

Equal Creation, Equal Work, and Equal Pay

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Our American founders proclaimed that “All men are created equal”—though, of course, they did not really mean “all.” The primary author of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson, enslaved many Black people, including some of his own children.

By contrast, the founders were serious about the “men” part—that is, they did not consider women to be their equals. No state would give women the right to vote for nearly a century, and white women’s suffrage would not be universal until 1920. Black women would not share that right in several states, including ours, until the 1960s.

Torah is unclear about women’s equality from the outset. Genesis offers two creation stories. In the first, we read: “So God created the human beings in [the divine] image, creating [them] in the image of God, creating them male and female.”ⁱ Unlike the opening lines of the Declaration of Independence, the first mention of humans in Torah suggests absolute equality, simultaneous co-creation in God’s image.

The second story, though, takes a different direction. Writing in *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, Rabbi Marla Feldman describes it best: “A few verses later, we find a different tale of Creation in which *haadam*, ‘the man’ ... is created to till and tend the Garden all alone, with no one else to assist him. God feels the man’s loneliness and creates the animals and birds, but alas none is a proper counterpoint for the man. Finally, God creates a woman, fashioned from the man’s rib, to be his *ezer k’negdo*, his ‘helpmate.’”ⁱⁱ

In this second account, the woman comes second. She is created in the image of the man—that is, she acquires God’s image through the man. Moreover, the woman is there **for** the man. To help **him**. Not as his equal. Rabbi Feldman cites Professor Rachel Adler, who describes the inequality more starkly: “Genesis 2...is an account of the creation of patriarchy—a remarkably truthful account...*Adam* is created to till the soil. Woman is created to heal *Adam*. However lush, the garden is a workplace.”ⁱⁱⁱ

After Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, each is cursed: Instead of having abundant food handed to them, Adam must work the land. However, as Rabbi Feldman notes, “no work is assigned to Eve. This version of Creation establishes a divinely ordained functional separation between men and women: Adam would work the land, and Eve would provide, and presumably care for, children. Thus, the segregation of men and women in the workforce begins.”^{iv}

The man’s work in the field is not intrinsically more valuable than the woman’s work of child-rearing. To the contrary, who among us can name a more important job than parenting, molding, and shaping the next generation?

And yet, the disparity worsens. Rabbi Feldman points to the construction of the Tabernacle, the traveling sanctuary that served as the Israelites’ place of worship during their desert wanderings. In Leviticus, the Israelites are given a choice: Either work without wages to build the Tabernacle or pay a set amount to avoid that requisitioned labor. For Israelites who prefer to pay rather than work, the amount varies based on age and gender. In Rabbi Feldman’s words, “According to this text, a woman’s labor is worth roughly 50 to 60 percent of a man’s!”^v

That pay disparity did not, of course, end in biblical days. This past spring, NBC reported that, “According to the U.S. Department of Labor, women’s annual earnings were 82.3 percent of men’s—and the gap was even wider for women of color. Black women were paid 63 percent of what non-Hispanic white men were paid in 2019, according to the U.S. Census. In other words, it takes the typical Black woman 19 months to earn what the average white man takes home in 12 months.”^{vi} *Forbes* notes that the pay gap is narrowing, but at a rate so slow that parity cannot be expected until 2059. Though the gap is smaller when comparing people with equivalent education, that education-controlled pay gap has been persistent, **not** trending toward equality.^{vii}

Tom Spiggle of *Forbes* has found that this unrelenting pay disparity is attributable to two phenomena, the familiar “glass ceiling” and a term that is new, at least to me: “sticky floors.” “Glass ceilings” refers not only to the diminishing but not-yet-ending reality that some women face discrimination in attaining jobs at the apex of their fields, but also, Spiggle writes, “to obstacles that stand in the way of women advancing their careers. An example might include a woman choosing not to apply for a promotion because she knows she needs to work part-time for caregiving responsibilities.”^{viii}

“In contrast,” Spiggle writes, “sticky floors are disadvantages women consistently face whether they’re just starting their careers or are getting ready to retire. For instance, a boss assumes that women are less competent or qualified in a position, and decides to offer a lower salary when making a job offer.”^{ix}

Rabbi Feldman, Executive Director of the Women for Reform Judaism, and Tom Spiggle, a writer at *Forbes*, offer strikingly similar suggestions to redress the gender pay gap. Chief among them is salary transparency. For example, after discovering appallingly persistent gender pay inequity among Reform rabbis, our placement service now requires all congregations seeking rabbis to post salary ranges at the outset of a rabbinic search. Both Feldman and Spiggle suggest prohibiting employers from inquiring about salary history when making new hires, since doing so perpetuates existing inequality.

Perhaps still more important, though, is the way that we talk about Creation. Genesis offers us an extraordinary origin story for humanity—not meant to be taken literally from a historical or scientific perspective, but to make a religious and moral point. Men and women are created equally and simultaneously in God’s image. Yes, Genesis also includes the story of the woman created from the man’s rib, to be his subordinate helper; but we need to understand that version for what it is—as Dr. Adler said, “the creation of the patriarchy,” an unholy revision of the beautiful Creation account. So let us return to Genesis 1: Every single one of us, of every gender, created in the image of God, equally deserving of the tangible and the sacred gifts of this world.

Amen.

ⁱ Genesis 1:27.

ⁱⁱ Rabbi Marla J. Feldman, “Separate and Unequal: A Tale of Creation,” *The Social Justice Torah Commentary*, New York: CCAR Press, 2021, p. 3.

ⁱⁱⁱ Feldman, p. 4.

^{iv} Feldman, p. 4.

^v Feldman, p. 5

^{vi} Renee Morad, “It’s 2021 and women STILL make 82 cents for every dollar earned by a man,” NBC News, March 23, 2021. [It's 2021 and women STILL make 82 cents for every dollar earned by a man \(nbcnews.com\)](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/it-s-2021-women-still-make-82-cents-for-every-dollar-earned-by-a-man-ncncnews.com).

^{vii} Tom Spiggle, “The Gender Pay Gap: Why It’s Still Here,” *Forbes*, May 25, 2021, [The Gender Pay Gap: Why It’s Still Here \(forbes.com\)](https://www.forbes.com).

^{viii} Spiggle.

^{ix} Spiggle.