

**Parshat Bechukotai**  
**The Second Sex: Here We Go Again**  
**Myriam Ackermann-Sommer - Class of 2023**

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Is one man really worth two women? Well, that seems to be what we learn in Parashat Bechukotai.

In Vayikra's final chapter we begin a new subject: the *arakhin* (estimated values). If a person vows the value of themselves, they must dedicate a prescribed amount of money to the Temple treasury, which will then be used for the *Bedek haBayit*, the maintenance of the Temple, and other expenses related to the holy place.

The value of each person is determined according to the biblical equivalent of an actuarial table, and is based on both gender and age. Let me summarize the hierarchy of human *arakhin*.

- A person in the prime of life, between the ages of 20 and 60, must give 50 shekels if he is a man and 30 shekels if she is a woman.
- A person between the ages of 5 and 20 must give 20 shekels if he is a man and 10 shekels if she is a woman.
- A person between one month and 5 years old owes 5 shekels if he is a little boy and 3 shekels if she is a little girl.
- A person over sixty years old gives 15 shekels if he is a man, 10 shekels if she is a woman.

So it is true that I was exaggerating when I said that a man is *always* worth two women, since this is strictly true only in the 5-20 year age group, but one thing is certain: in each of the four stages of a person's life, the estimated value of a man is greater than that of a woman.

How can we explain this discrepancy? A historicist perspective would allow us to suggest that, at first glance, it would seem that a person's value is estimated according to his or her ability to work. According to a realistic assumption, especially in biblical times, a higher monetary value is attached to a man than to a woman, and the value of each is determined according to his age and productive capacity. Sanhedrin 15a seems to suggest that these sums are consistently the default value of a person in the slave market. In other words, by virtue of innate biological inequalities, men are worth more than women. Judith Antonelli, in her feminist commentary *In the Image of God*, argues that men are paid more because they can work harder and carry heavier loads. Mixing historical and apologetic explanations, Antonelli adds that in other cultures, female slaves cost more than men because they were also sold as sex slaves. Citing historian Gordon Murray on slavery in the Arab world, she notes that a white slave woman was four to six times more expensive than a black slave woman, who was more expensive than a man specifically because she could be sold as a sex slave. What the Torah intends to do is to prohibit the sexual slavery of women, reducing the price of men and women to their labor power alone, and it is clear that men are more muscular and more capable of performing heavy work than women.

There are two problems here. First, we must question the statement that a person's best years in the labor market are until the age of sixty. The Torah seems to indicate that the working age is up to fifty, as we read about the Levi'im:

וּמִבֶּן חֲמִשִּׁים שָׁנָה יָשׁוּב מִצִּבְּאָה הָעֲבֹדָה וְלֹא יַעֲבֹד עוֹד:

From the age of fifty he shall leave the ranks of Divine service and shall serve no more.  
(Bamidbar 8:25)

It is also surprising that the value of a person in his most productive years is calculated at fifty shekels, which is much higher than the actual value of a slave:

אִם-עֶבֶד יִגַּח הַשּׁוֹר אוֹ אִמָּה כֶּסֶף שְׁלֹשִׁים שֶׁקֶלִים יִתֵּן לְאֹדֹנָיו ...

If the ox gores a slave or a maid, he shall give the sum of thirty shekels to the master...  
(Shemot 21:32)

Finally, the amount of payment does not take into account the person's health, strength or work potential. Shouldn't the labor of a healthy 62-year-old woman be worth more than that of a sickly 58-year-old man?

Another anomaly is that women often vary in terms of *arakhin* since, during two stages of life, a woman is worth three-fifths of a man - between the ages of twenty and sixty and from one month to five years. But this ratio is not maintained between the ages of five and twenty. Furthermore, why is the value of a man over sixty (15 shekels) less than its value between the ages of five and twenty (20 shekels), while in the case of a woman there is no difference between these two stages of life, and in both cases the value is 10 shekels? Rashi addresses this issue in his commentary on Vayikra 27:7, quoting the Talmud, Massekhet Arakhin 19a:

Upon reaching old age, the woman is closer in value to the man; therefore, the man loses **more** than a third of his value in his old age, (going from 50 down to 15) while the woman loses only a third of her value (going from 30 down to 10). As they say: "An old man in the house is like an obstacle in the house; an old woman in the house is a good sign in the house."

This is very nice but it is not enough.

Rav Amnon Bazak of Yeshivat Har Etzion offers an alternate reading. He suggests that men and women are not at all judged on the same scale because "The value attributed to men is related to a potential for fertility. The value of women is linked to a potential of work."

For men it is interesting to note that we find the age of sixty mentioned twice in the Tanakh in a different context - that of the end of the fertile years:

וַיִּצְחַק בֶּן־שָׁשִׁים שָׁנָה בְּלִדְתוֹ אֹתָם

Yitzchak was sixty years old when they were born. (Bereishit 25:26)

וְאַחַר בָּא חֶצְרוֹן אֶל־בֵּית־מְכִיר אָבִי גִלָּד וְהוּא לְקַחָהּ וְהוּא בֶן־שָׁשִׁים שָׁנָה וַתֵּלֶד לוֹ אֶת־שִׁגְוּב:

Then Chetzron came to the daughter of Makhir, the father of Gilad, and he married her - when he was sixty years old, and she gave birth to him in Siguv. (Divrei Ha-yamim I 2:21)

The only two places in Tanakh where a person is mentioned as being sixty years old concern people who had children at an advanced age. Thus, it would seem that the age of sixty represents the end of the usual period of fertility.

Conversely, twenty, the beginning of the range of a man's prime, is the age when a man should get married. It is the beginning of the age of building a home, and perhaps the beginning of his years of fertility.

Let us now try to understand why the second highest value is given to the stage between five and twenty years, rather than the one from sixty years and above. In both stages a man is able to achieve fertility, but the stage when he is about to reach his physical peak is not the same as the stage when he becomes old. In a person's later years, sex is no longer considered to have fertile potential, and because of this, the person's value decreases. It is interesting to note that the sum of fifteen shekels is found elsewhere in the context of sexual relations that are not supposed to lead to conception. Here, Hashem metaphorically describes a relationship between the Jewish people and foreign gods, specifying that nothing will come of the relationship:

וְאָכַרְתָּ לִּי בַחֲמֹשֶׁה עָשָׂר כֶּסֶף וְחֹמֶר שְׂעִירִים וְלֵתֶךְ שְׂעִירִים:

So I brought her to me for fifteen pieces of silver, a chomer of barley and a letekh of barley. (Hoshea 3:2)

Rav Hai Gaon notes this connection (as quoted by Rashi in his commentary on verse 3):

In the name of Rav Hai Gaon, I found the Gaon's explanation, "I brought her to my house..." - I allocated a small amount of money in exchange for her. As one who says: 'my own value [is imposed on me]' - if [the person is] sixty years old or more, the exchange is fifteen shekels.

We have already mentioned above that the sum of thirty shekels, the maximum value of a woman at the highest stage of her life, is noted in the Torah in a different context: "If the ox gores a male or female servant, he shall pay the master the sum of thirty shekels" (Shemot 21:32). The servant and the maid are worth the same price. We can deduce from this that when it comes to a woman, her value is indeed determined according to her ability to work. The woman loses less in value because she can always work in the house; the man has lost almost all his fertility at the same age as the woman. Beyond the parallelism, we have a fundamental division of evaluations.

It is all very well to have determined that a man pays according to the scale of fertility and a woman according to the scale of the work she can do. But where does that leave me?

Here is how I understand it in my time, in the context in which I live given the premise that the Torah carries a message for all times. For me this text is not asserting a sexist standard but deconstructing our own expectations of what a man's life and a woman's life are worth and mean. We know that we cannot evaluate the value of a person in a spiritual sense, but we can symbolize the orientation of his or her life by assigning a symbolic value that suggests a system of expectations.

According to traditional norms, a man works and a woman makes children. I would therefore expect that the value of a woman would be fixed according to her fertility and that of a man according to his work force. Here it is the opposite. The monetary value of a woman depends on her vigor, and her work force, that of a man, on the potential to have children. Gone is the Jewish mother who gives herself entirely to her home and the Jewish father who works hard outside the home; welcome to the mother who works and the father who begets. In saying this we are following Judith Antonelli's lead in saying that women are not treated as sex slaves in the Torah, but we also go further. This text shatters gendered expectations. So yes, I would go so far as to say that through the prism of the laws of *arakhin*, it is domesticity, marriage and transmission that characterize the male project; while it is the accomplishment through her actions that the woman dedicates to the Temple, the fruit of her hands, as a good *Eshet Hayil* or virtuous woman who distinguishes herself through her work and creativity. By turning the tables on traditional expectations and norms, may men and women thrive in a newly found space of freedom.



Myriam Ackermann-Sommer, BA, MA, was born and raised in Southern France and has been living in Paris for four years with her husband Emile. She earned a B.A. in English in 2016, majoring in English and minoring in Hebrew at the Sorbonne while completing an undergraduate degree in Humanities at the École Normale Supérieure, a selective French college. In the course of her master's degree in English literature, Myriam focused mainly on Jewish American authors and Jewish philosophy, writing essays on Nobelist I.B. Singer (main thesis: "Broken Shards: Vulnerability in the Works of Isaac Bashevis Singer") and Bernard Malamud ("Am I My Brother's Keeper? The Ethical Imperative in the Short Stories of Bernard Malamud. A Dialogue With Emmanuel Levinas", an essay at the intersection with contemporary French Jewish philosophy). She has also been inquiring into the representation of the sacred in Judaism in articles like "The Holy of Holies; or, the Architecture of Absence". Myriam has had extensive training in teaching and translation, and regularly gives talks in Jewish as well as academic contexts, starting a co-ed study group ("Ayeka") with her husband in 2017 for Parisian students and young professionals. Her favourite subjects are gender representations and notably the challenge of egalitarianism in Orthodox Judaism, the exchange of ideas and insights between Judaism and contemporary critical theory, and Jewish ethics. A dedicated musician, Myriam has also earned a diploma in transverse flute in 2015 and loves to enhance the spiritual dimension of Judaism by singing her heart out in prayer groups.