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Unveiling the Hidden Faces of Torah
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One of the challenges of being a woman who teaches Torah is threading the needle between creating a Torah that authentically reflects the experience of being a woman without it being seen as “women’s Torah” —Torah that is only about women and only for women. Certainly, many women have much to say about the experience of being female in the realm of Torah, in the Jewish community, and in the world. But we also have so many other things that inform our experiences, and our insights extend well beyond gender. We cannot be so easily pigeonholed. In fact, for many years, I refused to teach on any topic that might relate to gender, for fear of being seen as a woman who only thinks about women. Men are never asked to speak about men’s Torah, I reasoned, so why should it be any different for me?

My teacher, Rabbi David Silber, used to emphasize in shiur that giving women the opportunity to learn was not about creating honor for those women, but rather about creating honor for the Torah. If we believe that learning and teaching Torah is at the center of what it means to be a Jew, why would we close it off to half of the population? Imagine all of the Torah that has been lost from the generations of women who were told that they had no voice in this conversation. Imagine all of the Torah that has been directed only towards women because it was created by women, even though it could enrich everyone.

At the same time, it is true that every person—no matter their gender—brings their own life experience to their learning and teaching, and gender is surely a part of it. And so we try to find a delicate balance, not hiding the ways that our gender affects our Torah, but also not wanting to magnify it. We try to create a Torah that represents who we are as people, not just as women. And yet...

This is the third reader Maharat has published in the last 18 months, but it is the first one to specifically tackle the topic of gender. There is a good reason for that. The Maharat community has so much Torah to share, and much of it is not about gender at all. At the same time, as the pieces in this reader illustrate, there are so many specifically gendered pieces to the story of Esther. It’s impossible to fully grasp the narrative arc of the Megillah without giving them attention. Indeed, there are parts of Esther’s experience that are deeply relatable to women seeking leadership roles in the 21st century. Those lessons are for everyone—taught by Esther, distilled by Maharat students and alumnae, and accessible to anyone who is lucky enough to read their words.

When Esther is reluctant to go to Achashverosh to advocate for the Jews to survive, Mordecai tells her, “Who knows, perhaps it was for a moment like this that you attained royalty?” (4:14). This is a reminder that Esther has an opportunity and a purpose, if she will accept the mantle of responsibility. So too today, as chances for women to learn and teach Torah thankfully proliferate, there is a special



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responsibility to seize the possibilities presented by this landscape. That responsibility falls at the feet of these current and future Torah scholars, but also at the feet of the Jewish community, which needs to appreciate the potential of all of these new voices and create space for them. That means not simply consigning women to talking about women, or to women. Instead, for the most fruitful Torah to come into the world, the Jewish community needs to realize that our experiences as women shape our Torah, but that that Torah is for everyone—it's just that some of its 70 faces have been hidden for too long.

“Perhaps it was for a moment like this.” This moment in Jewish history is, in so many ways, unlike any other. And it is a moment where all of Torah's faces, where all of its teachers' voices, need to be heard. Our hope is that this reader will contribute to this amplification of women's voices, not for the sake of those women, but for the sake of the honor of the Torah.

Dr. Rachel Rosenthal is Gemara faculty and Director of External Affairs at Maharat. Before coming to Maharat, she was an adjunct assistant professor of Rabbinic Literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary and served as a Research Fellow and faculty member at the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America. She received her PhD in Rabbinic Literature from JTS, where her dissertation focused on how rabbinic analysis of the case of the stubborn and rebellious son provides models for moral education and development. During her time in graduate school, she was a Graduate Fellow in the Center for Law and Jewish Civilization at Cardozo Law School, a David Hartman Center Fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute, and a Wabash Teaching Fellow, and she was the first graduate student ever to be voted List College Professor of the Year. Rachel is a graduate of the Drisha Scholars Circle and holds a BA in religious studies from the University of Pennsylvania. She lives in Manhattan with her husband and children.