say about the position of women in ancient Judaism?
 - *It was a patriarchal society, as ordained by the Torah*
 - *Women had second-class status*
2. Did the Rabbis acknowledge this second-class status?
3. Although the Rabbis accepted this inequality, what did they do to redress some of the inequities of the patriarchal system?
 - *The Rabbis never sought to equalize women's status*
 - *They introduced corrective measures to improve the lives of women: eliminated abusive behavior; granted new rights (the ketubah, for example)*
 - *Sometimes new rights were granted at the expense of men*
4. Does Hauptman see the Rabbis as agents of social change?
5. Do you think that Hauptman's reading is sympathetic to the Rabbis? Is it helpful to Jewish feminism?

Emma Lazarus The Voice of Lady Liberty

Leader's Introduction: Emma Lazarus, an accomplished poet by the time of her death at the age of 37, lived her life, ironically, as a member of New York's privileged social elite. During her last years she became increasingly troubled by the violent injustices suffered by Jews in Eastern Europe. The sonnet to the Statue of Liberty was hardly noticed until after her death, when it was found tucked into a small portfolio of poems written in 1883 to raise money for the construction of the Statue of Liberty's pedestal. A patron was struck by the poem and arranged to have its last five lines become a permanent part of the statue itself. By 1945, the engraved poem was relocated – including all 14 lines – to be placed over the Statue of Liberty's main entrance.

The New Colossus (New York City, 1883)

*Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame,
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
with silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*

Brief background: Sculptor Frederic Auguste Bartholdi was commissioned to design a sculpture with the year 1876 in mind for completion, to commemorate the centennial of the American Declaration of Independence. It was his intention to create an ideological symbol, a magnificent statue facing France, a haven of enlightenment that still battled the forces of tyranny and oppression in Europe. The placement of Lazarus' poem at its base, however, dramatically changed the symbolism: the Statue of Liberty and the United States became a beacon of welcome for those immigrants *leaving the old world*, coming to the new.

Discussion Questions

1. How does Lazarus view the old world?
 - *Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" The old world is one of pomp and ceremony; class and inequality*
2. What does Lady Liberty, i.e. the United States offer instead?
 - *Freedom and opportunity to everyone, regardless of social and economic status*
3. What does Lazarus imply with the term the *New Colossus*, and what images does she conjure with the term *Mother of Exiles*?

Optional: Lazarus compares Lady Liberty to the Colossus of Rhodes? How do they differ?

- *There is a gender difference: The Colossus of Rhodes is a giant, with conquering limbs from land to land – presumably male, obsessed with warfare and conquest.*
- *Lady Liberty is maternal; loving and welcoming; mild eyes compare with conquering limbs; provides light for the oppressed, as opposed to being the oppressor.*

Gluckel of Hameln (1646-1724) Super Mom

Leader's Introduction: Gluckel began this remarkable memoir in 1690 as a form of grief therapy, following the death of her beloved husband, Haym. The mother of more than a dozen children, a widow at the age of forty, Gluckel carried on the family business after Haym's death, arranged marriages for their many surviving children, all the while lamenting and celebrating what life had to offer. While there are few extant works that paint such vivid images of Jewish life in early modern Germany, the most astonishing feature of Gluckel's memoir is to show that mothers have changed little, even with the passage of time.

The Memoirs of Gluckel of Hameln

The best thing for you, my children, is to serve God from your heart, without falsehood or sham, not giving out to people that you are one thing while, God forbid, in your heart you are another. Say your prayers with awe and devotion. During the time for prayers, do not stand about and talk of other things. While prayers are being offered to the Creator of the world, hold it a great sin to engage another man in talk about an entirely different matter—shall God almighty be kept waiting until you have finished your business?

Moreover, put aside a fixed time for the study of the Torah, as best you know how. Then diligently go about your business, for providing your wife and children a decent livelihood is likewise a mitzvah—the command of God and the duty of man. We should, I say, put ourselves to great pains for our children, for on this the world is built, yet we must understand that if children did as much for their parents, the children would quickly tire of it. (p. 2)

Discussion Questions:

1. What kinds of advice does Gluckel dispense to her children?
2. How much of her advice is applicable today?
3. What is the best piece of advice your mother gave to you?

Suggested Reading:
September (Rosh Hashanah/Yom Kippur)

Ray Frank **On Women's Spirituality (1893)**

Leader's Introduction: Until recently the life and work of Rachel "Ray" Frank, were completely lost to American Jewish history. Fortunately, she has been reclaimed by Jewish feminist scholarship.

Ray Frank's reputation was first established in 1890, by serendipity, when she was invited to give the Rosh Hashanah sermon in Spokane, Washington. So momentous was the event that local newspapers referred to her as "the lady rabbi" and "the latter day Deborah." By the time of the first Jewish Women's Congress in 1893, Ray Frank was acknowledged as the obvious choice to deliver the inaugural address, which she entitled "Woman in the Synagogue".

Excerpt from address to first Jewish Women's Congress, 1893

Duality manifests itself in all things, but in nothing is this two-foldness more plainly seen than in woman's nature.

The weaker sex physically, it is the stronger spiritually, it having been said that religion were impossible without woman. And yet the freedom of the human soul has been apparently effected by man. I say apparently effected, for experience has demonstrated, and history records, that one element possessed by woman had made her the great moral, the great motif force of the world, though she be, as all great forces are, a silent force.

It may be true that sin came into the world because of the disobedience of the first woman, but woman has long since atoned for it by her loving faith, her blind trust in the Unknown. Down through the ages, traditional and historical, she has come to us the symbol of faith and freedom, of loyalty and love.

Discussion questions

1. What does Ray Frank say about women's spirituality?
2. Is this a woman's voice, or is she restating men's perception of women?

Rosalyn S. Yalow

Nobel Prize Winner (Physiology, Medicine)

“I have decided not to accept the 1978 Woman of the Year Award...”

Leader’s Introduction: In 1977, Dr. Rosalyn Yalow became the first American-trained woman – as well as the first Jewish woman – to receive a Nobel Prize in a scientific field. Shortly thereafter, *Ladies Home Journal*, one of the most influential women’s magazines in the mid-twentieth century, wanted to honor her with their highly coveted Woman of the Year Award (in science), which she declined.

Yalow’s response to Lenore Hershey, editor-in-chief of *Ladies Home Journal*:

I have decided not to accept the 1978 Woman of the Year Award in the category of New Scientific Community from the Ladies Home Journal although it would perhaps have been more diplomatic to accept it. I think it more appropriate for me to take a positive stand by rejecting what Susan Jacoby would have called a ‘ghetto’ award.

She stated, very wisely I believe, that ‘A ghetto job is a ghetto job as long as it is perceived by male executives—and by the woman they hire—as a job with a ‘for women only’ sign. It doesn’t matter whether the salary is \$50,000 or \$7,5000 a year...the situation can only be changed by women who regard themselves and are regarded by others as being plain excellent—not excellent only in comparison to other women... Women who have ‘made it’ are no longer pleased to be told that their achievements are remarkable for a woman.’

Discussion Questions:

1. What is Yalow’s response to *Ladies Home Journal*?
2. What is her reason for declining?
 - *Yalow wants recognition among all of her peers, not just women*
 - *Excellence is absolute, not conditional*
 - *She does not want to be seen as the best among women only, but among all scientists, male and female*
3. Do you think that Yalow, as a Jew, has a responsibility to promote the accomplishments of other Jews, and particularly Jewish women?

Suggested for January, the month of *Shabbat Shirah*, or near *Pesach*

Miriam Not Part of the Club

Leader's Introduction: This poem is from *The Women's Haggadah*, by E.M Bronner. One of the first of its kind, this *haggadah* first appeared in *Ms. Magazine* in 1977. Jewish women, newly sensitized to the absence of women's voices in Jewish texts were beginning to create new rituals and literature that could speak to women, their experiences, and their place in Judaism. The women's seder is a popular new ritual that addresses the complete absence of women in the traditional *haggadah*.

The Women's Haggadah*, by E.M. Bronner with Naomi Nimrod, 1994 *The Lament of the Prophet Miriam

Once she danced at the banks of the sea.

Once the women leapt after her.
Then she praised the One on High
And her tambourine rose in the air.

And the rain in the wilderness
tasted like coriander,
like almond and honey,
but the taste in her mouth was maror,
bitter as her name.

"You shall be a Kingdom of Priests."
She was not appointed.
"And a land of prophets."
She was not heeded.
"Come up unto the Lord,"
Moses, Aaron and the Seventy Elders.
"Come up unto the Lord,"
Joshua.

"Come up to me into the Mount,
and the Lord spoke unto Moses"
"and the Lord spoke unto Moses"
"and the Lord said unto Moses..."
"And He gave unto Moses..."
"Moreover, the Lord spoke unto Moses
and He gave unto Moses
two tablets of stone."
"Come up unto the Lord"
"Come up to me unto the Mount
And take Aaron and his sons."

"And the Lord spoke
and Moses ... the skin of his face
shone."

"And the Lord spoke with Moses and
Aaron

and the Lord spoke with Moses
in Mount Sinai."

"And the Lord spoke with Moses
in the wilderness of the Sinai."

And Miriam and Aaron spoke against
Moses.

Miriam's face did not shine.
"Behold: Miriam became leprous,
white as snow."

Pale in the wilderness
for the counting of seven days,
shut out from the camp,
tented in dishonor.

Soon, she lay herself down,
the sister of Moses,
the prophet of her people
she lay down
in a place of no seed, no fig,
no wine, no pomegranate,
no water,
and, parched, Miriam died.

Discussion questions:

1. What does Miriam convey to us in this poem?
 - *Miriam is the first to celebrate God's miracle at the Sea of Reeds yet Miriam contrasts herself, and her role in this central time in Israel's history, as secondary to Moses, Aaron, and all other men. (i.e. Joshua, the Elders)*
 - *Her names implies "bitterness" – maror*
 - *The many honors given to men – kingdom of priests, prophets – were denied her but given to Moses and Aaron and his sons*
 - *When Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses, only Miriam was punished with leprosy*
 - *When menstruating she was exiled from the community*
 - *She was buried without honor, and without water, parched.*

2. Do you think this is a fair reading of the biblical text?

