

SICHA SUMMARY

Likkutei Sichos, Vol. 31

Yisro, Sicha 1

The Midrash:

In describing the events leading up to the giving of the Torah, the verse states, "Moses ascended to God, and G-d called to him from the mountain, saying, "So shall you say to the house of Jacob and tell the sons of Israel (Shemos 19:3)

The Mechilta comments: "So shall you say to the house of Jacob — These are the women. Tell the sons of Israel — these are the men. Another interpretation: So shall you say to the house of Jacob — with a gentle language, say to the women the general principles. And tell the sons of Israel — give them the details [of the laws].

Midrash Rabbah states slightly differently: So shall you say to the house of Jacob — these are the woman. G-d said to Moshe, "speak to them general principles which they are able to hear, and speak to the sons of Israel — these are the men. G-d said to Moshe, speak to them details of the laws which they can hear.

The Question:

By saying "Another interpretation" the Mechilta implies that the second interpretation differs from or opposes the first. But seemingly the first interpretation explains who the audience was, the second, what kind of information was imparted to them. They are complementary interpretations, not opposing.

The Explanation:

The difference between these two interpretations lies in the origin of the need to differentiate in communicating the Torah to men and women. According to the first interpretation, Moshe had to convey the Torah differently because of some essential difference in the constitution of men and women. "The house of Jacob — these are women, the sons of Israel — these are men." Meaning, the Torah itself does not require differentiation, those receiving the Torah do. The second reading suggests that the Torah itself contains differentiation that requires gradual communication — first there must be general principles, then there can be detailed law.

If this is correct, then the Midrash actually aligns with the first explanation of the

Mechilta. The Midrash says that the reason women were given the “general principles” was because this is what they were capable of hearing, implying that there is some essential disadvantage to the women that requires them to only hear the concise summary of the Torah, not the particulars.

According to the Mechilta’s second explanation which does not link the content to women’s inability to “hear” the details, the meaning of “general principals” is more sanguine, referring to the all-encompassing principles of Torah that include all possible details that later emerge. This leads to the conclusion that the entire Torah was given to women, even the time-bound mitzvos which they are exempt from. The meaning of this exemption is not that women are severed from any relationship with these mitzvos, rather, they were given to them at Sinai, but they are technically exempt from fulfilling them in practice. This lends insight into the Zohar’s statement that a wife and husband are two halves of one soul, and that when a husband does time-bound

mitzvos he does so on behalf of his wife. Meaning, women, too, have a relationship with these mitzvos, but fulfill it through the husband’s agency. Parenthetically, the same applies to a single woman and her future husband.

The reason for this more generous giving of the Torah to women is due to the essential transcendent grasp of the women’s soul. Because they are naturally more inclined to faith and belief, they can absorb the fundamental principles of the Torah, prior to their descent into the particularity of law, and into the strictures of time and space. This is a possible mystical explanation for their exemption from these laws — since their souls are receptive to these fundamentals that are not yet concretized in time. This is also one explanation for the fact that Jewish identity is matriarchal, because the essential faith of the soul is primarily a female quality, and therefore it is bequeathed from the mother to the next generation.
