**Women in Judaism**

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### Dr. Deborah Weissman

Born in New York City, Debbie settled in Israel in 1972. Her Ph.D. is from the Hebrew University on the social history of Jewish women's education. She is one of the founding members of Kehillat Yedidya, an Orthodox synagogue in Jerusalem's Bak'a neighborhood which integrates Halacha (Jewish religious law) with feminism, tolerance and pluralism. Debbie is involved with Jewish religious feminism, interfaith dialogue and the religious peace movement. Immediate Past President of the ICCJ, International Council of Christians and Jews.

1. Introduction.
	1. She alludes to the current unrest with deaths in the Old City and Bethlehem. Netanyahu has said that cabinet ministers cannot go to the Temple Mount. This is a sign of hope.
	2. Question from Past Class (Sept. 22). Candles can be made from olive oil as well as from wax.
2. The Sources for Succoth: the four species
	1. Leviticus 23:39. On the fifteenth day, then, of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the produce of the land, you shall celebrate the feast of the LORD**[\*](http://www.usccb.org/bible/leviticus/23%22%20%5Cl%20%2203023039-1)** for a whole week. The first and the eighth day shall be days of rest.40On the first day you shall gather fruit of majestic trees, branches of palms, and boughs**[\*](http://www.usccb.org/bible/leviticus/23%22%20%5Cl%20%2203023040-1)** of leafy trees and valley willows. Then for a week you shall make merry before the LORD, your God.
	2. Discussion of the film *Ushpizim*. The “four species” cost 100 NS.
		* 1. What do the four species represent in various midrashim:
				1. Of the four species, there is taste with fragrance, fragrance without taste, both (fragrance and taste) and neither. The community needs diversity.
				2. Of the four species, they each refer to the sense organs.
			2. The prime citrons come from Morocco.
3. The Topic of Women in Judaism.
	1. Weissman is optimistic, because she has seen a lot of grassroots change. She has taught a course at Hebrew University, “The Jewish Woman: Traditions and Transitions.” Today she would say, “Jewish Women,” not “The Jewish Woman.”
		* 1. The secretary at Hebrew University wanted “tradition*s* and transition*s*,” not the singular.
			2. The Bible is polyphonic, especially around the issue of women. There are many more men than women in the *Bible*, but in the *Talmud*, most of the women don’t have names, and they’re described in terms of relationships: “The mother of,” “the daughter of,” “the wife of.”
	2. Women Leaders. Many examples, but no “priestess.”
		* 1. When the Temple was destroyed, there were no more priests; the cult moved from sacrifice to Talmud.
			2. The social role of women declines in the Talmud, but the legal status of women improves: marriage, divorce, and inheritance.
				1. In the Bible, women were discriminated against.
				2. In the Mishnah and the Talmud, the rabbis improved the status of women.
				3. See Judith Hauptmann, *Rereading the Rabbis.*
	3. Opinions about Women.
		* 1. First opinion: Genesis 1:27. God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female[**\***](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/1#01001027-1) he created them.
				1. There are lots of repetitions with the words “image” and “create.” The passage is a counter-concept to Genesis 2:22. The word “man” (adám) can mean *Mankind*, *Males* alone, or one individual, *Adam*.
				2. Another interpretation from the Jewish mystical tradition: the first human being was androgynous, a single adám; then it split.
				3. First Opinion: Debbie’s interpretation from the Spanish 14th century, Isaac ben Judah Abravanel (1437–1508).

 אברבנאל, יצחק בן יהודה, commonly referred to just as Abravanel, was a [Portuguese](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portuguese_people) [Jewish](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jews) [statesman](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politician), [philosopher](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosophy), [Bible commentator](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rabbinic_commentaries), and [financier](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Financier).

He said that the verse (Gen. 1:27) is convoluted to suggest that only men were created in the image of God. Females were an afterthought, not in the divine image.

* + - 1. Second opinion. Isaac ben Moses Arama (c. 1420 – 1494) was a [Spanish](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spain) [rabbi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rabbi) and author. He was at first principal of a rabbinical academy at [Zamora](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zamora%2C_Spain) (probably his birthplace); then he received a call as rabbi and preacher from the community at [Tarragona](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tarragona), and later from that of Fraga in [Aragon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aragon). He officiated finally in [Calatayud](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calatayud) as rabbi and head of the Talmudical academy. Upon the expulsion of the Jews in 1492, Arama settled in [Naples](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naples), where he died in 1494. He commented on Genesis 30. When Rachel saw that she had not borne children to Jacob, she became envious of her sister. She said to Jacob, “Give me children or I shall die!” ([**a**](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/30#01030001-a)2) Jacob became angry with Rachel and said, “Can I take the place of God, who has denied you the fruit of the womb?” ([**b**](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/30#01030002-b)3) She replied, “Here is my maidservant Bilhah. Have intercourse with her, and let her give birth on my knees,**[\*](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/30%22%20%5Cl%20%2201030003-1)** so that I too may have children through her.” ([**c**](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/30#01030003-c)4) So she gave him her maidservant Bilhah as wife,**[\*](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/30%22%20%5Cl%20%2201030004-1)** and Jacob had intercourse with her. (5) When Bilhah conceived and bore a son for Jacob, (6) Rachel said, “God has vindicated me; indeed he has heeded my plea and given me a son.” Therefore she named him Dan.**[\*](http://www.usccb.org/bible/genesis/30%22%20%5Cl%20%2201030006-1)**
				1. Rachel envies Leah.
	+ “Give me children, or else I might as well die.”
	+ Jacob becomes angry. Where in the TaNaKh is another envious wife? Sarah and Bilhah.
	+ Samuel 1:8. Elkanah asks, “Am I not worth more than ten sons?”
	+ Debbie says that Jacob is angry that Rachel has no children; he’s angry with God, and takes it out on Rachel.
		- * 1. Isaac of Arama says: “There are two names for woman.”
	+ There is *Isha*, who came out of the *Ish*, the man. Isha implies that a woman is the equal of a man, and can contribute to the community in a way equal to the man.
	+ Then there is *Chava*, or Eve. She is the mother of all life. Motherhood is the secondary function. It’s sad if a woman has no children, but no sadder than if a man has no children. Yad Vashem: the gentile eunuchs will have “a memorial and a name” (Isaiah 56). The righteous gentiles.
		- * 1. The son of Isaac of Arama, in a book written in Italy, said that women can be philosophers.
1. Commandments.
	1. God’s Commandments: 613 Mitzvoth. They can be divided:
		* 1. Positive or negative.
				1. Positive, time-bound: tell the story of Exodus at Passover. You must rest on Shabbat. Recite the *shema* (“Hear, O Israel”) every morning and evening.
				2. Positive, non time-bound: honor your father and your mother. Widows, orphans, the stranger within your gates.
			2. Time bound or non-time bound.
				1. Some commands are only to be celebrated at a special time, such as Succoth. “Do not eat leavened bread, except at Passover.” “Don’t work on Shabbat or festivals.”
				2. Non time-bound negative: “You shall not kill” (Wilma Ann Bailey).
			3. Dietary commands: do not eat pork or shellfish.
	2. Where do women fit in? Debbie’s thesis: The greatest sign of the equality of men and women is the obligation to honor the commands of Judaism.
		* 1. Negative Time-Bound Commands. Men and women are equal in these obligations. “Do not eat leavened bread, except during Passover.”
			2. Negative Non Time-Bound.
				1. There is a general equality between men and women with these.
				2. Three Exceptions where men are commanded and women are not.
* A man is not supposed to cut off the corners of his hair lower than the cheekbones. Many orthodox let their sideburns grow. Women have no such restrictions.
* A man with facial hair is not allowed to put a razor to his face, but other ways of removing hair is allowed, e.g., electric shaver.
* Priests (or a man from a priestly family, a *Cohen*) are not allowed to deal with the dead, so there is a special place in the funeral where priests can stand. Priests can’t be undertakers, but women can be.
	+ - 1. Positive Time-Bound Commands. This is the area in which there are many commands that women are *not* obliged to follow. Debbie does not consider herself *obliged* to pray three times a day. But women can freely take on these commands.
				1. Examples. Tell the story of Exodus at Passover. Rest on Shabbat. Recite the *shema* every morning and evening.
				2. Book of Numbers. Can a woman have her hair covered? Mostly yes.
				3. Numbers 5:18. Normally, a woman’s hair is covered, but it can be uncovered. Making the woman stand before the LORD, the priest shall uncover her head and place in her hands the grain offering of remembrance, that is, the grain offering of jealousy, while he himself shall hold the water of bitterness that brings a curse.
			2. Positive Non Time-Bound.
				1. Be fruitful and multiply. The first command of the Torah. A woman is not obligated (1) because having a baby can be life-threatening; and (2) the assumption is that most women will choose it, because women mostly want to have children.
* The Torah obligates the male to be fruitful and multiply, because he may not want to have children.
* Can a woman divorce a man if he can’t give her a child? The man has a right to divorce. A woman can go to the court and ask the court to force him to divorce her.
* A man is supposed to give a divorce of his own free will. Maimonides said that the court should flog the man and force him to give his unhappy wife a divorce.
	+ - * 1. It takes a man just a few moments to father a child. He can then disappear and never see the child again – but he is still the father of the child.
				2. At childbirth, a woman enters into a life-threatening experience. Lots of women die in childbirth.
1. Contemporary Application.

A. Marriage.

* + - 1. See the film “Gett” (2014), the word for Jewish divorce, which is about a couple in which the husband refuses to give a woman the divorce she wants, because it hurts her.
			2. When a man divorces a woman for infertility, she has to consent.
			3. When women are inseminated artificially, the daughter of one woman and the son of another woman may have the same father.
			4. Rachel had two children: Joseph and Benjamin. She died in childbirth.
	1. Birth Control.
		+ 1. Pills and diaphragms are more acceptable than condoms. Beware the unnecessary spilling of seed.
			2. Openly Gay Rabbis. Female homosexuality is less frowned upon than Orthodox male gays, due to the unnecessary spilling of seed.
	2. “Be fruitful and multiply, and subdue the earth” (Genesis 1:28).
		+ 1. Is “subdue” singular? Is it only for the man? The rabbis wanted to exempt women.
			2. “Therefore a man should leave his mother and father, and cling to his wife.” That’s the command to marry. The *heredim* encourage their daughters to marry, but there is no command.
			3. Being happily married is wonderful; being unhappily married can be terrible. An unmarried woman, Debbie said, can have a happy life in the Jewish community.
			4. Jewish men are supposed to marry at 18; but what if he’s studying Torah? Then it can be pushed off to the mid-twenties. Some rabbis say, “No birth control until there are a few children,” but one female scholar says, “Birth control is permissible from the beginning of a marriage.”
			5. The Importance of Obligation.
				1. Jews want to be obligated to serve God. Doing something “out of the goodness of the heart” is less good than being obligated.
				2. But one should do what God wants. “Not charity but seddakah,” we give because the poor has to have something to eat.
1. Studying Torah.
	1. Traditionally, women are not obligated to studying Torah. But Torah is the key to power in Judaism. If we’re not obligated to study Torah, are we allowed?
		* 1. Discussion.
				1. “Yentl” with Barbara Streisand. A wagon comes into her village. She goes to buy books. There were communities that deny women access to books. Women learned informally, by observing mothers or grandmothers. But today there is an urgency to teaching women the Torah, and there a few woman on the same level as Jewish men.
				2. The false assumption of women’s ignorance.
			2. There is a change. In the vast majority of cases, the birth of a baby girl is celebrated as much as the birth of a boy. Jews don’t circumcise daughters, but they celebrate their birth. Women can circumcise, but more commonly, the women hold the baby at circumcision. Debbie held her nephew.
	2. At religious majority (bar Mitzvah and bath Mitzvah), both celebrations have equal importance.
	3. At marriage, there are changes.
		* 1. At one time, the bride’s role was passive. She didn’t even have to say “I do.”
			2. Today, weddings have radically changed. In double-ring ceremonies, there is a dialogue. Even at Orthodox Jewish weddings, women speak under the canopy. They do benedictions and even read the marriage contract.
			3. In 1997, Debbie went to an Orthodox wedding at a kibbutz. The rabbi apologetically said, “The liturgy speaks of the voice of the groom and of the bride. But where is the voice of the bride? It is a prophecy of equality.” Equality will come in the future. At that time, the rabbi was trying to be politically correct. But in the past 18 years, the equality has indeed come.
	4. Death and Funerals. Women can recite the *kaddish* and give a eulogy. At Orthodox funerals, women have sung solos in honor of the dead.
2. Conclusion.
	1. Rosh Hodesh. It is, at the beginning of the month, a celebration within feminism. Question: Should there be separate (women only) obligations and rituals?
	2. Debbie’s judgement.
		* 1. There has been a change in Debbie’s lifetime.
			2. She wants women to be involved in decision-making, and they can’t be unless they learn Torah.
	3. Recognition of Female Rabbis.
		* 1. Debbie doesn’t want the Orthodox rabbinate to have a “stranglehold” on marriage laws.
			2. Some couples get married in Cypress, in a civil ceremony, which is recognized by the state; and then they come back and have a variety of Jewish celebrations.
			3. Universal Life Church. In the USA, a non-denominational pastor does the weddings. Debbie wants to see that in Israel. In Israel, there can only be religious weddings. A wedding between a Christian and Jew is not recognized.
	4. The Last Days of Succoth. Now there are no more celebrations until Channuka. Simchat Torah was, until the 1970s, a disappointing time for Jewish women. Nothing special happened for women. A woman could go to the synagogue and observe the men celebrating. But starting in the 1970s, it has become a highlight of the year’s celebration. “We dance with the Torah, we sing with the Torah, we study the Torah.” This is a sign of change.