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It's tougher for a female candidate

By Merav Michaeli

Tzipi Livni's candidacy for prime minister is giving rise to a turbulent controversy over whether she may use her gender in her campaign. Is she feminist enough to attract feminists, male and female?

Amia Lieblich wrote here last week that psychological studies found no evidence that women and men are different by nature. Nonetheless, the two genders differ dramatically in their life experience, which shapes different worldviews.

The feminine experience has created and nurtured the feminist worldview. This outlook aspires to change the patriarchal, hierarchal social structure and to bring about gender, race and class equality. It also strives to make each of us an independent person in our own right, body and soul, instead of an object of use or abuse.

Not all women go through the same experiences. Some have felt oppression, disenfranchisement, exploitation and humiliation because of their gender. Some have encountered this to a lesser degree, or at a later stage in life.

U.S. President Barack Obama did not personally experience the oppression, discrimination and humiliation experienced by children from black families who were slaves in the past and subject to discrimination in the present. He learned the significance of being black as an adult, through the life experiences of others.

Like him, Tzipi Livni also was spared many of the hardships that many women face in their youth. Her life has been full of accomplishments and satisfaction.

But even if the prime ministerial race is Livni's first encounter with discrimination, there is no doubt that she has been exposed to women's status in the world.

She has seen how difficult it is for them to reach positions of power, how difficult it is for men to accept that women hold these positions, and how difficult it is for both men and women to believe that a woman can indeed lead, manage and navigate.

And she has seen the dear price women must pay: How much sexual harassment one has to put up with along the way.

A woman leader or manager is still an oddity. When out of 185 countries only 10 are headed by women, there can be little wonder that we still do not see women as leaders. All the qualities that pertain to leadership - authority, decisiveness, rationality, dignity, wisdom and vision - are attributed to men. To daddy. Not to mommy.

As for us women, we do not even know how all these qualities look when they are manifested in a woman, and which "feminine" qualities are suitable for leadership.

This is why we do not yet have the "perfect" woman, the right person who retains the proper level of femininity. She would be a feminist, but not too much so. She would be beautiful, but not devote too much attention to it.

We do not have a perfect woman because she does not have a social slot to occupy. That slot was made for men. And when that slot is occupied by a woman, it strikes us as unnatural. She seems out of place, even though she may be well suited for the job.

There's another consideration, much simpler and more logical. Tzipi Livni is a new candidate for the prime minister's seat. Her two main competitors already presided as premiers, and they both failed.

But beyond this consideration, both men and women need to remember that changing the leader's slot is up to us. And until we allow more women to reach that slot, we will not have perfect women for the job.

It is within our power to allow women to reach a position of power and be strong enough in that position, until they can acknowledge the reality of women and other parts of society that need our help. Eventually, women leaders will be able to identify with those people without fearing it would brand them or weaken them politically. Then they could change society and reality.

I can only hope that Livni reaches that position, and that she will indeed use that position to achieve just that.
