

Rereading Rav Hirsch on Mitzvos and Gender

By: YISRAEL KASHKIN

There is perhaps nothing which has contributed in a greater measure to the diffusion and prevalence of wrong ideas and notions than the readiness of men to draw false or half-true conclusions from premises which in themselves are correct. Judgments which are right up to a point and can be rightly applied to certain persons and circumstances are given universal validity, and are tacitly allowed in men's minds to imprint themselves on conditions of a totally different character, in defiance of their own true scope and nature. Both natural science and historical and social studies suffer equally from this perversion of the reasoning faculty. The premises may be true, but not so the conclusions. And if these apparently logical conclusions are used as welcome support for the fashionable notions of the day, they pass from hand to hand like coins, they form part of the public stock of ideas and views, they become well-worn and none takes the trouble to test them and to see whether their metallic content corresponds to their nominal value. The alloy may be the worst possible, but what does it matter? The coin is current, it serves its purpose, what more does one want? (R' Samson Raphael Hirsch¹)

R' Samson Raphael Hirsch, the great 19th-century German Orthodox thinker and leader, wrote these stirring words as a preface to an article where he endeavored to debunk “the most groundless notions about the

¹ R' Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Judaism Eternal, Volume 2* (New York: Soncino, 1976), p. 49.

Yisrael Kashkin was born in New York City, studied at Yeshivos in Metropolitan New York City and Jerusalem, and earned degrees from the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. His writings on Jewish themes have appeared in several books, journals, and blogs, and he operates a blog that focuses on the teachings of R' Samson Raphael Hirsch at www.TIDESociety.org, the Torah Im Derech Eretz Society.

degradation and subjection of woman in Israel.”² R’ Hirsch there and elsewhere masterfully defended the Torah against false charges of male chauvinism in its halakhic distinctions between the sexes and its depiction of their respective characteristics. Ironically, in recent decades, R’ Hirsch’s own writings have come to be reshaped through misinterpretation into a counterfeit currency of a different sort. All too often his commentary is misused in an improper attempt to support apologetics, i.e., a misportrayal of Torah concepts to suit frameworks that are alien to Torah.³ It is this writer’s contention that R’ Hirsch’s words are often read superficially and without consideration for the breadth of his writings on the subject of gender. The result is a kind of reverse chauvinism where we have gone from a misunderstanding of Torah that some may regard as disparaging of women to one that some may regard as disparaging of men.

One key passage that is often subject to misreading concerns the exemption of women from positive time-bound commandments.⁴ After pointing out that women are obligated in nearly as many positive time-bound *mitzvos* such as matzo as those to which they are exempt, R’ Hirsch said the following:

But it seems to us to be rather much more likely that the Torah did not impose these מצוות on women because *it did not consider them necessary to be demanded from women*. All מצוות שהזמן גרמא are meant, by symbolic procedures, to bring certain facts, principles, ideas, and resolutions, afresh to our minds from time to time to spur us on afresh and to fortify us to realize them to keep them. God’s Torah takes it for granted that our women have greater fervour and more faithful enthusiasm for their God-serving calling, and that this calling runs

² *Ibid.*, p. 50. This statement and many of the quotations in this essay can be found in R’ Hirsch’s article entitled “The Jewish Woman,” which he wrote in German. A different English translation appears in *The Collected Writings of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch*, Volume VIII (Nanuet, NY: Feldheim, 1997), pp. 83–135.

³ “Apologetics (from the Greek word *apologia*, meaning defense) results when a person accepts an external frame of reference as authoritative and tries to reconcile tradition with that external doctrine. When viewed this way, tradition becomes ‘problematic.’ By forcing tradition to fit into a preconceived and alien framework, one effectively places it into the proverbial *mitat Sedom*, or Procrustean bed. This inevitably leads to distortion of the tradition, either by assigning it unlikely meanings or by ignoring that which does not cohere with one’s theory.” R’ Reuven Ziegler, *Majesty and Humility: The Thought of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2012), p. 178, in *Torah Musings* <<http://torahmusings.com/2013/11/the-problem-of-apologetics/>>.

⁴ These are defined as *mitzvos* of positive action, such as *succah* and *tefillin*, that are required only at specific times.

less danger in their case than in that of men from the temptations which occur in the course of business and professional life. Accordingly it does not find it necessary to give women these repeated spurring reminders to remain true to their calling, and warnings against weaknesses in their business lives. Thus, at the very origin of the Jewish People, God's foresight did not find it necessary to ensure their bond with Him by giving women some permanent symbol in place of Mila for men. So, also, at the Lawgiving on Sinai, God reckoned first of all (Ex. XIX, 3) on the faith and devotion of the women. So also, the Jewish Nation has established the fact—and all our generations have inherited it—that in all the sins into which our nation has sunk, it has been בשכר נשים צדקניות, the faithfulness of our women to their convictions and sense of duty which has preserved and nurtured the seed of revival and return.⁵

Did R' Hirsch say that women don't need those *mitzvos* because they are spiritually superior to men as some contemporary outreach people and writers have proposed? A superficial reading may leave a person with that impression. Some people have added their own sound bites to this reading, claiming that R' Hirsch said women are “more in tune with God's will,” or as another book put it, that women are “on a higher spiritual plane” than men.

If you read R' Hirsch's words carefully, you'll see that he says nothing about spiritual planes. The whole concept of the male and female being on different planes is likely borrowed from the Maharal who talks about different planes of spirituality but does not depict the female as being on the higher plane.⁶ R' Hirsch also says nothing about anyone being more in tune with God's will. Rather, he appears to reference the Midrash that says women are “enthusiastic for *mitzvos*”⁷ to say that they are enthusiastic for their *mitzvos*. He references as well the condition of his era that women generally were protected from the negative influences of the professional and business world since the great majority of women stayed at home. This eliminates the need for one aspect of positive time-bound commandments, their spurring us on to our respective callings. He also depicts Jewish women historically as possessing a basic faith and loyalty to God.

⁵ R' Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Pentateuch* (New York: Judaica Press), Leviticus 23:43.

⁶ See Maharal, *Tiferes Israel* 4 and 28; *Derech Chaim* 2:8 “*marbeh nashim marbeh kisbatim*”; *Derech Chaim* 1:5 “*Al sarbeh sichah im ha-ishah*”; *Gur Aryeh*, *Parshas Tazriah*; *Chidushei Agados*, *Makkos* 23b; *Deroshos Al HaTorah* 27. For a discussion of the Maharal on this topic in English, see my book *Yisrael ben Reuven, Male and Female He Created Them* (Oak Park, MI: Targum, 1996), Chapter 8.

⁷ *Midrash Rabbah*, *Shemos* 28.

In a letter to the Jewish Observer, R' Yoel Chonon Wenger, R'M of the *Yeshiva Gedolah* of Montreal and *chaver* of the *Beth Din* of Montreal, objected to the notion that R' Hirsch depicts women as being higher spiritually than men. He explained R' Hirsch as follows:

Rabbi Hirsch actually states that “women have greater fervor and more faithful enthusiasm for *their* G-d given calling” and are less at risk than men, who must go out in professional and business pursuits. This is no way stating that women are spiritually superior. (He does not even say that women have more fervor and enthusiasm than men; he states that they have proportionally more zeal for their assigned tasks.)

Rabbi Hirsch is explaining that women are naturally endowed with *emuna peshuta* (unquestioning faith), and a woman's role of living a sheltered life of *v'hinei Sara ba'obel* (Sarah, in the tent) is removed from the many temptations that face man. Rabbi Hirsch explains that a woman's position in a Torah life protects her from the temptations that abound and the risks that time-bound *mitzvos* were given to protect against. Therefore, she does not require those *mitzvos*.

These characteristics should not be confused with spirituality. This is similar to the position of a king who has special *mitzvos* to protect him from arrogance and pride; his role is such that he requires the protection of additional *mitzvos*. Would anyone dream of saying that the king is lower spiritually than the rest of *Klal Yisroel* because of his need for additional *mitzvos*?⁸

As R' Wenger goes on to explain, *emuna peshuta* is a fundamental tool for raising a family. Simultaneously, *emuna peshuta* and more natural enthusiasm for one's *mitzvos* alleviate the need for one aspect of the time-bound commandments, and that aspect is inspiration via symbolism. In this we see the Torah's careful design since it is nearly impossible to attend to children and the positive time-bound *mitzvos* at the same time.

Surely, this *emuna peshuta* is a special type of personal quality. But it is only one type. Its possession by women in general does not mean that women are more spiritual than men in general. R' Hirsch's words should not be used for general comparison of women and men. R' Hirsch was talking about women, their *mitzvos*, and their job. While he was pointing out specific strengths of women, he wasn't comparing them to men in a

⁸ R' Yoel Chonon Wenger, Letter to the *Jewish Observer*, February 1997, Vol. XXX/No. 1, p. 42. See *Zi'es Ra'anah* (R' Avraham Gombiner, 17th century, author of the *Magen Avraham*), *Yalkut Shimoni*, *Shmuel* 1:1 for a view that generally women would likely not be enthusiastic for the positive time-bound commandments if commanded in them.

general sense. He was pointing out particulars and he used very exact language to make his point. Having more enthusiasm for one's own job is praise, but we must not add additional meanings to the words. As a grammarian and speaker of German, a language known for precision in grammar, R' Hirsch was extremely sensitive to nuances in words and etymologies. We have to read him with the care that he wrote.

We must consider also R' Hirsch's depictions of the strengths of the male spiritual personality. He drew on the etymology of the Hebrew word for male, i.e., זכר, which is related to the word remember, to portray a key feature of those strengths:

The male sex is זכר, it is the depositary of the Divine revelations and the spiritual attainments of the human race. To it has been entrusted the זכרון, the tradition of the human race as it has developed, in him is formed the spiritual chain which links together the beginning and the end of the human race; the male sex is זכר, the bearer of history. Its activities do not belong wholly to the present moment, it has to think of the tasks and traditions received from God and from the past, and from the union of these with the events and conditions of the present to produce its own activities which carry on the chain of history further and further to perpetuity.⁹

The male carries and transmits the spiritual tradition. He does this not just for himself due to some kind of personal deficiency, but he does it for the benefit of the entire human race. Would the male be given the role of "depositary of the Divine revelations and the spiritual attainments of the human race" if he were less spiritual or less in tune with the will of the Creator?

The same applies to religious leadership in the home. Commenting on verses that depict Avraham's command that his family move its tent to the east of Bethel, R' Hirsch noted the feminine attributes of the word for tent and the masculine of the word for command:

It is highly significant that it says אהלה, written with the feminine ה, as opposed to ויעתק. Whereas there, where it affected the whole household Abraham had to exert his authority, ויעתק, possibly even to persuade Sarah, here in the home, his house was really Sarah's house. For external matters the man, internal ones the woman; as leader, guiding star, to submit the whole household in every way to the Will of God, the man is in authority, in every other matter of

⁹ R' Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Judaism Eternal, Volume 2* (New York: Soncino, 1976), p. 51.

managing and directing the home, the woman has precedence. Such is the principle of intimate happy Jewish family life, the origin of which has its roots in Abraham's tent.¹⁰

Once again we ask, would it make sense to entrust spiritual authority in the home to a person who is on a lower spiritual plane? The same applies to education. In an article on the month of *Nissan* and the events of Passover, R' Hirsch wrote, "The mitzvah of education devolves upon the father, whom God has endowed with the necessary abilities. Where a father neglects this duty, no other means can compensate. All the textbooks, all the teaching aids that have been invented as surrogates for the consecration of our youth in the home, will be of no avail."¹¹ As R' Hirsch noted, God "endows" the male with the necessary abilities. They are not acquired through some catch-up race with the female as one contemporary outreach book proposed. They are inborn just as the female's *emunah pesbuta* is inborn.

R' Hirsch drew on the Hebrew word for female, נקבה, which is related to the word for receiving or acquiring, to tell us more about the woman, her role, and her relationship to her husband.

The female is the נקבה (נקבה שכרך אלי) Genesis 30. 28, ה' יקבנו אשר פי, Isaiah 62.2, cf. for the form גנבה, אבדה etc.), that which receives a vocation. The man chooses a calling, creates a position for himself, the woman receives both by attaching herself to a man and entering into his calling and position. The girl blossoms into a woman, a Jewess, and only at the side of her husband does she at length acquire a separate existence, and the narrower sphere of activity in which, united with her husband, she is called upon to perform her task as woman and Jewess in a definite calling and definite position.¹²

With this arrangement, the woman is in a position to develop into a nurturer par excellence as she protects the man from stumbling during his pursuit of a calling. She is, said R' Hirsch, "the nurse of all that is purely human in man."

The calling and position for which a man has to struggle are really nothing but the foundation on which he has to build his life's work,

¹⁰ R' Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Pentateuch* (New York: Judaica Press), *Genesis* 12:8.

¹¹ R' Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Hirsch Haggadah* (Nanuet, NY: Feldheim, 1993), p. 87, in Yisrael ben Reuven, *Male and Female He Created Them* (Oak Park, MI: Targum, 1996), p. 48. A different translation appears in *The Collected Writings of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch*, Volume I (Nanuet, NY: Feldheim, 1997), p. 49.

¹² R' Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Judaism Eternal, Volume 2* (New York: Soncino, 1976), pp. 51-52.

and carry out his own share in the general task of humanity. And there is a danger that he may completely lose himself in this struggle, that in striving to acquire the means he will lose sight of his real vocation and completely forget the great goal and his own task as a man, nay, that he will sacrifice and subordinate to these efforts what is genuinely human in himself. This is an error which can almost be regarded as the key to all the mistakes made in history. It is then the woman who leads him back to what is truly human in him. The riddle of history is solved with the domination of woman,¹³ with the restriction of the man to the sphere of the genuinely human which has been placed under the care of the woman. It is the return of the citizen to the man.¹⁴

“It is then the woman who leads him back to what is truly human in him.”—this is high praise indeed as are R’ Hirsch’s many other comments about the female sex. For example, he noted that “the Bible seems to make a particular point of bringing home to the man how helpless and joyless he would be without his wife in the midst of Paradise, with all his power to conquer the world and his ability to understand it how precarious and defective his whole being would be without his wife.”¹⁵ He wrote, “Hence for the Sages of the Jewish people, its matriarchs, a Sarah, a Rebecca, are filled with the spirit of God and see with the spirit of God just as much as the patriarchs (Sanhedrin, 69, B.R. 67). Like the men, so the women are through the deliverance and election of Israel called to the highest spiritual and moral elevation of which mankind is capable (Sifra on Leviticus 26.13).”¹⁶ And R’ Hirsch said in his characteristic emphasis on the roles of helpmate and mother, “Her whole life is a self-denying devotion to the welfare of others, especially of her husband and children. The true woman is the performance of duty personified. עֲצֻבּוֹן becomes her pleasure, renunciation, sacrifice for the joy of her husband and children becomes her joy, and the true woman is the noblest embodiment of

¹³ The meaning here seems to be not male domination of women, nor domination of an individual man by a woman, but placement of the yoke of domesticity upon men as a group.

¹⁴ R’ Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Judaism Eternal, Volume 2* (New York: Soncino, 1976), p. 52.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

man formed in the image of God.”¹⁷ The last sentence seems the highest praise that could be offered to anyone. However, it all stems from dedication to the roles of helpmate and mother, and it would seem unreasonable to ask this helpmate and mother this “noblest embodiment of man formed in the image of God” to receive her calling from a spiritual inferior.

R’ Hirsch’s writing style is often poetic as was the style in his era and appears to present contradictions. He wrote in his commentary on *sefer Vayikra*, “God’s foresight did not find it necessary to ensure their bond with Him by giving women some permanent symbol in place of Mila for men.”¹⁸ Yet he wrote in his commentary on *sefer Bereishis* “המול לכם כל זכר, this perpetuation of the fundamental condition of the Abrahamic covenant of God is to be performed on the body of that sex which, as זכר (see above Ch. I.21) is appointed to be the bearer of the spiritual traditions of mankind, and, accordingly of the special Abrahamic tradition.”¹⁹ He wrote in his article “The Jewish Woman” that “The riddle of history is solved with the domination of woman, with the restriction of the man to the sphere of the genuinely human which has been placed under the care of the woman.”²⁰ Yet, he wrote in the same article, “This will-subordination of the wife to the husband is a necessary condition of the unity which man and wife should form together. The subordination cannot be the other way about, since the man as זכר has to carry forward the divine and human messages which through every marriage are to be a living force in the household, and to which the husband and wife are in union to devote their forces.”²¹ And yet again in the same article he wrote, “We may note in parentheses that Sarah never calls Abraham her lord. Jewish wedlock with its intimate union of man and wife does not know of such a term of subjection.”²² And he wrote regarding the role of helpmate, “It places the

¹⁷ R’ Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Judaism Eternal, Volume 2* (New York: Soncino, 1976), p. 57. Similarly, he called motherhood, “The highest and noblest occupation, on which the whole future of the human race is built...” R’ Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Pentateuch* (New York: Judaica Press), *Leviticus* 12:2.

¹⁸ R’ Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Pentateuch* (New York: Judaica Press), *Leviticus* 23:43.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, *Genesis* 17:10.

²⁰ As noted in a prior footnote, the meaning here seems to be not male domination of women, nor domination of an individual man by a woman, but placement of the yoke of domesticity upon men as a group.

²¹ R’ Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Judaism Eternal, Volume 2* (New York: Soncino, 1976), p. 58.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 63-64.

woman forthwith on a footing of equality with the man, while giving to each a different sphere of activity, so that the man cannot fill the position of the woman nor the woman that of the man. Both stand and work on the same line, they play into one another's hands and by their co-operation consummate the human task. This partition of the human task is no mere matter of agreement. The woman has from the very beginning been created כנגדו, in the way required for such a fruitful supplementing of the man's activity."²³ These ideas are not contradictory. Like those contained in the Talmud and Midrash upon which R' Hirsch based his thinking, they need to be understood in conjunction with one another and studied carefully over time. Out of the syntheses emerge beautiful tapestries. R' Hirsch's writings, being deep, interwoven, and lyrical, are disserved by sound bites extracted from isolated statements.

R' Hirsch depicts men and women as having differing but interlocking spiritual strengths:

"It is not good that the man should be alone." The object would be missed or imperfectly attained if only men were to strive for it unaccompanied. The task is too great for one, it requires essentially two human beings who can share the work and carry it through by supplying one another's deficiencies. "I will provide for him a help meet for him." עזר כנגדו (cf. עזר, אצר, אזור, עזרה) is that kind of assistance which through taking over a part of the work to be performed allows the other partner to concentrate his attention on the part which is left to him to perform, and so enables him to perform his part properly, thus securing the proper performance of the whole. This is the essence of the division of labour.²⁴

For success in carrying out these differing roles, "it is essential that their powers and abilities should be of different kinds, and yet so interrelated as to supplement one another, one being strong where the other is weak."²⁵ The emphasis here is on the differences between the sexes. They are of a different kind from one another and operate on different tracks. To R' Hirsch the differences are so vast that it's hard to imagine him measuring the two in any general sense using the same yardstick.

While R' Hirsch noted how men losing themselves in their worldly engagements "is an error which can almost be regarded as the key to all the mistakes made in history" and the faithfulness of women nurtures "the seed of revival and return" after national collapse, he noted also how the women may contribute substantively to such collapse:

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

Even in the times of decay the great influence which the Jewish woman from of old exercised in Jewish life can still be seen. In Isaiah chapters 3 and 4 the downfall of the Jewish state is attributed principally to the fact that the women misused their influence. God enters into judgment with “the elders of His people and its princes”, and—with the women! Both had completely misunderstood and misused their position; both had exploited their influence for purely selfish aims, the great to satisfy their avarice, the “daughters of Zion” to satisfy their love of finery and luxury; they stepped forth haughtily and mincingly, they were the real “rulers” of the people.²⁶

In addition to the example from Isaiah, he cited Ezekiel, Chap. 13, where the women “gave the greatest encouragement to the lapse into idolatry.” He said also, “It was they who in the kingdom of Israel also, according to Amos, Chap.4, by their management of affairs hastened the downfall of the state, and whose degeneracy, according to Isaiah, Chap. 4, had therefore amid the general collapse of all national virtues, first to be atoned for and removed before the nation could resume its God-fearing course of life.”²⁷

In the end, R’ Hirsch himself undercut any readings of his writings that prejudicially or superficially depict one sex as superior to the other. He wrote, “Right from the beginning God reached ‘mankind’ male and female, both equally godly, of equal worth, neither more in the likeness of God than the other, both given the same blessing by God, *both together given the name ‘Adam’*.”²⁸ If the two sexes are equally Godly and made equally in the image of God then neither is more spiritual and neither is on a higher plane. And he wrote:

While fully appreciating the special and deeply implanted characteristics of the female sex, the Sages also attribute to it complete spiritual and intellectual equality with the male. In the very words with which the formation of man by the hands of God is proclaimed, ויִצְרֶה אֱלֹהִים אֶת הָאָדָם, they find an indication that the formation of both male and female is on the same footing. יצירה לאדם יצירה לחוה (Genesis R. 14).²⁹

²⁶ R’ Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Judaism Eternal, Volume 2* (New York: Soncino, 1976), p. 85.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 85-86.

²⁸ R’ Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Pentateuch* (New York: Judaica Press), Genesis 5:2.

²⁹ R’ Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Judaism Eternal, Volume 2* (New York: Soncino, 1976), p. 95.

The meaning cannot be clearer. The male and the female are spiritual equals. We cited earlier R' Hirsch's statements that the matriarchs "see with the spirit of God just as much as the patriarchs" and "Like the men, so the women are...called to the highest spiritual and moral elevation..."³⁰ One may note that the phrases "just as much as" and "Like the men" likewise indicate equality. Similarly, we see equality in R' Hirsch's designation that the "powers and abilities" of men and women supplement one another "one being strong where the other is weak."³¹ Any reading of R' Hirsch's myriad comments on gender must adhere to his general message of equality.

R' Hirsch labored to debunk the charge of sexism in the Torah and so wrote more specifically about women than men, offering extensive praises. Such was the necessity of his era, the dawn of the modern era, where the position of men and respect for men as a group was still basically unchallenged (a stark contrast from our era), but the traditional role of women was starting to be questioned. However, he did overall paint a balanced portrait, one that we must be careful to read faithfully lest we make distortions in the opposite direction. If there is a bottom line, it is this: The man and the woman have entirely different yet interdependent roles, both of which are holy.³² As R' Hirsch wrote, "God has divided the sexes, giving each specific tasks in the fulfilment of life. Both tasks, if fulfilled in purity, are equally sublime, equally holy."³³ As the roles are

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

³² The explanation that men and women are equally spiritual but engage in different roles is put forth by numerous contemporary authorities including R' Moshe Feinstein, *Igros Moshe, Orach Chaim IV #49*; the Lubavitcher Rebbe, *Sichos in English*, Iyar-Tammuz 5744, Vol. 21, pp. 69–72; R' Joseph Soloveitchik, *Man of Faith in the Modern World* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1989), p. 84; and R' Avigdor Miller, *Rabbi Avigdor Miller Speaks*, compiled by R' Simcha Bunim Cohen (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah, 1982), pp. 245–246 and R' Avigdor Miller, *Q&A: Thursday Nights with Rabbi Miller* (Columbus Publications, 5771), pp. 189–190. R' Feinstein stated that obligation in commandments results from the possession of holiness (rather than from the absence of it). However, men and women are equal in holiness. Every reference in the Torah to the holiness of the nation refers to the men and the women. The exemption of women from positive time-bound commandments is exactly as the term indicates an exemption due to family obligations. The Lubavitcher Rebbe and R' Miller said that a woman connects to those *mitzvos* via her husband. She is exempted from their physical performance so that she can engage in acts of *chesed*. They both noted that the exemption does not indicate the spiritual superiority of either gender.

³³ R' Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Horeb* (New York: Soncino, 1981), 433. As just noted, R' Hirsch states that "God has divided the sexes, giving each specific

equally holy, so are the people fulfilling them. As he wrote, “The change from singular to plural, which we have tried to reproduce in our translation of this first mention of man and woman in the story of the creation, already indicates the full equality of status, nay, the inner unity between man and woman in the conception and the destiny of ‘man formed in the image of God.’ This term embraces both sexes. Only man and woman together make up the idea of ‘man’, and God created both of them alike without intermediary, and with the same conscious effort of will power.”³⁴

Misunderstanding of R’ Hirsch extends also to his commentary on the blessings “Hast not made me a woman” and “Hast made me according to His will (רצוין),” although in an indirect way. The ArtScroll Siddur somewhat famously comments on the latter blessing that women are “created closer to God’s ideal of satisfaction.” The book cites R’ Elie Munk of Paris as its source. However, his comments are clearly based on those of R’ Hirsch. The ArtScroll passage first addresses the Torah’s assignment of different missions such as that of the family of David (royalty), *Kobanim*, and Levites and how these missions are accompanied by extra *mitzvos* for which the relevant parties express gratitude to God. Men likewise express gratitude for the assignment of additional *mitzvos* by which they may serve God. As for women, the ArtScroll commentary adds the following:

Women, on the other hand, both historically and because of their nature, are the guardians of tradition, the molders of character, children, and family. Furthermore, women have often been the protectors of Judaism when the impetuosity and aggressiveness of the male

tasks in the fulfilment of life. Both tasks, if fulfilled in purity, are equally sublime, equally holy.” This observation also helps us to put into perspective his explanation on the exemption of women from positive time-bound commandments. The proposal that the reason for the exemption is that women are generally more spiritual than men and men need spiritual activity in order to catch up implies that the women’s activities are less spiritual. R’ Hirsch tell us otherwise. The respective roles and tasks of men and women are equally holy. In other words, performance of *chesed* such as taking care of one’s family generates just as much spirituality as does putting on *tefillin* or sitting in a *succah*. If men trailed women in spirituality, they could never catch up since both spend the day doing *mitzvos* that may be different at times but are ultimately “equally sublime, equally holy.” We must conclude that men and women are equally spiritual even as each has different strengths that their respective roles and tasks engage and challenges to which their respective roles and tasks lend support.

³⁴ R’ Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Judaism Eternal, Volume 2* (New York: Soncino, 1976), p. 51. He is referring to the verses “God formed man in His image” and “Male and female He created them” the latter of which follows the former.

nature led the men astray. The classic precedent was in the Wilderness when the men—not the women—worshiped the Golden Calf. Thus, though women were not given the privilege of the challenge assigned to men, they are created closer to God's ideal of satisfaction. They express their gratitude in the blessing *שעשני כרצונו* for *having made me according to His will* (R' Munk).³⁵

While the first part of the ArtScroll passage presents some general concepts about roles and commandments and the middle one (quoted above) echoes R' Munk, the penultimate sentence adds a thought that is not stated by R' Munk. He actually said as follows:

This concept of the moral value of the human personality makes it possible for each man to be content with his lot, and to be grateful for the “measure granted to him by G-d.” The Jewish woman, relieved by the Divine law from the obligation to observe a large portion of its precepts, can see in this exemption a manifestation of Divine faith in the greater strength of her moral self-discipline. The Torah assumes that the woman has greater faith in her Jewish destiny and fears less for temptation in her sphere of activity. So it absolved woman from many of the practices designed to protect man. When the Torah was given, the first appeal was made to the faith and trust of the woman. Indeed, the Jewish mentality has always recognized that during all the aberrations and periods of decline, it was the “*בזכות נשים צדיקות*” “merit of the righteous woman” which kept alive and safeguarded the seeds of restoration. In Israel, the woman is honored as the guardian of the pure and the moral. She recites the blessing *שעשני כרצונו*, daily, not in humble submission to the immutable will of the Creator—but rather in joyous gratitude that her Maker has created her *כרצונו* “to His satisfaction.” (*רצון* *always* means a positive, affirmative liking and sense of satisfaction. cf. the formula *יהי רצון, רצה* etc.)³⁶

³⁵ *The Complete ArtScroll Siddur, Ashkenaz* (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah, 1997), pp. 19-20.

³⁶ R' Elie Munk, *The World of Prayer* (Nanuet, NY: Feldheim, 1988), p. 28. Part of R' Munk's comment appears to counter the Tur who said, “And women are accustomed to bless ‘Who made me according to His will.’ It is possible that they are accustomed in this like one who judges on himself *הדין על הרעה* (Tur, *Orach Chaim* 46).” R' Munk (1900–1981) was born in Paris to German-Jewish parents and spent his years as a young adult and rabbinical and college student in Berlin. *The World of Prayer* was the first book that he wrote. R' Munk, who was known for his calm and balanced disposition, said about himself, “I always wanted Shalom.” (Serge Golan, “Le rabbin Elie Munk zatsal, pilier du renouveau du judaïsme orthodoxe,” *Hamodia*, Edition Internationale En Français, No 320,

R' Munk did not describe the word רצון as indicating anything about the man. He said only that the term רצון is “positive, affirmative” with regard to the woman. Clearly echoing R' Hirsch on *Leviticus* 23:43, he praised the Jewish woman for her faith, her “moral self-discipline,” and her merit in times of decline and restoration. Given these positive traits and acts, her creation was according to God’s satisfaction. It is good, not better. R' Munk, like R' Hirsch, emphasized the Torah’s high regard for women so as to counterbalance any feelings of offense that these blessings may generate in the modern era.³⁷

And what did R' Hirsch have to say about these morning blessings? He wrote as follows:

This is not a prayer of thanks that God did not make us heathens, slaves or women. Rather, it calls upon us to contemplate the task which God has imposed upon us by making us free Jewish men, and to pledge ourselves to do justice to this mission. These three aspects of our own status impose upon us duties much more comprehensive than those required of the rest of mankind. And if our women have a smaller number of מצוות to fulfill than men, they know that the tasks which they must discharge as free Jewish women are no less in accordance with the will and desire of God than are those of their brothers.³⁸

You do not find there any depiction of anyone being created closer to God’s ideal of satisfaction. He said only that the woman’s role, even

20 Tammuz 5774, Vendredi 18 Juillet 2014, Parachat Matot, <<http://www.hamodia.fr/article.php?id=2162>>).

³⁷ R' Joseph Soloveitchik had an interesting take on the morning blessings. His thought was as follows: “שְׁלֵמָה עָשִׂי אֱשֶׁחַ...שְׁעֵשֶׂנִי כְרִצוֹנוֹ” - The Tanna Rabbi Meir instituted the recital of the בְּרִכּוֹת הַשָּׁחַר. In Rabbi Meir’s time the study of Torah was prohibited by the Romans, who executed any man who studied it since they recognized that Torah study kept Jews from assimilating. Women on the other hand were generally spared by the Romans but were instead taken into captivity. Through instituting this blessing, Rabbi Meir expressed gratitude to God for being a man and therefore having the privilege to sanctify God’s name in death. The blessing of שְׁעֵשֶׂנִי כְרִצוֹנוֹ was introduced by women in the Middle Ages, because during the Crusades men and women were massacred alike. Women now shared in the privilege of dying *al kiddush Hashem*, sanctifying His Name, and therefore instituted their own blessing.” R' Isaiah Wohlgemuth, *Guide to Jewish Prayer*, pp. 59-60, said in the name of R' Soloveitchik, in Arnold Lustiger, *Addendum to Koren Mesorat Harav Siddur*.

³⁸ R' Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Hirsch Siddur* (New York: Feldheim, 1978), p. 13.

though consisting of fewer types of different *mitzvos*, is no less in accordance with God's will. Moreover, he addresses function, not spiritual makeup.

R' Munk's commentary is clearly built on that of R' Hirsch here and in Leviticus as brought earlier in this article. This is altogether fitting. While born in Paris, R' Munk descends from German Jews and was raised and educated partially in Berlin. R' Munk, who earned his *smicha* from the Hildesheimer Seminary in Berlin and a PhD in philosophy from the University of Berlin, was a prominent proponent of R' Hirsch's philosophy of *Torah Im Derech Eretz*.³⁹ The reference in the ArtScroll Siddur to R' Munk constitutes something of a "telephone game" where the final communication is substantively different from the original. Once again, R' Hirsch, here indirectly, is used as a source of apologetics in contradiction to his own message.⁴⁰

³⁹ Serge Golan, "Le rabbin Elie Munk zatsal, pilier du renouveau du judaïsme orthodoxe," *Hamodia*, Edition Internationale En Français, No 320, 20 Tammuz 5774, Vendredi 18 Juillet 2014, Parachat Matot, <<http://www.hamodia.fr/article.php?id=2162>>. His thesis focused on the writings of French novelist Victor Hugo. R' Munk was the father-in-law of Rabbi Dr. Immanuel Jakobovits, Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth from 1967 to 1991. Rabbi Jakobovits was born in Germany and also identified himself as a follower of the *derech* of R' Hirsch.

⁴⁰ Moreover, to say that the creation of the woman is better contradicts the flow of the three blessings and their indication of ascendancy as noted by several commentators. The order of the morning blessings is "Hast not made me a gentile," "Hast not made me a slave," and lastly "Hast not made me a woman." The *Aruch HaShulchan* (*Orach Chaim*, 46) said that the order relates to obligation in increased numbers of commandments. The man in reciting the last blessing is giving thanks for his obligation in *Talmud Torah* and positive time-bound commandments. The *Taz* referenced the ascendancy as well, associating it to some extent with the performance of increased numbers of *mitzvos*, and noted that each successive blessing makes a positive statement on the group represented in the blessing that precedes it. It is better to be compared to something of high value than to something of low value. For example, it is a bigger compliment to be called faster than a gazelle than faster than a tortoise. So even though the blessing positively distinguishes the relevant group from the prior one, it still makes a positive statement about the prior one. He concluded: "Behold, we see in the blessing of the man the positive nature of the creation of the woman. Therefore, it is fitting that she makes a blessing on her positive attributes" (*Taz, Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim*, 46). Like R' Hirsch, the *Taz* saw the blessing שעשני כרצוני as giving the meaning "also good." See also the Tur, *Orach Chaim*, 46.

As we have shown, R' Hirsch was quite adamant to draw an equivalence between men and women on the matter of innate spirituality, describing them as “equally godly, of equal worth, neither more in the likeness of God than the other, both given the same blessing by God, *both together given the name ‘Adam’*.”⁴¹ To say that one party is “created closer to God’s ideal of satisfaction” contradicts the idea that neither is created more Godly or in the likeness of God. Again and again, R' Hirsch stressed the equality of the sexes. He wrote, “כִּי מֵאִישׁ לְקַחָהּ זֹאת”, the name אִשָּׁה, accordingly, does not designate the dependence of Woman on Man, but rather the equality, the two belonging together, the division of the one human calling between the two sexes.”⁴² He wrote, “God formed one side of Man into Woman; Man, as it were, was divided, and the one part formed into Woman, not יִצְרָא, בְּרָא but בָּנָה, only built out, arranged as Woman. So that what was previously one creature was now two, and thereby the complete equality of women for ever attested.”⁴³ He wrote, “But here Sarah is called upon in completely equal worthiness and importance as the second, no less essential factor of this whole covenant-promise, and just as Abraham’s significance in this covenant was to be perpetuated by a change of his name to Abraham, so here, henceforth is the equal essential importance of Sarai to be perpetuated by changing her name to Sarah.”⁴⁴ And he wrote:

In the word אִישׁ and אִשָּׁה lay the guarantee for the equality in rank and mutually complementing calling of Man and Woman. As long as man and woman were אִישׁ and אִשָּׁה there was no need for man to be emancipated from woman nor woman from man, neither could make the other into a slave nor yet into a god or goddess. The first who altered this designation—as indeed our sages remark, in no other language are man and woman designated by words coming from the same root and so regarded from the same trend of thought—brought it about that one man would yoke his woman to the plough while the other would throw himself at her feet.⁴⁵

Once again, the message is clear. One could imagine that R' Hirsch would be taken aback to see how his commentary has been used in recent times to support apologetics and “reverse sexism.” If you read all of his

⁴¹ R' Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Pentateuch* (New York: Judaica Press), Genesis 5:2.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 2:23.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 2:21.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 17:15.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 11:7.

multi-dimensional commentary, you come out with the message of equality. Perhaps, to the contemporary Western mind that is influenced by the competitiveness of the general society, somebody always has to be better. R' Hirsch saw it differently.

Neither inferiority, nor superiority, but rather equality. 