

Debbie Goldman Drash. Parsha R'eih. August 15, 2020. 100th anniversary of 19th Amendment

English reading. Chapter 11:26-31 and chapter 15:1-18.

Without stretching too much, I think I can connect parts of today's Torah portion to the topic that John asked me to talk about: the 100th anniversary of the ratification of the 19th Amendment giving women the right to vote.

One theme in today's Torah portion is our obligation not only to take care of the poor, but also to prevent the emergence of a permanent underclass, to promote an economy that binds all of us together. Not only must we allow slaves to go free in the seventh year, we must provide them with resources to make a fresh start. Moreover, the requirement that we forgive all debts in the seventh year is designed to block the formation of a permanent underclass of the poor. As I will discuss, passage of the 19th Amendment was the result of a cross-class alliance, with one strong element Progressive era social reformers and working class immigrant women who understood that improving their social condition required women's political power, including the right to vote.

Another theme in today's Torah portion is the beginning of a recognition of women's independent personhood, still inadequate and deeply flawed. The Deuteronomy discussion of the freeing of the slaves in the seventh year differs from the earlier discussion in Exodus. In Exodus, the limitation is only for male slaves, but in Deuteronomy women slaves are included. Similarly, Deuteronomy uses different language in the 10th commandment. Exodus says don't covet your neighbor's house and then lists his neighbor's wife as one of those possessions; Deuteronomy simply says don't covet your neighbor's wife. The Torah's view of women is evolving, seeing her as a person, not a commodity. The Torah sets a process in motion, one that we are challenged to take up further. There is a connection to the fight for women's suffrage. When the First Wave feminist movement mobilized in the mid-1800s, the legal system of "coverture" subsumed women as the property of her husband or, if unmarried, her father or other male relative. Overturning the system of coverture was a major achievement of the feminist movement of that era.

Now, to turn to the topic of the 19th amendment. First, several questions. I'm curious about whether our foremothers were involved in the suffrage movement. So,

- Raise your hand if any of your grandmothers were here by 1910, when the suffrage movement really gained steam.
- Keep your hand raised if any of your grandmothers was over the age of 15 in 1910.
- Keep your hand raised if any of your grandmothers talked about or to your knowledge was involved in the suffrage movement

Hands down.

- Raise your hand if any of your older female relatives – or you – were a member or active in the League of Women Voters, the organization that took over from the national suffrage association after women got the right to vote.

When we discuss the 19th amendment, it's important to point out, in the words of Alexander Keyssar, who wrote a comprehensive history called *The Right to Vote* of movements for voting rights in the US,

that for much of US history, the right to vote has been far from universal. Until the 1960s, most African Americans in the South could not vote. Women were denied the franchise until the 19th Amendment in 1920. For many years, Asian immigrants were disfranchised because they could not become citizens. Native Americans lacked the right to vote far more often than they possessed it. In the early 19th century, states generally granted the franchise only to property owners. Today, many states bar ex-felons from voting and have erected barriers to voter registration. And now even our post office seems a barrier to mail in voting in a pandemic. (Keysar, p xvi)

Certainly there were many factors that restricted the vote: racism, sexism, ethnic antagonism, partisan interests; but most important according to Keysar were class fears of extending democracy to blacks, immigrants, women – people perceived as dependent. And while the mobilization by disenfranchised was central to winning the vote, Keysar makes a really interesting point: a key factor in the timing were the pressures that war created to enlarge the vote.

There were many tensions and conflicts among women's vote advocates. One key issue was race. Before the Civil War, women's rights advocates were strong abolitionists. But the movement split after the Civil War over the 14th Amendment, which gave Black men, but not women, the right to vote. One of the leaders Elizabeth Cady Stanton objected to having "the colored man enfranchised before women...I would not trust him with all my rights, degraded, oppressed himself, he would be more despotic with the governing power than even our Saxon rulers." (quote, Keysar p 178) Another faction, led by Lucy Stone, supported the 14th Amendment, recognizing that winning the Black male vote was a step forward and appropriate legacy of the Civil War. Later, toward the end of the 19th century, suffragists argued that giving white women the vote would help retain "supremacy of white race over the African" and Stanton supported "reading and writing" tests to restrict "ignorant foreign vote." (Keysar p 199). The social base of the suffragist movement was limited in the 19th century to white middle class women – limiting its effectiveness and power.

This changed around 1910 when Progressive reformers like Jane Addams, Florence Kelley (socialists, by the way) and the cross-class Women's Trade Union Unity League broadened the base to include working class women, linking the movement to improve conditions for working women to gaining political power through the vote. Suffragists engaged in increasingly militant tactics in the decade before passage: White House pickets and hunger strikes, 2 million members in the leading suffrage organization, marches, petitions, state legislation giving women right to vote, and important, mobilization of women in WWI strengthen their arguments for the vote.

Where were Jewish women? Elaine Reuben forwarded an article from Hadassah magazine, which highlights several elite Jewish women who were active suffragists and notes that the major Jewish women's organizations like Hadassah and National Council of Jewish Women were largely absent from the movement. But the article ignores a very important group of Jewish women who were suffrage leaders – the working class immigrant women who had led the 1909 garment workers strike, and then moved on to organize to win the vote for women. The story of these industrial feminists -- Rose Schneiderman, Pauline Newman, Clara Lemlich, and Fania Cohn -- is told in the fabulous book by Annelise Orleck, *Common Sense and a Little Fire*. Here's a leaflet penned by their organization, the Wage Earners' League:

“Why are you paid less than men? Why do you work in a fire trap? Why are your hours so long? Why are you all strap hangers when you pay for a seat? Why do your children go into factories? Why don’t you get a square deal in the courts? BECAUSE YOU ARE A WOMAN AND HAVE NOT VOTE. VOTES MAKE THE LAW. VOTES ENFORCE THE LAW. THE LAW CONTROLS CONDITIONS. WOMEN WHO WANT BETTER CONDITIONS MUST VOTE.” (Orleck, p100). These women linked their fight for dignity, good working conditions and good living conditions for working women to the fight for political power, including the right to vote. These women helped build the cross-class alliance and brought the struggle into the streets and street corners as well as the legislatures and Congress that finally won passage and ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920.

Winning the vote for women took 70 long years. As Carrie Chapman Catt, leader of the National Women’s Suffrage Assn, wrote in 1926: “To get the world “male” in effect out of the Constitution cost the women of the country 52 years of pauseless campaign. During that time they were forced to conduct 56 campaigns to submit suffrage amendments to voters; 47 campaigns to get state constitutional conventions to write women suffrage into state constitutions, 277 campaigns to get state party conventions to include women suffrage planks, 30 campaigns to get presidential party conventions to adopt woman suffrage planks in party platforms, and 19 campaigns with successive 19 Congresses. (cite Keysar p 172)}

I take certain lessons from this brief history, as well as the selections from the Torah portion. I’m interested to hear what lessons you take from the struggle for the women’s vote? What might it teach us, personally and collectively, as we join in struggle for equity and justice for all Americans today?