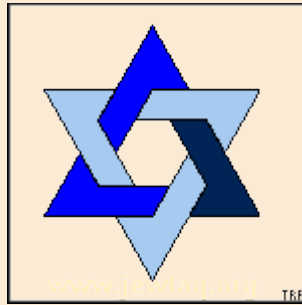


## JUDAISM 101



### The Role of Women in Judaism

- In Judaism, G-d is neither male nor female
- The Talmud says both good and bad things about women
- Women are not required to perform certain commandments
- Certain commandments are reserved specifically for women
- The first of the month is a minor festival for women
- Men and women sit separately in traditional synagogues
- The idea of Lilith as a feminist hero is based on a questionable source

The role of women in traditional Judaism has been grossly misrepresented and misunderstood. The position of women is not nearly as lowly as many modern people think; in fact, the position of women in [halakhah](#) (Jewish Law) that dates back to the biblical period is in many ways better than the position of women under American civil law as recently as a century ago. Many of the important feminist leaders of the 20th century (Gloria Steinem, for example, and Betty Friedan) are Jewish women, and some commentators have suggested that this is no coincidence: the respect accorded to women in Jewish tradition was a part of their ethnic culture.

In traditional Judaism, women are for the most part seen as separate but equal. Women's obligations and responsibilities are different from men's, but no less important (in fact, in some ways, women's responsibilities are considered more important, as we shall see).

The equality of men and women begins at the highest possible level: [G-d](#). In Judaism, unlike traditional Christianity, G-d has never been viewed as exclusively male or masculine. Judaism has always maintained that G-d has both masculine and feminine qualities. As one [Chasidic rabbi](#) explained it to me, G-d has no body, no genitalia, therefore the very idea that G-d is male or female is patently absurd. We refer to G-d using masculine terms simply for convenience's sake, because Hebrew has no neutral gender; G-d is no more male than a table is.

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Both man and woman were created in the image of G-d. According to most Jewish scholars, "man" was created in Gen. 1:27 with dual gender, and was later separated into male and female.

According to traditional Judaism, women are endowed with a greater degree of "binah" (intuition, understanding, intelligence) than men. The [rabbi](#)s inferred this from the fact that woman was "built" (Gen. 2:22) rather than "formed" (Gen. 2:7), and the Hebrew [root](#) of "build" has the same consonants as the word "binah." It has been said that the matriarchs (Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah) were superior to the [patriarchs](#) ([Abraham](#), [Isaac](#) and [Jacob](#)) in prophecy. Women did not participate in the idolatry regarding the Golden Calf. See [Rosh Chodesh](#) below. Some traditional sources suggest that women are closer to G-d's ideal than men.

Women have held positions of respect in Judaism since biblical times. [Miriam](#) is considered one of the liberators of the [Children of Israel](#), along with her brothers [Moses](#) and [Aaron](#). One of the Judges (Deborah) was a woman. Seven of the 55 [prophets](#) of the Bible were women (they are included in the [list of biblical prophets](#)).

The [Ten Commandments](#) require respect for both mother and father. Note that the father comes first in Ex. 20:12, but the mother comes first in Lev. 19:3, and many traditional sources point out that this reversal is intended to show that both parents are equally entitled to honor and reverence.

There were many learned women of note. The [Talmud](#) and later rabbinical writings speak of the wisdom of Berurya, the wife of Rabbi Meir. In several instances, her opinions on [halakhah](#) (Jewish Law) were accepted over those of her male contemporaries. In the [ketubah](#) (marriage contract) of [Rabbi Akiba](#)'s son, the wife is obligated to teach the husband [Torah](#)! Many rabbis over the centuries have been known to consult their wives on matters of Jewish law relating to the woman's role, such as laws of [kashrut](#) and [women's cycles](#). The wife of a [rabbi](#) is referred to as a rebbetzin, practically a title of her own, which should give some idea of her significance in Jewish life.

There can be no doubt, however, that the [Talmud](#) also has many negative things to say about women. Various rabbis at various times describe women as lazy, jealous, vain and gluttonous, prone to gossip and particularly prone to the occult and witchcraft. Men are repeatedly advised against associating with women, although this is usually because of man's lust rather than because of any shortcoming in women. It is worth noting that the Talmud also has negative things to say about men, frequently describing men as particularly prone to lust and forbidden sexual desires.

Women are discouraged from pursuing higher education or religious pursuits, but this seems to be primarily because women who engage in such pursuits might neglect their primary duties as wives and mothers. The rabbis are not concerned

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that women are not spiritual enough; rather, they are concerned that women might become too spiritually devoted.

The rights of women in traditional Judaism are much greater than they were in the rest of Western civilization until the 20th century. Women had the right to buy, sell, and own property, and make their own contracts, rights which women in Western countries (including America) did not have until about 100 years ago. In fact, Proverbs 31:10-31, which is traditionally read at Jewish weddings, speaks repeatedly of business acumen as a trait to be prized in women (v. 11, 13, 16, and 18 especially).

Women have the right to be consulted with regard to their [marriage](#). Marital [sex](#) is regarded as the woman's right, and not the man's. Men do not have the right to beat or mistreat their wives, a right that was recognized by law in many Western countries until a few hundred years ago. In cases of rape, a woman is generally presumed *not* to have consented to the intercourse, even if she enjoyed it, even if she consented after the sexual act began and declined a rescue! This is in sharp contrast to American society, where even today rape victims often have to overcome public suspicion that they "asked for it" or "wanted it." Traditional Judaism recognizes that forced sexual relations within the context of marriage are rape and are not permitted; in many states in America today, rape within marriage is still not a crime.

There is no question that in traditional Judaism, the primary role of a woman is as wife and mother, keeper of the household. However, Judaism has great respect for the importance of that role and the spiritual influence that the woman has over her family. The [Talmud](#) says that when a pious man marries a wicked woman, the man becomes wicked, but when a wicked man marries a pious woman, the man becomes pious. The child of a Jewish woman and a gentile man is Jewish because of the mother's spiritual influence; the child of a Jewish man and a gentile woman is not. See [Who Is a Jew?](#) Women are exempted from all positive [mitzvot](#) ("thou shalt" as opposed to "thou shalt not") that are time-related (that is, mitzvot that must be performed at a specific time of the day or year), because the woman's duties as wife and mother are so important that they cannot be postponed to fulfill a mitzvah. After all, a woman cannot be expected to just drop a crying baby when the time comes to perform a mitzvah. She cannot leave dinner unattended on the stove while she [davens ma'ariv](#) (evening prayer services).

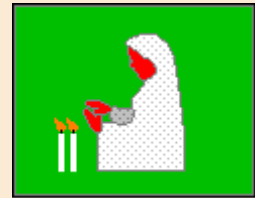
It is this exemption from certain mitzvot that has led to the greatest misunderstanding of the role of women in Judaism. First, many people make the mistake of thinking that this exemption is a prohibition. On the contrary, although women are not required to perform time-based positive mitzvot, they are generally permitted to observe such mitzvot if they choose (though some are frustrated with women who insist on performing visible, prestigious optional mitzvot while they ignore mundane mandatory ones). Second, because this exemption diminishes the

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role of women in the [synagogue](#), many people perceive that women have no role in Jewish religious life. This misconception derives from the mistaken assumption that Jewish religious life revolves around the synagogue. It does not; it revolves around the home, where the woman's role is every bit as important as the man's.

### Women's Mitzvot: Nerot, Challah and Niddah

In Jewish tradition, there are three [mitzvot](#) (commandments) that are reserved for women: nerot (lighting candles), [challah](#) (separating a portion of dough), and [niddah](#) (sexual separation during a woman's menstrual period and ritual immersion afterwards). If a woman is present who can perform these mitzvot, the privilege of fulfilling the mitzvah is reserved for the woman. Two of these mitzvot can be performed by a man if no woman is present. The third, for reasons of biology, is limited to the woman. All of these mitzvot are related to the home and the family, areas where the woman is primarily responsible.



The first of these women's mitzvot is nerot (literally, "lights") or hadlakat ha-ner (literally, "lighting the lights"), that is, the privilege of lighting candles to mark the beginning of the [Shabbat](#) or a [holiday](#). The lighting of candles officially marks the beginning of sacred time for the home; once candles are lit, any restrictions or observances of the holiday are in effect. The lighting of candles is a [rabbinical](#) mitzvah, rather than a mitzvah from the [Torah](#). See [Halakhah: Jewish Law](#) for an explanation of the distinction.

The second woman's mitzvah is challah, that is, the privilege of separating a portion of dough from bread before baking it. This mitzvah comes from Num. 15:20, where we are commanded to set aside a portion of dough for the kohein. This mitzvah is only in full effect in Israel; however, the rabbis determined that Jews throughout the world should be reminded of this mitzvah by separating a piece of dough before baking it and burning the dough. You may have noticed that on boxes of matzah at [Pesach](#), there is usually a notation that says "Challah Has Been Taken," which means that this mitzvah has been fulfilled for the matzah. Note that this mitzvah has little to do with the traditional Shabbat bread, which is also called "challah." See [Jewish Food: Challah](#) for more information about the Shabbat bread.

The third woman's mitzvah is the obligation to separate herself from her husband during her menstrual period and to immerse herself in a mikvah (ritual bath) after the end of her menstrual period. The Torah prohibits sexual intercourse during a woman's menstrual period. This ritual immersion marks the end of that period of separation and the resumption of the couple's sexual activities. For more information about this practice, see [Kosher Sex: Niddah](#).

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Some sources point out that the name Chanah is an acronym of the names of these three mitzvot (Challah, Niddah, and Hadlakat HaNer). In the Bible, Chanah was the mother of Samuel and a prophetess. She is considered in Jewish tradition to be a role model for women.

### **Women's Holiday: Rosh Chodesh**

Rosh Chodesh, the first day of each month, is a minor festival. There is a custom that women do not work on Rosh Chodesh. A midrash teaches that each of the Rosh Chodeshim was originally intended to represent the one of the twelve tribes of Israel, just as the three major festivals (Pesach, Sukkot and Shavu'ot) each represent one of the three patriarchs. However, because of the sin of the Golden Calf, the holiday was taken away from the men and given to women, as a reward for the women's refusal to participate in the construction of the Golden Calf.

How do we know that women didn't participate in the Golden Calf incident? The midrash notes that Exodus 32 says that "the people" came to Aaron and asked him to make an idol. Aaron told them to get the golden rings from their wives and their sons and their daughters. Note that the biblical verse doesn't say anything about "the people" getting the rings from their husbands, only from wives and sons and daughters, from which we can infer that "the people" in question were the men. Then Ex. 32:3 says that "the people" broke off the golden rings that were in *their* ears. The bible does not say that they got the gold from their wives and sons and daughters; rather, it says that "the people" (i.e., the same people) gave their own gold. The midrash explains that the men went back to their wives and the wives refused to give their gold to the creation of an idol. As a reward for this, the women were given the holiday that was intended to represent the tribes.

### **The Role of Women in the Synagogue**

To understand the limited role of women in synagogue life, it is important to understand the nature of mitzvot (commandments) in Judaism and the separation of men and women.

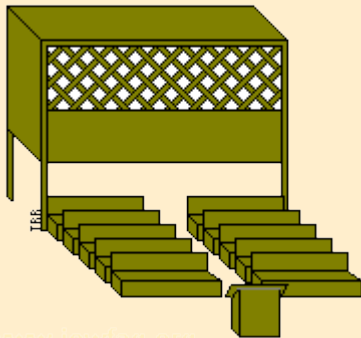
Judaism recognizes that it is mankind's nature to rebel against authority; thus, one who does something because he is commanded to is regarded with greater merit than one who does something because he chooses to. The person who refrains from pork because it is a mitzvah has more merit than the person who refrains from pork because he doesn't like the taste. In addition, the mitzvot that were given to the Jewish people are regarded as a privilege, and the more mitzvot one is obliged to observe, the more privileged one is.

Because women are not required to perform certain mitzvot, their observance of those mitzvot does not "count" for group purposes. Thus, a woman's voluntary attendance at daily worship services does not count toward a minyan (the 10 people necessary to recite certain prayers), a woman's voluntary recitation of

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certain prayers does not count on behalf of the group (thus women cannot lead services), and a woman's voluntary reading from the [Torah](#) does not count towards the community's obligation to read from the Torah. The same is true of boys under the age of [13](#), who are not obligated to perform any mitzvot, though they are permitted to perform them.

In addition, because women are not obligated to perform as many mitzvot as men are, women are regarded as less privileged. It is in this light that one must understand the man's prayer thanking [G-d](#) for "not making me a woman." The prayer does not indicate that it is bad to be a woman, but only that men are fortunate to be privileged to have more obligations. The corresponding women's prayer, thanking G-d for making me "according to his will," is not a statement of resignation to a lower status (hardly an appropriate sentiment for prayer!) On the contrary, this prayer should be understood as thanking G-d for giving women greater binah, for making women closer to G-d's idea of spiritual perfection, and for all the joys of being a woman generally.



The second thing that must be understood is the separation of men and women during prayer. According to Jewish Law, men and women must be separated during prayer, usually by a wall or curtain called a mechitza or by placing women in a second floor balcony. There are two reasons for this: first, your mind is supposed to be on prayer, not on the pretty girl praying near you. Second, many pagan religious ceremonies at the time Judaism was founded involved sexual activity and orgies, and the separation prevents or at least discourages this. Interestingly, although men should not be able to see women during prayer, women are permitted to see men during prayer. This seems to reflect the opinion that women are better able to concentrate on prayer with an attractive member of the opposite sex visible.

The combination of this exemption from certain mitzvot and this separation often has the result that women have an inferior place in the synagogue. Women are not obligated by Jewish law to attend formal religious services, and cannot participate in many aspects of the services (traditional Jewish services have a very high degree of "audience participation" -- and I'm not just talking about community readings, I'm talking about actively taking part in running the service), so they have less motivation to attend. Woman's obligations in the home (which are the reason why women are exempt from time-based mitzvot like formal prayer services) often

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keep them away from synagogue. In several synagogues that I have attended, the women's section is poorly climate controlled, and women cannot see (sometimes can't even hear!) what's going on in the men's section, where the services are being led. This has improved somewhat in recent years, but men: if you think I'm lying, ask your wives.

But as I said before, this restriction on participation in synagogue life does not mean that women are excluded the Jewish religion, because the Jewish religion is not just something that happens in synagogue. Judaism is something that permeates every aspect of your life, every thing that you do, from the time you wake up in the morning to the time you go to bed, from what you eat and how you dress to how you conduct business. Prayer services are only a small, though important, part of the Jewish religion.

### **Lilith**

Lilith is a character who appears in passing in the [Talmud](#) and in [rabbinical](#) folklore. She is a figure of evil, a female demon who seduces men and threatens babies and women in childbirth. She is described as having long hair and wings (Erub. 100b; Nid. 24b). It is said that she seizes men who sleep in a house alone, like a succubus (Shab. 151b). She is also mentioned in [midrashim](#) and [kabbalistic](#) works, in which she is considered to be the mother of demons. Her name probably comes from the [Hebrew](#) word for night (laila). She is similar to and probably based on a pagan demon named Lulu or Lilu that appears in Gilgamesh and other Sumerian and Babylonian folklore.

In recent years, some women have tried to reinvent Lilith, turning her into a role model for women who do not accept male domination or a rival goddess to the traditions that they think are too male-biased. For example, a number of female musical artists participated a concert tour called "Lilith Fair" a few years ago, and the name "Lilith" was clearly chosen to represent female empowerment.

This revisionist view of Lilith is based primarily on a work called the Alphabet of Ben Sira, which portrays Lilith as Adam's first wife who was rejected because she wanted to be on top during sexual intercourse. Lilith was replaced with Eve, a more submissive second wife. The complete story is presented [here](#). Many modern commentators describe this as part of the Talmud or midrash, or at least a traditional Jewish source, and claim that this story reflects the traditional rabbinical understanding of the roles of men and women. Feminists reject the negative characterization of Lilith's actions in this story. They claim Lilith was a hero who was demonized by male-chauvinist rabbis who did not want women to have any sexual power.

Actually, Ben Sira is a much later medieval work of questionable authorship. Ben Sira appears to be a satire or parody, possibly even an antisemitic one. It tells many stories about biblical characters envisioned in non-traditional, often unflattering

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ways, often with slapstick humor at the expense of traditional heroes. Frankly, to treat Ben Sira as a reflection of traditional Jewish thought is like treating Cervantes' Don Quixote as a treatise on chivalry, or Mel Brooks' Blazing Saddles as a documentary of the American West. See [this scholarly critique](#) of the use of Ben Sira to turn Lilith into a feminist hero.

### **Links for Further Reading**

[Project Genesis](#) offers an online course on [Women in Judaism](#), covering subjects such as equality between men and women in Judaism, faith, prayer, relationships, and feminine intuition.

[Kresel's Korner](#), written by an Orthodox woman, addresses many of the questions that people have about the role of women in Orthodoxy. Kresel is an intelligent, well-educated woman who responds to many feminist critiques of Orthodoxy and illustrates a very different kind of female empowerment.

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