

Equality Without Adjuncts?
Confronting the Limits and Challenges of Gender Egalitarianism

By Rabbi Ethan Tucker

I. Introduction

One Shabbat morning in the early years of my marriage, I found myself and my wife sitting at home as the clock ticked forward and the minutes of *shul* whittled away. Neither of us was making a concerted effort to leave the house and it suddenly became clear to me that we were going to arrive well into the Torah reading. (Some of you are thinking that that sounds pretty respectable. I won't judge you.) And it suddenly became clear to me why this was happening, and a significant cause was gender egalitarianism. Our mutual assumptions of equal obligation, responsibility, and public importance ironically created a dynamic of equal and opposite forces resulting in total static inertia. Neither of us was ritually needed in the communal space more than the other, such that one of us would be naturally pulled to take the lead in getting us out. Neither of us had a theory that one of us was more obligated than the other, such that it would make sense for one of us to be more essentially stressed out than the other. Nor could one of us plausibly be in the position of haranguing the other to get out so as not to default on that obligation. We also assumed that we would walk together, as partners and equals. And it was then that I turned to my wife and said: "Wait a minute! I can be the husband and you can be the wife. You can be the husband and I can be the wife. We can both be the husband. We can't both be the wife!"

I was, of course, using the terms "husband" and "wife" in their traditional construction in non-egalitarian prayer spaces, where it is normal and expected that a man, who can help make the *minyan*, may well have to go earlier and more often to communal prayers than a woman, whose presence does not alter the ritual space in any way. There is also, of course, a broader social context where the husband's career has often been supported by the wife's. More broadly, it is certainly fair to say that, with respect to many aspects of public life, husbands have been principals while wives have been adjuncts. Beginning with who takes on whose last name and often manifesting itself in income and professional disparities, so much of the history of humanity has featured this hierarchical dynamic between men and women. Much of modern

feminism and the movement towards gender equality has been focused on reevaluating this arrangement, and on seizing the opportunities available in the contemporary world to propose different models that aim to reduce and eliminate the importance of gender when it comes to questions of power and citizenship.

My cute story indicates a challenge we have to deal with in egalitarian models of religious life. Deprived of clear roles of principal and adjunct, how do we nonetheless share responsibilities? How can we avoid egalitarianism just being an opportunity for both genders to become more lazy, less educated, and less committed because we have no algorithm for dividing things up? How can we avoid egalitarianism being an unsustainable commitment to everyone doing everything, in a way that ultimately deprives any normal person from seeing a plausible pathway to living their life that way?

These questions inspire me this week to explore non-gendered models in our tradition for dividing up responsibilities and opportunities among religious equals. We will begin by thinking about the historical role of adjuncts in facilitating the principals in their lives, and then turn to what it looks like to imagine a world without them. I am hopeful this can help begin a conversation around useful strategies for maintaining a healthy ecosystem of obligation and practice in an increasingly egalitarian world.

II. The inescapability of adjuncts

Let's begin by thinking about the role of adjuncts and their importance to society. Can a society actually survive and excel without some of its members playing a supporting role for others? What do we lose by trying to eliminate or narrow this set of people, or at least by not having a clear sense of who they are? Only with that fundamental understanding can we usefully reflect on what might replace the classic gendered model that has been in place for so many for so long, but which cannot serve as the basis for division of religious labor in an egalitarian Jewish community.

In fact, an honest look at history and anthropology reveals that the notion of adjuncts is as old as civilization itself. Even societies that project a democratic, egalitarian vision often purchase the equality of many at the price of the subservience of others. In ancient Greece,

democracy meant that free, adult, landholding males were equal and empowered, while the landless, women, slaves, and children were on the outs. The Declaration of Independence states that “all men are created equal,” even as Article 1, Section 2, Paragraph 3 of the United States Constitution states that the African slaves held by white slave-owners are reckoned as three-fifths of a person for purposes of representation.¹

The Torah is no exception in this regard. While the Torah has hierarchies, it is also a profoundly democratic document, expecting that the core terms of the covenant apply to everyone. One of the most dramatic moments for democratic rhetoric is Shemot 19, where we hear about the lead-up to the national theophany at Sinai. There, we are told that God’s plan is for the Israelites to be a *ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש* / “A kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” The language here is strong and bold. Though other national frameworks may place priests at the top as a kind of proxy or intermediary for God, in Israel, *all* people are meant to be holy and in theory, if not in practice, priests. This is a forcefully democratic vision where all are equal before God and equally expected to live up to divine obligations.

It is thus perhaps surprising that, just a few lines later, it seems that the audience for this national revelation seems to have shifted. When Moshe descends the mountain to prepare the people for the encounter with God a few days hence, we are told: *וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל הָעָם הָיוּ נְכַנִּים לְשִׁלֹּשֶׁת יָמִים אֶל תִּגְשׁוּ אֶל אִשָּׁה* / “He said to **the people**: ‘Be ready against the third day; **come not near a woman**.’” This formulation suddenly makes us realize that perhaps “the people” is limited to men.² As we continue into Shemot 20, we find that the command to observe Shabbat is directed to a person, a person’s children, and a person’s slaves. While the command to observe Shabbat is deeply egalitarian—and in significant part designed to protect the slave—it nonetheless responds to a world in which there is deep social hierarchy that is accepted as a fact of life. The respite

¹ This is a particularly perverse version of adjunct status, in that the fractional representation here did not go to the slaves themselves, but to the respective states, whose federal representatives could of course only be elected by white slave owners!

² This basic realization lies at the heart of Judith Plaskow’s *Standing Again at Sinai*. It is undoubtedly in response to this anxiety that Mekhilta de-R. Yishmael Yitro Ba-Hodesh Parashah 2 goes out of its way to read women back into this story as central members of the addressed audience, in its comment on an *earlier* verse in this chapter: *כֹּה תֹאמַר* / “So speak to the house of Ya’akov”—this refers to the women; “*וְתִגַּד לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל*, אֱלֹהֵי הָאֲנָשִׁים” / “and say to the sons of Israel”—this refers to the men. This reading not only places women into the narrative; it has God instructing Moshe to speak to them *first*! This fits well with a robust rabbinic notion that women are Jews, not just the wives of Jews, perhaps most clearly in evidence by the fact that the child of a Jewish man and a Gentile woman is a Gentile in rabbinic law. But the need for this *midrash* only underscores that the plain sense of the text is that men are the principals here and women are adjuncts.

offered by Shabbat only highlights the presence of some sort of servitude the rest of the week. This is underscored further in Shemot 21, which opens with the laws of the Hebrew slave, an assumed element of this society leaning towards democracy, at least for some.

The pattern continues in Devarim 29:9-11, which emphasizes that *everyone* stands before God as the nation enters into the covenant:

דברים כט:ט-יא

אִתְּכֶם נִצָּבִים הַיּוֹם כְּלָכֶם לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם רָאשֵׁיכֶם שְׂבִטֵיכֶם זְקֵנֵיכֶם וְשְׂטָרֵיכֶם כָּל אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל: ¹⁰טַפְּכֶם נְשֵׁיכֶם וְגֵרְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבְּךָ מִחֹטֵב עֵצִיד עַד שֹׁאֵב מִיָּד: ¹¹לְעֵבְרְךָ בְּבִרְתִּי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ וּבְאֵלֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ פָּרַת עִמָּךְ הַיּוֹם:

Devarim 29:9:11

⁹You are all standing in the Lord your God's presence today: The heads of your tribes, your elders, your offices, every man of Israel. ¹⁰Your children, your wives, the stranger in the midst of your camp, from the woodchoppers to the water drawers. ¹¹In order to pass you through the covenant and the oath of the Lord your God that the Lord your God is forging with you today.

But this covenantally democratic statement assumes the presence of a set of woodchoppers and water drawers! The very sources that aim to emphasize that God has high expectations of all call our attention to the ways in which some of the people in the community are support staff for others. These adjuncts, present even in texts that yearn for and prod towards greater equality, suggest something almost unshakeable about this feature of human society.

Why are adjuncts so omnipresent? Put simply, because adjuncts enable other people to get things done more efficiently. One of the defining pillars of civilization is the division of labor. Basic metrics of efficiency and output are greatly maximized when people act and work in complementary ways as opposed to parallel ones. In fact, some levels of achievement are simply unattainable without “support staff.” But when labor is divided up, even if everyone is assigned a vital role, it is unavoidable that some roles will be more highly valued than others. Some will require more skill, will be more pleasant or otherwise more desirable, and this will almost inevitably affect how people are compensated and socially valued.

We could cite examples from economies throughout space and time, but I want to invoke a few rabbinic texts that drive this point home. Two, in particular, speculate on how one can plausibly devote all of one's energy and time to the study of Torah and deal with the other needs of life.

תלמוד בבלי ברכות לה:

תנו רבנן: ואספת דגנך, - מה תלמוד לומר - לפי שנאמר: לא ימוש ספר התורה הזה מפיו, יכול דברים ככתבן? תלמוד לומר: ואספת דגנך - הנהג בהן מנהג דרך ארץ, דברי רבי ישמעאל; רבי שמעון בן יוחי אומר: אפשר אדם חורש בשעת חרישה, וזורע בשעת זריעה, וקוצר בשעת קצירה, ודש בשעת דישה, וזורע בשעת הרוח, תורה מה תהא עליה? אלא: בזמן שישראל עושין רצונו של מקום - מלאכתן נעשית על ידי אחרים, שנאמר: ועמדו זרים ורעו צאנכם וגו'. ובזמן שאין ישראל עושין רצונו של מקום - מלאכתן נעשית על ידי עצמן, שנאמר: ואספת דגנך...

Talmud Bavli Berakhot 35b

Our Sages taught: “You shall gather in your grain.” What is the purpose of this verse? Since it says, “This scroll of teaching shall not depart from your mouth”, could that possibly be meant literally? The verse teaches: “You shall gather in your grain”—conduct [your study of Torah] in keeping with the normal patterns of life, so says R. Yishmael. R. Shimon b. Yoḥai says: “Can a person plow in plowing season, plant in planting season, harvest in harvesting season, thresh in threshing season, winnow when it is windy, and still have time for Torah? Rather, when Israel does the will of God, their work is done by others... and when Israel does not do the will of God, their work is done by themselves, as it says, “You shall gather in your grain.”...

In this text, R. Yishmael reads the Torah as insisting that we find a way to integrate study and work. The Bible's apparent expectation of constant study is really a call for study that punctuates and anchors a life of manual labor. “Gathering the grain” is its own kind of *mitzvah*. But R. Shimon b. Yoḥai will not settle for this. For him, the expectation for Torah study is not merely continual, but continuous. How can one possibly achieve this—and the heights of learning that are only made possible with so many hours of investment—while doing the mundane work of self-sustenance? The answer: As long as the Jews behave, Gentiles will do their work for them. This implicit hierarchy within humanity—in addition to whatever

(troubling) ideology makes it possible—is designed to further a highly practical goal: allowing the Jewish people to devote all of their time to Torah study. In the desert period, this role was played by God, who daily fed the Israelites morning and evening, and R. Shimon elsewhere remembers it fondly as an ideal context for receiving the Torah.³ In a more mechanized age, we can imagine automation getting us to the same end. But the bottom line is that an expansive commitment to Torah is dramatically enhanced when one is exempted from attending to many of life's other needs.

This is narrated most poignantly and tragically in the story of R. Akiva and his wife:

תלמוד בבלי כתובות סב:-סג.

ר"ע רעיא דבן כלבא שבוע הוה, חזיתיה ברתייה דהוה צניע ומעלי, אמרה ליה: אי מקדשנא לך אזלת לבי רב? אמר לה: אין. איקדשא ליה בצינעה ושדרתיה...אזיל יתיב תרי סרי שנין בבי רב. כי אתא, אייתי בהדיה תרי סרי אלפי תלמידי. שמעיה להווא סבא דקאמר לה: עד כמה קא מדברת אלמנות חיים? אמרה ליה: אי לדידי ציית, יתיב תרי סרי שני אחריני. אמר: ברשות קא עבידנא, הדר אזיל ויתיב תרי סרי שני אחריני בבי רב. כי אתא, אייתי בהדיה עשרין וארבעה אלפי תלמידי. שמעה דביתהו הות קא נפקא לאפיה...כי מטיא לגביה, נפלה על אפה קא מנשקא ליה לכרעיה, הוו קא מדחפי לה שמעיה, אמר להו: שבקוה, שלי ושלכם שלה הוא.

Talmud Bavli Ketubot 62b-63a

R. Akiva was a shepherd of Ben Kalba Savua. The latter's daughter, seeing how modest and noble he was, said to him, "Were I to be betrothed to you. would you go away to [study at] an academy?" "Yes," he replied. She was then secretly betrothed to him and sent him away... He departed and spent twelve years at the academy. When he returned home he brought with him twelve thousand disciples. He heard an old man saying to her, "How long will you lead the life of a living widowhood?" "If he would listen to me," she replied, "he would spend another twelve years [in study]." Said [R. Akiva]: "It is then with her consent that I am acting," and he departed again and spent another twelve years at the academy. When he finally returned he brought with him twenty-four thousand disciples. His wife heard [of his arrival] and went out to meet him... On approaching him she fell upon her face and kissed his feet. His attendants were about to thrust her aside, when [R. Akiba] cried to them, "Leave her alone, mine and yours are hers."

³ לא ניתנה תורה אלא לאוכלי (ה)מן בלבד ³ Mekhilta de-R. Yishmael Be-Shalah Va-Yassa Parashah 2 and Mekhilta de-RSBY 13:17.

In order for R. Akiva to become a scholar himself and to advance a more democratic vision of Torah, he needs a wife who will allow him to focus monomaniacally on this task for 24(!) years. The final line in this passage features R. Akiva recognizing that without his own personal adjunct, there is no way he could have accomplished his goals or spread Torah at the phenomenal rate that he did.

To my mind, the most shocking text about principals and adjuncts is a comment almost made in passing by the Rambam as he attempts to illustrate the flow of the rituals at the Seder. Attempting to give color to the rabbinic notion that one must make the lessons of the Exodus real to one's children according to one's abilities, the Rambam offers the following formulation:

רמב"ם חמץ ומצה ז:ב

מצוה להודיע לבנים ואפילו לא שאלו שנאמר והגדת לבנך, לפי דעתו של בן אביו מלמדו, כיצד אם היה קטן או טיפש אומר לו בני כולנו היינו עבדים כמו שפחה זו או כמו עבד זה במצרים ובליילה הזה פדה אותנו הקב"ה ויוציאנו לחירות...

Rambam, Laws of Hametz and Matzah 7:2

It is a commandment to tell children [the story of the Exodus] even if they don't ask, as it says: "You shall tell your child." The parent explains this according to the intelligence of the child. For instance: If the child is very young or lacking in intelligence, one says: "My child, we were once all slaves—like this female-slave or like this male-slave—in Egypt, and on this night the Holy and Blessed One redeemed us and brought us into freedom..."

A quick read of this text can miss the fact that, the Rambam is illustrating his guidance to parents here with a familiar scene from his own Seder: a feast devoted to freedom that is being served by a slave—and this slave is itself a useful prop for explaining what slavery used to be like for the Jews! This little vignette perhaps best illustrates the complete inescapability of adjuncts, as many who have attended Seders know. If one wants a fully focused, calm banquet devoted to eating, drinking, learning, and conversation, someone has to do the serving. And the person serving, at least while they are serving, is certainly not being waited upon. Eliminating the role of server altogether means eliminating a certain experience of freedom that is only fully realized

by, at least temporarily, having no cares and having one's needs entirely met. And we thus return, unavoidably, to the roles of principals and adjuncts.

In truth, there is nothing intrinsically offensive about the notion of principals and adjuncts, about the idea that to accomplish great things (and sometimes even small things) we need to collaborate in ways that differentiate roles and call for complementary, rather than identical contributions. Whether we are building a civilization or hosting a dinner party, the divide between principals and adjuncts in various contexts and areas of life is unavoidable and, I think, desirable. The rub is this: Most of the time, those roles get essentialized and set into stone. The server is not just someone who happens to serve on that evening, s/he is a slave. Support staff jobs are not always just an entry point for new immigrants who may see themselves easily rise up the ladder of power; they often facilitate the creation of a permanent underclass. And spouses have not historically supported one another based on a random distribution unrelated to gender; instead, men and women as classes get assigned roles that are fixed and become bound up with biology.

Contemporary feminism and gender egalitarianism rejects the acceptability of a principal-adjunct relationship grounded in gender. But if, as we have seen, the presence of adjuncts is a stubborn, inescapable facet of life, how do we share responsibility without permanently assuming that, when push comes to shove, women will facilitate men and not vice-versa? Put another way, being an advocate for gender equality in ritual and other areas of Jewish life requires developing a theory of how this responsibility sharing works. As my opening story suggested, there is not an easy default setting. One can of course simply replace one sort of adjunct with another—gender with class—which has been a critique of (Western white) feminism since its inception. But assuming that is an uncomfortable and problematic choice to make, how should we think of sharing religious responsibility without adjuncts? What models does the tradition offer for thinking about how principals juggle their obligations when they cannot both be accommodated at once?

To be honest, in many cases, it is really not all that complicated. A family that has a *lulav* can make sure to find the thirty seconds somewhere in the day for all adults in the family to shake it. Classically gendered rabbinic law already insisted that women and men are obligated in the *Amidah* and the reading of the *megillah* and expected people to find ways to meet this obligation. Entire families can eat together in a *sukkah* and there are no real logistical challenges

with having all adults in a family wear *tzitzit*. In many cases, an egalitarian take on *mitzvot* just broadens the tent of obligation, adds more performance into the mix, and lets all boats rise.

But there are areas and situations where it is not so simple. *Communal* presence cannot be achieved for all adults simultaneously, sometimes because of children, sometimes because of other pressing needs that must be handled outside of the public space. Even where obligation in *mitzvot* can be easily extended—such as declaring that all are obligated in *shofar*—getting everyone to the actual sounding of the communal blasts at the same time may not be feasible. And this is most intensely true for the creation of *minyan* in communal prayer spaces. It is simply not possible to expect every adult to be present for *minyan* at every service. How do we more evenly distribute the theoretical and practical responsibility for these communal obligations without diluting their intensity or making them unrealistic?⁴

III. Models for sharing responsibility among equals

I would like to offer a range of models from our classical sources that can, perhaps, point the way to addressing this problem. I don't think the goal is to pick one as the best; rather, the question is when to apply which one, and with what costs and benefits. Each text considers a situation where people are equally situated in terms of their status and obligations, but we

⁴ One common practical way of “addressing” this challenge is simply to turn a blind eye to the fact that one part of the population will simply not be as punctilious as another, and that this is accepted with a wink as part of the necessary arrangement for allowing society to function. For one example of this, see the mentality of the gravediggers described on Sanhedrin 26b. They clearly think that, despite there being a ban on burying the dead on Yom Tov, the rabbis expect there to be a religious criminal class that will do this anyway and then be formally “punished” by the community for doing so. They self-conceive as a kind of black-ops team that cannot enjoy official authorization, but which is a necessary part of national security strategy. One often sees this dynamic at work in contemporary settings, especially in Israel, when “religious” Jews implicitly rely on “non-religious” Jews to do all sorts of functions of state and society for them. One can fairly say that much of the project of religious Zionist *halakhah* has been to eliminate reliance on this sort of mentality, by way of refusing to treat “non-religious” Jews as adjuncts. In certain religious settings, one can detect this sort of approach with regard to women, even beyond what the black letter law would justify. Women, while certainly subject to most *mitzvot* and the focus of plenty of rabbinic discussions, were also clearly often *sociologically* on the margins of the law, and their behaviors were not always closely monitored or controlled by men and male rabbis. This, to my mind, is not a *substantive* strategy for addressing our question, which is why I do not explore it in depth. Nonetheless, one must be aware that at times, “turning a blind eye” to those on the margins of informed observance is *de facto* a central psychological and practical strategy for allowing a dedicated core to observe the fullness of the law, while others implicitly function as their support staff, even if this is not meant to be so.

nonetheless cannot accommodate or obligate both to something simultaneously. In short, principals without adjuncts.

A. Splitting the community into two; taking turns

Sometimes, there is no leeway to apply obligations unevenly across the population. Everyone is obligated and the logistical challenges are significant. Consider the following ruling and practical report around the reading of the *megillah*:

תלמוד ירושלמי מגילה ב:ה, דף עג טור ב
בר קפרא אמ' צריך לקרותה לפני נשים ולפני קטני' שאף אותם היו בספק ר' יהושע בן לוי עבד כן מכנש בנוי
ובני בייתיה וקרי לה קומיהון

Talmud Yerushalmi Megillah 2:5, 73b

Bar Kappara said: One must read the *megillah* to women and children, because they too were in danger [of extermination by Haman]. R. Yehoshua b. Levi acted [in accordance with this ruling]: He would gather his wife and children and read the *megillah* in their presence.

Bar Kappara rules that the *megillah* must be read widely, to all members of the community, irrespective of gender or age, because of the comprehensive threat posed to all members of the Jewish people in the time of Haman. But this creates a challenge: How can you plausibly do this for all the people at the same time? The answer seems to be that one cannot. **R. Yehoshua b. Levi** convenes a reading for his family. While it is possible that this served as his own reading as well, it seems plausible that he attended some sort of reading of his own and then read the *megillah* again for his family. Even if that was not the case in his context, it is undoubtedly a necessary strategy for attending to the obligations of all the people in the community. There is no plausible way to get everyone together to read the *megillah*, and it is not plausible that each individual member of the community will have a physical *megillah* at their disposal or the skills to read it to themselves. Sometimes, an egalitarian commitment to obligation means that things

cannot happen in a single moment for everyone acting as a united community. People must take turns and communities must facilitate that by having multiple events and readings.

Another case of taking turns comes up when dealing with two people attending to a task that makes it impossible or inappropriate to pray, such as when guarding a dead body. Neither guard is more obligated than the other, but there is really no excuse for both of them to take the exemption at the same time:

תלמוד בבלי ברכות יח.

המשמר את המת אף על פי שאינו מתו - פטור מקריאת שמע ומן התפלה ומן התפילין ומכל מצות האמורות בתורה. היו שנים - זה משמר וזה קורא, וזה משמר וזה קורא. בן עזאי אומר: היו באים בספינה - מניחו בזוית זו ומתפללין שניהם בזוית אחרת.

Talmud Bavli Berakhot 18a

One who watches a dead [body], even though it is not his own dead [relative], is exempt from the recital of the *Shema* and from *Amidah* and from putting on *tefillin* and from all the precepts laid down in the Torah.⁵ If there were two [watching], one goes on watching while the other recites, and then the other watches while this one recites. Ben Azzai says: If they were traveling by ship, they put the body in a corner and both say their prayers in another corner.

Without a hierarchy in place, with no principals and adjuncts when it comes to obligation, people just have to take turns. This is, in some ways, the best way to express perfect equality. In cases like those cited above, it is also practical and can work. Until today, communities that are serious about gender-blind obligations in *megillah* generally have multiple readings both at night and in the morning, recognizing that it is not possible for all people—especially those with small children—to be present for the reading all at once. This is doable for a once-a-year event like Purim. It is also completely attainable for rituals that need not be done in synchronization. An egalitarian couple praying with their crying infant at home on Friday night can (and should) have one person pray the *Amidah* and then take the child while the other parent follows suit.

⁵ This last phrase obviously refers to positive, ritual obligations, not to a blanket permission to violate the Torah's laws.

This model is more difficult to sustain for more regular communal obligations; we can't possibly expect every Jewish adult to be present for daily *minyan* three times a day, even if we run multiple *minyanim* at multiple times. And in many cases—*minyan* attendance being one of them—it may well be that the obligation is more communal than individual. How might we divide up responsibility when we don't want or need to assume everyone is doing the same thing?

B. Rotations

Another model offers a way for dividing up a job among equals that need not be done by all of them at the same time. This comes from the world of the Temple and the range of priestly responsibilities:

תוספתא סוכה ד: יט-כא

התמידין והגדירים והגדבות והבכורות והמעשרות ומוספי שבת חטאות צבור ועולותיהן ועולת חובה של יחיד
עבודתן ואכילתן במשמר הקבוע
שתי הלחם עבודתן ואכילתן בכל המשמרות מפני שהן באות חובת הרגל
לחם הפנים עבודתו במשמר הקבוע ואכילתו בכל המשמרות

Tosefta Sukkah 4:19-21

The daily sacrifice, sacrifices brought to fulfill vows and donation, firstborn animals, tithes, additional sacrifices for Shabbat, public purification- and burnt-offerings, and obligatory burnt offerings brought by individuals are offered and eaten by the priestly rotation in place.

The two loaves of bread [offered on Shavuot] are offered and eaten by members of all of the priestly rotations, because they are part of the festival obligations.

The showbread is offered by the priestly rotation in place that week but is eaten by members of all of the priestly rotations.

Here we have a set of tasks that must get done in the Temple—sacrifices that must be offered and sacred foods that must be consumed. There are too many priests for them to participate in these

duties all at once; it is unreasonable and unfair for some subset of the priests to do them all the time, and there is no particular need to have specific people in these roles at any given moment. The result: The משמרות, or rotations of priests already hinted at in the Bible. Different priestly divisions—twenty-four of them to be precise—bore these burdens equally, working in weeklong shifts to cover the various responsibilities.

This is another useful model to consider. Some synagogues I know ask their members to commit to an evenly distributed number of *minyan* days a year, in order to help the community meet its corporate obligations. Rotations avoid the notion that anyone is any more obligated than anyone else, while effectively distributing the human capital at a community's disposal. One can imagine an egalitarian family that sends its adult members to *minyan* in some sort of fixed rotation, ensuring equally distributed representation and obligation for all.

C. Division by enthusiasm

Equal division of responsibilities is very fair and impartial, but it can also be artificial and stilted. Often, if there is an unacknowledged enthusiasm gap among equals, the commitment to equality can pull in the direction of *lesser* enthusiasm *all around*. Without the license to divide up into separate roles, but without the passion to sustain equal involvement, the sum total of performance and contribution can suffer. Therefore, another model that should be reckoned with is one that explicitly names the enthusiasm gaps that exist around various rituals and practices, and actually validates using this gap in order to distribute roles among equally situated people. Here is one great example of such a system:

משנה יומא ב:א-ב

בראשונה כל מי שרוצה לתרום את המזבח תורם ובזמן שהן מרובין רצין ועולין בכבש וכל הקודם את חברו בארבע אמות זכה...

מעשה שהיו שניהם שוין ורצין ועולין בכבש ודחף אחד מהן את חברו ונפל ונשברה רגלו וכיון שראו בית דין שבאין לידי סכנה התקינו שלא יהו תורמין את המזבח אלא בפייס ארבע פייסות היו שם וזה הפייס הראשון:

Mishnah Yoma 2:1-2

Originally whosoever desired to remove [the ashes from] the altar did so. If they were many, they would run and mount the ramp [of the altar] and he that came first within four cubits obtained the privilege... It once happened that two were even as they ran to mount the ramp. One of them pushed his fellow who fell and broke his leg. When the court saw that they incurred danger, they ordained that the altar be cleared only by lottery. There were four lotteries. This is the first lottery.

Here we have a single job that happen once a day in the Temple. It was kind of like lighting the Olympic flame at the start of the games, and it was highly coveted. The original system for determining who got to remove the ashes from the altar each morning was a test of enthusiasm. If you signed up, you got it. If more than one person signed up, then if you could run the fastest to the top of the ramp, the job was yours. This is often a powerful way of distributing tasks among equals. You want to read Torah? Sign up in the spreadsheet to do it. Those who take the initiative are rewarded. Does a given task give you enormous satisfaction and does it motivate you? It may make sense to give it to you. In many families, some people—not always correlated with gender—like to go to *minyan* more than others. One way of breaking the equality logjam is to acknowledge that this is an important factor, and perhaps should be the basis for affirming who gets there on time and who comes a bit later, if that is necessary.

As we see from the end of this text, such encouragement of enthusiasm wars can lead to aggressive behavior that obscures the notion of a collaborative effort. This is surely a danger and must be avoided. In the above case, the Sages felt that could only happen by reverting to a lottery, a kind of variant on the “rotations” system we already examined. But in less cutthroat environments—as hopefully most families are!—the metric of enthusiasm can be a healthy, sustainable and realistic way to divide up certain communal responsibilities among principals.

D. Considering who has the most to gain and lose

Sometimes, people who are equally situated before the law are not equally situated in terms of their vulnerabilities. Even those who are equally obligated and commanded are not always equally needy in the same ways. If enthusiasm measures how excited and motivated someone is

to bear a burden or have an opportunity, thinking about what each person has to lose by *not* participating in something can be another important way of delegating responsibilities. The following text gives us a picture of what that looks like:

תלמוד בבלי סנהדרין לב:

צדק צדק תרדף - אחד לדין ואחד לפשרה. כיצד? שתי ספינות עוברות בנהר ופגעו זה בזה, אם עוברות שתייהן - שתייהן טובעות, בזה אחר זה - שתייהן עוברות. וכן שני גמלים שהיו עולים במעלות בית חורון ופגעו זה בזה, אם עלו שניהן - שניהן נופלין, בזה אחר זה - שניהן עולין. הא כיצד? טעונה ושאינה טעונה - תידחה שאינה טעונה מפני טעונה. קרובה ושאינה קרובה - תידחה קרובה מפני שאינה קרובה. היו שתייהן קרובות, שתייהן רחוקות - הטל פשרה ביניהן, ומעלות שכר זו לזו.

Talmud Bavli Sanhedrin 32b

“Justice, justice you shall pursue!”—The first [mention of justice] refers to a decision based on strict law; the second, to a compromise. How so? Where two boats sailing on a river meet—if both attempt to pass simultaneously, both will sink; whereas, if one makes way for the other, both can pass. Likewise, if two camels met each other while on the ascent to Beit-Horon—if they both ascend [at the same time] both may tumble down [into the valley]; but if [they ascend] after each other, both can go up. How then should they act? If one is laden and the other unladen, the latter should give way to the former. If one is nearer [to its destination] than the other, the former should give way to the latter. If both are [equally] near or far [from their destination,] make a compromise between them, the one [which is to go forward] compensating the other [which has to give way].

The two boats or camels here have equal right of way. There is no way to resolve the conflict here based on authority or status. But we can assess the *need*, which is unlikely to be uniform. How heavy is the load? How long the remaining journey? Whoever has the tougher road ahead should be given priority. Even if the cargo and destination are identical, one side is probably more willing to be compensated than another. This is the sort of system we see at work when airlines overbook flights and start offering compensation for those who voluntarily give up their seats. But it may also be a more generally useful strategy for delegating responsibilities among equals. Who is religiously at greater risk if not contributing publicly? Whose spiritual profile is more fragile and in need of greater peer reinforcement? Often, in a family, there is one person

who is generally more rattled about being late. There may be one person who grew up with weightier expectations around communal prayer and will feel more like a failure if they are lackluster in their attendance. In other cases, someone who has taken on observance might more pressing need presence at *minyan* as part of reinforcing an electively chosen practice of prayer. These sorts of delicate psychological questions can help us focus on the “cargo” that different people are transporting and how long their remaining journey seems to be.

E. Validating different roles

Finally, even in a world where gender is not the basis for dividing people into principals and adjuncts, it should not be inadmissible to consider that different roles might be appropriate for different people. Yes, the basic democratic expectations of the world of *mitzvot* must be done by all. But so much of what takes time and care in religious life are the more amorphous fulfillments of and investments in communal needs, in harder-to-quantify *mitzvot* like *talmud Torah* and the education of children. Even if gender need not play a normative role in those tasks, it might be that healthy marriages and families sometimes settle on different roles for different partners. We encounter a beautiful and humble assessment of this sort in a saying that was reportedly a favorite among the Sages of Yavneh. These Sages reflect on the fact that they are an urban class that contributes to the world primarily through intellectual enterprise. But there are many other Jews who live a more rural life, who farm and only devote the most minimal amount of time to study. Instead of beckoning these other Jews to find a way to become like the Sages, they offer the following thought:

תלמוד בבלי ברכות יז.

מרגלא בפומייהו דרבנן דיבנה: אני בריה וחברי בריה, אני מלאכתי בעיר והוא מלאכתי בשדה, אני משכים למלאכתי והוא משכים למלאכתי, כשם שהוא אינו מתגדר במלאכתי כך אני איני מתגדר במלאכתי, ושם תאמר: אני מרבה והוא ממעיט - שנינו: אחד המרבה ואחד הממעט ובלבד שיכוין לבו לשמים.

Talmud Bavli Berakhot 17a

A favorite saying of the Rabbis of Yavneh was: I am God's creature and my fellow is God's creature. My work is in the town and his work is in the country. I rise early for my

work and he rises early for his work. Just as he does not presume to do my work, so I do not presume to do his work. Will you say, I do much and he does little? We have learned: One may do much or one may do little; it is all one, provided he directs his heart to heaven.

Behind this statement is a recognition that society may in fact need some people to be in a scholarly role while others provide the sustenance and the economic engine for the larger society to function. This is echoed elsewhere in Rabbinic literature through the paradigms of Yissakhar and Zevulun, tribes that are said to have divided up responsibilities for Torah study and commerce among themselves.⁶ Obviously, arrangements like this can be abused, particularly if they morph into hereditary patterns, as opposed to meritocratic invitations for people to shine at what they are best at. But they are a model not to be ignored. As we have seen, not all jobs need to be done by everyone, even in a healthy community. Gender egalitarian communities of Torah may also find direction and efficiency in embracing certain roles for different people, albeit not broken down by gender. Different from the enthusiasm model above, which might shift day to day, this model imagines people settling in to different roles over time, based on talent, proclivity, and perhaps even convenience. A person whose work is closer to a *minyan* may be the one who bears that burden, as might someone who grew up doing it and is familiar with integrating it into their routine. Whatever the criteria, this model is pursued with a sense of humility and appreciation—humility that there is much holy work to be done, and appreciation for the part of it that others do with greater intensity than we do.

IV. Conclusion

The Sages of Yavneh had their favorite saying, and my mother has always had one as well: “The advance of civilization has always depended on the subordination of women,” she would tell me. “And it is not clear we have yet come up with a better strategy.” I would put it in softer terms: Social adjuncts always have, and likely will, continue to play a role in shaping society. Can we

⁶ See Bereishit Rabbah 99 for one example of this trope.

actually eliminate this category altogether? And if not, what is our best way forward for eliminating gender as the boundary between principals and adjuncts?

This essay is intended more as a stage-setter and conversation starter than a set of final thoughts. One of the clear consequences of a more gender egalitarian world is rethinking obligation in a world without adjuncts. I firmly believe that, with respect to most religious obligations, we can simply assert that a larger set of people are now included under the umbrella of expectation and our community will simply be richer and fuller for it. But there are indeed areas, particularly time-intensive, decorum-heavy, and communal ones, where it is not realistic for everyone to be doing the same thing at the same time. It is there that we must mine our tradition for ways of thinking about axes other than gender that help us distribute obligation among equals. Sometimes we will have to invest time and resources to facilitate multiple manifestations of the *mitzvah* in question, allowing people to take turns to accomplish the same goal. Sometimes a rotation gets the job done for the community without overburdening the individual. And sometimes some people should be prioritized over others, whether due to an enthusiasm gap, divergent needs, or simply the efficiency and richer religious civilization that can sometimes come from assigning roles. In fact, all these strategies will need to work in concert as we face the blessed challenge of running a community that embodies obligation and responsibility in fuller measure than ever before. As with many contemporary issues, we will only fully understand ourselves in retrospect, many years from now. In the meantime, I hope some of the models we have explored in this essay can help us leave a legacy of shared practice that is broadly and sustainably shared.