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“LET US CALL THE LASS, AND ASK HER OPINION”:

A SURPRISING MOMENT AND AN ASTONISHING MODEL OF ORTHODOX FEMINISM

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When Avraham’s servant seeks to be off with Rivkah, her mother and brother respond:

נקרא לנערה ונשאלה את פיה

Let us call the lass and ask her mouth

The word “mouth” seems unnecessary: why not say just “ask her?”

R. Chayyim Yosef David Azulai (known as א"ד"א: Morocco, 1724-1806) in his Nachal Kedumim suggests that Rivkah’s family intended to use her words in a form of idolatrous divination, but she frustrated them by saying only the one word אלך (=I will go); by contrast, Rabbi Chaim Tchernowitz (Galicia, 1760 – 1818?) in his B'er Mayim Chayyim contends that the family looked for Hashem to put words in her mouth, since her speech and actions had indicated Divine guidance throughout this episode. The common denominator is that Rivkah’s family had no interest in finding out what Rivkah wanted for herself.

Midrash Rabbah, however, followed by Rashi and the mainstream of rishonim and acharonim, derives from here that women, even orphaned minors, ought not be married off without their consent. Illustrating the maxim that ideological extremes often agree in practice, the fiercely antifeminist Rabbi Menasheh Klein (Responsa Mishneh Halakhot 12:301) argues ala Andrea Dworkin that the Torah is not satisfied with mere consent:

כל פתוי לנשים שלא לרצונם לשם אישות,

אפילו קודם הנישואין –

לאו מדרך אנשים הכשרים הוא,

ובתורה כתיב נקרא לנערה ונשאלה את פיה –

ולא שנפתה אותה, אלא בשאלת פיה ואומרת "הן,"

בלא פיתוי אלא ברצון שלה.

Any seduction of women against their will for the purpose of marriage, even after kiddushin/ betrothal so as to proceed to

nisuin/ consummation –

this is not of the ways of proper men.

The Torah writes “Let us call the lass and ask her mouth” –

meaning that we should not seduce her, rather we should “ask her mouth” and see if she says “Yes,”

without seduction, rather as an expression of her will.

(Contrast Shekhem’s “speaking to the heart of the lass” in 34:3.) The context of Rabbi Klein’s interpretation is an attack on the phenomenon of “dating,” which, by putting young men and women in direct contact, risks having women persuaded into marriages that do not accord with their most authentic selves’ values.

Note that the Midrash and Rabbi Klein assume that Rivkah’s family is a compelling source of norms in this area. We’ll return to that point below.

My favorite use of “*Let us call the lass and ask her mouth!*” is in Rabbi Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg’s 1924 *hesped* for the remarkable Esther Rubenstein.¹ Rubenstein was the only daughter of Rabbi Chaim Yirmiyahu Flensburg, a noted scholar and preacher. According to Rabbi Weinberg,

“It was a bon mot of his, when conversation with him turned to a statement of Chazal, and its location was hidden from all those participating, to say ‘*Let us call the lass and ask her mouth.*’ His late daughter had comprehensive Torah knowledge (*bekius*) and all (Rabbinic) statements were fluent in her mouth.”

Rabbi Weinberg says of her later career (when she was married to Rabbi Isaac Rubenstein, Chief Rabbi of Vilna):

“In her published writings, she tried to broaden recognition that our national resurrection could not be imagined without the help of women... The education

¹ I first read sections of the eulogy in Rabbi Eliezer Katzman’s biographical introduction to Rabbi Flensburg’s שאלות חיים. The eulogy was originally printed in a Sefer HaZikaron for her, (itself an extraordinary thing), reprinted in כתבי הגאון רבי יחיאל יעקב vol. 2 p.171, and translated by Rabbi Dr. Schneur Leiman in Tradition. Translations herein are my own where they differ from Professor Leiman’s. I am deeply grateful to Rabbi Dr. Marc Shapiro for the collection of Rabbi Weinberg’s writings, and for steering me to Professor Leiman’s translation and to Esther Rubenstein’s essay translated and excerpted below.

of daughters is the hardest question facing us. With regard to this question, we the *charedim* who are loyal to the flag of our Tradition are especially bewildered, both outwardly and in the recesses of our hearts. In depressed moments, it is as if her portrait (דמות דיוקנה) rises before my eyes. She was our model... If Esther Rubenstein had lived a full lifespan, she would have helped us resolve this question and blaze the trail for the education of our daughters..."

I wondered for years where Esther Rubenstein would have led us. This week, I finally had the opportunity to read her essay on women's education and rights.² It is too long to translate here. But her first installment offered a fascinating explanation of why Avraham insists on marrying Yitzchak off to a member of his family rather than to a Canaanite:

"In the childhood of humanity, in the time of crude physical dominance, when whoever was stronger - dominated (כל דאליים גבר), and (therefore) every male was dominant (כל גבר אליים), and woman, weaker by nature, was a maidservant bound to her husband, deprived of any independent will, and even in the circle of her family had no worth – then, in those very days of darkness and ignorance, the early Hebrews gave equal rights to their wives. In the Hebrew family they considered women in all matters, **"asked their mouths,"** and consulted with them about all matters great and small. Avraham Avinu considered it a sacred duty to listen constantly to his wife's advice – *"Everything which Sarah will say to you – heed her voice."* Not just in domestic matters, but in all his paths and activities, Sarah was his companion and his associate (*chevrato*) in life. From the verse *"and the souls which they made in Charan,"* Chazal learned that Sarah Imeinu also 'made souls' for our holy ideal, like her husband, and exercised spiritual influence on her surroundings, and did not satisfy herself with 'the life of the tent' alone. She also held authority together with him and became SARAH, a female *adon*, when she became the wife of "AVRAHAM." (Just as Avram became Avraham, moving from "Father to Aram" to "Father to the entire world," so too Sarai moved from "Mistress of her nation" to "Mistress of the entire world.") And so too every time he advanced, she elevated with him.

Avraham Avinu derived so much gratification from having a wife with equal rights, which was the framework of his whole life, that out of the goodness of his heart he sought the same arrangement for his son. He made his servant swear *"You must go to my homeland and to my culture, and take a wife for my son,"* (because) he sought a companion for Yitzchak from the place where Sarah his companion had been educated, she of such powerful sensitivity and will. He sought companionship and equality in life between husband and wife, and mandated this for all his descendants.

We can perhaps say that Avraham was the first to introduce the world to the slogan of equal rights for women. That slogan, which is now seen as the last word of the new culture and the foundation of a good society, found its first expression in an aggada of Chazal (Bava Kamma 97b):

*"What is the coin of Avraham Avinu?
An elderly man and woman on one side,
and a young man and woman on the other."*

This aggada teaches us in a symbolic way the root notion of equality, that must be foundational for men and women throughout their lives, from youth through old age, that the woman must stand at the same level as a man of her years, that in all times and periods of life they must be equal in everything: in education, in learning and personal development, in spiritual, ethical, and social condition, and in all human progress women must walk in lockstep with men their age, because the path of life is single, equal, that includes both and is shared by them always.³

In the end, Sarah Schenirer rather than Esther Rubenstein led the revolution in Jewish women's education, and political Zionism succeeded without forcing Orthodoxy to grapple with feminism. But when conservative rhetoric speaks of recreating the *alter heim* of pre-Shoah Eastern Europe, perhaps the portrait that rises before our eyes should be that of the Rebbetzin of Vilna, intimate friend of at least one *gadol hador* and fiery advocate for women's equality.

² published in four installments in 1919 in the journal HaMizrachi, beginning with the edition of 28 Tishrei 5780; all are available online from the National Library of Israel [here](#))

³ I hope to publish more translated excerpts of this essay over the next few weeks, including sections dealing specifically with education, and also to discuss Rabbi Weinberg's presentation of her views.