

B'REISHIT—GENESIS 1:1–6:8

Separate and Unequal: A Tale of Creation

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ON THE SIXTH DAY, God creates human beings. We are created *b'tzelem Elohim* (בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים), “in the divine image,” and *zachar un'keivah* (זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה), “male and female” (Genesis 1:27). Alone in being formed in God’s image, humans are empowered to oversee and govern all the other creatures and commanded to reproduce and multiply, filling the land. Males and females are equally reflective of the divine image, equally empowered, and equally commanded. “And it was very good” (Genesis 1:31).

A few verses later, we find a different tale of Creation in which *haadam* (הָאָדָם), “the man” (or “mankind”), is created to till and to tend the Garden all alone, with no one else to assist him (Genesis 2:15). God feels the man’s loneliness and creates the animals and birds, but alas none is a proper counterpart for the man. Finally, God creates a woman, fashioned from the man’s rib, to be his *ezer k'nedgo* (עֶזֶר כְּנֶדְגוֹ), his “helpmate” (Genesis 2:18–21). We all know what happens in the next chapter of Genesis: The woman becomes curious and eats from the forbidden Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, leading to expulsion from the Garden. In response to Eve’s transgression, God punishes all women with anguish in bearing children and by subjecting them to their husbands’ rule (Genesis 3:1–17).

“No biblical story has had more influence on women’s lives and identity—and none has been more often reinterpreted through later cultural biases—than the creation of woman in Genesis 2 and the

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expulsion from the Garden in Genesis 3,” writes Dr. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi in *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*. “The version of creation of humankind in 1:26–28, which portrays equality between the sexes and their shared reflection of God’s image, is typically overlooked in favor [of] the more ambiguous one in Genesis 2, which is typically read as one in which man precedes woman in time. Consequently, the first woman has been cast by later interpreters as an afterthought: second and therefore secondary in value, not essential to God’s plan.”¹

In a commentary on this *parashah*, Rachel Adler notes that the Adam and Eve saga marks a fundamental change in the relationship between men and women from the idyllic oneness with Creation to a utilitarian, consumer-based “commodification” of Creation, diminishing their loving partnership:

Genesis 1 is an account of the Creation, whereas Genesis 2–3 is an account of the creation of patriarchy—a remarkably truthful account. The world brought about by Genesis 2–3 is one in which desire is no longer joyful but oppressive. Even before the disobedience, relations between man and woman and world are commodified and function-based. *Adam* is created to till the soil. Woman is created to heal *Adam*. However lush, the garden is a workplace. Created things are good, not intrinsically as in Genesis 1, but because they are resources.²

The punishment for defying the divine decree is hard labor. For Eve, she, and all women after her, would suffer pain in childbirth. For Adam and all future men, the punishment would be the rigorous challenge of cultivating the land. While toil and sweat are prescribed for Adam and blamed on Eve, no work is assigned to Eve. This version of Creation establishes a divinely ordained functional separation between men and women: Adam would work the land, and Eve would provide, and presumably care for, children. Thus, the segregation of men and women in the workforce begins.

The separate spheres ascribed to men and women became embedded within our cultural norms, with a hierarchy among those roles set in place. The physical labor of men was assigned a higher value

than work permitted to women such as caregiving and education.

A prime example comes in Leviticus 27:1–7, as the text outlines the work needed to build the Tabernacle. When freewill offerings are no longer sufficient, the Israelites are required to provide actual service to keep the Tabernacle operational. In lieu of service, they are permitted to make financial contributions matching the value of their labor, which varies based on age and gender: the labor of men aged twenty to sixty is worth fifty shekels, as compared to thirty shekels for women that age; the work of boys aged five to twenty is worth twenty shekels, while girls' work is worth half that amount; men over age sixty are valued at fifteen shekels, while women over age sixty are worth ten shekels. According to this text, a woman's labor is worth roughly 50 to 60 percent of a man's!

These differences are not based on intrinsic value, but rather on assessments predicated on cultural expectations and assumptions. Work that requires brawn and sweat is not inherently more valuable than work that requires fine motor skills or emotional intelligence. Yet the consumer-based labor market values women's worth and work less than that of her male counterparts. In today's workforce, we see "pink-collar" jobs such as teaching, nursing, and social services valued less than male-dominated "blue-collar" work such as construction, manufacturing, or trades. Higher paying "white-collar" professions and STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) fields continue to be hostile environments for women as they bump their heads on the glass ceiling. These salary differences across occupations and industries are the most significant factor in the current gender pay gap.³

Even when women and men are in the exact same field doing the same work, women are, on average, compensated at lower levels. In almost every occupation, women continue to earn less than men, with 80 percent being the average in the United States.⁴ Black, Latina, and Native American women fare far worse than the national average.⁵ Sadly, internal studies have shown that the gender wage gap also persists in the Reform Movement, as female professionals—rabbis, cantors, educators, and administrators—face a similar gender

disparity as do other US professionals, with women earning about 85 percent of what men earn.⁶

This wage gap adds up to hundreds of billions of dollars lost by women annually, not only impacting their ability to support themselves and their families, but also harming the overall economy, businesses, and educational opportunities for the next generation. With women being the primary breadwinners in half of American families with children under eighteen, closing the wage gap could lift millions of families out of poverty.⁷

The issue of pay equity is not a woman's issue—it is a family issue. When a woman's income is suppressed, her entire family's income is diminished. Pay equity is a human rights issue, a matter of fundamental fairness and justice. When we undervalue and underpay a segment of our workforce, we are all diminished.

Fortunately, the gender wage gap is a problem that can be solved. Legislation like the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act provides remedies for employment discrimination. State and local regulations requiring employers to provide salary data and protect employees' rights to discuss salaries empower women to challenge unfair wage discrimination. Living-wage laws and salary protection for tipped workers can ameliorate the impact of low wages for pink-collar jobs.

Individuals, too, play an important role in addressing inequity in the workforce. Implicit bias and lack of salary transparency are among the causes of the wage gap that can be addressed by employers. Simple interventions such as not utilizing a job seeker's prior salary information and using gender-blind recruitment tools can help elevate women in the workforce and achieve more diversity generally.⁸ Training to understand the impact of unconscious bias has proved to be beneficial.⁹ Through the Reform Pay Equity Initiative's educational and training opportunities, affiliates of the Reform Movement are working collaboratively to implement these interventions and address hiring policies within Reform congregations and organizations.¹⁰

The gender wage gap is a manifestation of the patriarchy set in motion with the tale of Adam and Eve. Its continuing effect has cor-

rupted the relationship between men and women and undermined the fundamental truth of their equality. The time has come to reassert the primacy of the first Creation story of *Parashat B'reishit* in which men and women are created together, of equal value, and both in the image of God.

As Rachel Adler added in her commentary, “The world of patriarchy cries out for mending. A mending world would commit itself to equality and power-sharing, to working cooperatively in order to fill needs and solve problems.”¹¹ If we are able to see the Divine within every human being, if we share a commitment to fairness and equity, and if we work together to address the gender wage gap, this is a problem we can solve.

NOTES

1. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, “Creation and Transformation,” in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss (New York: Reform Judaism Publishing, an imprint of CCAR Press and Women of Reform Judaism, 2008), 2–3.
2. Rachel Adler, “Contemporary Reflection,” in Eskenazi and Weiss, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, 30.
3. Francine D. Blau and Lawrence M. Kahn, “The Gender Wage Gap: Extent, Trends, and Explanations,” Institute for the Study of Labor Discussion Paper No. 9656, January 2016, 27, <http://ftp.iza.org/dp9656.pdf>.
4. “What’s the Wage Gap in the States?,” National Partnership for Women and Families, accessed October 10, 2020, <https://www.nationalpartnership.org/our-work/economic-justice/wage-gap/>.
5. “Black Women and the Wage Gap,” National Partnership for Women and Families, accessed November 14, 2020, <https://www.nationalpartnership.org/our-work/resources/economic-justice/fair-pay/african-american-women-wage-gap.pdf>; and “Beyond Wages: Effects of the Latina Wage Gap,” National Partnership for Women and Families, accessed November 14, 2020, <https://www.nationalpartnership.org/our-work/resources/economic-justice/fair-pay/latinas-wage-gap.pdf>.
6. Marla Feldman and Mary Zamore, “Pay Equity Within the Reform Movement,” *CCAR Journal*, Fall 2018, 5–97.
7. “America’s Women and the Wage Gap,” National Partnership for Women and Families, accessed October 10, 2020, <https://www.nationalpartnership.org/our-work/resources/economic-justice/fair-pay/americas-women-and-the-wage-gap.pdf>.
8. Clair Cain Miller, “Is Blind Hiring the Best Hiring?,” *New York Times*,

- February 25, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/magazine/is-blind-hiring-the-best-hiring.html>.
9. Aaron R. Conklin, "Breaking Bias," College of Letters and Science, University of Wisconsin–Madison, posted September 17, 2020, <https://ls.wisc.edu/news/breaking-bias>.
10. See the Reform Pay Equity Initiative website (reformpayequity.org) to learn more about efforts of the Reform Movement to address the gender pay gap within Reform congregations and organizations.
11. Adler, "Contemporary Reflection," 31.