

Real Jewish Men

Parshat Vayishlach 5770

By Rabbi Mark B Greenspan

(With thanks to Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin)

This morning I'm going to say something that might surprise you. It might even shock you. I suspect what I am going to say is 'politically incorrect,' given the fact that we're a proud egalitarian congregation which encourages the participation of women in religious life. What I have to say, however, needs to be said and discussed. It's time to rethink the meaning of egalitarianism in religious life because men are quickly becoming disenfranchised from Judaism. In fact real Jewish men have become an endangered species.

I'm not the first person to say this. During my years at the seminary when faculty and students were divided over the issue of admitting women to rabbinical school, one of our professors, Dr Mortimer Ostow, a staunch opponent of ordaining women, argued that the egalitarian trend of contemporary Judaism was unhealthy for religious life. A respected New York psychiatrist, Ostow taught pastoral counseling to rabbinical students. He argued that the current trend in religious life would lead to the feminization of Judaism and discourage men from being involved in Jewish communal life.

Fast forward almost thirty years and we find an article entitled [Jewish Macho](#) by Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin, a Reform Rabbi. He writes, "Let's face it. The great, unspoken crisis facing modern Judaism is the disengagement of men in large numbers. While no one mourns the exclusive male minyan, more and more men seem to be leaving synagogue in the hands of women. Men are increasingly distancing themselves from congregations – as worshippers, as students of Torah, even as trustees!" I can almost hear Professor Ostow calling out from the grave, "I told you so!" At the recent biennial convention of the Reform movement they even did something radical – they held an all male minyan! And Rabbi Salkin has recently published a "male commentary" on the Torah!

Now, while this issue is not nearly as serious in Conservative congregations, I believe that real crisis of masculinity is a societal one. We're no longer certain about what it means to be a man and what it means to be a Jewish man in particular. At one time this role was clearly defined within Jewish society. But as we continued to navigate our way through the changing terrain of gender roles in Jewish life, there is less and less of a role for Jewish men in our tradition, and I think this is unfortunate.

When Jewish men get together, what do they do? They watch a football game, play basket ball, or discuss the stock market. And while there is nothing wrong with these activities, they are traditionally not the types of activities that defined Jewish men as men. We men are so focused on career and economic responsibilities that we have little time or energy for anything that uplifts us or deepens our spirit. Rabbi Harold Schulweis writes: "The Jewish man feels driven by some ubiquitous force that makes him expand in order to stay alive...he does not speak with God. He's too spent for poetry, too drained for that intense dialogue. The world of ritual is a non-utilitarian, non-profit-making domain. His life has been taken over by the values and ideals of the marketplace."

The problem begins long before Jewish men become men. It begins when they're boys. These boys get a clear message from their parents and from society at large. Male is macho. Their primary role is to be

number one – in school and on the sports field. And while there is nothing wrong with these pursuits, they become a kind of idolatry when they are the be-all and end all of life. Of course these are also issues for Jewish girls but for boys it creates an image and ideal that encourages independence, industriousness and competition to the exclusion of spirituality, emotional openness and vulnerability. And I think this is unfortunate and even disastrous for Jewish life. One was never meant to exclude the other

So what makes a real Jewish man? This is a question our Torah wrestles with. As we look at the stories in Genesis, we find that the question of masculinity underlies much of the patriarchal narrative. In each generation two types of sons are born who feud with one another: Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers. One is tough and macho while the other is docile and, if you'll pardon me for saying so, 'feminine.' Isaac is passive and non-confrontational; Jacob is a home body and a momma's boy; and Joseph goes around preening in his designer coat of many colors. Rabbi Salkin writes: In their various rivalries, the tough and warlike brothers always lose out to the more docile, intellectual ones. But there is a sacred paradox: in the end the feuding brothers reunite..."

In the case of Jacob the story is even more complex. When our forefather wrestles with a night time visitor, I suspect he's wrestling with himself. This visitor is called an *eesh*. Could it be that Jacob is wrestling with his own masculinity? To be a man is to face the world with courage and honesty. Like Jacob, to be a man is also emotionally honest: he's not afraid to admit his fear or to cry in the presence of his long estranged brother, or to embrace him. Yet, at the same time, Jacob wrestles with God/an angel/himself. It seems to me that there is nothing more masculine than wrestling. Jacob is wounded when the angel touches his thigh – this wound is a badge of honor; that he has finally become a real man. The angel blesses our forefather by giving him a new name - Israel – his name symbolizes his ascension to real manhood. Now he is Yisrael – one who struggles with beings divine and human.

But Israel is not a man because he is macho. Rather he is a man because he combines the qualities of Jacob and Israel. He has the ability to be strong and confrontational but he is also willing to acknowledge his vulnerabilities and weaknesses. The real sign of his manhood is his humility and faith in God.

I'm not suggesting that we go backwards, that we do away with hard earned advances of egalitarianism in Jewish life. What I am suggesting is that we need to devote as much time to teaching Jewish boys how to be men as we devote to feminism and issues affecting young women; we need to think more seriously about helping boys grow up to be responsible men, fathers and sons. We can do this by teaching boys that their worth will be measured not by what they earn, how many touchdowns they run, or what position they hold but by who they are and what they strive to be as human beings. Our tradition offers opportunities to do this by encouraging male participation in Jewish life, by promoting Torah study as a meaningful activity for men with other men, by teaching the donning of Tallit and Tefillin as a daily activity and seeing *Gemilut Hasadim* as a uniquely Jewish way for men to express kindness and compassion in their daily lives. There is nothing feminine about kindness – it is a mitzvah incumbent on men as well as women! It also means to be purpose driven in ones life not only in terms of career and accomplishments but also in terms of the pursuit of righteousness and devotion to God. And it might be helpful to allow some of those masculine pronouns to slip back into our liturgy and life. In psalm 15 we recite:

O Lord, who shall dwell in Your sanctuary?
 Who shall abide upon Your holy mountain?
 He lives with integrity and does what is right.

He speaks the truth in his heart and has no slander upon his tongue;
He does no evil to his fellow and does not reproach his neighbor.
In his eyes a vile person is despised but he honors those who revere the Lord.
He takes an oath even to his own harm and does not change.
He does not lend money at interest and does not take a bribe against the innocent.
Whoever does these things shall stand firm forever!

We find here a definition of real Jewish man. Like Jacob, he can be a *yoshev ohalim*, one who is not embarrassed to stay home and make soup but who is courageous enough to wrestle with god and himself alone in the night. He embraces kindness and charisma, strength and softness. And he recognizes that in his unique relation with God, his manliness finds its full expression.

Shabbat Shalom