



## SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

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**SHAVUOS 2**

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***The Woman's Torah Comes First***

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## Shavuos 2

### **The Woman's Torah Comes First**

Good Yom Tov!

The Hebrew calendar year 5777 (or 2017) is special for one dubious reason: It's the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution.

The Bolshevik Revolution, of course, is the social upheaval that got rid of the centuries-old monarchy in Russia. With the royal family of the Czars killed by the rebels, many believed that Communism would be better. But instead, the Communists in power only brought suffering to millions of Russians for the next 70 years.

Additionally, 1917 not only marked the Bolshevik Revolution but also the Balfour Declaration.

The Balfour Declaration, made by Lord Balfour, a representative of the British Empire which at the time was a world power, recognized that the Land of Israel was the national home of the Jewish People.

But in 1917, there was another revolution in history—a little less known, but one which had a mighty influence on the future of the Jewish People. Over 100 years ago, there rose up, as the Rebbe himself put it, “a righteous woman who saw and felt what was happening with girls around her, and who started a movement of effort to establish schools for girls” (Sichah, 6 Tishrei 5735, Sichos Kodesh Vol. I, pg. 35).

That woman was Sarah Schneirer.

Up to 100 years ago, the prevailing custom (at least in Orthodox and traditional Jewish homes) was that parents took pains to ensure that their sons amassed knowledge in the cheders and yeshivos—while the daughters, on the other hand, amassed knowledge in the context of the home. Most girls (with the exception of those in the most developed countries, like Germany, England and the U.S.) did not know how to read and write—and not just Jewish girls but all girls. That is what was considered normal in general—girls did not go to school and did not learn anything in any organized fashion.

But with the rise of the Industrial Revolution (and the European Jewish Haskalah movement before that, really), girls started getting formal education—with the result that a growing number of Jewish girls were getting secular educations of increasing quality, leaving them with gaps in Jewish education. And that resulted in many of them drifting from Judaism.

But then Sarah Schenirer came along and opened the first Jewish girl's school in Cracow, Poland. She named the school Bais Yaakov (the “House of Jacob”). And nowadays, 100 years later, there are hundreds of Jewish girls' schools all around the world carrying the name “Bais Yaakov.”

Now, why did she name her school system Bais Yaakov?

Well, that brings us to today's Torah reading. On Shavuot, we read the story of Matan Torah, the Giving of the Torah, of course. We find it in the Torah portion of Yisro. Right at the beginning, we read how the Jewish Nation arrived in the Sinai Desert, and right away, "Moshe went up to the L-rd, and G-d called to him from the mountain, saying, 'Thus shall you say to the House of Jacob and tell the Sons of Israel.' "

And what did G-d ask Moshe to say to the Jewish Nation? "You saw that which I did to Egypt... and now, if you listen to My Voice... and you shall be a treasure unto Me" (Shmos 19:3-4). Put simply, G-d told the Jewish Nation that I took you out of Egypt so that you could get the Torah.

Our Sages, who took close note of every letter in the Torah, were bewildered by the verse in the Torah, "Thus shall you say to the House of Jacob and tell the Sons of Israel"—it's repetitive, seemingly: "Thus shall you say" has the same meaning as "tell," so why does the Torah say the same thing twice?

So Rashi (Shmos 19:3) quotes from the Midrash: " 'Thus shall you say to the House of Jacob' refers to the womenfolk... and 'tell the Sons of Israel' was reserved for the menfolk." So here we have a specific command to Moshe to first speak to the womenfolk, the "House of Jacob," and only then to speak to the men, to the "Sons of Israel." And that's why Mrs. Schenirer named her school Bais Yaakov.

But why indeed did G-d see a special need to send Moshe to speak to the women first? And the Midrash (Shmos Rabbah 28:2) asks this very question: "Why first to the womenfolk?"

And the Midrash offers three answers:

1. "Because they are motivated with mitzvos." The womenfolk keep the mitzvos with greater feeling and passion than men—meaning that women by nature are more attuned to spirituality and are closer to G-d. And so they're happy to keep mitzvos.
2. "So that they would lead their sons to Torah." The women are the ones who educated the children—after all, education at home is set by the woman. And so the womenfolk needed to be convinced first, because if the women were on the right side, then the entire family follows in the way of Torah.
3. "G-d said, 'When I created the universe, I commanded only Adam, and after that, Eve was commanded (by Adam's mouth), and she transgressed and corrupted the universe. So now, if I do not address the women first, they will negate the Torah.'" And the Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer (Chapt. 41) adds, "G-d said to Moshe, 'Go ask the daughters of Israel if they want to accept the Torah, for I know from Adam that the way of men is that they follow the opinion of women.'"

At the creation of the universe, G-d commanded Adam to not eat from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, and it was Adam who passed along that command to Eve. And we all know what the end of that story was: Eve influenced him to eat of the fruit, and he did—and as a result of that, he was exiled from the Garden of Eden. G-d said that all that happened because Eve didn't hear the command from G-d Himself—if she had only heard the command from G-d Himself, she would have never eaten from the Tree of Knowledge and also would not have allowed her husband to do the same. And so now, G-d instructed Moshe to speak to the women first—and if they accepted the Torah, it would be an "insurance plan" that Judaism would continue for the

coming generations, because they would take pains that their husbands and children would also follow the way of Torah. (Toras Menachem Vol. 35. pg. 186 et al.)

Why indeed is it so important that women study the Torah?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of England, explains that we find two definitions of the Torah. One of them is said in connection with men, and the other relates to women. With regards to men, we find in the Prophet Malachi (2:6), the final Prophet of the Tanach, a statement about the Kohanim—a group of men: “The Torah of truth was in his mouth”—meaning that the Torah as the Kohanim had it is a Torah of truth.

And in the Book of Mishlei (Proverbs) at the end, there is a chapter that everyone knows from Shabbos night. Before we recite the Kiddush, we sing the “Aishes Chayil.” There, the Jewish Woman is described as having “the Torah of kindness on her tongue.”

So there we have it that women are associated with kindness and men with truth.

And what’s interesting is that every time the Torah mentions the words “emes” (truth) and “chesed” (kindness) together, the word “chesed” always comes first.

For example, when Eliezer, the servant of Avraham, went to go find a match for Yitzchak, his master’s son, and found Rivkah, the Torah tells us that he thanked G-d “for not leaving His Kindness and Truth from my master” (Bereishi 24:27)—first kindness, then truth.

With Yaakov, in Bereishis 32:11, we are told that before he encountered his brother Eisav, he turned to G-d with a prayer and said, “I have become small from all the kindnesses and from all the truth that You have rendered Your servant”—again, kindness before truth.

And it’s the same thing with the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy that we know from the Yom Kippur prayers—that G-d is “slow to anger and abundant in loving kindness and truth” (Shmos 34:6). And so on with many other examples.

And so, if kindness precedes truth, it’s no wonder that women precede men when it comes to receiving the Torah.

What women contribute to Torah study is that the Torah is a “Torah of kindness”—meaning, that the Torah is all about Ahavas Yisroel, love of fellow Jew, a Torah that springs from empathy for the other and always trying to give the other the benefit of the doubt—to go easy on her and bring her close out of kindness.

And then, the Torah becomes “Toras Chaim”—a Torah of life.

Good Yom Tov!