

Letter to D. L. Halper, 13 Iyar, 5737 (May 1, 1977)

The role of women; The importance of asking questions yet continue to do the Mitzvos

RABBI MENACHEM M. SCHNEERSON
Lubavitch
770 Eastern Parkway
Brooklyn, N. Y. 11213
493-9250

מנחם מנדל שניאורסאהן
ליובאוויטש

770 איסטערן פארקוויי
ברוקלין, נ. י.

By the Grace of G-d
13th of Iyar, 5737
Brooklyn, N. Y.

D. L. Halper
c/o WRVR
85 Claremont Avenue
New York, N. Y. 10027

Blessing and Greeting:

Your letter (post-dated April 18) reached me with some delay.

First, many thanks for your good wishes in connection with my birthday. I can best reciprocate in the words of our Sages, "One who blesses others is himself, or herself, blessed by G-d, the Source of all blessings." Accordingly, may G-d bestow His generous blessings on you in all needs.

Now with regard to your question about the woman's role from the viewpoint of our religion, or, as you refer to it, 'orthodox' Judaism,

I must first point out that the division of Judaism into 'orthodox, conservative, reform,' etc. is a purely artificial one, for all Jews have one and the same Torah, given by the One and Same G-d, though there are more observant Jews and less observant Jews. To tag on a 'label' does not, of course, change the reality.

As for the attitude of Judaism to the woman, it has also been frequently pointed out that those who think that the Torah places the woman in an inferior role to that of the man labor under a misconception, for it has no basis in truth. Man and woman are like the head and the heart in the physical body: both are equally vital, though each has entirely different functions, and only the normal functioning of both together ensure a healthy body. The same is true of the role of the man and woman in Jewish life and, indeed, in any healthy human society.

It follows that the heart need not feel inferior to the brain, although in certain aspects it depends on the brain, just as the brain need not feel inferior to the heart because in certain respects it depends on the latter. Similarly in Jewish life there are duties and functions which G-d has allotted to the woman and those allotted to the man.

Where a person, for some reason, is unable to perform a certain Mitzva or some of his or her functions, there is a ruling in the Torah, Toras Emes (so called because all its teachings are true), "the Merciful One excuses a person who is incapable of performing his, or her, duty." Indeed, G-d who knows what is in the heart of everyone, and knowing that were the person

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able, he or she would have performed it, considers the thought in place of the deed.

Incidentally, it is noteworthy that of the various Divine names, it is the name רחמנא ('Merciful One') that is used in the above ruling. This pointedly emphasizes that all G-d's precepts derive from His attribute of mercy and lovingkindness, which, like all Divine attributes, is infinite. It follows that where a person is precluded from performing a Mitzva by circumstances beyond his or her control is completely excused and exonerated.

Needless to say, one need not apologise for asking questions. On the contrary, since Jews are described in the Torah as a 'wise and understanding people,' it is desirable that questions which come within the realm of human understanding should be also be understood and not left to faith alone, wherever this is possible. There is only one prerequisite, which goes back to the time when the Torah and Mitzvos were given at Sinai, namely that the Torah must be accepted on the basis of Naaseh ('we will do') first, and then v'nishma ('we will understand') - meaning, that the performance of Mitzvos must not be made conditional on the understanding of their deeper significance, etc., nor must the vitality and enthusiasm of the performance be any the less.

This basic principle and attitude is also a matter of common sense. If the Torah is accepted as Divine - otherwise there is no point at all in any questions and discussions, since if it's man-made one would be free to do as one pleases - that is, given by a Supreme Being, Whose Essence is beyond human grasp, it would be a contradiction in terms to demand to know the meaning and significance of each Divine Mitzva before performing it, for it would reduce the Supreme Being to the level of the limited human intelligence, which, moreover, is subject to development, since human understanding increases from day to day with newly acquired knowledge and experience; yet he insists on understanding it today, on his present level.

One might even add that there is a sound pragmatic, or 'business' consideration involved, as, by way of a simple illustration, when one is offered an opportunity to invest a dollar with a view to earning a thousand dollars, though there may be a remote possibility of losing the \$1. A normal individual would certainly not hesitate to make his decision. Similarly, when a Jew, on the basis of na'aseh before v'nishma, invests in a relatively small effort by restricting himself in matters of Kashrus and Shabbos observance, and the Yetzer hara attempts to distract him by saying, even if you live 120 years maybe you will never fully grasp the significance of what you are doing -- the most the person will have lost would be having denied himself certain foods or some convenience on Shabbos. On the other hand, if a person will wait with the performance of Mitzvos until he will realize their significance, and in the meantime will act like any gentile, he will deprive himself of the eternal good which was his within easy reach, and when the time will come and he will dis-

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Divine Torah, with all the consequences therefrom,

Much more could be said on the subject matter, but I trust the above will suffice. May G-d, whose benevolent Providence extends to each and everyone individually, lead you in the path of Truth,

With blessing *M. Schneerson*

✓ similar P.S. Since you refer to women's lib, which has become so popular in recent years, it baffles me that the thrust of the movement is centered on the woman's becoming ~~equal~~ ^{similar} to man -- and this is what is termed 'independence' and 'feminist' pride, etc.!