

Both Judaism and Islam are deeply rooted in the Abrahamic tradition, espousing a firm vision of monotheism and social justice. Yet despite acknowledging Jews as “people of the book” and Jewish prophets as prophets of Islam, Islam differs significantly from Judaism in its social and cultural manifestations. This underlying social-theological difference of opinion is most apparent in the treatment of women under Islam and its religious predecessor. By examining the value of women as mandated in the Ten Commandments and contrasting it to the classical Islamic hermeneutics, a greater understanding of the cultural disparities between the religions is achieved.

The fifth commandment, which delineates the proper Jewish relationship between parents and their children, offers a primary example of Judaism promoting female social power. Vayikra 19:3’s mandate that “every person must respect (or revere and fear) their mother and father” illustrates that women are not to be valued merely as passive childbearers within a strictly patriarchal society. Nor are they weak creatures, regarded as valuable but inferior. Rather, they are empowered women to whom younger generations must submit complete respect and deference. Kiddushin 31f, wherein a rabbi offers himself as a footstool to his mother, illustrates how the gift of life imbues a mother with an eternal claim to superiority. By bringing a rabbi, traditionally held as a figure of ultimate authority and respect, to his knees, the mother indicates her sacred role as a powerful elder. Shulchan Aorch Yored De’ Ah 240:5’s insistence that a son “should credit his parents for the honor bestowed upon him” further illustrates how women command power through the union of marriage. The Shulchan’s prohibition against a son sitting in his parent’s place of worship, contradicting his mother disrespectfully, or calling a mother by her first name further reveals how “honoring ones parents is equivalent to honoring G-d,” a

blessed unequal relationship of fear and respect that establishes a woman as religious superior to her male sons (Shulchan Aruch Yoreh De' Ah 240:20).

The Torah's progressive view of strong women is further reinforced by accompanying classical religious texts. In his Sefer Hamitzvot, Maimonides strengthens the Jewish perception of women as bold and commanding, insisting that "one should act towards *his parents* as he would towards a monarch who has the power to punish those who act disrespectfully." By equating *both* father and mother with kings, the text renders Jewish women as a superior social force (relative to the younger generation) within society. Despite the male monopoly on positions of religious authority, a woman's right to respect and personal safety (a son may not degrade, hit, or curse his mother, as decreed by Teshuvot Rivash 220) is guaranteed by virtue of her position as a mother. Thus the fifth commandment and its associated text elevate the Jewish woman to a respected, venerated, and ultimately superior status above men, challenging notions of total Jewish patriarchy.

While Islam agrees that women ought to be treated with respect, it does not grant women the same degree of sacred, elevated superiority ensured by motherhood. Although the Prophet Mohammed insisted that "all people are equal as the teeth of a comb," subsequent religious texts and prophetic teachings outline a more subservient role of women in Islam.ⁱ Veiling, the harem, and polygamy are all expressions of the power and authority of men relative to women in Islam. Mohammed himself revealed the diminished power of women under *shari'a*, urging on his deathbed that "He who honors women is honorable, he who insults them is lowly and mean... I urge you to treat women kindly. They are a trust in your hand. Fear God on his trust."ⁱⁱ This quote voices the Prophet's significant respect for women, and equates respect of women with holiness and respect for God, as does the Shulchan of Judaism. Yet it reveals a dynamic of Islamic gender

relations unsettling from a modern Jewish standpoint - by regarding women as a “trust” under men, the Prophet acknowledges the inherent power inequality between genders, and suggests a social hierarchy that relegates women to a valued yet disempowered status. In Islam, it is the will of man, rather than divine halakha, that affords a mother the right to be treated with generosity. The mandate to respect and even *fear* mothers is noticeably absent from the Islamic discourse, and a son would only bow to his mother as a footstool if his own will encouraged him to do so. Furthermore, since the virtue of a mother’s role in bearing children garners much less thematic emphasis in Islamic religious texts as it does in Judaism, Islam does not require its youths to continually credit and revere their mothers for bestowing them life.

The co-optation of Islam by patriarchal forces further diminished the role of women and mothers within the religion, creating a stronger counterpoint to the Jewish model. According to Islamic feminists such as Fatima Mernissi, as Islam’s establishment coincided with the rise of patriarchy in the Arab world, and since women were only beginning to politically assert themselves during the era of the Prophet, men successfully orchestrated a “patriarchal takeover” and “through a historical process of cooperation, patriarchy was able to devour Islam and quickly make it its own after the death of Prophet Mohammed.”ⁱⁱⁱ Thus, although “the basis of misogyny in Islam is actually quite weak,” customs contrary to the original tenets of Islam were able to assert a universal male superiority that triumphed over the honor of childbearing so central to Jewish gender dialogues. Thus in Islam, “injustice against women is still camouflaged as sacred law, when in fact it is the law of men that subjugates women.”^{iv} Although Judaism maintains strongly patriarchal elements, it cannot be characterized by its own practitioners as “the law of the victor, the man who subdued the woman,” as is the case in Islam.^v Instead, the Judaism of the

ten commandments mandates *greater* respect for women over younger men, as in the case of a mother and her child.

The Torah also envisions an equal female role in marriage, as outlined by the seventh commandment. The Jewish mandate against adultery regards sexuality as an inherently neutral practice that, when eclipsed in the sanctity of a “distinct and separate marriage,” become an expression of *shehinah*, a divine presence. Not only does Judaism embrace sexuality in marriage as positive, but it also establishes a woman as a powerful and dynamic figure within the marriage. The Talmud’s insistence that “a man without a woman is not a person” strongly endorses the generous and authoritative nature of a woman, granting her the power to usher in the *shehinah* through marital unity. The Zohar commentary that “the unity of male and female is called one...because male without female is called a half body and half is not one” explicitly grants women exactly equal status relative to men. Women are not trusts under men, inferiors to be cared for at the will of patriarchal society, but rather authoritative forces that are held in exactly *equal* religious esteem as men, and are necessary for men to be complete. Marriage is valued as an expression of love, as asserted by Rabbi Menachem Schneersohn, and merits the divine approval of the *shehinah*.

Jewish creation theology and equation of holy ceremonies with marriage further values women in Judaism. According to Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki in Rashi 1040-1105, “God initially created Adam with two aspects [male and female], which He then separated.” By imbuing God with both feminine and masculine qualities, the text suggests the divinity of women, and thus elevates their social position. The Mechilta and Talmud’s metaphor of the giving of the commandments as a marriage further equates women with the sacred. The Mechilta’s

observation that at Mount Sinai, the “divine presence came out to greet them as a groom who goes to greet his bride,” further associates women with positive sexuality and equal relationship.

Islam, in contrast, is predicated upon a negative notion of female sexuality, and regards marriage not as the uniting of equals, but rather as a mechanism to empower men. The commandments indicate that Judaism views sexual power as neutral force wielded by both men and women, and made holy by the union of the two. Islam believes that women alone possess an explosive sexual power: “The Muslim woman is endowed with a fatal attraction, hence her identification with *fitna*, chaos, and with the anti-divine and anti-social forces of the universe.”^{vi} In other words, a Muslim woman commands such devastating sexual authority that her full presentation can incite social chaos and overpower men, so as to fully usurp the social order. A far cry from the benevolent, holy sexuality of women endorsed by the Torah. Thus Islam’s relegation of women into polygamy, wherein women are expected to remain mostly in the private sphere, illustrates why Islamic feminists like Faegheh Shirazi insist that the “entire Muslim social structure can be seen as an attack on, and a defense against, the disruptive power of female sexuality.”^{vii} Multiple marriages, by empowering the man and controlling multiple women at once, emerges as a “logical conclusion of the almost phobic attitude...towards women,” a patriarchal mechanism to control the forces that jeopardize male dominance.^{viii} The Qu’ranic stipulation that men are allowed to marry up to four women as long as they can treat all wives equally explains how women remain a trust under men, rather than their equals – and their welfare is contingent upon the will of men rather than sacred law.

Since “the whole issue of polygamy is the result of patriarchal attempts to distort the Qu’ran in the male’s favor,” it is no surprise that adultery is viewed from an equally secular model of gender power politics.^{ix} Contrary to Judaic commandments, adultery in Islam is not

perceived as a violation of sacred law, but rather a terrifying attempt to challenge female inequality. Islamic feminists such as Fatima Mernissi have illustrated this dynamic in analyses of *The Thousand and One Nights*. Mernissi contends that the “sexual betrayal” of King Shahrayar’s wife in sleeping with Mas’ud, a slave, reveals the “harem tragedy” as a whole: “the woman’s fatal need to topple the hierarchy built by the husband who has locked her up...is built into the very structure of the harem: it is the hierarchies and frontiers that men erect to dominate women that predetermine women’s behavior.”^x By defining the wife’s adultery in secular terms of gender politics, Mernissi further establishes marital oppression as a patriarchal institution that views marriage and sexuality in terms of unequal power and not holiness.

Thus, the contrast of Jewish commandments with classical Islamic texts reveals the differing views of women in the two religions. While childbearing affords women equal status within Judaism, Islam is motivated by the notion that “if women invade public space, male supremacy is seriously jeopardized,” and thus despite their avowed equality, women “are granted a minority status that restricts their legal rights and denies them access” to the public sphere.^{xi} The cultural manifestations of these differing concepts of equality – marriage and birth, are illustrations of how despite some theological congruence, the two religions differ greatly in social reality.

ⁱ Al-Hibri. *Women and Islam*. England: Pergamon Press, 1982. 183

ⁱⁱ Al Hibri, Azizah. *A Study of Islamic Herstory* Rpt. In Al-Hibri. *Women and Islam*. England: Pergamon Press, 1982. 213

ⁱⁱⁱ Al-Hibri, Azizah. “A Study of Islamic Herstory” Rptd. In Al-Hibri, 214

^{iv} Mernissi, Fatima. *Scheherazade Goes West*. New York: Washington Square Press, 2001. 147

^v Mernissi 186

^{vi} Faegheh, Shirazi. *The Veil Unveiled*. Florida: University of Florida Press, 2001. 29

^{vii} Ibid

^{viii} Ibid

^{ix} Al-Hibri, 217

^x Mernissi 46

^{xi} Mernissi 22