YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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# BEREISHIT

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LECTURE #12: THE WOMAN IN CREATION

In this lecture we shall not deal with the general question of the status of women; that issue is too broad for a single session. We shall content ourselves here with a discussion regarding the woman's place in creation.

THE PLAIN SENSE OF THE SCRIPTURAL TEXT

Let us start with the plain sense of the scriptural verses. The second chapter of *Bereishit* describes the creation of the woman in an optimistic atmosphere of partnership and friendship:

And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone: I will make him a help to match him. And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every bird of the air; and brought them to the man to see what he would call them: and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. And the man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for the man there was not found a help to match him. And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs [alternatively: sides], and closed up the flesh in its place, and of the rib [alternatively: side] which the Lord God had taken from the man, he made a woman, and brought her to the man. And the man said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called woman [=*Isha*], because she was taken out of man [=*Ish*]. That is why a man leaves his father and his mother, and cleaves to his wife; and they become one flesh. (*Bereishit* 2:18-24)

The story starts with the man's loneliness. "It is not good that man should be alone." He is searching for a "help." This is immediately followed by the account of how the man named the animals. What is this doing here? According to the plain sense of the text, the answer is simple: the man is searching among the animals for a helpmate. He names all of the animals, trying to understand their essential nature. But still, "for the man there was not found a help to match him." God then decides that the man's mate will only be found in a creature closely resembling him, one that is fashioned out of one of his ribs. This is the way the woman comes into being. The man calls her "woman" [=*Isha*], as a symbol of the similarity between them and her source in him [=*Ish*]: "She shall be called woman, because she was taken out of man." The story ends on an optimistic note: "That is why a man leaves his father and his mother, and cleaves to his wife; and they become one flesh." The woman is part of the man; for this reason a man leaves his parents' house in order to find a woman who will restore him, as it were, to his original wholeness.

Sin, however, brought this idyllic situation to an abrupt end. The sin, as we learned in one of the previous lectures, allowed unrestrained desire to enter into the relationship. Uncontrollable desire causes a person to relate to others merely as a means for the satisfaction of his own needs. Thus, the man quickly blames his wife: "The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree" (*Bereishit* 3:12). Following the sin, the relationship between the two undergoes a change. We all remember the woman's punishment:

Unto the woman He said, I will greatly multiply the pain of your childbearing; in sorrow you shall bring forth children; and yet your desire [*teshukatekh*] shall be your husband, and he shall rule over you. (*Bereishit* 3:16)

What is meant by the words, "And yet your *teshuka* [usually translated as 'desire'] shall be your husband"? Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra offers a surprising interpretation:

*Teshukatekh* - your obedience, meaning that you will do whatever he commands you [to do], for you are under his authority to do what he wants. (Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra, commentary ad loc.)

What brought Ibn Ezra to this interpretation? He may, perhaps, have been prompted by the real life observation that a woman's desire is not necessarily any greater than that of a man; perhaps, he failed to understand how desire could be regarded as a curse; or perhaps he was guided by the parallelism with the final clause of the verse: "And he shall rule over you." The classical commentators as well as modern biblical scholars adduce proof for Ibn Ezra's position from the verse regarding Yosef: "And according to your word shall all my people be ruled [*yishak*]" (*Bereishit* 41:40), where "*teshuka*" is equivalent to "rule." According to this interpretation we understand how God's words are a curse; and there is no difficulty from observable human conduct. It seems that this is also the way to understand the verse appearing below regarding Kayin, "And to you shall be his '*teshuka*,' and yet you shall rule over him" (*Bereishit* 4:7), where once again we find a juxtaposition of '*teshuka*' and rule.

Rabbenu Bachya Ibn Pekuda proposes a different interpretation. The verse does not mean to say that a woman's desire is greater than that of a man, but rather that, in contrast to others in a subservient position, e.g., slaves, she yearns for her husband, and therefore makes no attempt to escape her bondage. In any event, Rabbenu Bachya also understands that the verse relates to a man's domination over his wife.

It is important to emphasize that we are dealing here with a curse, and not with the ideal state. There are those who try to find support in these verses for the perpetuation of a woman's subservience to her husband. But this is a curse, against which we are commanded to fight! The message of this passage is the very opposite. Someone once told me that in the delivery room next to his wife lay a *charedi* woman, whose husband forbade her to have an epidural, so that she should be better able to fulfill the imperative, "in sorrow shall you bring forth children." My friend asked the husband whether he was careful to fulfill the command, "in the sweat of your face shall you eat bread." This is total nonsense: we are dealing here with a curse, not a command. The words, "and he shall rule over you," should be understood in similar fashion. We are being given here an important message that male domination and oppression of women is not part of the optimal social order, but rather a curse.

Let us continue and see what happens in the aftermath of the sin. Adam names his wife for a second time:

And the man called his wife's name Chava; because she was the mother of all living. (*Bereishit* 3:20)

There is an enormous difference between the names given to the woman before and after the sin. This point was noted by Rabbi Yitzchak Arama, author of "*Akedat Yitzchak*":

Originally, Adam had called Chava "*Isha*", emphasizing her parity with man, i.e., *Ish*. After the episode with the tree of Knowledge, he called her Chava, emphasizing the female element within her, and the fact that she was the mother of all subsequent human beings. Between these two names, the two functions of woman are defined. On the one hand, as the "*eshet chayil*," woman of valor, she possesses all the ingredients that can raise her to the status of prophetess; on the other hand, her function is to become a mother. A woman who fails to give birth, just like a man who is sterile, has not forfeited her major function in life, as is proven from *Yeshaya* 56:3-5: "Let not the barren proclaim I am but a dried put tree." We hold the view that man's major function is the performance of good deeds, something quite independent of procreation. If Ya'akov had been angry at Rachel for demanding children, else her life would not be worth living, it was precisely for this reason. (Rabbi Yitzchak Arama, *Akedat Yitzchak*, *Bereishit* 9)[1]

Before the sin, the man called his wife Isha, giving expression to her essential nature as well as to her origin. Now he calls her Chava, a name that expresses the benefit that she brings him. He does not relate to his wife's essential nature and personality, but only to the fact that she provides him with children, that she is "the mother of all living." He relates to her functionally, attempting to examine the benefit that Chava can bring him.

This leads naturally to the next stage:

And Lemekh took to him two wives; the name of the one was Ada, and the name of the other Tzila. (*Bereishit* 4:19)

As pointed out by Radak, Lemekh was the first to take two wives. The taking of two wives reflects a way of looking at a woman not as a partner in marriage, but as a source of benefit. A man who marries two women does not expect to "cleave to his wife and become one flesh," but to derive gain and benefit. Rashi on the spot cites the words of *Chazal*:

This was the custom of the generation that lived before the time of the Flood; they had two wives, one for child-bearing, the other for frivolous companionship and charm; the latter was given a cup of some drug to drink in order that she might become barren, and was dressed up like a bride and fed with the best food, while her fellow-wife was left without her husband's companionship and ever mourned like a widow. (Rashi, commentary ad loc., following *Chazal*)

At first glance, it would appear that the woman designated for the man's companionship should be happy; in truth, however, they are both wretched. When a woman is set aside for a particular purpose, whether for procreation or for companionship, she is being related to as an object from which benefit may be derived. Dividing the various functions of a wife among several women is the ultimate expression of relating to a woman from the perspective of the functional benefit that may be derived from her. The message of *Parashat Bereishit* is that the ideal situation is harmony and friendship between husband and wife, and that exploitation follows from exaggerated desire and sin.

WHAT THE COMMENTATORS SAY

THE IMAGE OF GOD

The commentators disagree whether only the man or also the woman was created in the image of God. The dispute stems from the fact that the biblical verse passes from the singular to the plural: "In the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." Thus, it is possible to understand that creation relates to the two of them, whereas the image of God relates to the man alone. This is the way Abravanel, for example, understood the verse:

Even though the two of them were of one species, they were not equally in the image of God. This is why the verse states: "In the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." That is, man alone was created in the image of God... For the primary creation was that of the male, he alone being created in the image of God, as it is stated in the singular: "In the image of God, He created Him." For it is he who would perceive the mysteries of wisdom, and not the female whose wisdom is limited to the spindle. (Abravanel, commentary to *Bereishit* 1:27)

Rabbi Naphtali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, the Netziv, developed this idea further:

"Male and female He created them." The verse does not come to explain that this species, more so than all the other creatures, has a male and a female. Rather, [it comes] to teach you that they are two beings, as will be explained below. This is because the male of this species is not at all similar in his character to the female of the same species. As *Kohelet* says: "One man among a thousand I have found; but a woman among all those I have not found" (*Kohelet* 7:28). That is, that a man of virtue resembling his Creator in the image of God is found one in a thousand; which is not the case regarding women. (Netziv, *Ha'amek Davar*, *Bereishit* 1:27)

The Netziv wonders why it is that only about man is it stated that his species was created male and female; surely, the same could have been said about all the other members of the animal kingdom! He answers that there is a huge difference between men and women with respect to the level that they can possibly reach. Only a man can attain the image of God, and so regarding the image of God the verse uses the singular. The Netziv explains the entire creation story in the same spirit.

Thus, we see that there were those who understood that "the image of God" refers to man alone. Rabbi Avraham ben ha-Rambam rejected this idea. He argues that even if we say that God created "the man" (and only "the man") in His image, the verse is referring to the entire human race:

The term "Adam" has more than one meaning. It denotes the first human being, as will be explained, and also the human species which divides into men and women. The reference in this and the following verses is to the species, for it is stated: "Male and female he created them." (Rabbi Avraham ben ha-Rambam, commentary to *Bereishit* 1:27)

According to Rabbi Avraham, when the verse says that God created "the man" in His image," it refers to the entire human race, and not only to males. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch developed this idea further. His conclusion, based on what it says in Chapter 1 regarding the creation of the male and the female, is the very opposite of that of the Netziv:

"Male and female He created them." Although all living creatures were created in both sexes, this is only stressed at human beings to lay down the fact that both sexes were created equally directly by God, and in equal likeness to Him. An equality which is also quite specially expressed by the transition from the singular to the plural, "*oto*" to "*otam*." The one Adam-creature in the likeness of God is presented in two sexes, which only both together form the complete "Adam." (Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, commentary to *Bereishit* 1:27)

The Netziv understands the statement, "In the image of God, He created him," as referring to the male alone. Rabbi Hirsch arrives at just the opposite conclusion: only when the two sexes come together do they constitute a whole creature that is in the image of God. Rabbi Hirsch explains the entire passage in this spirit.

THE WOMAN'S CREATION FROM THE MAN'S RIB

The fact that the woman was created from the man's rib seems to suggest the male's superiority over the female. This is the understanding, for example, of Ralbag:

Woman was created from man, because he is the reason for her existence, that is to say, she was created to serve him... She was created from him, so that she should be more obedient to him and perform the services that he requires... This is not the case regarding other living creatures. And for this reason they were created together from one place. (Ralbag, commentary to the Torah)

At the end of the passage, Ralbag argues that it is only in the human species that the female is inferior to the male. Hence, it was only the man who was created alone without his wife, she being created only afterwards.[2]

Plato also alludes to a hierarchy among men and women, and he too bases it on the order of creation:

At first only males were created, and according to the reasonable explanation, all those of faint heart who lived evil lives would pass into women at their second birth. (Plato, Timeaus)

The Ba'alei ha-Tosafot explained that it was because of her inferiority and subservience to her husband that the woman was created from his rib:

There is a difficulty: why was the woman created from a rib, and not some other organ? So that she should be bent at the ribs and subservient to her husband.[3] (*Ba'alei ha-Tosafot al ha-Torah*)

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, however, explained this in the opposite manner. He argues that the fact that the woman was created from the man testifies to her superiority.

With woman, the material for her body was not taken from the earth as it was with man. God formed one side of Man into Woman: Man, as it were, was divided, and the one part formed into Woman ... built out, arranged as Woman. So that what was previously one creature was now two, and thereby the complete equality of women forever attested. Our Sages also ascribe all the special characteristics of the female voice, the female character and temperament, as well as the earlier spiritual and mental maturity of women, as being connected with this formation of Woman out of the already feeling, sensitive living body of Man, in contrast to Man, whose body was created out of earth. (Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, commentary to *Bereishit* 2:22)

Rabbi Hirsch raises two points in favor of the woman: The woman is the "final model," as opposed to the man who was merely a "trial run," or at best, a less sophisticated model. Moreover, the man was created from the earth, whereas the woman was created from the man, and so she enjoys higher status.

It is interesting to note that the first chapter of *Bereishit* describes a single joint creation of the man and the woman, in contrast to the second chapter, where the male is created first. Even with respect to chapter 2, *Chazal* understood that the primal creature was not a male, but a creature that was both male and female:

Rabbi Shemuel bar Nachman said: When the Holy One, blessed be He, created the first man, he created him an hermaphrodite. Rabbi Levi said: When man was created, he was created with two body fronts, and He sawed him in two, so that two backs resulted, one back for the male and another for the female. An objection was raised: "And He took one of his ribs" (*Bereishit* 2:21). He answered: The word should be rendered "of his sides," as it is written: "And for the second side of the tabernacle" (*Shemot* 26:20) (*Vayikra Rabba*, 14, 1)

THE SIN

Many thinkers and biblical commentators emphasized the woman's guilt and responsibility for the sin involving the Tree of Knowledge. Thus, for example, writes Rabbenu Bachye Ibn Pekuda:

"That God has made man upright" (*Kohelet* 7:29) - In other words, He created [man] entirely rational, that in all his qualities he should only follow [his] intellect. But when the woman emerged from him, having been taken from his ribs, he then sinned and veered from the path of the intellect because of her, for she caused him to sin and think evil of God as a result of the wicked advisor... For he had never sinned when he was by himself, until the woman came. But once she came, sin came [as well]. (*Kitvei Rabbenu Bachya*, p. 550)

The Torah states that the woman ate of the forbidden fruit first, but it does not say that she seduced the man. It only says that she gave him of the fruit and he ate. It was only Adam who tried to blame his wife, hanging the sin upon her.[5] *Midrash ha-Gadol* presents the woman as having seduced her husband, but it is precisely her weakness and inferiority that it puts forward in her defense:

Adam said to the Holy One, blessed be He: "Master of the universe, when I was by myself, I did not sin before You. But when this woman came to me, she led me astray, as it says: 'She gave me of the tree, and I ate.'" The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: "I gave her to you as a help, yet you are ungrateful, saying: 'She gave it to me.' You should not have listened to her, for she is subordinate to you, whereas you are not subordinate to her." (*Midrash ha-Gadol*, *Bereishit* 3:12)

"IT IS NOT GOOD THAT MAN SHOULD BE ALONE"

Though in general he follows the interpretation that emphasizes the woman's inferiority, the Netziv also suggests an interpretation of a wholly different sort. When the verse says, "It is not good that man should be alone," it is not referring to the fact that the male needs the female, for that is the case with all the world's creatures, and why should man be different? What is the novelty that a man needs a woman? Rather, it means to say as follows:

It is not good that [man] should have a female counterpart like those of the other creatures, who, rather than being a help throughout the course of life, only present themselves at mating time; it is not good that man should be in such a situation. (Netziv, *Ha'amek Davar*, *Bereishit* 2:18)

Human coupling is based not only upon sexual union, but also upon partnership and joint living. We might add that even on the purely sexual plain, there is a difference between man and other living creatures. All other animals have a limited mating season, at which time the males join with their female counterparts. Only man comes together with his wife at all times of the year. This too gives expression to the need of man and woman to be together at all times.

FOOTNOTES:

[1] Rabbi Arama, however, does not develop the idea that we have presented here regarding the change effected by the sin. It should be mentioned that Ralbag explains that the name "Chava" alludes to the fact that in a certain respect the woman belongs to the class of animals, she being the highest among them. According to him, the name itself emphasizes the female's inferiority.

[2] This explanation is also found in Ra'avad's "*Ba'alei ha-Nefesh*," pp. 14-15.

[3] I.e., that a woman should bow down and prostrate herself before her husband.

[4] Resh Lakish understands that the verse which states that God took one of Adam's "*tzela'ot*" (*Bereishit* 1:21) is not referring to what we call a "*tzela*," i.e., a rib, but to one of Adam's sides. Resh Lakish's interpretation of "*tzela*" as side is indeed the plain sense of the word (though the picture that he paints of Adam being created with two faces is certainly not the plain sense of the verse). It should be noted that a similar account appears already in Plato's "Symposium."

[5] Christianity, as opposed to Judaism, greatly developed the idea of the woman's responsibility for the primeval sin. As Paul said: "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet woman will be saved through bearing children, if she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty" (I Timothy 2:12-15).

(Translated by David Strauss)