

THE STATUS OF WOMEN AND EXODUS 25:2

DAN VOGEL

Regarding the donations collected for the construction of the Tabernacle, we find, *And the Lord spoke unto Moses, saying: Speak unto the children of Israel, that they take for Me an offering; of every man [kol ish] whose heart maketh him willing ye shall take My offering'* (Ex. 25:2; JPS trans. 1917 – but see below). Although Rashi and other classical exegetes were not attracted to any difficulty here, this verse is a very confusing one. The Lord speaks to all the children of Israel, but immediately seems to lay down that the offering should be made by *kol ish* – "every man." The very phrase is ambiguous, allowing variant understandings:

1. The address is to men only, perhaps implying that the Torah reflects an attitude to women that considers them second-grade.
2. Semantic tradition allows the masculine gender of a phrase to embrace the feminine gender.

That there is a problem here is attested to by centuries of differing translations of the verse.¹ Translations of Exodus 25:2 differ not only for various religious readerships, but also on account of some publishers who changed the literal translation of *kol ish* in their first editions to a more liberal translation decades later in subsequent editions.

CLASSIC TRANSLATION

Since around the beginning of translations from the Hebrew, this sentence has bedeviled translators. The translation by Onkelos (first century CE), from Hebrew into Babylonian Aramaic, still renders *kol ish* in the operative phrase as *kol gevar* ["every man"] *deyitre'ei libei*. However, the next translation (from Hebrew into Western Aramaic), the Targum Yerushalmi or Pseudo-Jonathan (seventh-eighth century), omits the word *gevar*, thus employing a generalized phrase: "everyone whose heart is willing."

Dan Vogel z"l was Professor of English at Yeshiva University and Dean of Stern College. He then served as Chairman of the Department of English at Michlalah-Jerusalem College until retirement in 1995. He authored Three Masks of American Tragedy, Emma Lazarus, Mark Twain's Jews and many articles on literature. He was an Associate Editor of The Jewish Bible Quarterly.

A little later in time, two translations of the Bible nearly became canonized: one was the Greek translation known as the Septuagint in the late 2nd century BCE, and another was Jerome's Latin rendition, the Vulgate, in the fourth century. The 1884 English translation of the Greek reads: *Speak to the children of Israel and take first fruits of all, who may be disposed in their hearts to give . . .* This translator evidently included both genders of the people in his version of God's words. Not so the translator of the Vulgate, which Jerome penned: *Speak to the children of Israel that they bring first fruits to me of every man that offereth of his first accord, you shall take them.*

A survey of original translations in English, from John Wycliffe's text in the 14th century to nearly a dozen different ones in the modern age, shows that approximately half of the surveyed translations offer "every man" and the other half supply "all," "everyone," or some other near-synonym of the inclusive. This, I suggest, is sufficient evidence that the phrase *kol ish* presented a dilemma to translators of the biblical text. They had to decide on a literal phrase or one with a touch of exegesis, since the holy text offers neither suggestion, nor pronouns, nor other near-synonyms to include women. They are left to the translator's understanding.

FIRST AND SECOND EDITIONS

Two translations have become what might be called "quasi-official" – each for a respective readership: The Authorized or King James (KJV) Version of 1611 (which influenced all future English translations) for gentile readership; and the one produced by the Jewish Publication Society of America (JPS) in 1917 for Jewish readership. Both liberalized the translation of *kol ish* in their second editions. The 1611 KJV has *every man*; the New KJV in 1979 offers *every one*. The JPS of 1917 has *every man*, while the New JPS (1985) offers *every person*. To that extent, both versions have recognized the radical upgrade of women in their societies in the intervening years of publication. However, the Torah itself did even better.

RESOLUTION

Amazingly, the Torah itself seemed concerned about the possibility of misunderstanding the term *kol ish* as implying the secondary status of women in tribe and household. After all, this message from the Lord involved no law or

ritual, only an invitation to display one's love of God. Later on, in the Book of Exodus, there is a clarification of the phrase *kol ish* with an address directly including womenfolk: *Men and women, all whose hearts moved them, all who would make an elevation offering of gold to the Lord, came bringing brooches, earrings, rings, and pendants . . .* (Ex. 35:22).

The Torah reiterates the language of what was said ten chapters earlier about the wholeheartedness of the people, but this time women are specifically included. The response was so great that *Moses thereupon had this proclamation made throughout the camp: 'Let no man or woman make further effort toward gifts for the sanctuary!'* (Ex. 36:6). Later on, in fact, the Torah appreciatively singles out the women's generous response: [Bezalel] *made the laver of copper and its stand of copper from the mirrors of the women who performed tasks at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting* (Ex. 38:8).

This resolution is mirrored in rabbinic literature, where the phrase *kol ish* was understood to exclude children (TJ *Terumot* 1:1) or non-Israelites (*Zohar Hadash* 2:195a) from donating to the Tabernacle, but excluding women was never suggested.²

Thus, the Torah wishes to remind us that a woman is not just an appendage but a full partner with her husband in the Jewish home. Not only in biblical times but year after year and for evermore, as long as the Torah is read aloud in the synagogue and studied in Jewish schools and homes.

Dedicated to the memory of Sibil, my deeply beloved wife, z"l

NOTES

1. This article restricts itself mainly to English-language translations out of deference to the readership of the *JBQ*.

2. R. Menahem Kasher, *Torah Shelemah*, vol. 20 (Jerusalem: The Torah Shelemah Institute, 1992) pp. 5-6.