

## **Parshat Tetzaveh: Building Stronger Communities Through Women's Obligation** **Chana Borow, Class of 2026**

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This week, Jews around the world will listen to Parshat Zachor, the Torah passage describing Amalek's attack on the Jews in the desert. The Torah commands us to obliterate Amalek, and since we can't do that today, we are obligated to hear the account instead.

Women's commitment to hearing Parshat Zachor stands out across the Orthodox spectrum. Even in communities where women rarely attend synagogue, there is an overwhelming consensus that women make efforts to hear Parshat Zachor. This phenomenon reveals a profound truth: obligation brings people in, and communities grow stronger when women participate as obligated members.

The Sefer HaChinuch, a 13th-century halachic work, rules that women are exempt from Parshat Zachor because they don't wage war against Amalek. However, the Minchat Chinuch, a commentary written by Rabbi Joseph ben Moses Babad in the 19th century, disagrees. He argues that women are obligated for three reasons: because the word "zachor"—remember—a positive commandment from which women might be exempted—is paired with "lo tishkach"—do not forget—a negative commandment binding on women; because the mitzvah isn't time-bound (making it less likely that women would be exempted); and because the Gemara states in Sotah 44b that everyone—even a bride under the chuppah—must go to a milchemet mitzvah, an obligatory war like the one against Amalek.

Major poskim agree: Rav Nosson Adler, a prominent 18th-century German rabbi, ensured that all women in his household heard Parshat Zachor. Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, a 20th-century Israeli posek; Rav Ovadia Yosef, another 20th-century Israeli posek who was the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel; and the Minchat Elazar, a Chasidic Polish 19th-century rabbi, all ruled that women are obligated. Even the Aruch HaShulchan, a 19th-century Lithuanian rabbi, who questions women's biblical requirement, acknowledges: "Women have adopted the stringency to come to synagogue to hear Parshat Zachor (Aruch HaShulchan 685:7)."

The contrast is striking: in communities where women's synagogue attendance is generally low, Parshat Zachor sees a dramatic increase in participation. Why? Because women understand themselves as obligated. The Gemara in Kiddushin 31a states: "Greater is one who is commanded and performs than one who is not commanded and performs." Doing something out of obligation is more important than choosing to do something. Obligation heightens the status of the mitzvah. Obligation creates identity and consistency: optional practices fluctuate with motivation, while obligation creates structure. When communities treat women's participation as obligatory, they signal that women fully belong to the community.

Communities that emphasize women's obligation see real change. Where women's obligation in Talmud Torah is emphasized, following the Chafetz Chaim, a prominent turn-of-the-century Lithuanian Rabbi who wrote the Mishna Berura, ruling that modern women must learn Torah broadly, learning sustains itself. Compare this to regular Torah reading throughout the year. The Gemara in Bava Kamma 82a teaches that Ezra instituted public Torah reading as a communal obligation, and the Aruch HaShulchan (282:7) writes that the more people who hear Torah, the greater

the honor to the Torah and the community. Yet women's attendance varies dramatically—not for halachic reasons, but for cultural ones.

Parshat Zachor proves our model works. When we prioritize women's participation by offering accommodations to help them attend, teaching about the obligation, and ensuring accessibility, women respond with dedication and consistency. This creates fundamentally stronger communities.

Memory requires everyone. Collective memory cannot exclude half the community. Women have always been central to the transmission of memory and identity. Women's role in transmitting Torah to the next generation isn't peripheral; it's foundational to covenantal continuity.

If Torah reading serves the community rather than an individual, women's presence doesn't raise questions about who may or may not participate; rather, it enriches and completes the community. The Netziv, a Russian 19th century rabbi and Rosh Yeshiva, writes that Amalek attacked “kol ha'necheshalim” all those who straggled behind. Our communal memory cannot leave anyone behind or pushed to the margins. Complete remembrance requires the complete community.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, a major 20th-century Orthodox rabbi, taught that covenant creates community. When women and men share obligations, we build communities of genuine partnership. Women are halakhically obligated in numerous mitzvot where communal infrastructure lags far behind what we've built for Zachor. To build stronger communities, we must extend the Zachor model more broadly. We must remove barriers by applying the same accommodations. Creating expectation changes communal culture, speaking about women's synagogue attendance with the same normative expectation as they do for men, planning programming with women's presence assumed rather than treated as exceptional.

Finally, we should celebrate women's participation, highlighting women fulfilling their obligations not as exceptional or praiseworthy beyond the norm, but as the natural expression of their covenantal identity. Our communities have demonstrated that women have accepted and embraced Parshat Zachor as an obligation.

As we prepare for Purim, celebrating the defeat of Haman, descendant of Amalek, let us draw inspiration from women's commitment to Zachor. The Ramban, a 13th-century Spanish rabbi and philosopher, teaches that we will ultimately fulfill “blotting out Amalek's memory” only when we have built a complete society, when Israel dwells securely with justice and peace. Part of building that complete society is ensuring our entire community participates fully as obligated members of the covenant. Remember, do not forget. Let us remember to build communities in which every member's obligations are honored, supported, and celebrated. Our communities will be strongest, most vibrant, and most aligned with Torah values when everyone participates in our sacred work, not as volunteers or guests, but as equal participants.

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*Chana Borow has a master's in Jewish Education and a BA in History, and she currently serves as a Pulpit Intern at Anshe Sholom B'nai Israel in Chicago and Program Assistant at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. Her experience includes teaching Middle School and High School Tanakh, Talmud and Jewish history at multiple institutions including the Abraham Joshua Heschel School. Chana specializes in making traditional Jewish texts accessible while fostering inclusive community spaces.*