

“Women and Mitzvot”

by Rabbi Pamela Barmash

A Study Guide by Rabbi Pamela Barmash

Estimated lesson duration: 60-90 minutes, or 90-120 minutes with hevruta study

Central study questions:

1. How does halakhah speak to us in a time of social and cultural change?
2. How do mitzvot inspire us to be more mindful of God in the daily routines of life and be more in tune with our spirituality?

Goals and Objectives

1. Comprehending Rabbi Barmash’s *legal argument* in the teshuvah.

Participants will be able to:

- a. explain in their own words the primary question addressed.
- b. explain in their own words the steps in Rabbi Barmash’s argument.
- c. define halakhah, teshuvah, Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, mitzvah/mitzvot, egalitarianism, Mishnah, Babylonian Talmud, Sifre, Tosefta, reciting the Shema, tzitzit, tefillin, lulav, shofar, counting the omer, minyan

2. Comprehending Rabbi Barmash’s theology and understanding of social change.

Participants will be able to:

- a. articulate how spirituality and theological issues shape the *teshuvah*.
- b. participate in a discussion on how mitzvot enrich their lives and bring them closer to God.
- c. explain how changes have occurred to the social role and understanding of women.
- d. discuss how to fully implement egalitarianism in their community.

Texts

The educator may choose to provide the participants either with the teshuvah or the source sheet. The educator may choose to do all or some of the sources.

Suggested Teaching Plan

Depending on available time and the interests of the participants, the educator may choose to:

1. work through the argument and sources of the teshuvah, interspersing questions for the participants to answer; or
2. introduce sections of the teshuvah, then allow time for participants to study sources in hevruta, then come together to discuss what they have learned.

Then ask the participants to vote on the teshuvah like the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards does.

Other Questions to Consider:

1. In some Conservative/Masorti communities, egalitarianism is instituted only partially: that is, males are expected to wear a tallit and put on tefillin, and females are allowed to. What does this say about egalitarianism in the Conservative/Masorti movement? How should egalitarianism be fully instituted in Conservative/Masorti communities?

2. Does it matter that this teshuvah (or any teshuvah) was approved by a large majority of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards? Why did a large majority support this teshuvah?

3. Why does Rabbi Barmash believe that egalitarianism is about fostering the fulfillment of mitzvot by all Jews, not just women?

4. Why is Torah study part of the issue of women observing mitzvot?

5. Why did it take until 2014 for a teshuvah on this topic to be addressed by the Committee on Law and Standards?

6. What might be the consequences of the exemption from mitzvot for care-givers? Would it apply both to female and male care-givers? Would it apply to those caring for the elderly as well as for young children?

7. How does egalitarianism reflect the distinct philosophy and vision of Conservative/Masorti Judaism?