

January 18, 1965

Editors
Commonweal
232 Madison Avenue
New York, New York 10016

To The Editors:

Your readers should know that Gertrude Heinzelmann's description of Judaism's attitude to women ("The Priesthood and Women," January 15, 1965) is based on a colossal misunderstanding of the Jewish tradition. To say, as she does, that Judaism "consigned women to the harem as dumb beings without rights," is to betray a woeful ignorance of Judaism. "Harems" were unknown in Jewish life, even in the days when polygamy had not yet been legally proscribed. Women were never deemed "dumb beings"; they were considered the equal of men in value, though different functions were assigned to each sex. And several tractates of the Talmud (a "Pharisee" work) are devoted to safeguarding the personal and property rights of women long before the rest of the world thought it necessary.

Women, contrary to Miss Heinzelmann's assertions, were quite capable of initiating legal action on their own. Their exclusion from certain observances was not a prohibition but a release from duty, and then not from all religious duties, but only from positive commandments that must be observed at certain times. The Mishnah's limitations on conversation with women are not, as the author suggests, an indication of feminine inferiority but a reflection of high moral standards; and the limitation applies not to "conversation" as such but to sihah, frivolous and idle talk. Similarly, the separation of men and women in the synagogue is a reflection not of the value of women but of the moral context from which prayer must issue and in which it becomes most meaningful. The remark that women were "herded into the left" is pejorative and unenlightening.

Your author ascribes to Judaism the idea that sex implies uncleanness and wickedness, and thus "blames" Judaism for Paul's notions on the subject. The facts are just the opposite: the Torah's first commandment is procreation. The blessings pronounced at a wedding ceremony affirms the positive Jewish approach to sex and marriage.

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It is a pity that an enlightened Christian writing in 1965 still feels it necessary to berate "the reactionary Jewish tradition" in order to prove her point. As an Orthodox Rabbi who accepts that tradition, and who knows it in the original rather than from the questionable sources evidently used by the author, I feel saddened by the slipshod scholarship and factual errors that hold up to contempt all that I cherish. Commonweal deserved better than this.

Sincerely,

RABBI NORMAN LAMM

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