

Edited by Mark B. Pearlman



# More Precious than Pearls



*A Prayer for the Women of Valor in Our Lives*

*Eishet Chayil*

אשת חיל

*Commentary  
and Reflections*

SINAI LIVE BOOKS

Imprint of Rethink Partners, Publishing

Copyright © 2012 Rethink Partners, LLC.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner without written permission except in the case of brief quotations in critical articles and reviews.

Rethink Partners books may be purchased for educational, business or sales promotional use. For more information please contact Rethink Partners, LLC at [info@rethinkpartners.com](mailto:info@rethinkpartners.com).

ISBN-13: 978-0615637075

ISBN-10: 0615637078

*For the women of valor in our lives,  
and for the women of valor everywhere.*





## Contents

**From the Editor: Aha! Moments**..... 6

*By Mark B. Pearlman*

**Eishet Chayil**..... 8

*Book of Proverbs (31:10-31)*

**Introduction: On Mother's Day,**

**Our Women Of Valor** ..... 11

*By Gary Rosenblatt*

**Finding Ourselves** ..... 16

*By Sara Esther Crispe*

**Exchanging Supermom**

**for Everywoman** ..... 21

*By Shimona Tzukernik*

**Reflections on Eishet Chayil** ..... 31

*By Rabbi Jeffrey Segelman*

**Creating Memories** ..... 37

*By Marc Suvall*



**Tell Her You Love Her ..... 40**

*By Rabbi Benjamin Blech*

**How to Read Eishet Chayil ..... 44**

*By Wendy Zierler*

**The Root of Soul-Mates and  
the Feminine Quality ..... 55**

*By Rabbi DovBer Pinson*

**Rereading Eishet Chayil..... 69**

*By Dr. Gail Reimer*

**Eishet Chayil Study Guide ..... 82**

*From the Jewish Women's Archive and  
Hillel's Joseph Myerhoff Center for Jewish Learning*

**About Sinai Live Books ..... 92**

**About Rethink Partners ..... 93**

This book would not have been possible without the help of many people. Special thanks goes to **Jake Laub** and **Raquel Amram** for their creativity and attention to detail.

## *From the Editor: Aha! Moments*

There is a mystical concept in Judaism that you are your name (“For as his name, so is he” [Samuel I: 25; 25]). The name for this book series is Sinai Live, in reference to our experience at Mount Sinai when God revealed the Torah. Back then that was the “big Reveal” – with a capital R. Now our hope with the publication of these books is to offer teachings that reveal (with a small r, at least) how to make your personal journey more meaningful and connected.

Sometimes the right words at the right time can unlock the deepest insights. Sinai Live is about guiding you to these “Aha! Moments” – moments of clarity that stay with you forever. Through concise and thoughtful books, we hope to make Jewish wisdom relevant to our daily lives, ultimately guiding us to be better people and have better relationships with those around us and with God. We want to live up to the meaning of our Sinai name.

In Judaism, one way we acknowledge how much we appreciate the women in our lives is through the poem *Eishet Chayil*. It is traditional for the men of the household to recite this section of Proverbs on Friday evenings, and, as with most Jewish traditions, this one offers many opportunities for insight and meaning.

This book personally resonates for me, and is relevant to anyone with important women in their lives – be it wives, mothers, sisters or extended family members. The women in my life have helped (in the words of Jerry Maguire) to “complete me” and to inspire and elevate others around them. My wife Jennifer, mother Jeanette and sisters Susan and Claudia are women who have been unconditionally devoted to their families and who have created warm and caring Jewish homes. They have lived a life more precious than their name – Pearl is in our surname – and are all my women of valor.

For the first edition of this book, we asked a wide range of authors, teachers and friends to share how Eishet Chayil is relevant to their lives. Some chose to discuss the poem on an intellectual level while others reflect on their personal experiences with the ritual itself. Together the essays delve into the many facets of what it means to be a woman and a mother, and all offer their own opportunities for Aha! moments. We hope you experience a few, and that your Friday night Sabbath becomes a more meaningful experience because of them.

Read on,

**Mark Pearlman**

Creator of Rethink Partners Publishing  
& Sinai Live Books

[connect@sinailive.com](mailto:connect@sinailive.com)



## *Eishet Chayil*

*Book of Proverbs (31:10-31)*

אשת-חיל מי ימצא ורחק מפנינים מכרה  
בטח בה לב בעלה ושלל לא יחסר  
גמלתהו טוב ולא-רע כל ימי חייה  
דרשה צמר ופשתים ותעש בחפץ כפיה  
היתה כאניות סוחר ממרחק תביא לחמה  
ותקם בעוד לילה ותתן טרף לביתה וחק לנערתייה  
זממה שדה ותקחהו מפרי כפיה נטע כרם  
חגרה בעוז מתניה ותאמץ זרעותיה  
טעמה כי-טוב סחרה לא-יכבה בליל נרה  
ידיה שלחה בכישור וכפיה תמכו פלך  
כפה פרשה לעני וידיה שלחה לאביון  
לא-תירא לביתה משלג כי כל-ביתה לבש שנים  
מרבדים עשתה-לה שש וארגמן לבושה  
נודע בשערים בעלה בשבתו עם-זקני-ארץ  
סדין עשתה ותמכר וחגור נתנה לכנעני  
עז-והדר לבושה ותשחק ליום אחרון  
פיה פתחה בחכמה ותורת-חסד על-לשונה  
צופיה הליכות ביתה ולחם עצלות לא תאכל  
קמו בניה ויאשרוה בעלה ויהללה  
רבות בנות עשו חיל ואת עלית על-כלנה  
שקר החן והבל היפי אשה יראת-יהוה היא תתהלל  
תנו-לה מפרי ידיה ויהללה בשערים מעשייה

*A woman of valor, who can find? Far beyond pearls is her value. Her husband's heart trusts in her and he shall lack no fortune.*

*She repays his good, but never his harm, all the days of her life. She seeks out wool and linen, and her hands work willingly.*

*She is like a merchant's ships; from afar she brings her sustenance. She rises while it is still nighttime, and gives food to her household and a ration to her maids.*

*She considers a field and buys it; from the fruit of her handiwork she plants a vineyard. She girds her loins with might and strengthens her arms.*

*She senses that her enterprise is good, so her lamp is not extinguished at night. She puts her hand to the distaff, and her palms support the spindle.*

*She spreads out her palm to the poor and extends her hands to the destitute. She fears not snow for her household, for her entire household is clothed with scarlet wool.*

*Bedspreads she makes herself; linen and purple wool are her clothing. Well-known at the gates is her husband as he sits with the elders of the land.*

*Garments she makes and sells, and she delivers a belt to the peddler. Strength and splendor are her clothing, and smilingly she awaits her last day.*

*She opens her mouth with Wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue. She anticipates the needs of her household, and the bread of idleness, she does not eat.*

*Her children rise and celebrate her; and her husband, he praises her: "Many daughters have attained valor, but you have surpassed them all."*

*False is grace, and vain is beauty; a G-d-fearing woman, she should be praised.*

*Give her the fruit of her hands, and she will be praised at the gates by her very own deeds.*



Translation from [Chabad.org](http://Chabad.org)



## *Introduction: On Mother's Day, Our Women Of Valor*

*“Mother’s Day seems a fitting time to blend the secular custom of honoring women dear to us on a Sunday in May with the Jewish tradition of blessing these women each Shabbat.”*

*By Gary Rosenblatt*

Rare is the Jewish woman who is not praised as an Eishet Chayil, a woman of valor, though too often it comes at her funeral, when she is not around to hear the rabbi intone from the Book of Proverbs.

“A woman of valor, who can find? Her worth is far beyond pearls...”

Perhaps the words have become a cliché, their meaning lost from hearing them so often. But the specificity of the attributes described in this 22-verse text still intrigue us, portraying a confident, independent woman to some, and to critics an all-too familiar image of wife in a supporting role.

For the living, the words of Eishet Chayil, the

woman praised as a devoted wife and mother, wise, kind, charitable and business-savvy, traditionally are sung by husbands to their wives just before Kiddush on Friday nights. Some commentaries posit that the woman in the text, said to be written by King Solomon, is a symbol of Shabbat itself, or of the soul, or the Divine Presence. But the plain meaning suggests that the man of the house is thanking his wife for all she does throughout the week for him, their family and household.

In keeping with the mood and spirit of Shabbat, a time to let go of weekday worries and reflect on the values that mean the most, the husband gives voice to his appreciation of his wife (at least once aloud during the week) and the key role she plays.

That moment evokes sweet images for me, remembering the contented smile my mother had at the Shabbat table she'd prepared, carrying over to the warm glow in our own home, and to seeing my daughter and daughters-in-law continuing the tradition.

Mother's Day seems a fitting time to blend the secular custom of honoring women dear to us on a Sunday in May with the Jewish tradition of blessing these women each Shabbat by acknowledging the talents they personify.

Beyond sending a generic greeting card message,

though, or even reciting the verses from the closing chapter of Proverbs, how meaningful it would be if we sons and husbands composed our own, personal tributes to the women we love in our own hand (such a rarity these days) and told them just why they are so special.

And while saying it with flowers is a lovely gesture, finding new ways to honor these women by lightening their loads – from driving an additional carpool to improving our own cooking skills – would probably be even more appreciated.

Curiously, the ancient words of Eishet Chayil do not describe the quintessential Jewish woman as laboring to prepare the Sabbath meal. While we remember our bubbes for the delicious foods they made, there are no images of cooking, baking or cleaning in Proverbs. Instead we have the consummate woman who seems remarkably contemporary: wise, loyal, God-fearing, strong, overseeing her business, providing for the poor as well as for her family, and inspiring loved ones to thank her publicly.

“Her children rise and call her happy; her husband also praises her: Many women have excelled, but you surpass them all.”

The image we conjure up from the words of Proverbs is a woman who stands tall but is filled with grace.

“Clothed with strength and dignity, she can laugh at the days to come,” says the text.

And yet I know that many women, whether they express it or not, are deeply uncomfortable with the imagery of Eishet Chayil, which, however well intentioned, they say, promotes the ideal woman as helpmate to her husband, the jewel in his crown.

In truth, gender plays a significant role throughout the 31 chapters of Proverbs. They are written from father to son, with an emphasis on keeping the commandments and acquiring wisdom, which is described in the feminine.

“Say to Wisdom, ‘you are my sister,’ and call Understanding a kinswoman. She will guard you from a forbidden woman, from an alien woman whose talk is smooth.”

That passage is an example of how King Solomon writes passionately of the power of women for good or evil – the source of insight or the dangerous seductress.

“A capable wife is a crown for her husband,” he observes in Chapter 12, “but an incompetent one is like rot in his bones.”

The choice a man makes determines his fate and his family’s future. All the more reason to rejoice when one has chosen wisely.

Today the ancient words of Eishet Chayil are appreciated more for their emotional resonance than for the actual attributes described. Few 21st century women “seek wool and flax” to work with their hands, “grasp the spindle” with their palms, make and sell garments and “supply merchants with sashes.”

But women are still seeking to balance work and home, professional responsibilities and family, being a loving partner and a compassionate role model to the next generation. Reading Eishet Chayil now reminds us that those tensions have been with women for centuries, and, even in the age of gender equality, the emotional burden within the family remains heaviest on them.

“Give her the reward she has earned,” Eishet Chayil concludes, “let her deeds bring her praise in the gates.”

So on Mother’s Day, or Shabbat – or any other day – sing to her with a full heart and pray that she feels in her soul the sincerity of your sentiment.



*Gary Rosenblatt is editor and publisher of The Jewish Week of New York.*



## *Finding Ourselves*

*“When we take the time and make the effort we will find within ourselves that woman of valor waiting to be revealed.”*

*By Sara Esther Crispe*

*“Who can find a woman of valor? For her value is far above pearls.”*

What is a woman of valor? And why is she being compared to pearls?

The text of Eishet Chayil is very specific. While many English translations often misinterpret certain words, randomly choosing one gem for another, every single word, every single description, is carefully describing something unique about the power of the Jewish woman.

The word in Hebrew for “valor” is “chayal,” which also means “soldier.” When one thinks of a Jewish woman, a soldier is not necessarily the term that comes to mind. And yet a soldier is most definitely valorous and most aptly describes her role. A

soldier is one who dedicates her life to fight and defend what is most precious and beloved. A soldier likewise must always be thinking not only of her own safety but of her comrades as well. The underlying principle of armies around the world, and most definitely of our Jewish army in Israel, is no soldier left behind. Every single person is indispensable and must be protected and cared for.

Likewise, the Jewish woman protects her loved ones, constantly thinking about the balance of their needs and ensuring each one receives what is necessary at the right time. Every decision requires forethought for not only the immediate situation but the ultimate goal. And we all know that no one should get in the way of mama bear. A Jewish mother will go to the end of the world to make sure her babies are safe and sound.

But then the verse continues, comparing a Jewish woman to a pearl – yet even that is not as precious as she is. But why a pearl? There are many precious jewels. Why not the diamond or ruby (as the word is often mistakenly translated). Unlike these other gems, the process of the creation and formation of the pearl most brilliantly describes the development of a Jewish woman.

Just as one must seek to find the woman of valor, so too must one seek to find the pearl. The pearl

is hidden within an oyster and rests at the bottom of the ocean. The external of the oyster however is ugly, hiding the beauty within. And yet the name in Hebrew for the pearl, *pnimim*, relates to the word for both *panim*, meaning “face” as well as “*pnimiyut*” which means “internal.” While the pearl has a harsh and rough external casing but is beautiful within, the Jewish woman’s true beauty lies within but shines and can be seen through the outside as well. Just as our face is the portal to our internal selves, our faces represent the beauty of our souls and should reflect what lies within, not hide it.

The Jewish woman of valor is not one who has it all, but one who works and betters all that she has. The pearl is the result of a process, and not an easy one at that. The pearl is formed inside the shell of certain mollusks as a defense mechanism against a potentially threatening irritant such as a parasite inside its shell, or an attack from outside that could injure the mantle tissue. The mollusk therefore creates a pearl sac to seal off the irritation.

What this means is that our beauty, our strength, our accomplishments, take work, often very hard work. We might have a lot of barriers in our way, but with the right mentality, and keeping focused on our goal, we will become stronger and better *because* of the adversity. If anything, those tests and

challenges will allow our true beauty to shine forth and will show us and those around us the strength we have within that otherwise may not have been revealed.

We are soldiers, valorous soldiers, fighting for our families, fighting for our beliefs, fighting for our values. We know challenge and we have faced it head on and we have overcome it. The woman of valor is not someone else. Each and every one of us has that potential within us. We just need to look. We just need to find her.

Perhaps this is why there are 150 words in the text of Eishet Chayil. This number, when represented by Hebrew letters, is *nun kuf*. The word for “female” is *nekeiva* which is spelled *nun kuf beit hei*. Since *nun kuf* = 150 and *beit hei* spell the Hebrew word “bah” which means “within her” the word for female, *nekeiva*, can be read as “150 within her.” All the words, all the meaning, all the potential and all the beauty of the 150 words of Eishet Chayil are within her. Within each and every Jewish woman. Within us.

So who can find a woman of valor? As our Sages teach (Megila 6b), “If one looks and hasn’t found, don’t believe him. If one has found and didn’t look, don’t believe him. But if one has looked and one has found, believe him.” When we take the time and

make the effort we will find within ourselves that woman of valor waiting to be revealed. And once she is, then all those around us will recognize her as well.



*Sara Esther Crispe, a writer, international speaker and mother of four, is the creator and editor of [TheJewishWoman.org](http://TheJewishWoman.org), the women's website of [Chabad.org](http://Chabad.org). She also writes the popular weekly blog, *Musing for Meaning*.*



## *Exchanging Supermom for Everywoman*

*“Doesn’t it make sense that Eishet Chayil alludes  
not to one woman’s all-encompassing virtues  
(Supermom) but to our collective identity  
(Everywoman)?”*

*By Shimona Tzukernik*

About a year ago I spoke to a group of women in Pittsburgh. The topic was, “Will the Real Jewish Woman Please Stand Up?” The energy was already upbeat and intimate by the time I made reference to the famous text, “Woman of Strength” which Jews customarily sing at the Friday night meal. Before I could work my way into the point I intended to make, a woman blurted out something to the effect of, “I *hate* that song.” I turned to her, inviting her to elaborate.

“Well...She’s just so...*perfect!* I feel like a complete failure every Friday night. I mean, do *you* know anyone like her?” Laughter all round.

I love when that happens – a real, visceral response to the topic at hand (especially when it resonates with my own inner passion, hesitancy or conflict around a particular idea). How many times had I balked at the words?! Using the Hebrew letters as a springboard, it is a veritable Alphabet Soup of Perfection. I won't overwhelm you with *all* the details but how's this for starters?

- Alef – She's an *Eishet Chayil*, a “strong” woman. The word *chayil* connotes the power of war. She's a warrior. And a spiritual one too, with all the attributes needed to carry out any task at hand. Friday night rolls round; we haven't even gotten past verse one and I'm up against “Jewish Tiger Mom!”
- Beit – *Batach bah lev ba'alah*, her husband's heart trusts in her. Hmm. I can count on one hand (okay, two fingers) the number of girlfriends whose husbands are at peace with their wives' take on life and what's best for them. Verse two and I'm dealing with not only a powerhouse but someone who's wise and gentle enough to inspire confidence in her mate!
- Gimmel – *Gemalthu tov*, she imparts goodness and kindness to him, never evil. Who *is* this gal?

In short, a brief read-through of the song reveals that Kosher Tiger Mom has a loving, trusting husband; she's an entrepreneur and successful business woman; she's industrious, charitable, wise, empathic and intuitive. To boot she's well groomed (read: manicures, facials and Sacks Fifth Av if not Vera Wang) and even has the time and cash to buy gorgeous bedroom linens in mindful attention to her sex life.

Is it any wonder the second phrase, in breathless pursuit of the words *Eishet Chayil*, asks "Who can find (her)?" She is *not* me! Which leaves me with the question of how to read and apply King Solomon's song to my life – along with the implications it has for my role not only as wife but as daughter to my mother and mother to my own children.

It seems to me that *Eishet Chayil* is "Everywoman," an archetype of us all. No, I'm not just looking for a backdoor escape from my perfectionism, a way to avoid the reflections of my flaws I encounter on a daily basis. I ask myself whether she represents an attainable goal. Certainly in a utopian era we may each come to embody the *Eishet Chayil* described by King Solomon, but in the here-and-now of life-as-we-know-it, I've yet to meet the woman who lives up to the persona he portrays. Rather than take the text as a description of Supermom,

it seems to me, the song serves to connect us with the *universal* image of wife and mother. After all, the passage has been interpreted as a metaphor for the *Shechina*, the Sabbath, the Torah and the soul. Doesn't it make sense that the acrostic, spanning all twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, alludes not to one woman's all-encompassing virtues (Supermom) but to our collective identity (Everywoman)?

Just before my marriage, a spiritual midwife told me, "King Solomon says, 'The wisdom of a woman builds her home.' The literal translation though states, 'The wisdom of women (plural) builds *her* home (singular).' You will build your home on the wisdom of many women. Pay attention to how they live and what they have to say." How right she was. I have enriched myself and my home through the collective wisdom and experience of the thousands of women I've merited connecting with. I carry them within me and am personally empowered by who *they* are. As *Eishet Chayil* is sung each Friday night, it affords me some brief moments of contemplation to rejoin with them and also to be eased by the knowledge that our physical and spiritual interconnectedness mitigates my own flaws, enabling me to bring their lights into my home.

By extension, I have access to the *larger*, cosmic Everywoman, namely the energies and insights of the women who have come before me all the way back to Sarah. (In fact, one reading of *Eishet Chayil* is as the eulogy Abraham said for Sarah before he buried her.) It may be a span of thousands of years between me and my first mother but it's not more than around 175 generations. That's not an impossible divide. I want some of the wisdom and joy of the women between the two of us. I now know how far from the truth my youthful stereotype of the shtetel Bubby – naïve, somewhat simple, lacking emotional subtlety – is. Today I'd love to have her over for brunch and glean her insights and tools on how to handle my life. The same goes for all the women throughout those interceding generations, each of whom has her own shining letter from the Alphabet Soup of Perfection to impart to me. As their daughter and granddaughter I am bound with their point of perfection. Thereby, at some level, despite the fact that I'm no Supermom, *Eishet Chayil* is in my home each Friday night. More so I even carry her, the collective "Everywoman," within my own being.

In this way, I gain access to a dimension of myself that is way beyond my highest personal aspirations: For if the totality of who I can be is purely a result of my own endeavors, I will be very small indeed. Rather, it is in surrendering to my imperfections

and humbly admitting the bigness of *Eishet Chayil* that I open the window to the full expanse of who I am.

But to me, the collective gestalt of Jewish womanhood embodied by *Eishet Chayil* allows us even more than access to this larger, truer self. In addition to this priceless gift, she affords us the possibility to reconfigure our relationship with our mothers. I know, easier said than done. The most potent reaction I ever got to a presentation was a lecture called, “Moms, the Magic and the Madness.” The audience – and yours truly – wasn’t quite sure whether to laugh or weep. Our relationship with our mothers is incomparably multi-dimensional, complex, overlaid with love and with hatred. It’s a real big one to navigate but one that we are nonetheless expected to manage and even heal.

It’s not that we can disregard that relationship if it’s uncomfortable for us. “Honor your father and mother” even made it to fifth on the list of the Big Ten. Yet for many this instruction on how we ought to relate to our parents is something they find absurd. I can hear the disdain: “My Mom hangs out at the gym all day and gossips non-stop. She’s dishonest in business, self-centered – nay narcissistic – and materialistic. She never had the courage to face her wounds so I get to be the beneficiary of *her* dysfunctional inheritance!

Yadda, yadda...” Alright, this is Everymom we’re talking about. But you get the idea. How are we to honor and respect our Moms despite their often startling imperfections?

Ultimately the reason we honor them has nothing to do with their personal or moral stature. G-d’s directive is rooted in the fact that at the moment of conception, our parents take on something of the Divine. They become co-creators with G-d in bringing us into being. *That’s* why honor of our parents is immutable. It’s not about the gym or manicures, how they do or don’t pay taxes and show up in life. It’s about the fact that *in relation to us* they are G-dlike in a certain respect. That’s the ground-zero of honoring our parents, and until we get nothing else we say or hear will be of use to us in moving the relationship forward.

But this immutable point of greatness aside, each Friday night *Eishet Chayil* reminds us of two key ideas that can change the way we negotiate our very first relationship. The first is that, as mentioned, *none* of us is perfect – and that’s okay! The second is that in some mysterious way we can, if we choose to, receive what we need through the collective Everywoman. In this way, we learn to lower the bar on our mothers. Whew! We don’t *have* to hold her to an impossible standard. In fact (surprise) we can begin to accept her for who she is and learn to get

our needs met elsewhere if she is not able to do so. We can stop blaming our unhappiness on someone who would not – or more accurately could not – come to the table in the way we needed her to. *Eishet Chayil*, Everywoman, becomes a reservoir of healing and nourishment for our being.

Through this forgiving of her for her imperfections, we can put down the aspects of our emotional and mental inheritance we'd rather do without. One of the first things we learn about our father Abraham is that he smashed his parents' idols! I am embarrassed to admit it but it was only well into my thirties that I realized I had to do the same. I'd spent decades bowing to my folks' false beliefs, accepting it as fact that I was doomed for time everlasting to live with the limitations those beliefs generated. Then one day the teaching about Abraham took hold in my mind with a vigorous vitality. I took an inventory of what I'd inherited. In addition to the abundant goodness and wonder, it included beliefs about how much I was likely to earn, how to respond when angered, what the appropriate response to suffering is and a whole lot more. I trust you get what I'm talking about. How liberating to realize that I could systematically smash those idols – without betraying my parents!! I was not being faithless to them in subscribing to different truths and happiness.

The catch in doing so is to disown the false beliefs yet remain *in* the relationship. Abraham smashed Terach's idols but he continued to live with him – for another seventy-two years. Granted Terach came round to Abraham's way of thinking but our first father would have managed to negotiate the relationship regardless. I believe that is because connection with G-d was the singular driving force in his life and as such he was able to a) see his father's flaws, b) not take them personally, c) not feel limited by them and d) detach with love so that he could c) actually help Terach. He was able to not own another's dysfunction and yet remaining connected to the one he loved.

To accomplish this mode of conduct, we must discover a new mental set and learn to shift our reading of the events and relationships in our lives. Most of our pain in relation to our parents (and pretty much everything else) has to do with our own perception. We *interpret* things to mean what they are not. As such, we tend to live in the rather unhappy space between the way things are and the way we think they should be. We walk around confessing the sins of G-d and others in our life. And of course, we know our mothers' sins best of all! To be whole with her, we must find that new mental set that allows us to let go of the expectations we have of her and of our interpretation of the interactions between us. For

me, *Eishet Chayil* enables me to begin to navigate this. It teaches me that I am not perfect but that that's okay – and the same goes for my Mom; that I no longer have to hold her to an impossible standard and that I can be enriched by my universal family of sisters and mothered by generations of women whose sterling qualities are inestimable. In other words, although I'm not Supermom, I have access to the superlative perfection of Everywoman. It turns out that Jewish Tiger Mom liberates me through the abundant truth that although none of us is perfect, we have access to a flawlessness that is way beyond pearls.



*Known as The Kabbalah Coach, Shimona is considered one of the foremost female authorities on Kabbalah in the world. She founded and directs Omek, an educational non-profit, and has authored a course for the Rohr JLI currently taught at over 50 college campuses in the USA. Her most recent venture is Corporate Soul which provides tools and techniques for individuals and corporations seeking spiritually based transformation.*



## *Reflections on Eishet Chayil*

*“Sometimes we find something in each other’s eyes that we had forgotten to see just minutes earlier.”*

*By Rabbi Jeffrey Segelman*

I have recited Eishet Chayil to my wife every Friday night for nearly 32 years. This began, of course, on the first Shabbat of our marriage. I did not know it well back then, and I could not say it by heart. I read it from a text.

I made the decision, without consulting her, that I would not chant it as was the practice in other traditional homes. While the song is beautiful, it did not afford me the opportunity to say it to her with my tone of voice, with my inflection and with the emphasis on certain verses and phrases. I wanted these words to come from me in the manner in which I would speak to her every day. Over time, I developed my own little “sing song” chant, but it was mine. No, it was ours.

By the time I was truly comfortable with the words, our daughter was born. This added a new aspect to our Friday night ritual – that of blessing her. While her blessing had nothing to do directly with Eishet Chayil, it did cast new meaning as it gave it context. I was saying Eishet Chayil **first**. My thoughts to my wife preceded those to my child. So often, the arrival of children deflects both time and energy from the relationship between husband and wife. Eishet Chayil is an opportunity – if only for a moment – to put our marriage before our children. It was a reminder of who sat at this table first and who would, hopefully, be sitting here together after the children leave to establish their own homes.

Having children (I also have two sons) also made me aware of the fact that Eishet Chayil is not a blessing. A blessing flows from a greater to a lesser. A blessing can come from a teacher to a student or from a parent to a child. Eishet Chayil is a reminder that husband and wife are equal. The words I speak to my children are a blessing. The words I speak to my wife – my equal – are praise.

I would like to think that over the years my children also grasped that subtle message. Though I do not remember how it started, it became my custom to point at my wife when, at the end of Eishet Chayil I would say “many women have done gloriously, but YOU surpass them all.” As they grew,

I was pleased to see that my children also pointed at their mother when I said the “you” in the verse. I am even more pleased today, for I have a son-in-law who now points to my daughter and a son who points to his wife.

This brings us to the issue of praise. *Eishet Chayil* raises some questions. If praise is so ritualized, is it really praise? Moreover, how can one possibly feel that love and mean that praise every single Friday at sunset over three decades, without fail? Do the words then become disingenuous? And what about the fact that it is “one sided,” as this might offend some who would prefer a more egalitarian moment.

In the answers to these questions we find Judaism and Jewish practice to be, once again, a most excellent and insightful source of wisdom.

Any person who lives in a traditional Jewish home knows the most tense moments of life happen in those few hours before the sun sets on Friday. The very nature of Shabbat observance dictates that it be born, each week, out of some degree of chaos and panic. The house must be clean, the table set. Everyone is taking a shower and finding their proper clothes. (This is particularly difficult with small children who do not always want to cooperate.) All the food must be properly prepared for the next twenty-five hours. The lights that must

be off must be off and those that must be on must be on. The hot water urn must be prepared (for who could survive without coffee?) And without fail, when there are thirty minutes left before candle lighting, there are forty five minutes of work yet to be done.

In a traditional home, it is the woman who is directing this chaos. The burden of responsibility falls squarely on her shoulders. It is she who sees the whole picture of the family. She makes us aware of what must be done; she spots the problems and orders the solutions. She leads us through those tense moments and then, with the striking of a match and the lighting of her candles, she calls it all to an end.

If only for this (and of course there is much more) she is deserving of praise when we come to the table. If nothing else, Eishet Chayil is my way to say thank you.

But it is more than that. Eishet Chayil gives my children the opportunity to see their parents in a moment of love. In the hustle bustle of the week, we might express our love but it is often at moments when we are alone. It is good for children to see a love moment and equally important to associate that love moment with Shabbat.

Yet sometimes there is not so much love. We know that couples get angry with each other. We act thoughtlessly from time to time and we hurt each other. Sometimes the natural tension of a Friday afternoon exacerbates those bad feelings and by the time we sit down at the table we are not always feeling love for each other. At such a moment is Eishet Chayil disingenuous?

Not at all. First, in such circumstances I find that I am saying the words not so much to my wife as to myself. I need to hear myself say these praises and when I do, I often rediscover my wife in them. Second, the power of the ritual word allows me to say something, in this case, “I love you,” from my soul – even when I might not be able to speak such words from my mind. Finally, the words function far beyond their literal meaning. They become a reason to look deeply into her eyes (which I always do when I say Eishet Chayil) and give her a chance to stare back at me. Sometimes we find something in each other’s eyes that we had forgotten to see just minutes earlier. Moreover, beyond the literal meaning of the words, they form a bridge upon which we can meet. Such is the power of words in Jewish tradition.

In less than a minute it is over. It is, however, one of the most powerful and holy moments we know.



*Rabbi Jeffrey Segelman is the senior rabbi of the Westchester Jewish Center in Mamaroneck, N.Y., where he has served for 25 years. He also was the rabbi of Shomrei Torah, the Wayne Conservative Congregation in Wayne, N.J., for 5 years. He received his Bachelor Degrees from Boston University and the Boston Hebrew College, and his Masters Degree, Rabbinic Ordination, and an Honorary Doctorate from the Jewish Theological Seminary. He lives with his wife and has three children and three grandchildren.*



## *Creating Memories*

*“A strong and loving bond renewed weekly. An adoring husband and a blushing mother.”*

*By Marc Suvall*

I love Shabbat dinner and all it represents, but that was not the case growing up. I was raised in a confused, dysfunctional Jewish home with no positive memories of being Jewish. Friday night dinner was the only night we sat together as a family and it usually resulted in arguing. There was no valued ritual, no warmth, no love at these meals.

Once I got married and had children, my wife Harriet and I decided that making Shabbat dinner special was a priority for us. Shabbat represents sacred time and sacred space. The rituals are wonderful and the lessons taught and learned – we felt – would be immensely valuable. Our goal was to make Friday evenings special and delicious in every way.

Our practice was definitely halachically challenged. Rather than focus on specific candle lighting

time, it was the act of lighting the candles and the peacefulness and beauty of the flame – the idea of sending light into the world – that we focused on. Whereas during the week our children didn't watch TV or eat sweet desserts, on Shabbat a "Shabbat Shalom" seven-layer cake, beautifully decorated, was anxiously awaited. And when dinner was over and any guests left, the occasional TV show was enjoyed by all. This made great sense to me! Shabbat was quality family time: unique, value-laden and, above all, "Jewish."

To me, Eishet Chayil was a particularly beautiful and moving part of the evening. The prayers were said, the children were blessed, and I wanted them to see, hear, and feel the love, respect and admiration I have for my wife. I wanted them to recognize unmistakably the appreciation and commitment we share. I wanted them to understand the importance of expressing love and not taking people or things for granted.

At times I would sing the Carlebach tune in my croaky voice and at other times I would read the English translation, leaving the second half of each sentence for the children to complete, sometimes seriously and others amusingly, but always with smile and love. My wife always felt special and honored – our *shekinah*, my Shabbat bride. The children were amused, but, more importantly,

they witnessed a strong and loving bond, renewed weekly, an adoring husband, and a blushing mother who in every way is a woman of valor.

The children are grown and out of the house. They call every Friday – wherever they are – for their blessing, and I still sing Eishet Chayil. I am certain that these memories will last a lifetime.



*Marc Suvall is involved in Jewish philanthropy with a particular interest in building a stronger Israeli civil society and in issues of economic empowerment within Israel's marginal populations. He is on the boards of the UJA-Federation of NY, JDC, the Jewish Community Relations Council of NY, and the Baron de Hirsch Fund. Marc also teaches as a volunteer several days a week at a low performing, economically distressed school in the south Bronx in NY and at a women's correctional facility. He has two grown children and is married to Harriet, a true woman of valor.*



## *Tell Her You Love Her*

*Just because men won't ask for directions when they are lost doesn't mean they are exempt from expressing appreciation for what they've found.*

*By Rabbi Benjamin Blech*

Sabbath is the holiest day of the week. For six days our focus is physical; we tend to the needs of our body. At least once every week, every seventh day, we are commanded to recharge ourselves spiritually and take care of our souls.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great 20th century theologian, put it beautifully: "The Temple was a sanctuary in space; the Sabbath is a sanctuary in time." For six days we live life on the level of "how?" Every seventh day we change the focus of our existence to "why?"

The Sabbath is not so much a day of rest in a passive sense but rather a time to call a temporary halt to our frenzied lifestyles in order to evaluate what is really important. When an artist steps back from his painting to view it and consider whether it fulfills his expectations, that too is part of the process of

creating a masterpiece. Our lives, if they are to be works of art, require review and contemplation.

That's what the Sabbath commands as it asks us to rest *from* the demands of the business world and dedicate ourselves *to* the demands of our spiritual being and the meaning of our lives.

Small wonder then that the focus of the Sabbath is the home. Here we play with our children, eat our festive family dinners, relax and find peace from our daily struggles, and make love with our mates. For Adam and Eve, Paradise was their home; for us, our home is Paradise.

The Talmud, that great compendium of Jewish wisdom, didn't hesitate to declare that the very essence and spirit of the home is the woman – the wife and the mother. It is the woman who lights the candles on Friday night because she is the one who always brings light into the home.

And that is why there is a remarkable tradition observed in every Jewish home before the commencement of the Sabbath meal. Jewish husbands are obligated to sing a love song to their wives. The lyrics aren't country Western; they are more ancient Eastern. The words recited come from the biblical book of Proverbs 31:10 – 31. They were written by King Solomon, reputed to be the wisest of all men, and they extol the virtues of an *eishet*

*chayil* – a woman of valor.

Even an all-powerful ancient monarch recognized and acknowledged how much life is enhanced by a loving mate:

*“The heart of her husband did safely trust in her, and he had no lack of gain. She did him good and not evil all the days of her life.”*

Solomon’s praises capture a woman’s worth in phrases that still have meaning to this day. He begins his tribute with what appears to be a question: “A woman of valor who can find?” But his intent is not to imply that the search is fruitless. It is merely to suggest how very blessed the finder must consider himself, because once found, “Far greater than pearls is her value.”

The translation of the Hebrew *eishet chayil* is usually rendered as a woman of valor. In truth it means much more. The Hebrew *chayil* means strength; a *chayal* is a soldier. At first glance, strength wouldn’t appear to be the trait for which women ought most to be admired. We tend to identify strength with physical power. But King Solomon had greater insight. True strength comes from within. It is the power to perform the menial with dignity, the everyday task with enthusiasm, the raising of children with heroic discipline and unstinting devotion, the infusion of the home

with holiness, and the creation of that indefinable warmth and joy that define a beautiful family. It is the true meaning of a wife and a mother.

This is what every husband is expected to acknowledge as we enter the Sabbath. The day that brings with it sanctity should inspire an expression of gratitude not only to God but to the one most responsible for bringing God into the home.

Every man is asked to make his wife feel that in his eyes she is the most wonderful of all women. The man isn't simply supposed to *think* it – he is required to *say* it. Just because men will never ask for directions when they're lost doesn't mean that they are exempt from expressing their appreciation for what they've found.

And that isn't just good marital counseling. It's a mitzvah, nothing less than a religious obligation.



*Rabbi Benjamin Blech is a Professor of Talmud at Yeshiva University and an internationally recognized educator, religious leader, author, and lecturer. A recipient of the American Educator of the Year award and author of twelve highly acclaimed books, he writes regularly for major newspapers and journals and was recently ranked #16 in a list of the 50 most influential Jews in America.*



## *How to Read Eishet Chayil*

*“What do we find when we look into the ways in which Jews read and understood this poem/song in the past? And what new readings can we offer as moderns and as feminists?”*

*By Wendy Zierler*

### **Eishet Chayil and Me**

I cannot remember exactly when my family began singing Eishet Chayil at the Friday night table. I do know that it was we, the kids, who brought it into the house. When I was five years old, my family moved to Toronto from Sarnia, a small town on Western Ontario where my father owned a furniture store, founded by his father, an immigrant from Galicia. “Who had time in Sarnia,” recalls my father, “for a leisurely Friday night dinner? You had to rush home, eat quickly and get back to the store.”

When my family moved to Toronto, however, all this changed. My father ceased working on Shabbat. We began attending Jewish schools and camps where we learned *tefilot* and Hebrew songs. When

we first introduced the singing of Eishet Chayil at the Shabbat table, my father, who had received but a rudimentary Jewish education growing up in Sarnia, struggled with the complex Hebrew words, yet persisted in going through it every week.

For our family, singing Eishet Chayil symbolized renewed commitment to Jewish observance and the authentic calm of a leisurely Shabbat meal shared with the whole family. It stood for the realization of a Jewish-Canadian-American dream, completely elusive to my grandfather's generation, wherein it was possible to earn a living and live as a fully observant Jew.

Scholars say that the custom of singing Eishet Chayil at the Friday night table was initiated by kabbalists in the 17th century, who viewed Shabbat as an occasion of mystical union within the divine and understood the Eishet Chayil allegorically as a representation of the *Shekhinah*, the feminine presence of God.<sup>1</sup> In a sense, we were living out our own contemporary allegorical interpretation of Proverbs 31, with the Woman of Valor being the

---

1. See Polen and Kushner, "Hassidic Commentary," in *My People's Prayer Book, Volume 7: Shabbat at Home* (Burlington, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2003), p. 85. Also see Benjamin J. Segal, "The Liberated Woman of Valor," *Conservative Judaism* 52:2 (Winter 2000), pp. 49-56.

Sabbath, whom we had welcomed with renewed energy into our midst.

There is allegory and there is literal reading. Singing Eishet Chayil was also an occasion to offer appreciation for my mother, who cooked and baked and sewed and prepared the Shabbat dinner we so much enjoyed. The valorous woman in Proverbs 31 never sits still, let alone rests. Her light never goes out and she rises from her bed when it is still dark. Was that not just like my own mother, who teemed with nervous energy, walked more quickly than anyone else in the family, and had this uncanny ability to wake up in the middle of the night in response to the sound of my footsteps approaching my parents' room?

Years later, as a mother, scholar and feminist, I find myself returning to Eishet Chayil, wondering where I see myself in relation to this biblical *uber-frau*, who single-handedly feeds her entire household, works her hands in wool and flax, clothes her children in crimson, all the while managing a business and various philanthropic endeavors. To what extent do any of us see ourselves in this *aleph-to-tav* list of what was valued in a woman in the biblical period? Are we amused by it, even alienated? In the context of our own times, where so many of us work outside as well as inside the home, negotiating on a daily basis a heroic set

of professional as well as domestic duties, does Proverbs 31 provide inspiration or does it enshrine a set of unrealistic expectations? Nowadays, when husbands are more involved in child rearing, domestic chores and Shabbat preparation, should they still sing this paean to their wives, while wives sing nothing to their husbands? Given our awareness of the number of single women in our midst as well as couples and families who do not conform to this heterosexual norm, are we not concerned about trumpeting this image as an ideal?

In asking these questions we exit the experiential mode in which the song wafts over us unthinkingly, and begin a more critical set of deliberations that discovery. What do we find when we look into the ways in which Jews read and understood this poem/song in the past? And what new readings can we offer as moderns and as feminists?

### **Allegorical versus Literal Readings**

In poring over midrashic interpretations of the Eishet Chayil, I find that my family was not unique in combining both an allegorical and a literal approach to the poem. The rabbis engaged in a similar set of interpretive tendencies and tensions, more typically favoring the allegorical over the literal. Well before the kabbalistic reading of the Eishet Chayil as the *Shekhinah*, Pesikta Rabbati 35 (9<sup>th</sup> century) insisted that the Eishet Chayil of

Proverbs 31 was a feminized figure of Knesset Yisrael. In a similar vein, Midrash Mishlei (9<sup>th</sup> century) offered the following allegorical interpretation of the Eishet Chayil as the Torah:

[י] אשת חיל מי ימצא. [זו היא  
התורה. ורחוק מפנינים מכרה].  
שהיתה לפני לפנינים, וזכה משה  
והורידה למטה לארץ. בטח בה לב  
בעלה ושלל לא יחסר. שלא חסר בה  
דבר.

*What a rare find is a capable wife!* This is the Torah, whose price is far above rubies. For she [the Torah] had been kept in the Innermost [chamber] Moses merited to bring her down to earth [to Israel]. *Her husband puts his confidence in her and he has no lack of gain.* That she [the Torah] lacks nothing.

What leads the rabbis to insist on this allegorical reading? On the most basic level, these interpretations imply a certain skepticism, supported by the biblical words “*mi yimtzah?*” (who will find?), as to the ability of any woman to be so valorous or impeccable. By turning the Eishet Chayil into the (infallible) Torah, the litany of positive attributes becomes more credible. Real life women lack or fail in some way or another, but the Torah, the rabbis say, does not.

This tension between literal and allegorical interpretation is perhaps best seen in the writings of

Gersonides (Ralbag, 13<sup>th</sup> -14<sup>th</sup> century France). In his commentary on Genesis 47:6, Gersonides forges an exegetic link between the *Eishet Chayil* as seen in Ruth 3:11 and *anshei chayil* that Pharaoh asks Joseph to identify from among his kin:

אנשי חיל - ראויים לגבורה  
ולשררה, כמו אשת חיל את.

*Able men* – Capable of courage and leadership, as in “You are an Eishet Chayil (an able woman). (Ruth 3: 11).

In both the masculine and feminine cases cited above, the word *chayil* is understood as capable or leaderly. Lest one assume that Gersonides is promoting a proto-egalitarian position, we turn to his commentary on the words Eishet Chayil as they appear in Proverbs 12: 4:

אשת חיל - הנה האשה הזריזה  
במעשיה היא עטרת בעלה ואולם  
האשה המתעצלת במעשיה היא  
משחתת אותו והיא לו כמו הרקב  
בעצמותיו שיבלו אותם והנה רמז  
בזה אל האשה המשרתת השכל  
בשתכין לו מהמוחשות מה שיצטרך  
לו בחקירותיו ואם לא תהיה נשמעת  
לו אך תתרושל מזה והיא מתאחרת  
ובוששת הנה היא לו כרקב בעצמותיו  
כי היא תמנע ממנו השלימות:

*A capable woman – is she who is swift in her deeds. She is a crown to her husband. However, the lazy woman corrupts him and is like rot that will wither his bones. And behold, there is another [allegorical] meaning to this referring to the feminine [matter] that serves the [masculine] intellect and prepares for him from the tangible realm what he needs for his investigations, and if she is not subject to him, if she is negligent, tardy, or absent, behold it is like rot in his bones and she will prevent him from reaching [intellectual] perfection.*

In the second part of his interpretation, Gersonides adopts an allegorical approach that is based on a classical binary opposition between the masculine principle of the intellect or mind and the feminine (subservient) principle of matter. Like that of a good wife, it is the role of feminine matter to serve the masculine mind, and enable its perfection.

If one considers the poem within its biblical context, Gersonides' reading emerges as the least convincing of the allegorical lot. Here is Proverbs, a book in which wisdom and intellect are repeatedly figured in feminine terms (see chapters 1, 8 and 9), so much so that many contemporary biblical scholars have viewed the representation of the Eishet Chayil as an extended praise of this same feminine figure of *Hokhmah*, and yet Gersonides

insists on reading the feminine here not as Dame Wisdom, but as the material principle that serves the masculine intellect!

Then there are those classical exegetes who eschew the allegorical tack, insisting that Proverbs 31 eulogizes actual women. In one famous story quoted in Midrash Mishlei, the Eishet Chayil is associated with the (here unnamed) wife of Rabbi Meir (Beruriah in other sources), who, when her two sons die on the same Shabbat, waits until after Shabbat when Rabbi Meir returns from the academy and makes havdalah, serves him his Motzei Shabbat meal, and only then tells him the tragic news by way of a halakhic question, namely, if you borrow something, do you need to return it when its owner comes to claim it? Only when Rabbi Meir affirms that one needs indeed to return it, does she show him the dead bodies of their sons. She is deemed an Eishet Chayil, because of the way in which she comforts her grieving husband. The bravery and strength of this woman inheres in her (conventionally masculine) ability to suppress completely her own feelings of grief and loss for the sake of consoling her husband. I confess I don't believe this story: What mother can cover her own grief so thoroughly and why should she be expected to do so? Are she and her husband not allowed and expected to cry and mourn together?

Elsewhere in Midrash Mishlei (and in Midrash Hagadol, 14<sup>th</sup> century), the Eishet Chayil is associated not with one particular woman, but with a string of 23 biblical women, each separate verse of the poem matching with a different biblical woman (with the exception of one verse which is attached to two). Feminist writers such as Penina Adelman (*Praise her Works*, 2005) have used this midrash in their own effort to recover the stories of biblical women, including some lesser-known or hitherto uncelebrated figures such as the wife of Noah, the wife of Ovadiah, or even Vashti.<sup>2</sup> The unexpected consequence of this approach, however, is that the idea of the woman of valor becomes an ancient rather than a contemporary notion, limited to particular women of the past; by implication, only our ancestors were truly meritorious and exemplary, while we occupy a less holy, spiritually denuded realm.

We all know remarkable men and women, though, who possess amazing and numerous virtues that inspire us and even arrest our imaginations. As feminists, we may not thrill to the list of tasks and traits enumerated in the biblical acrostic that is Proverbs 31. I know, however, that I still cling to the scholarly mission of searching out outstanding

---

2. For more on rabbinic readings of Proverbs 31, see Yael Levine Katz, *Midreshei Eishet Chayil*, Ph.D Thesis for the Talmud Department of Bar Ilan University, 1993.

women of the past as well as the belief in the real possibility of contemporary women of valor, however we define the term.

Once again, I refer to the issue of context. We typically ignore that the Eishet Chayil poem is preceded in Proverbs 31 by nine verses of instruction offered by an unnamed Queen Mother, to her son King Lemuel, in which she warns her son against drunkenness and debauchery (with women), encouraging him instead to judge righteously and be an advocate for the needy. One way to read Eishet Chayil, then, is as King Lemuel's eulogy for his valorous and wise mother, bearing in mind the genre of the eulogy, which often includes hyperbole and sacralization of the lost loved one.

We all know, of course, that it is best not to reserve one's appreciation for that ultimate occasion. Instead, why not sing it each week to others as well as ourselves? This past Friday night, after completing a draft of this essay as well as a dizzying array of other home-related tasks, I giddily joined in the singing of Eishet Chayil, adding in my own extemporaneous musical list of my accomplishments and those of the people around me –my kids had been remarkably cooperative that Friday, my husband survived another week on Wall Street and had managed to get home just in time for candle lighting – to the praised attainments of yesteryear. A better way to begin my Shabbat: Who can find?



*Wendy Zierler is Associate Professor of Modern Jewish Literature and Feminist Studies at Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion in New York. She is the author of **And Rachel Stole the Idols: The Emergence of Modern Hebrew Women's Writing** (2004), of the feminist Haggadah commentary included in **My People's Passover Haggadah** (2008), and co-editor with Carole B. Balin of **Behikansi atah** (*The Selected Writings of Hava Shapiro*), published in Hebrew by Resling Press in 2008, and forthcoming in English, with many of her own translations, by Wayne State University Press, 2013.*



## *The Root of Soul-Mates and the Feminine Quality*

*“On Shabbos we enter a more “feminine” quality.  
We cease conquering the world around us, and  
relinquish our obsession and attachment to control.”*

*By Rabbi DovBer Pinson*

A beautiful tradition has developed over time to recite a uniquely poetic portion from the Book of Proverbs every Friday evening, right before Kiddush, known as the Eishet Chayil or “Woman of Valor.”

The Eishet Chayil is comprised of twenty-two verses, with each verse beginning with another letter of the Aleph-Bet, forming an acrostic of the Hebrew alphabet.

The poem, which speaks of the inner qualities and external manifestations of the archetypal Woman of Valor, was understood throughout history as a multi-dimensional allegory that simultaneously alludes to the nature of the Soul, Wisdom, Torah,

Shechinah (the Divine Feminine Presence), and Shabbos.

Yet, on the simplest level, the poem refers to a woman. In fact, one Midrashic reading implies that the twenty-two verses are actually referring to twenty-two of the most powerful and important women of Jewish history.

Over the course of the past few hundred years the custom has developed for the men of the home to sing this poem at the end of the work week, as the family is about to participate in the festive Shabbos meal, in honor of the gifts of the women of the home. This humble ritual act expresses our deepest gratitude for everything they have done for the entire family.

### **Shabbos – The Feminine Quality**

Shabbos – our day of rest, reflection, and rejuvenation – is deeply related to the concept of the Feminine. Furthermore, the Feminine is associated with the very essence of the home – a peaceful and secure place permeated by a sanctified presence within which we find stability and security while being nourished on the deepest levels of our being. Our home is the center of our gravity. It focuses us and grounds us. The woman of the home, like Shabbos, is understood as the foundation of the familial enterprise, which in turn

is understood as the very soil in which the fruits of our labors begin to take root.

Shabbos is referred to as “the Queen.” She is also known as the Sabbath Bride. This indicates that Shabbos is our spiritual soul-mate. During Kabbalat Shabbat, the service of “Receiving the Shabbos,” we welcome her into our lives with spirited song, dance, and celebration.

Alternately, in relation to Hashem (The King), we ourselves are like Shabbos, and our soul is characterized as the Queen or Bride of the Creator. Our sages express this symbolic relationship in the story of a King who sought to create a beautiful bridal chamber. It was designed, adorned, and decorated immaculately. There was but one element missing – the Bride. Shabbos is that bride – our soul is that bride. And there is no King, no ruler, except for the Infinite One.

### **Kabbalat Shabbat – Receiving the Bride**

In Talmudic times there were sages who would dress in their finest attire and sing, “let us go out to greet the Shabbos queen,” as well as chanting “come O bride, come O bride” (Shabbos, 119a). During the medieval period, a ritual custom was developed to enhance the liminal moments as Shabbos was beginning (and ending) with song and dance, as would befit the entrance and exit of a Queen (Safer

Hamanhig). The AriZal (Rabbi Issac Luria) and many other mystics of that generation, as the sun was setting over the hilltops, would venture out into the open fields, or gather at one of the magnificent slopes to open their minds and hearts in joyous longing and festive song to greet the Shabbos Bride. It was during this time that the order of poems and Psalms now known as “Kabbalat Shabbos” was set in place.

### **In G-d’s Image They Were Created**

In psycho-symbolic terminology, each one of us possesses both masculine (assertive) and feminine (receptive) qualities. (NOTE: This one-dimensional, black and white, polarized categorization of the concepts of “masculine” and “feminine” is in no way to be mistaken for a characterization of physical “gender” as it manifests in bodily form. Furthermore, it must be reiterated that we are all comprised of both “masculine” and “feminine” energies and attributes.)

The externally directed, masculine tendency is exercised and activated during the six days of the week. For a psycho-celestial cycle of six days we create, we manipulate, and we aspire to ‘change’ and mold nature. On Shabbos, the Seventh Day, we rest, we stop, we cease, we pause, and we move inward and open ourselves up to receive. It is during Shabbos that we attempt to submit ourselves

in reflective acknowledgement and prayerful appreciation for Creation as it is in the Present Moment, no longer needing to change anything.

During the week we are devoted to “masculine” pursuits, as it were, mastering and manipulating the elements of creation, molding them to our will. On Shabbos we enter a more “feminine” quality, we cease conquering the world around us, and relinquish our obsession and attachment to control. We aim to settle and allow ourselves to be still.

### **Present & Future**

Shabbos is both a place (or time) to come to, a destination – as in the rest that culminates six days of hard work – and a place to come from, a beginning – as in the gestation period that gives focus and trajectory to our coming week. In this sense we can see that the Feminine is both the foundation and the catapult of the Masculine, stabilizing as well as stirring.

Shabbos absorbs and assimilates the previous week, as well as impregnates and influences the following week. The Feminine as it exists within each one of us – expressing itself within all of our different relationships and energetic exchanges – absorbs and assimilates the struggles and strivings of the Masculine, impregnating the present by integrating the past within the possibility for a renewed future.

## Soul Mates: Our 'First' and 'Second' Match

Eishet Chayil is a wonderful and deep poem that demands an entire book to truly explore, but for our purposes, let us focus on the opening words of the poem and unearth some of its deeper wisdom.

The poem opens with the words: "A woman of valor, who can find?"

Is this meant to be a rhetorical question or an actual inquiry? Is the poet asking: "Who can find a woman of valor?" Or, is it that having found his 'woman of valor,' he is saying: "Who could ever imagine that I would actually find my perfect match?"

To explore this further, let us begin with a passage in the Talmud:

Reish Lakish expounded and said: "They only pair a woman with a man according to his deeds." Rav Yehudah said: "Forty days before the creation of a child, a Heavenly Voice issues forth and proclaims: 'The daughter of so and so is destined to marry so and so.'" In this, there is no contradiction. The latter teaching refers to a 'first match' and the former to a 'second match' (Sotah, 2a).

It appears that the concept of the 'first match' represents entering into a relationship that was 'meant to be,' i.e. founded on Heavenly decree. The 'second match' – supposing one marries twice

– is based on merit, personality, and actions. In summary: ‘first match’ would be analogous to Divine Providence, and ‘second match’ would be analogous to Free Will.

These concepts, ‘first’ and ‘second’ match, however, do not necessarily always refer to a linear order of relationship (as in a chronological first and second partner), but rather, they can refer more to an ontological order, wherein the ‘firstborn’ relationship is set aside for someone based on Heavenly decree, and the ‘second temple’ relationship is arrived at due to a person’s own choices and decisions. Seen from this perspective, it becomes clear that there are multiple paths to arrive at a singular destination, in this case true unification with your soul-mate.

Furthermore, this metaphor can be understood on a deeper level when we compare two stories that depict the ways in which the Children of Israel accepted the Torah. The first story, based on a Midrash, describes Hashem as ‘holding Mt. Sinai over the heads of the Israelites,’ effectively forcing them to accept the Torah. Due to this Heavenly coercion, the sages learn that we did not fully accept the Divine Decree during the overpowering revelation at Sinai. It was only during the time of Esther and Mordechai, in the Purim story, in which the name of G-d is conspicuously absent,

that the Children of Israel willingly, and with full consciousness, took on the obligations of the Torah through their own resolve.

Still another way to understand this concept of 'first' and 'second matches' is how these two archetypes can both play out in a single relationship. As our souls become embodied we are given a soul-mate, a 'first match,' who if we marry will be our perfect match based on the original nature of our eternal soul. But we are only able to 'receive' our soul-mate if we 'deserve' it. We 'earn' our rightful soul-mate when we do the internal work necessary to recognize them when they appear to us in temporal form. We have to be open, sensitive, and ready for the deep work of bringing 'two into one.' This work often entails more than 'finding the right person.' One must actually 'be the right person' in order to recognize and be recognized.

This dynamic can be illustrated by a Midrash that reports how the Sea of Reeds was created solely on the condition that it would part for the Israelites as they were escaping their enslavement in Egypt. As the pre-destined time approached and the Israelites stood on the shore of the sea, the waters refused to part. The sea only split for the Israelites once their true nature was revealed through a heroic act of ultimate faith. As the Egyptian army was approaching from behind, and the sea remained

in front of them, blocking their way to freedom, Nachshon, a member of the tribe of Judah, walked straight into the sea. The waters finally parted as they reached his nose. This is a beautiful example of a Divinely decreed event occurring only on the merit of one's actions. This is more fully articulated when one considers the saying of the sages that, "finding one's soul-mate is as big of a miracle as the splitting of the sea."

### **The Roots of our Soul**

The concept of soul-mates is intricately connected with the concept of 'soul roots' within the primordial human – Adam.

Adam, the way he is described at the genesis of creation, is both male and female. Physically and metaphysically the prototypical human being was neither all male nor all female, but rather a synthesis of both the male and female aspects.

Physicality is a reflection of spiritual reality. As Adam is understood as the physical parent of humankind, so is Adam also our spiritual parent. Adam's soul represents the original collective soul from where all later souls emanate – a Source Soul from which all individualized souls are derivatives.

One's body is the physical imprint of their soul. Body and soul mirror and reflect each other. The

form of Adam's body was analogous to the spiritual structure of his soul. As the physical body can be divided into various compartments, the same is true with regard to the soul. There are souls that are rooted in the 'head' of Adam and there are souls who stem from the 'hands' of Adam, there are souls who come from the 'heart,' and souls that come from the 'feet.' Accordingly, 'head' souls are inclined towards more intellectual pursuits, 'hand' souls show signs of physical dexterity and craftsmanship, 'heart' souls are brimming with emotions and empathy and 'feet' souls are action or movement oriented.

Our perfect 'first match' is known as our counterpart (male or female) soul from within the 'body' of Adam. This means that if we are primarily a 'head' or 'heart' soul, our 'first match' will also be a soul from Adam's 'head' or 'heart,' but from the opposite side of the 'body,' so to speak. For instance if one is a 'hand' soul, their 'first match' counterpart would also be a 'hand' soul, but one partner would be from the right hand of 'Adam' (Chesed) and their partner would be from the 'left hand' (Gevurah). Another way to dichotomize this dynamic would be to say that one soul is from the 'masculine' side, while the other soul is from the 'feminine' side within the specific area of the primordial body. In this way, 'first match' souls are 'opposite' each other. This dynamic is manifest as a kind of symmetrical

equilibrium, thus creating a balance of energies and capacities that complement each other's specific gifts.

Our 'second match' is most often found in souls that are more similar to our own soul-root, rather than being a more contrasting counterpart. This means that if we are 'head' souls, our 'second match' soul-mate would also be a head soul, but instead of each partner being rooted in an opposite 'side of the brain' (so to speak), each partner would be from the same 'side of Adam's brain.' This dynamic is present in relationships where each party shares many common interests, activities, and even approaches to life in general. Rather than balancing each other out, 'second match' partners reflect and reinforce each other's energies in more of a mirroring quality. In this respect, each partner is looking to unite with someone who is 'created in their own image,' so to speak.

To further illustrate this dynamic we can turn to a fascinating phrase in Genesis and its illuminating explication from the Gemarah. The Torah states that Chava was an Ezer K'negdo to Adam. This mysterious description is often translated as a "helper for him," but when rendered literally according to the Hebrew it more accurately means a "helper against him." The Sages interpret this to mean that a wife can be either an Ezer/Helper,

or K'negdo/Against him, depending on how the couple relates to each other.

And yet on the deepest level we can see that a partner may actually become a 'helper' by being an 'opposite.' This is the characterization of the 'first match' soul-mate. In the case of the 'second match' soul-mate, each partner is more of an Ezer/Helper, without so much K'negdo/Oppositional energy. The relationship is characterized more by each partner supporting the other in complementary growth rather than challenging each other by providing an equal and opposite aspect of a similar soul-root.

In summary, a 'first match' soul-mate challenges one to grow and evolve, through the process of relationship and unification with an 'other', into a more comprehensive and balanced individual. By providing each other with a countervailing force to wrestle against and align with, each partner is able to both highlight and call forth the unique talents of the other, while also illuminating the darker areas in which one needs support and encouragement in order to become the best person they can be.

A 'second match' soul-mate is more likely to connect with and reinforce one's current level and perspective. This is not to say that a 'second match' relationship will not engender growth. But it may occur more along the lines of both partners growing together in similar ways, rather than both

partners growing in opposing ways, together.

Either relationship or approach has the infinite potential to provide each partner with the conditions and consciousness necessary to evolve further into the person they came here to be. And indeed, as noted earlier, a single relationship may very well include both of these dynamics at one or different times depending on the circumstances.

### **Prayer or Acknowledgment**

And so, to return to our initial discussion of the Eishet Chayil, as one is about to begin the Friday night meal, sitting down to a beautifully set table, fully prepared to usher in and celebrate the entrance of the perfect soul-mate of the Jewish people, the holy Shabbos Bride, one recites this poem, and begins: “A woman of valor, who can find”?

For the one who is still looking to find his perfect soul-mate, the Eishet Chayil is a prayer of yearning. He begins by saying: “A woman of valor, who can find?” This short opening line poetically expresses an active search for the perfect match, his soul-mate. He is looking to ‘find’ her because, due to his own actions, she has been ‘lost,’ or has yet to have been acknowledged.

But for the one who has found his perfect match,

as he is poised to enter into blissful union with the cosmic bride of Shabbos, he pauses to acknowledge the Divine Presence within his holy wife and healthy family. He takes a look around the Shabbos table and is filled with praise, thanks, and gratitude for finding his perfect soul-mate.



*Rabbi Pinson is a world-renowned scholar, author, kabbalist and beloved spiritual teacher. He is a master of the revealed and inner aspects of Torah and has written dozens of groundbreaking books on Kabbalah and Philosophy. Rabbi Pinson is the Rosh Yeshivah of the IYYUN Yeshivah and heads the IYYUN Center for Jewish Spirituality in Brooklyn, NY. He travels extensively and has attracted thousands of loyal followers and students around the world. Learn more at [www.iyyun.com](http://www.iyyun.com).*



## *Rereading Eishet Chayil*

*“With each recitation we have the opportunity to see ourselves as links in a long chain of powerful women.”*

*By Dr. Gail Reimer*

In traditional Jewish homes it is customary on Friday nights to sing the Eishet Chayil. Drawn from the final chapter of the biblical book of Proverbs, the song describes the ideal Jewish woman through the myriad activities she engages in and excels at. The song’s seeming emphasis on what the ideal woman provides for her husband and children, on the ideal woman as wife and mother, on the ideal woman as primarily engaged in domestic activity, has led many women of my generation to eliminate the song from their Friday night ritual.

One translation of the phrase “*eishet chayil*” is indeed “a capable wife” and it is easy to understand why women today might take offense to defining themselves in this way. But the more accurate translation of the phrase Eishet Chayil is “woman of valor.” This is based on the context in which the

phrase is used elsewhere in the Bible – the only other time it appears – in the Book of Ruth. There it clearly does not refer to a wife and mother. The phrase is used to describe Ruth, a childless widow who has courageously ventured into a foreign land in solidarity and compassion with her grieving mother-in-law, Naomi, and risked violence and humiliation to secure sustenance and comfort for Naomi in her old age. When one reads *Eishet Chayil* through the lens offered by this context, the maternal and domestic activities it describes take on a different cast.

One of my favorite readings of the poem is neither from a contemporary defender of the ritual, nor from a scholarly interpreter. It's author, Lillian Wald, was also neither wife nor mother. Born into a well-to-do family in Rochester, New York, in 1867, Wald might have said that her life truly began 26 years later when, as a young nurse, she visited a poor family in a crumbling tenement on the Lower East Side. "That experience," she wrote in her autobiography, "was a baptism by fire."

"On my way from the sickroom to my comfortable student quarters my mind was intent on my own responsibility. To my inexperience it seemed certain that conditions such as these were allowed because people did not know, and for me there was a challenge to know and to tell. When early

morning found me still awake, my naïve conviction remained that if people knew things – and things meant everything implied in the conditions of this family – such horrors would cease to exist.”

During the next decades, Wald founded the Visiting Nurse Service of New York and the Henry Street Settlement. Championing the causes of public health nursing, housing reform, suffrage, world peace, and the rights of women, children, immigrants and working people, Wald became an influential leader in city, state, and national politics.

In October 1915 Wald was invited to address Vassar students as part of the College’s celebrations of its 50th anniversary. Wald used the occasion to celebrate women’s participation in the public realm and encourage the students – women of privilege like herself – to play leadership roles in the public domain. “The Roots of public social service and responsibility,” she told them, “are deeply planted in the nature of woman. And what we are witnessing in our generation are the manifestations of her unchanged and unchanging interests and devotions.”

While we might take issue with the essentialist nature of this claim, elsewhere in her speech Wald located these same roots not in nature but in nurture – in “time honored custom and the

traditional sanction of the ages.” “The wise book,” she went on to say, “long ago describing the ideal woman of biblical days claimed for her worldly attributes and great efficiency, associated with tender feeling and social conscience.”

*“She seeketh wool and flax and worketh willingly with her hands.* A consumer and producer.

*She considereth a field and buyeth it; with the fruit of her hand she planteth a vineyard.* In the real estate business and an agricultural student.

*She girdeth her loins with strength and strengtheneth her arms.* A winner of athletic honors.

*She perceiveth that her merchandise is good; her candle goeth not out by night.* An expert and doubtless an advocate of the double shift.

*She stretcheth out her hand to the poor, yea she reacheth forth her hands to the needy.* A member in good standing of the Associated Charities.

*She maketh herself coverings of tapestry, her clothing is silk and purple.* A patron of arts and crafts.

*Her husband is known in the gates, when he sitteth among the elders of the land.* The implication here is that she has made a man of her husband.

*She openeth her mouth with wisdom and in her tongue is the law of kindness.* Plainly the social worker.

*Give her of the fruits of her hands; and let her own works praise her in the gates.* In other words, she is an individual who must stand or fall as she is worthy or otherwise.”

With her playful irreverence Wald subverts the domestic foundations of the poem’s ideal woman, and encourages us to read its images less literally and more metaphorically.

Even more significantly, Wald’s tag lines – a consumer and producer; a patron of the arts; a social worker, etc. – suggest that our understanding of the ideal Jewish woman set forth in the poem is limited by our knowledge of Jewish women who as activists and rebels, as entrepreneurs and philanthropists, as volunteers and professionals, have provided us with manifold models of the ideal.

Imagine how differently we would experience the poem and the models of the ideal it presents if when we spoke or sang the line – “She opens her hand to the poor and extends her hand to the needy” – we had in mind Emma Lazarus whose concern for the plight of the Jewish immigrants fleeing from the Russian pogroms led to what is arguably the best known and most influential

American poem ever written.

Born in 1849 to an upper class Jewish family in New York, Lazarus, who by her early twenties was already part of the late nineteenth century New York literary elite, was transformed by her visit to the refugee station at Castle garden, the immigrant reception center in New York. Following that visit Lazarus produced her most bold and powerful poetry and essays protesting anti-Semitism, defending immigrant rights, and advocating for the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. In 1883 she wrote *The New Colossus* for an art auction designed to raise money for the pedestal on which the Statue of Liberty would sit. With her poem she almost singlehandedly transformed the Statue of Liberty from an abstract symbol of open minded liberty beaming out to all the world (as it was discussed originally) into an openhanded woman, the “mother of exile,” calling all the world’s oppressed home to America and challenging her country to live up to its ideals.

Imagine how differently we would experience the poem and the models of the ideal it presents if when we spoke the line – “She opens her mouth with wisdom and a lesson of kindness is on her tongue” – we had in mind Rebecca Gratz, a pioneer figure in American Jewish philanthropy and American Jewish education.

Born in 1781 into a prosperous merchant family in Philadelphia, Rebecca Gratz moved in the same kind of elite social circles that Lazarus did, devoting much of her energies to philanthropic activities within both the general and Jewish communities. In the 1830's, as a woman in her fifties, she became increasingly concerned about the rising tide of Evangelical Christianity. In her time, as in our own, there were strong social forces pushing for the country to become an openly Christian society. Gratz, who was in regular contact with poor Jewish immigrants through her volunteer work at the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society she helped found, realized that little stood between these families and the larger social message that to become a good American one also had to become a Christian. Poor immigrants had little time to devote to religious education. And besides, there were no schools available to them that they could afford.

Familiar from her philanthropic work with the model of the Christian Sunday School, Gratz seized upon that model and in 1838 opened the first Hebrew Sunday School in America. Gratz was teacher, principal and chief fundraiser for the school. The first Jewish school in America run by women, open to both boys and girls, and free to children of the poor, the model was soon adopted by the Jewish communities of New York and Charleston, North Carolina. Indeed for the next

75 years the model of the Jewish Sunday School Gratz developed would be the bulwark of Jewish education in this country.

Imagine how differently we would experience the poem and the models of the ideal it presents if when we spoke the line – She girded herself with strength and braces her arms for work – we had in mind Justine Wise Polier, a visionary family court judge and an advocate for children's rights and social justice, whose court, as Joyce Antler writes in *The Journey Home*, became a national model of open communication between the legal system, the behavioral sciences and the the human services delivery system.

As a young undergraduate studying economics at Radcliffe College, Polier was upset by the college's failure to connect students with the poor people on whom the courses often focused. She moved out of the Cambridge dorms and into a settlement house in Boston. By day she attended classes at Radcliffe and taught foreign residents English and by night she worked at a local factory to gain firsthand experience of the conditions under which the working class labored. Upon graduating Polier pursued her education as a quiller on the evening shift at the Passaic Cotton Mills, working alongside the poor and immigrants. After her father, Rabbi Stephen Wise convinced her that with a law degree

she could be a more effective agent for change, she entered Yale Law School – 1 of 5 women in her class of 125. When in her second year the Passaic Mill workers went out on strike Polier returned to stand with them, spending several months commuting back and forth between New Haven and Passaic, on the picket line by day and in the library by night.

Imagine how differently we would experience the poem and the models of the ideal it presents if when we spoke the line – “She perceives that her profit is good; her lamp goes not out at night” – we had in mind Rose Schneiderman, a four-foot-nine redhead who for more than half a century organized working women to demand “bread and roses,” inspiring countless women and men of her own generation as well as succeeding generations to envision and claim better lives for themselves.

A leader of the Women’s Trade Union League, Rose Schneiderman also worked for a short time for the ILGWU. During that period, she recalls in her autobiography, she informed then president Bernard Schlesinger that she had completed preparations for a general strike of Boston waistmakers that she believed could be won. “I worked for months,” she wrote, “holding shop meeting after work, then visiting women in their homes at night.” Three days before the strike was to begin Schlesinger assigned a male organizer to lead

it. Schneiderman resigned. "They have got to be taught," she wrote her colleague Pauline Newman, "that a woman is no rag – and I propose to do it. Think of doing all that worrying and planning and when the task is almost done they send in a man and give him the credit for building the thing up." Schneiderman returned to the WTUL where as president of the New York WTUL from 1917-1949 and of the national WTUL from 1926-1950 she served both presidents and governors as a liaison to organized women workers. The only woman on FDR's national recovery administration Labor Advisory Board, Schneiderman played key roles in shaping the National Labor Relations Act, the Social Security Act, and the Fair Labor Standards Act. After leaving Washington she was appointed secretary of labor of New York State. In that post she campaigned for the extension of social security benefits to domestic workers, for equal pay for women workers, comparable worth, government funded child care and maternity insurance.

Imagine how differently we would experience the poem and the models of the ideal it presents if when we spoke the line – "With the fruit of her handiwork she plants a vineyard" – we had in mind anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff whose innovative study of elderly Jews in Venice, Calif., transformed the discipline of anthropology and influenced fieldwork practice in several other disciplines.

Her study at the Israel Levin Senior center led to the Academy Award winning documentary film *Number Our Days*. Her book by the same title was selected by the New York Times Book review as one of the 10 best social science books of the year. *Number Our Days* then became a play at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. And then Myerhoff organized the “Life not Death in Venice” art and cultural festival at USC about which Myerhoff wrote:

“The visibility we had hoped for allowed us to present the exhibition and celebration as a model, adaptable to people of any cultural group. There is no doubt that there are ethnic elderly people all over America, waiting to be asked, to be discovered, whose art works sit on boxes in the cellar, in trunks, in the attic, whose poems are jammed in drawers, whose reminiscences need to find a witness, a receiver, so that they may complete the interchange that is requisite to all cultural transmission.”

The lives of leadership and activism of women like Lilian Wald, Emma Lazarus, Rebecca Gratz, Justine Wise Polier, Rose Schneiderman and Barbara Meyerhoff are part of our rightful inheritance. Their activities extend the ideals of home and motherhood into the public realm – providing us with models for thinking about ourselves, about our obligations, about our possibilities in

this new century. In the absence of these stories we fall back on the stereotypes of Jewish women that predominate in popular culture. Relating to wives, mothers and daughters, and almost always negative, these stereotypes powerfully affect our ability to take pride in being Jewish women, to meaningfully connect to a traditional text that celebrates us in our infinite variety, and to actively participate in that very Jewish activity of extending the commentary.

Rebeccah Kohut, an early leader of New York's council of Jewish women wrote of the new pride she felt in being a Jewish woman once she began studying Jewish women's lives: "More cause for worship. More examples of nobility. Richer race consciousness." Her language is dated and somewhat arcane, but her message is as relevant as ever. We have an impressive legacy to build on – to shore us up in moments of self doubt – to inspire us to do more in moments of complacency. With each recitation of Eishet Chayil, we have the opportunity to see ourselves as links in a long chain of powerful women.



*Dr. Gail Reimer is the founding director of the Jewish Women's Archive and the co-editor of two pathbreaking anthologies of Jewish women's writings, **Reading Ruth: Women Reclaim a Sacred Story** and **Beginning Anew: A Woman's Companion to the High Holy Days**.*



## *Eishet Chayil Study Guide*

*A Post-modern Talmudic Dialogue between  
Biblical and Modern Women of Valor.*

*From the Jewish Women's Archive and  
Hillel's Joseph Myerhoff Center for Jewish Learning*

Begin by reading the central text out loud to yourself or to your study partner, then delve into the surrounding commentary. Each underlined phrase from Eishet Chayil is accompanied by both ancient and modern voices. If you choose, use the questions at the bottom as your guide.

---

## The Text

What a rare find is a woman of **chayil**! Her worth is far beyond that of pearls... She sets her mind on an estate and acquires it; she plants a vineyard by her own labors. She **girds herself with strength**, and performs her tasks with vigor. She sees that her business thrives; **her lamp never goes out at night**... She gives generously to the poor; her hands are stretched out to the needy... Her husband is prominent in the gates, as he sits among the elders of the land... She is **clothed with strength and splendor**; she looks to the future cheerfully. **Her mouth is full of wisdom**; her tongue with kindly teaching... Her children declare her happy; her husband praises her... Extol her for the fruit of her hand, and **let her works praise her in the gates**.  
—from *Eishet Chayil*, Proverbs 31:10-31

---

## **chayil**

This word takes on several meanings in Jewish texts. Chayil can connote bravery (Ps. 76:6); capability (Prov. 12:4); triumph (Ps. 118:15); a rampart (Ps. 84:8); or wealth (Prov.13:22).

---

### **girds herself with strength**

Genesis 2:22 –

*“With understanding the Lord God took the rib from Adam for a woman and he brought her to Adam.”*

Babylonian Talmud, Niddah 45b –

*“And the Lord God endowed the rib with understanding” (Gen. 2:22).*

The verse indicates that the Holy One endowed woman with more understanding than man.

Bobbie Rosenfeld, Athlete (1904-1969) –

*“No longer are we athletes the pretty maids of yesteryear. Our perfect 36’s are being ruined, our features are becoming quite ‘Frankensteinish,’ shout these croquet and pat-ball advocators, all because we are no longer satisfied with being just a ‘rib of Adam’, but we have elected to hurl the discus, throw the javelin, run and jump as ‘Adam’ does...”*

---

### **her lamp never goes out at night**

Genesis Rabbah 60:16 –

*“Isaac brought her [Rebekah] into the tent [and behold, she was like] his mother Sarah” (Gen. 24:67)*

As long as Sarah lived, a lamp was alight [in her tent] from one Sabbath eve to the next; at her death, the light ceased. But when Rebekah came, the light returned.

Justine Wise Polier, Judge (1903-1987) – *“So, one lived two lives: one worked during the day at one’s job, and then pitched into the things that seemed most important at night.”*

---

### **clothed with strength and splendor**

Exodus 15:19-21 –

*“For the horses of Pharaoh, with his chariots and horsemen, went into the sea; and the Lord turned back on them the waters of the sea; but the Israelites marched on dry ground in the midst of the sea. Then Miriam the prophetess, Aaron’s sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women went out after her in dance with timbrels. And Miriam chanted for them: Sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously; Horse and driver He has hurled into the sea.”*

Bella Abzug, Feminist Politician (1920-1998) –

*“I believe very deeply that the hope of an effective women’s political movement lies in reaching out to working women, to young women, to black women, to women on welfare – and joining their strength together with millions of other American women*

*who are on the move all over this country demanding an end to discrimination and fighting for their rights as full and equal citizens.”*

---

### **Her mouth is full of wisdom**

Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 11a – *“There were thugs in the neighborhood of Rebbe Meir, and they aggravated him greatly. So Rebbe Meir prayed that they would die. Beruriah his wife said to him, What do you think this verse means: It is written, ‘The sins will be removed from the earth’ (Psalms 104:35)?*

Is it written that the sinners should be removed?

Gertrude Weil, Social Reformer (1879-1971)  
– *“Knowing our past we shall find strength and wisdom to meet the present.”*

---

### **let her works praise her in the gates**

Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 45b – *“Every woman has a mind of her own.”*

Gertrude Elion, Chemist (1918-1999) – *“What greater joy can you have than to know what an impact your work has had on people’s lives?”*

---

## Discussion Questions

### Eishet Chayil

1. Upon first reading the excerpted verses from Proverbs 31:10-31, what do you learn about a woman of chayil?
2. Which of these characteristics, if any, strike you as particularly surprising, unrealistic, or compelling?
3. The phrase *eishet chayil* is often translated as either “a woman of valor” or “a capable wife.” Looking at the text box on the top of the page, examine *chayil*’s different meanings. How does this word’s flexibility affect your understanding of what *eishet chayil* means? Which meaning do you like the best?

### Girds Herself with Strength

1. Often, Hebrew verbs have many different meanings. The Midrash considers all of the possibilities and will frequently give interpretations that reflect every one of these meanings. In the Talmudic commentary on Genesis 2:22, the verb *va-yiven* has been translated into its secondary meaning, “endowed with understanding,” rather than its primary meaning, “to construct” or “to fashion.” This is because *va-yiven* resonates with the Hebrew word for understanding, *binah*. What

dimensions or nuances does the phrase “with understanding” add to the interpretation of this verse from Genesis?

2. What understanding of the Biblical text does Bobbie Rosenfeld’s comment about the “rib of Adam” suggest?

3. When the woman of chayil in Proverbs “girds herself with strength,” is she building up her mental or physical strength? Use the Talmud or Bobbie Rosenfeld to support your view.

### **Her Lamp Never Goes Out at Night**

1. In what spheres is the woman of chayil active – family, community, career, etc? How do these commitments relate to her lamp being on all night long?

2. Genesis Rabbah speaks to the continuity of traditions between Isaac’s mother, Sarah, and his wife, Rebekah. What role does the lamp play in this text?

3. Justine Wise Polier makes a stark differentiation between her day job and the “most important” things that she took on at night, which included civic obligations, committees, fundraising for Israel, and family life as well. Examine the entire line in Proverbs, “She sees that her business thrives; her

lamp never goes out at night.” How does Polier’s comment on multi-faceted lives connect to this verse?

### **Clothed with Strength and Splendor**

1. What is splendid about Miriam’s actions in the verses from Exodus?
2. How do Miriam and the other Israelite women exhibit strength in these verses?
3. How is Bella Abzug’s vision of women’s strength similar to or different from Miriam’s?

### **Her Mouth is Full of Wisdom**

1. The Talmudic tradition reveres the words of its rabbis; as there were no female rabbis at the time, few women’s voices are recorded in its volumes. Why, then, do you think the rabbis included this feisty exchange wherein Beruriah challenges her husband’s judgment?
2. What kind of wisdom does Beruriah exhibit here? On what does she rely for her authority?
3. What do Weil’s words suggest about the nature of wisdom?

### **Let Her Works Praise Her in the Gates**

1. Both of these texts allude to the way in which a woman's individual thoughts and deeds – her “works” – can become a praiseworthy legacy. In your view, are all of the “works” detailed in the Eishet Chayil excerpt praiseworthy? What “works” would you add or remove?
2. Look at the Talmud quote. What is laudable about having a mind of one's own? Do you think that the Eishet Chayil text allows for individuality, advocates a particular model for female behavior, or finds a way to do both?
3. How does Gertrude Elion perceive the legacy that will “praise her in the gates”?

### **Final Questions**

1. What causes mattered to the women of chayil featured in this text study? What passions did they pursue?
2. Just as chayil can range widely in meaning depending on context, so too can each reader of Proverbs 31:10-31 bring different interpretations to the language and concepts therein. Think back to your initial reaction to Eishet Chayil. How have the ancient and modern voices included in this Talmud page changed your initial understanding of this text?

3. When the feminist movement was in its infancy, would these verses from Proverbs have been received in a certain way? How do you think this reception is different today?

4. Why do you think that contemporary Jewish communities could still connect to or value this text?

---

A Post-modern Talmudic Dialogue between Biblical and Modern Women of Valor. All quotes from Rosenfeld, Polier,

Abzug, Weil, and Elion taken from [www.jwa.org](http://www.jwa.org). For more post-modern Talmud pages, visit [www.hillel.org](http://www.hillel.org).





## *About Sinai Live Books*



Sinai Live is committed to assisting high-quality teachers share their wisdom. Our goal is to enhance our readers' personal Jewish journeys and elevate everyday life through thoughtful and insightful content. We aim to engage, inspire and encourage further exploration.

### **Our books include:**

*Telushkinisms: Wisdom to the Point*

by Rabbi Joseph Telushkin

*Footsteps: Perspectives for Daily Life*

by Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis

*Insights: Concise and Thoughtful Jewish Wisdom*

by Rabbi Benjamin Blech

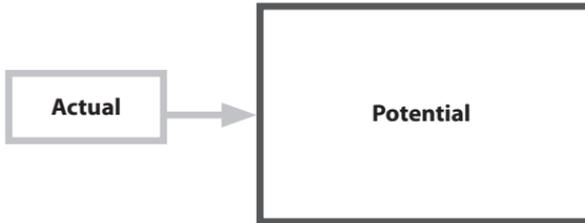
*Passport to Kabbalah: A Journey of Inner Transformation*

by Rabbi DovBer Pinson

Visit [www.sinailive.com](http://www.sinailive.com) or contact us at [connect@sinailive.com](mailto:connect@sinailive.com) to learn more.



## *About Rethink Partners*



This book was developed by Mark Pearlman's Rethink Partners, an organization dedicated to shifting user and industry perspectives through a combination of business strategy, product management, sales and marketing, editorial, design and online implementation.

Rethink Partners works with for-profit and non-profit organizations to help them reach their potential. We are focused on seeing both what is and what could be.

Visit us at [www.rethinkpartners.com](http://www.rethinkpartners.com).

