

**Parashat Achrei Mot, April 30, 2022**  
**29 Nisan 5782**  
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**At Congregation Netivot Shalom, Berkeley, California**

I was inspired to give this drash by Claire Max, who taught us last Fall about Bereshit, her birth parsha. I was born 75 years ago, after Peysekh, on the 24<sup>th</sup> of Nisan, which was this past Monday.

This drash is also in honor of my friend Rivka Greenberg, whom I first got to know when we organized presentations in 2001 on the topic of Gender & Judaism.

Most years, my birthday corresponds to *Parshat Shmini* but in leap years *Shmini* comes before *Peysekh* and *Achrei Mot* comes just after. Which would I choose?

I decided to compare women in the two *parshiot* because contemporary thought notes the importance of individuals seeing themselves in the stories they read, in the issues they consider, and in the faces of role models.

Long after the delicious narratives in *Bereshit/Genesis* involving interesting women, who would I find in these two *parshiot*?

*SHMINI* has Moshe, Aharon, Aharon's four sons, Aharon's uncle Uzziel, and Uzziel's two sons. No women.

*ACHREI MOT* has Moshe and Aharon. About three-quarters of the way through, (18:7) we get to, well, no specific women but roughly this: Don't uncover ... the nakedness of your mother, your father's wife, or your sister, your son's daughter or your daughter's daughter, your father's wife's daughter, your father's or mother's sister, your father's brother's wife, daughter-in-law, or brother's wife. (p. 691). Then, "Don't come near a woman during her period of impurity, don't have carnal relations with your neighbor's wife...."

Who would argue with the prohibition of incest? Yet all these instructions are for men, who are told that women are a source of impurity, of defilement (Plaskow, p. 175).

I've chosen to talk about *ACHREI MOT* and deliberately asked for the honor of the fifth *aliya*, which contains this language, to take ownership even of Torah whose language is troubling.

How do I feel listening to Torah when there are no ACTIVE women in a *parshe*?

I do feel included in the mass of Israelites leaving *Mitzrayim*, receiving the Torah, wandering in the desert for 40 years, then settling the promised land.

Unfortunately, there are numerous instances in which the Torah makes clear that its COMPILERS did not think of the Israelites per se as including the women. For example:

In *Shmot/Exodus* 32.2, Aharon says, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters.... (p. 530)

In *Dvarim/Deuteronomy* 29:10. Moshe says, "You stand this day, all of you, before the Lord your God – your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your wives, ... (p. 1165)

I cringe when I hear this language. I know Moshe and Aharon were addressing me at Sinai and in the desert, not BECAUSE of the Torah's language but DESPITE it.

\* \* \*

Whether or not there are HUMAN females in a *parshe*, I do feel included because my mind and heart contain both male and female images for God.

My first experience using female God language was at community High Holyday services put on by the Beyt Chesed chavurah for Hillel thirty-five years ago. Beyt Chesed was one of the forerunners of Netivot Shalom and some of you were there.

I read aloud a prayer in English that used "She" for God. Tears welled up in many eyes, including my own.

Our liturgy uses multiple images to name the sacred because, for each of us, some metaphors speak more profoundly than others.

Claire Sherman once said how meaningful it is for her that in the High Holyday liturgy we talk of God as a potter, because she, Claire, is a potter.

What kinds of metaphors and pronouns do we use to talk about (and to) God? *HaShem* is the name. *HaMaqom* is the place. In Yiddish. *der Eybershter* is the one on high.

The editors of *Lev Shaleym*, our *sidur*, comment on the importance of words. They tell us (at the beginning of *P'sukei D'zimra*) (p. 122), "Just as divine speech created the world, so too with human speech: what we give voice to becomes more substantive, more real.... The prayers that we utter shape our inner lives.... (and prompt) us to shape a different external reality."

I think the exclusively masculine language about God in Hebrew and often in English, using the same pronouns that refer to human men, has led many to have a male image of God, even if Jewish theology denies that God is male.

Two weeks ago, we read in the *Hagode* (A Night of Questions, p. 46) "*Vayotsi-eynu Adoshem elokeynu misham b'yad khazaka u-vi-zroa netuya*," "The Eternal One our God brought us out from there (from *Mitzrayim*) with a strong hand and an outstretched arm."

In your mind's eye did you see a human arm? If so, was it a male arm?

\* \* \*

Let's explore how to deal with this.

(ONE) When most of us were young, we were told in English class and maybe in religious school that "he" (whether for people or for God), incorporates "she." That is no longer convincing.

As Cal Linguistics Professor Eve Sweetser has told me, when a broader category (such as man meaning humans) shares a name with one sub-category (man

meaning males), THAT sub-category is the core and other sub-categories (such as woman, female) are peripheral, are seen as other.

(TWO) In Jewish mystical tradition, the Shekhina, depicted as female, is the presence of God within each person. Some *minyanim* address *brachot* to Shekhina.

I'm not comfortable with association of the Shekhina exclusively with the female OR association of the God on high, who judges, punishes, and wages war on His enemies, exclusively with the male.

(THREE) You might right now be thinking that theologically you're really more of a Reconstructionist, feeling God as a force in the universe rather than a being who can or should be addressed with personal pronouns. Poet Marcia Falk has reframed liturgy this way.

Yet we have all chosen today to be HERE, using a *siddur* in which we address a personal God using personal pronouns.

It seems more honest to take seriously what gendered metaphors and pronouns we use for God, both in the liturgy and in our hearts.

(FOUR) Some *siddurim*, such as our own *Lev Shaleym*, have replaced He, Him, and His (in the English) with the word "God."

Others might like this, but when the word "God" is repeated over and over, I am distracted from my davening imagining the editors sitting around a table furiously replacing third-person pronouns or torturing sentences so they don't need personal pronouns.

Alternatively, we could start using "they" in English as God's preferred pronoun.

But to me, neither "God" nor "they," rather than male and female pronouns, is good enough.

And in Hebrew, second-person pronouns are gendered, so there's an additional problem.

I agree with Judith Plaskow, who wrote in 1990 in “Standing Again at Sinai, “Only deliberately disruptive – that is, female – metaphors can break the imaginative hold of male metaphors that have been used for millennia (p. 160).”

Our tradition tells us that God cannot be described in words. Yet words matter to us, to those who pray.

To quote Judith Plaskow again, “the capacity to see the One in and through the changing forms of the many, to glimpse the whole in and through its infinite images, is finally what monotheism is truly about. (p.152).”

For three decades, the Nishmat Shalom Minyan, most of whose participants also *daven* here, has used gender-balanced language in both Hebrew and English.

Our religious experiences have changed since women have come to the *bima*. How might our religious experiences change if we use both female and male metaphors and pronouns for God?

I invite you to explore pronouns in a few minutes, in Musaf:

- Instead of the words “God” or “Adoshem,” try saying or feeling “she” or “her.”

- In the 2<sup>nd</sup> *brokhe* of the Musaf Amida (p. 186):

for

*Ata gibor l’olam adoshem*, “You are ever mighty, Adoshem”

try

*At gibora l’olam adoshem*

- In the 2<sup>nd</sup> paragraph of the *Kedusha* (p. 187),

for

*Barukh kvod adoshem mimkomo*, “Praised is Adoshem’s glory wherever He dwells.”

try

*Barukh kvod adoshem mimkoma*, “Praised is Adoshem’s glory wherever She dwells.”

- And when we are outside doing *kidish*,  
try

*Ki sheyshet yamim asta Adoshem et ha shamayim v'et ha-aretz, u-vayom ha-shvi-i shavta va'tinafash.*

“In six days God made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day She rested and was refreshed.”

I wish us all the same. *A gutn Shabes. Shabbat Shalom.*