

I am speaking tonight because I am passionate about inclusion. Our community is working actively to make our synagogue a home to all, regardless of age, ability, gender or sexual orientation. This talk is the first of a series to raise issues in relation to inclusion.

I have chosen to speak about inclusion of women because it has been difficult for me to reconcile the role of women prescribed in Jewish tradition with my secular feminist values.

One may ask why this challenge exists in a reform community like NSTE which has readily adopted egalitarian practice, and women are so prominent in our spiritual leadership and synagogue governance. Yes, this is true. But there remains a disconnection between our community's values and the male dominated thinking that is entrenched in Jewish tradition.

This disconnect can be seen in **both** the presence and the absence of women in Torah. The vast majority of Torah stories appear to be about men for men, so when women are mentioned, we prick up our ears.

Feminists have used these stories to demonstrate the role women played outside of the home as leaders and prophets. For example, the Pesach story portrays Moses's sister Miriam as a leader of Jewish women who led them in song, music and dance on the shores of the Red Sea.

But importantly, their voices rise only after the men have commenced their victory celebration in song. The particular song that Miriam and the women sang may well have been a back-and-forth chant between the men and the women which historically, was common at victory celebrations to express relief and jubilation at the defeat of enemies.

It interests me that Deborah, the Judge and most revered of the female prophets, rose to prominence at a time when Jewish men had been significantly weakened by Canaanite rule. Their lands were in ruins and they were powerless under foreign rule. Deborah was a leader and an agitator in the **absence** of male leadership, not from male willingness to relinquish power to a woman.

Other stories about female prophets, including Miriam and the little known Noadiah tell of their conflicts with male authorities for which they are punished or derided.

While stories of strong female characters and retellings of Torah stories from a female perspective feel inspirational and affirming to women, they are not sufficient to empower women in Judaism. They do not alter the historical fact that women were, and in some communities **still**, shut out of ritual life.

We can no more rewrite this history of female repression than we say we were not slaves in Egypt.

In her book, *Standing Again at Sinai Jewish Memory from a Feminist Perspective*, Judith Plaskow suggests that the absence of women from the moment the Jewish people stood at Mount Sinai ready to enter into the covenant cannot be dismissed as merely historical injustice. Plaskow states “the Torah is not just history...but also **living memory**”. These stories and absences perpetuated through generations as a central part of the Shabbat and festival liturgy leave women—in Plaskow’s words “eavesdropping on a conversation among men and between man and God.”

Women’s biological functions have also set us apart from men in relation to Jewish laws and precepts and have resulted in our alienation and disconnection from the sacred community.

The laws of ritual purity set out in Leviticus excluded women from the priesthood and the Tabernacle. The exclusion of women during their biological cycles and after childbirth, not only signified their own impurity but also had the potential to render ritually impure people and objects around them.

Laws concerning women’s sexual activity are outlined not in **moral** terms, but in terms of **property** rights. Thus a man is executed for having intercourse with another’s wife, because he has committed a crime of theft against a man. In Deuteronomy, a man who seduces or rapes a virgin effectively purchases her, by paying a bride price to her father and marrying her.

Women have lesser spiritual obligations than men according to Halachic law. We are responsible for obeying all of Judaism's negative commandments, and also for observing most of the positive commandments. These positive precepts include celebrating the Sabbath and all of the festivals and holy days of the Jewish year.

But women are not required to observe mitzvot that must occur at a particular time, such as attending Synagogue services, or mitzvot associated with festivals, such as counting the omer; dwelling in a sukkah; or hearing the shofar on Rosh Hashanah.

Time-bound rituals from which women are not exempted mostly take place in the home. These include lighting candles and participating in the kiddush on Shabbat; eating matzah; and drinking the four cups at the Passover seder.

Traditionally women's observance must not interfere with the domestic and child rearing duties ascribed to them. But why do these exclusions and exemptions include all women, and not just those who are married with dependent children. Were these rules perhaps, a deliberate attempt to restrict female participation in communal activities in the public domain?

While women are not prohibited from voluntarily fulfilling most of the time-bound ritual commandments from which they are exempt, in orthodox traditions they are not encouraged to do so. Maimonides ruled that a woman's voluntary actions are worth less than a man's, because she is not responding to a divine commandment.

Even the beautiful tradition of giving women precedence in kindling the Sabbath candles has been given a negative connotation in rabbinic tradition. To light the candles is seen to atone for original sin. Eve caused Adam to sin, extinguishing the light of the world and darkening his soul.

So what can be done for women to find their voice in the tradition? Is this a responsibility that extends beyond our own inclusive community?

In my opinion, true inclusion for women requires a spirit of innovation and willingness to modernise the liturgy which is at the heart of the Reform movement. But we need to be cautious in how we achieve this.

An inclusive feminist perspective, therefore, does not require us to change Torah or exclude the passages that are challenging to current day values of inclusion. Rather it is necessary to reinterpret the stories in such a way that both men and women in our community can be guided by them.

While this community has largely addressed the issue of masculine vocabulary in the representation of God and in prayer, we still stumble over language. At our Seders we play a linguistic game of substituting 'He' for 'She' or the gender neutral 'They' which becomes harder as we move through the four cups. How much easier it would be if we read from a gender neutral Haggadah?

Outside of our own inclusive community, we should support women's struggles for inclusion in Israel and in the Diaspora. In Israel, women's lack of inclusion is evident in many places, from the lack of Government financial support for inclusive reform synagogues, inability to obtain a civil divorce, and prohibitions against wearing kippot, tallit and reading from Torah at the Kotel. Haredi men frequently assert that it is their religious right not to sit next to women on planes and buses. As individuals, and as a community, we should involve ourselves in these struggles through organisations such as the Israel Religious Action Centre.

We have the opportunity to introduce new customs and innovative practices which focus on women and female experience. These can be symbolic, such as the recent tradition of including an orange on a seder plate to represent inclusion of women and other groups who may be marginalised in their practice of Judaism, or ritualistic activities such as Rosh Chodesh prayer groups.

The most meaningful inclusion will be achieved by innovations in how our precepts are interpreted and how we pray. After all, the word used to describe Jewish law, *Halachah*, literally means movement, the path that one walks. This surely implies that change or the removal of obstacles is permissible in order to go forward?

There is a place for a feminist Mishnah that gives both women and men a more central place in the interpretation of Torah.

In our prayers, why do we bless our sons before our daughters, and our patriarchs before the matriarchs? Should the idealised Jewish vision of womanhood portrayed in *A Woman of Valour* incorporate **both** traditional and contemporary notions of valour or *Eishet Chayil*? While we all wish to help our husbands and provide love and guidance to our children, many women seek to be recognised for more. How might our community evolve to help women reclaim and redefine *Eishet Chayil* as something uplifting and worldly, not restricted to women's role in upholding Jewish values in the domestic sphere?

I leave you with these thought provoking questions and wish you Shabbat Shalom.