

FROM OUR PRESIDENT

The Evolution of Women's Learning—and My Own

By Pam Scheininger

As international women's Jewish learning and scholarship have evolved in previously unimaginable ways, so has my own relationship with Jewish text. When I think of myself as a learner, I remember that during high school, I routinely lost my Humash and *Navi* books during the first week of school, never to find them again. I diligently listened to what my teachers said, wrote down their words verbatim, and memorized the information for my tests. I did not think much about, nor did I miss, the actual texts—the words and the *p'sukim* (verses). I also had no exposure to *Torah shebe'al peh* (oral law). Girls didn't learn Mishna or Gemara in my high school.



In my last year of high school in Toronto, my principal learned that I, along with two other girls, was planning to go to Midreshet Lindenbaum the following year. He took the very generous step of offering to start teaching us Talmud during our free periods so that we would begin school with some familiarity with Gemara. I still owe him a debt of thanks for his actions. And in these sessions, I began to understand why opening a text and learning from it directly actually matter.

The following fall, I arrived at Midreshet Lindenbaum full of trepidation—for good reason. My fellow students were talented and intelligent, and they had been learning

Torah and *Torah shebe'al peh* at a high level for many years. But I dove right in and found a home in the texts. I loved being surrounded by *sefarim* and absorbing their contents. For the first time, I learned from books instead of notes. I got to know my Gemara, turned to Rashi and Tosafot to understand what I was reading, discovered the distinction between the *Shulhan Arukh* and the *Arukh Ha'Shulhan*, and found in the Rambam's philosophy a vision of God that resonated with me. I spent hours in the *beit midrash* and felt at home and at peace there.

Yet even during that year, the environment for women's learning had its challenges. I heard about the girls at other seminaries who were “more malleable” and so seen as more likely to get married. On more than one occasion, I was asked where my *tzitzis* were. In a particularly unpleasant experience, a line from *Masekhet Nedarim* was misquoted to me to suggest that women should be treated as meat (the phrase “*mashal l'basar*” meaning “a comparison to meat”). I was not quite as amused as the individual who shared the thought.

Returning home was even harder. I had started to learn *daf yomi* (a page of Talmud a day) while in Israel, and as one of the only women in my community to be doing so, my participation drew some attention. There were few, if any, higher-level learning opportunities for women at that time; as a result, I found no one suitable to learn with.

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Strength in Numbers: What's New in Women's Torah Leadership in Israel

By Karen Miller Jackson

Women's Torah learning, teaching, and leadership are booming in Israel today. The number of *beit midrash* programs that exist and the number of women studying in them have increased significantly over the past few years. The most significant stride has occurred in the study of *halakhah*. Training in *hilkhot niddah* (family purity law) may have been the first step and the area of *halakhah* that answered the greatest need for women, but today there are several programs that cover rigorous study of *hilkhot Shabbat*, *aveilut*, *kiddushin*, and *kashrut* as

well. Study of *halakhah* has given these women the ability to join halakhic decision-making alongside their fellow male rabbis and publish articles and *teshuvot* (responsa). They are doing all of this while often juggling the needs of their large families, several jobs (sometimes two different careers), and fewer benefits. These women have helped change the image of what Torah leadership looks like for the next generation.

I am interested in and passionate about the world of

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In Celebration of Women's Learning

By Daphne Lazar Price

I'm so excited about the editorial board's choice to focus on women's learning in this issue of the *JOFA Journal*. The timing is hardly coincidental. As we near the end of the seven-year *daf yomi* cycle, JOFA wanted to honor and to call attention to the proliferation of women's scholarship in Talmud studies and beyond.



Indeed, throughout the years, JOFA has prioritized elevating and amplifying women's scholarship, including supporting the publication of the first volume of the *Hilkhot Nashim* series and *Shema Bekolah* articles written by women, as well as arranging webinars and in-person classes on halakhic topics. To mark the completion of the thirteenth daily Talmud study cycle, JOFA is partnering with Hadran for a women-led *Siyum HaShas*. JOFA will be facilitating our own events in New York City and in the Greater Washington area in partnership with local synagogues and schools.

The topics in these pages reflect the gamut of experiences and viewpoints on the growth of women's learning. The explosion of online Judaic resources in the last few years—from digital libraries of Jewish texts to webinars and podcasts by scholarly women and men—has helped to fill a need for those who don't have access to in-person *shiurim* (classes) and *midrashot* (seminaries) or who are always on the go. Whether you have been studying Jewish texts all your life or are a novice, the insights shared in these articles will resonate with you. When we improve the accessibility

of our core Jewish texts, we create a pathway for increased participation in rituals and personal practice.

On a personal note, I developed a deep appreciation for primary Jewish texts at a young age. In middle school, I volunteered to participate in *Hidon HaTanakh*, Israel's national Bible contest. With only moderate coaching and guidance, I absorbed and processed chapter upon chapter from the *Tanakh*. In doing so, I realized the flaws in my own education that had meshed *p'shat* and *drash*. I was challenged to interrogate my own assumptions by searching in the Humash for the foundational stories taught in my primary years, for the passage in which Adam gifts King David with 70 years of his own life (*Yalkut Shimoni, Bereishit* 41), the story of Abraham smashing the idols (*Bereishit Rabbah* 38), and the attribution of Isaac's blindness to the angels weeping into his eyes because of Abraham's imminent sacrifice (*Bereishit Rabbah* 65:1). Even though we place great value on rabbinic commentaries and biblical texts, it is important to differentiate between the two.

What started as an effort to gain a more firm understanding of biblical texts grew into a deeper exploration of the *Shulhan Arukh*, Mishna, and Talmud. This study of rabbinic texts helped me interrogate other sets of assumptions from an Orthodox feminist perspective, such as when teachers would make sweeping statements excluding women from participating in rituals ranging from reciting Kaddish and reading Megillah to studying Talmud or touching a *sefer Torah*.

Our knowledge is our strength and will help to inform ourselves, those around us, and future generations.

From Our President *continued from page 1*

And so it went until I moved to New York and discovered Drisha. At Drisha, with Rabbi David Silber and Rabbi Kenny Wachsmen, I found my place again. During my last year of law school, I had the privilege of joining the then-Scholar's Circle for its Gemara *shiur*. I was once again surrounded by exceptionally talented and intelligent women who (as before) knew much more than I did, but I embraced every minute of the experience. Instead of taking a part-time job in a law firm, I took a subway to Drisha every morning to learn Gemara.

With work, marriage, and children, time became more and more scarce, but my learning remained deeply important to me. I learned a *masekhet* of Gemara while pregnant with each of my children and have relearned it again with each of them as they prepared to become *b'nei mitzvah*. When a good friend became ill, I learned Mishna for his recovery, and after his death, I finished *Tanakh* in his memory. Right now, I am in a learning lull—life has gotten in the way. I feel the loss and am committed to begin learning

again soon. But today, fortunately, I am far from alone. Thousands of women will be celebrating the *Siyum HaShas* (the completion of the *daf yomi* cycle) in January. They are inspirational, and they have changed the landscape of women's learning for myself and my daughters.

And the world of women's learning continues to evolve. I love watching my daughters learn Gemara. I love that they take the opportunities to do so for granted—that they do not, for one minute, question whether it is their right or whether they are differently entitled to learn than the boys around them. And I love that my son learns Gemara with girls around him, and they are just as likely to challenge him about his thoughts and conclusions as their male counterparts. They are so far from having to crowd around a benevolent principal's desk that I can barely comprehend the contrast.

I am so thrilled to be writing for this edition of the *JOFA Journal*. Although there is still so much for us to accomplish—so many barriers and so many challenges to overcome—there is also much to celebrate. Please join me in doing so.

Following is an up-to-date survey of women's Torah learning programs in Israel, as well as of the organizations that are promoting *lamdaniyot* (learned women) and

Other institutions offer a fuller program of *halakhah*, modeled after the curriculum for rabbinic ordination. Matan Jerusalem's *Hilkhatah* program and Midreshet Lindenbaum's Women's Institute of Halachic Leadership program have already held graduation ceremonies for women who have completed this course of study. Beit Morasha has graduated one cohort as well. Outside Jerusalem, two women just completed Midreshet Ein Hanatziv's comprehensive *halakhah* program and nine women completed Matan HaSharon's *Morot l'Halakhah* program in the *halakhot* of *niddah* and life cycle, and several are continuing through *hilkhot Shabbat* and perhaps beyond. The *Morot l'Halakhah* program emphasizes different forms of community leadership beyond the *beit midrash*. Migdal Oz has begun an advanced *halakhah* training program recently as well, and Beit Midrash Har'el is training women alongside men in rabbinic studies.

Programs may be found all over Israel, including those at Midreshet Lindenbaum, Midreshet Ein Hanatziv, Mechinat Tzahali, Midreshet Be'er, Migdal

Poster for Kolech program "Shabbat Dorshot Tov."

Oz, Mechinat Lapidot, and more. These programs are also a source of employment for the women who complete some of these programs. Young women who choose *sherut leumi* also sometimes study Torah for a year before or after their service. The growing *midrashah* trend is reflective of the value that the religious Zionist community puts on Torah study, now by women as well.

Promoters of Female Torah Leadership

In addition to the institutions that train the women scholars, two organizations in particular have provided opportunities for growth and empowerment of the women completing advanced *halakhah* programs. Beit Hillel was the first rabbinic organization to include female membership. Created to foster and strengthen attentive rabbinic leadership, Beit Hillel publishes journals on topics of *halakhah* and Jewish thought by its members. Most significantly, Beit Hillel recently published a book of halakhic *teshuvot* on contemporary issues, such as halakhic issues faced by people with mental illness, by its rabbis and *rabbaniyot*. This recognition and encouragement of female Torah scholarship by mainstream rabbinic leadership has had a significant impact.

Kolech, the Religious Women's Forum, has devoted much energy and resources to promoting female Torah leadership in Israel. This year marked the fourth annual Shabbat Dorshot Tov project (see poster on page 4), in which 100 women delivered *shiurim* and lectures in more than 200 *shuls* throughout Israel. This project tries to reflect the diversity of Israeli society, including speakers from both Ashkenazic and Sephardic backgrounds. This program has wide reach and presents communities with female role models in Torah study and communal leadership. By showcasing the growing number of female Torah scholars all on one Shabbat, the communities and women feel strength and pride in how far religious women and Israel have come. Kolech is also encouraging women's halakhic writing (discussed later).

Employment of Female Halakhic Leaders

Several of the jobs open to male rabbis are not open to women who complete the course of *halakhah* study. This does create a challenge and puts pressure on these women to compete for a limited number of jobs. *Shul* in Israel is only one of several centers for community building and leadership, and it has provided less of a route open to and taken by female Torah leaders, although a few communities either have employed a "power couple" to lead the *shul* or have created a position for a woman specifically. The many *beit midrash* programs also provide some employment for these women.

Israeli culture is less formal overall, but most of the women who choose to take a title at all have chosen *rabbanit*. Classically, *rabbanit* means "*rebbeztin*" (the wife of a rabbi), but Israeli women have transformed the meaning of the word. There is something special about having a word that only women can use, which perhaps highlights the unique contributions they are making in communal leadership and the Torah world today.

Female Torah "Celebrities"

Even though most of the women in this category have not studied in the *halakhah* programs highlighted in this article, it would not give a complete picture if they went unmentioned. A number of learned women have become Torah "celebs" and have a following all over the country. Fans join WhatsApp groups to follow these women when they speak. Some are affiliated more with the right-wing side of the religious Zionist world, yet appeal to the masses, such as Rabbanit Yemima Mizrachi and Sivan Rahav Meir, a television reporter who launched a second career through classes on *parashat hashavuah* and meaningful Torah-inspired thoughts on social media. For the more mainstream is Rabbanit Pnina Neuwirth, who is a full-time judge and, in her free time, gives thoughtful and inspiring *shiurim*.

These examples give a small sample of the thirst that religious women in Israel have for female role models and the value increasingly being placed by the whole community on women's Torah study and leadership. Girls around Israel even dress up as these celebs on Purim!

Women's Torah and Halakhic Writing

Writing and publishing are probably the most recent glass ceiling to be broken in the world of female Torah leadership. There has been a significant increase in recent years in women's writing, but these are still the token few. Rabbanit Malka Pietrekovsky's book *Mehalehet B'darkah* is a halakhic work on life's challenges. Beit Hillel's recent book of responsa includes several written by women. Moreover, women have started an online responsa service by Beit Hillel called *Meshivot Nefesh* and one by Matan called *Shayla*. To encourage younger women's halakhic writing, Kolech has also funded a writing competition called *Tiyuwa*. Finally, one of the major Israeli journals of *halakhah*, *Tchumin*, from Zomet Institute, published an article for the first time with a halakhic *hiddush* written by a woman.

Conclusion

It would be easy to look in from the outside and conclude that there is still so much inequality regarding women's Torah leadership in the Orthodox world in Israel. Even with all these accomplishments, there certainly remains a lot further to go. But there is no doubt that the entry of women into halakhic discourse and leadership in Israel is on the rise and will continue to have a positive impact on the whole Jewish world.

Karen Miller Jackson is a Jewish educator and writer who teaches at Matan HaSharon and recently completed Matan HaSharon's Morot l'Halakhah program. She developed educational content for Lookstein Virtual and also directs Kivun l'Sherut, a guidance program for religious high school girls before army and national service. She is also on the board of Kolech and the JOFA Journal Editorial Board. She has an M.A. in Talmud and midrash from NYU and has learned in Drisha, Matan, and Midreshet Lindenbaum.

"It's Your Torah"

By David Silber

Drisha opened its doors in September 1979. Brochures had been distributed listing classes from morning till evening, Monday through Thursday. Women could come to a single class or could come to learn full-time. We were to hold classes in a rented space in a synagogue on the Upper West Side of Manhattan—in the upper story, which had been used for nothing but storage for years. A friend put up two partitions, creating two classrooms and an office between them, complete with a rusty sink and a ketchup-colored rotary phone. There was no office staff. The elevator, old and small and creaky, went up to the fifth floor. We were on the sixth floor, accessible only by stairs.

That first September morning, I sat in the sixth-floor classroom closer to the stairs and waited for my students. And waited. Nobody came. In fact, nobody came that day at all. The next day, another class, same time—9:30 A.M. Again I waited in an empty room for class to start. At 9:30, nobody. About ten minutes later, I heard the elevator creaking and the sound of the elevator door opening on the fifth floor. Someone was walking up the stairs. She opened the door and said, "I'm looking for Drisha." "You are Drisha," I said. And soon a second student joined my class, Tuesday morning Humash. The three of us, joined by many others, learned together for the next four years, and that class has continued through today.

Many of the other classes never materialized that first year. But enough classes did, and Drisha was on its way. We didn't have any students learning full-time that first year, but the brochure and its promise stuck in my mind. Five years later, having built our base of learning, Drisha launched the first-ever *kollel* for women, a yearlong program.

A Turning Point

Classes at Drisha met in the fall and spring and aligned with the college schedule. Many of our students came from Barnard, the women's college a couple of miles uptown; some of them had learned in Israel for a year, which was far less common at that time. In 1982, we decided to offer a program in the summer: a five-week, full-time course of study. Mornings were dedicated to Talmud study—a core part of Drisha's program from its inception, given its importance in the traditional curriculum and the lack of other opportunities for women to pursue Talmud study—and afternoons to other text-focused classes. All of these courses, like all Drisha classes, included a robust *hevruta* period.

We had no idea whether there would be interest in such

a program. To my amazement, sixteen women—two of them seniors in high school—came to learn. And what a group it was! Incredibly bright, with a deep love of learning, and unbounded commitment. I remember thinking that we must create more opportunities for the sake of these women and for the sake of the Jewish people as a whole.

Stairway to Heaven

I hate elevators, especially creaky ones in empty buildings. So I would take the stairs in the empty synagogue building up to Drisha's classrooms. One day in September 1984, I began my daily ascent. As I climbed the stairs, I heard voices. They became louder and louder. I arrived at Drisha's space, by now supplemented by a dark room on the fifth floor, painted yellow and with bars on the windows. I opened the door, and I saw

eight women learning in *hevruta*. Of course, I knew they would be there. We had just inaugurated the Fellowship Program, a yearlong, fully stipended *kollel* for women. But hearing these women's voices, loudly learning Torah, energetically engaged in learning, caught me by surprise nonetheless. I had never heard such a sound. I felt that something new was unfolding in the world, and that Drisha had made this possible.

That program would continue for thirty years, augmented a few years later by the Scholars Circle, a three-year fellowship program for women wanting to become experts in Talmud and *halakhah*. The *halakhah* component was organized by the topics classically studied in *semikhah* programs: *Shabbat*, *niddah*, and *kashrut*.

This program was one of Drisha's most impactful contributions. Its graduates took and continue to hold leadership roles in schools and institutions of higher learning in the United States and Israel. The program itself spurred the launching of several advanced learning programs for women in Israel and the United States. The ascent up the staircase that morning to the voices of Torah study heralded a new era for women's Torah learning. It will forever remain in my mind.

Do It for Their Sisters

In 1988, we decided to open a summer learning program for high school girls. We recruited five faculty members, developed the curriculum, arranged housing, and looked forward to this innovative program. There was only one problem—only four girls applied.

I remember speaking to my wife and saying, "Even for Drisha, five faculty and all this investment for four students is extreme. Should we be doing this?" She said,

Our approach to learning—combining rigor, honesty, openness, and religious seriousness—seemed more and more to be something that was important for the entire community.

“You’re not doing this for these four girls. You’re doing it for their little sisters. They need to grow up knowing that there is a place where they can learn Torah.” We ran the program.

This past summer, the high school program, now named in memory of Scholars Circle alumna and former director of the program Dr. Beth Samuels, accepted its 500th student. It draws 26 girls each summer from across North America and Israel and welcomes them into an immersive, 24/7 program of learning. The program has become more complex and multifaceted, but at its core it has a single, simple message: It’s your Torah. The high school program has been life-changing for many young women on the cusp of adulthood: For the first time, they realize that Torah learning can be an integral part of their lives.

Drisha has begun to incorporate an emphasis on the intersection of Torah learning and critical communal issues.

Men Can Learn, Too

Drisha’s founding mission was to offer women access to serious Torah learning, especially Talmud study, at a time when there were almost no places in the world in which women could learn Talmud at all and very few places where women could learn on a serious level and gain direct access to the text. Over the course of time, Drisha has built on that mission through the programs I described here, and others. But it also became clear that Drisha had a contribution to make in the world of Torah study in general. Our approach to learning—combining rigor, honesty, openness, and religious seriousness—seemed more and more to be something that was important for the entire community. And so Drisha began gradually to open its offerings to men, beginning with part-time classes and culminating in the coed summer *kollels* for young adults that Drisha launched first in New York and then, in addition, in Israel, over the last decade. At this time, all of Drisha’s programs, both in the United States and in Israel, serve both women and men, with the exception of the high school program and Drisha’s new yeshiva (see Devora Steinmetz’s article on page 15). The high school program, with its mission of empowering young girls, will remain for girls only.

The Nature of Talmud Torah

Over the course of the past decade, as well, Drisha’s programs have incorporated an emphasis on *tefillah*. All of Drisha’s full-time programs now include thrice-daily *tefillah*. Participants lead and participate in *minyanim* or prayer groups that reflect their best understanding of how they ought to *daven*, and often our programs include more than one choice of *minyan*. In addition, participants in our full-time programs engage in *hakha-*

nah l’tefillah workshops, helping prepare for *davening* and introducing people to a variety of modalities and ideas that can enhance their engagement in *tefillah*. Beginning and ending the day with prayer serves to frame our study as a religious activity, bringing into the *beit midrash* all of the responsibility and service that a religious activity demands. The choice of *minyanim* allows for participants to enter into the *beit midrash* without having to park their commitments at the door or pretend to be someone other than themselves. This is part of creating a *beit midrash* in which the learning is characterized by honesty, commitment, and full engagement of the whole person.

Additionally, Drisha has begun to incorporate an emphasis on the intersection of Torah learning and critical communal issues. We believe both that the study of Torah can help inform and direct us to appropriate responses to issues confronting our communities and that a full awareness of the reality of life and its hardships enables us to understand Torah in a deeper way.

A Personal Note

Much of my own teaching, especially over the course of the past twenty years, has taken place in our weekly adult education classes. Drisha has given me the opportunity, together with my students, to develop an approach to the study of *Tanakh*. I have been told by many of my students, who number many thousands, that these classes have had a powerful impact on their lives. I believe that the study of Torah, if accomplished with honesty, rigor, and commitment, and without agendas, can have a transformational effect. It allows us to see ourselves and our world with an additional perspective and is a call to action.

Drisha has been, and continues to be, an agent for change.

I see Drisha in a similar way. Drisha reflects upon the world and attempts to make it a better place. It creates programs that are new, with the hope that others will pick up the gauntlet. It begins programs and, if they become no longer necessary because others have picked them up or they are not central to Drisha’s mission, moves on to other challenges. It has been, and continues to be, an agent for change. We will continue to challenge the status quo—as long as there is that one person who says, “I’m looking for Drisha.”

Rabbi David Silber is the founder of Drisha, where he has taught since its inception. He received the Covenant award in 2000. He is the author of Go Forth and Learn, a commentary on the Haggadah in English and Hebrew, and For Such a Time as This, a commentary on Megillat Esther in Hebrew. His primary area of expertise is biblical narrative.

Opening a Window: How Tech Can Elevate Women's Voices on Torah

By Sara Tillingier Wolkenfeld

“I don’t know when window shades were invented, but clearly that isn’t an option the Gemara is considering here,” I found myself saying to a class of fifteen college-aged students. At the time, I didn’t realize this would be a life-altering observation, tossed out nonchalantly in the middle of my course on “*Hilkhot Roommates*.” But as soon as I said it, I knew my relationship with teaching and the internet was about to change forever and for good.

Instantly, all fifteen heads in my class snapped down toward screens, and thirty hands began typing furiously. I was simply trying to give them a sense of the ways in which the *sugya* in *Bava Batra* might be thinking about visual privacy, but I had miscalculated the impact. For these young men and women, my lack of knowledge was a temporary challenge, easily overcome through reference to Google. There was no reason *not* to know the answer. We talked for a few extra minutes about where, how, and why window shades had been invented, and I suggested that to understand *Hazal’s* (the rabbis’) ideal window shade, we’d have to delve further into the *sugya*.

This was a turning point for me—even long after we had turned our collective attention back to the *daf* at hand. For the first time, I fully understood the forces released into the classroom by the presence of devices connected to the internet. For my students, demanding information from the cloud was already second nature. Additional information was easily available to them, and they didn’t think twice about supplementing the teacher’s knowledge with some simple online research.

For Learners of Text, a Technological Revolution

That the internet is changing learning and teaching is no surprise. Look no further than a quick Google search to see that educators and pundits have been writing about the questions raised by the digital revolution for years. There is no exact science to determine the precise impact of these tools on teaching and learning, but the one undisputed truth is that these fields are forever altered.

For learners of Jewish texts, a technological revolution is nothing new. We have weathered other shifts throughout our history: oral to written, manuscript to print, the invention of *tsurat hadaf* (the set arrangement of the page), and the *mikraot gedolot* (the primary text accompanied by selected commentators) are just a few examples of the ways in which technology has propelled our learning culture forward. As director of education for Sefaria, the world’s largest free library of digital

Jewish texts, my goal is to help our community leverage technology and to elevate Jewish literacy for all.

Leveling the Playing Field

First, online texts allow us to level the playing field in Torah learning. Now, anyone with a device and an internet connection can instantly access the entire canon from anywhere in the world. Sefaria’s goal is to ensure that the texts that have always belonged to the entire Jewish people are freely accessible to all for generations to come. This is a sea change for us all, but it’s especially significant in the context of women’s learning; we don’t always have a physical *beit midrash* that will welcome us. One way of ensuring that women reach higher levels of learning is by ensuring, first and foremost, that they have a way to open up these texts.

But availability of the texts is only part of the equation. At Sefaria, we’re also deeply concerned with accessibility. That means, we’re driven to pioneer and innovate new ways of helping people find pathways into the texts. I

The future of Torah is one in which the shelves of the *beit midrash* are infinitely expandable and easily searchable, so there is room for everyone to contribute.

love books and suspect that many of my fellow text-learners feel similarly. A favorite dog-eared and underlined volume of Talmud, a treasured *Tanakh*, a *siddur* that we use every day—these are trusted companions throughout our religious lives. The experience of opening a new book, however, can be a foreign and even alienating experience. What is it? How do we use it?

How will we find meaning in it?

For those of us embracing Jewish textual learning for the first time, or for others who were previously barred from studying Talmud or other texts, the tools that digital technology packs into this learning experience are invaluable. Features such as topical search and built-in dictionaries can help people navigate new materials with greater comprehension than ever before. The ability to see user-generated content side by side with traditional texts can help people feel more at home in unfamiliar works.

One of the frequent critiques of the digital age is that learners today will internalize less information because we can so easily access knowledge as we need it. But in my work with Sefaria, I’ve learned that there’s a lot to be optimistic about. The internet allows for linking ideas and concepts and helping people move between them. The discovery and creation of connections between ideas is, significantly, a key component of Torah learning. New insights—*hidushim*—come about when you can see new relationships and new conclusions, and the internet empowers these moments of discovery. In my work at Sefaria, I see the myriad ways in which new learners

can take advantage of the connections built into our site: discovering fresh parallels and configuring and reconfiguring knowledge in previously unexplored ways. When educators take advantage of the ease with which students can move between texts, the constant availability of knowledge is an opportunity, not a setback.

A Platform to Lift Up Women's Torah Voices

This process of building new knowledge and generating *hidush* is amplified by the publishing platform of the digital *beit midrash*. As a female Torah scholar, I am aware that the traditional bookshelf in all the learning spaces I've been in contains very few works authored by women. I attended Jewish day school and went on to study Torah at several *yeshivot* in Israel and America, yet I was 27 years old the first time that I had a female Talmud teacher. I never had difficulty feeling connected to *Hazal*, yet the experience of learning Gemara from a woman was transformative for me.

Similarly, Sefaria is a platform to lift up women's Torah voices and intertwine them with our ancient texts. Sefaria actively seeks out works of Torah by women that can be added to our database. In addition, learners everywhere—regardless of their gender—can publish their work on Sefaria. Our library of sheets represents a huge corpus of modern Torah. As on all media platforms, women are often reluctant to publicly share their thoughts, but we are committed to encouraging them and making it possible for people to learn from all the different Torah voices in our community. Publishing new insights or a fully formulated *shiur* is empowering and helps shape the learning of the next generation. The future of Torah is one in which the shelves of the *beit midrash* are infinitely expandable and easily searchable, so there is room for everyone to contribute.

A Vision of All Levels of Learners Participating

The Gemara in *Ta'anit* asks why the verse in *Proverbs*, “it is a tree of life to those who hold fast to it,” compares Torah to a tree. It answers that the analogy is meant to teach that just as a small piece of wood can ignite a larger one, so too, minor Torah scholars can sharpen great Torah scholars. The vision of all levels of learners participating together in a community of study, bumping up against one another and sparking ideas, is one that resonates for me in thinking about Sefaria's library.

Like most technological changes, the shift to digital texts is notable for its impact on the power structures of the community of scholars. More people can participate, and voices of “minor” learners can rise to the top



A visualization of Sefaria's library of Torah texts, showing the components of Sefaria's library (<https://www.sefaria.org/visualize/library>).

when they express thoughts that others recognize as significant. Learners can access the same texts as their teachers, and quickly move from one source to another, pursuing their own questions and even creating their own materials. I believe this shifting power dynamic is part of what people sometimes resist about the advent of digital texts.

As I experienced with my students on the day that I wondered aloud about window shades in the Gemara, it can be destabilizing when your students bring new and unexpected knowledge into the classroom. It can change the direction of a conversation, provide an answer for something that the teacher intended to leave open, or empower students to think differently from their superiors. With the vision of the Gemara in *Ta'anit* in mind, I believe this will ultimately be to the benefit of Torah, as more and more people are able to take hold of the branches and spread the message.

Sara Tillinger Wolkenfeld is the director of education at Sefaria, an online database and new interface for Jewish texts. She is also a fellow of the David Hartman Center at the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America. Her previous experience includes serving as director of education at the Center for Jewish Life—Hillel at Princeton University, as part of the Orthodox Union's Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus. She studied Talmud and Jewish Law at Midreshet Lindenbaum, Nishmat, Beit Morashah, Drisha, and Pardes, and lectures frequently at synagogues, schools, and university communities. She lives in Chicago with her husband and their five children.

On Leaving Academia and Embracing Torah

By Rachel Anisfeld

I no longer consider myself an academic. I have a Ph.D. in rabbinic literature and I use the tools I got from academia every day in my teaching and writing about Torah texts, but I am no longer an academic.

I grew up in a Modern Orthodox home and community. My father loved Torah, and I grew to love it, too. I was inspired by a middle school Humash teacher who stood on the desk and shouted out Rashis in *Sefer Bamidbar* and by high school Humash and Gemara teachers for whom teaching Torah was a matter of the heart and soul as well as of the mind. I remember the feeling of connection more than the content itself. The learning was infused with a sense of higher calling; it was an *avodah*, a form of divine worship and service. My year at Midreshet Lindenbaum in Jerusalem intensified this sense of soulful connection to Torah.

I want to be able to lose myself in Torah, to lose my ego, to become part of something larger than myself.

My parents were both academics (in psychology) and each of their three children chose an academic route, too. Because my passion was Torah, I majored in religion in college and then continued with the doctorate.

I spent eleven years getting my doctorate and another two turning the dissertation into a book. In the meantime, I got married and had three children. We lived in a small, warm community in Albany, New York, where I often taught Torah.

Return to My Heart

What I figured out during those years of early child-rearing and living in Albany while finishing my dissertation was that I needed to return to my heart. Academia had taught me many things: literary tools such as form and structural analysis, a sense of the historical context of any text, the richness of very deep analysis of a single passage, and, above all, rigor and honesty without any intellectual boundaries in pursuit of truth.

But there was something missing. I wrote my dissertation about the move in amoraic midrash from the purely exegetical commentary of the *tannaim* (early rabbinic sages) to the more popular and soulful aggadic homiletical midrash—and the move I was describing was unconsciously my own. It was not just the *amoraim* (rabbinic sages who followed the *tannaim*) who wanted out of the closed intellectual elite mindset; it was I, as well.

I wanted more heart; I wanted more soul. I wanted to be allowed to say not just what the text meant at the time it was written in a distant, objective way, but what the text means to me today—how it inspires me and speaks to me, what it has to tell all of us about how to live and think and

be a religious person. I wanted to be able to think and talk about God, to view this study as a religious endeavor, part of an unfolding relationship with and service of God.

And I wanted to be part of an ongoing dialogue with the generations of Jews who had studied before me. What I wanted, what I still want, is not just to study Torah, but to *make* Torah, or more—to *become* Torah, to become part of the process, to be embedded not in my own historical moment or the historical moment of the text, but in some out-of-time eternal moment of intergenerational study, a mystical place that disappears when you approach the text with academic distance.

I want to be able to lose myself in Torah, to lose my ego, to become part of something larger than myself, a member of a community, a piece of a puzzle. I know there is collaboration in academia, but I found that there was also a sense of competition and self-promotion, the need to constantly be original, to say something novel that no one has thought of before, to be the smartest one in the room.

We all know that this competitiveness is not absent from the religious world. Here, too, there is ego and there is a prizing of the intellect and of the clever *hiddush* or insight. But there is also a reaching for purity and a humble sense of divine service and mission, of being a link in a larger chain of transmission.

The Why of Torah Study

It feels essential to learn and teach Torah in such a consciously religious framework. That is what we are doing when we recite *birkhot haTorah* each day. We are reminding ourselves of the *why* of Torah study. The why is everything here. The why is not to be smart or show off or achieve anything. The why is simply to be involved in Torah for its own sake; it is our sacred divine mission on earth; we serve God and Torah, not ourselves.

It feels essential to learn and teach Torah in such a consciously religious framework.

I find that this attitude has helped to shape and change my teaching style. For me, the project is always a communal project. I don't own the Torah. It is a relief, in a way. Unlike in academia, where I have to prove my expertise and added cleverness, in Torah study, I can simply be a conduit for opening *others* up to the beauty of the Torah. My focus moves away from myself and out toward my students and the Torah text we are studying. The culture I want to create in a group is one that does not prize smartness so much as honest and authentic encounter and connection—both with the text and with each other.

I have been drawn to the hasidic idea that each person
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Daf Yomi: A Driver's Manual

By Yonina Bendheim Jacobson

A few *Shabbatot* ago, while speaking about *Parashat Korah*, the rabbi of our *shul* took the opportunity to exhort all of the members of the congregation to “stay in [their] lane[s].” He implored them to limit their aspirations to their determined lot, to be happy and content with their place, and to work on themselves spiritually, wherever they were.

Asking the congregation to think about their life aspirations in the context of Korah’s terrible sin felt jarring, as did the notion of staying in a predetermined lane. Instead, I found myself contemplating the road that I actually *have* been traveling for the past two years. That road is the busy multilane highway—bustling with exits and entrances, bridges and tunnels, U-turns and detours—known as the *Daf* (*daf yomi*). Here’s what I have learned while driving.

The On-Ramp

Almost two years ago, on Sukkot, I read—actually, consumed—Ilana Kurshan’s book *If All the Seas Were Ink*.¹ Upon finishing it, I decided that I would try to follow in the lane Kurshan had paved for me and start to learn the *Daf*.

Merge Quickly

Although it was not the beginning of the cycle, I started right after Sukkot with *Masekhet Makkot*. If you are going

¹ Ilana Kurshan, *If All the Seas Were Ink*. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2017.

Leaving Academia

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Unlike in academia, where I have to prove my expertise and added cleverness, in Torah study, I can simply be a conduit for opening others up to the beauty of the Torah.

has a special piece of Torah inside her, one that only she can uncover. What this means for me as a teacher is that my role is not so much to show my own Torah—except as a model—but to help my students uncover theirs. And as each person discovers her own Torah voice, there is also a beautiful flowering of a joint project that takes place. We each have a contribution to make to the larger eternal Torah project; we build on each other and grow through each other and are woven together through the threads of our communal Torah study.

I do not regret my academic study. Above all, being an academic has opened me up and enlarged my sense

to get into Gemara, there is no better on-ramp than the *Daf*. It’s more like taking the freeway than driving up the coast. You don’t have time to take in the view. The pages and their contents are rapidly moving by, and you had better just find your space, move in, and flow with the traffic.

Set Your Speed Limit

For those of us who listen to podcasts, speed—or the lack thereof—can be an issue. If you are a native New Yorker like me, it is likely that you will find yourself in the fast lane (a.k.a. 2× speed). That seems to be my “Goldilocks” speed—just right for getting through the day’s learning at a rapid clip, while still being able to digest the information. This also gives you the opportunity to review the *Daf* twice, if you want to, without too much time being spent.

Listening to a *daf yomi shiur* being taught by a male teacher to male students, I often feel like I’m eavesdropping.

The Long Haul

This isn’t a race. You are in this for the long haul. So settle in, pack some snacks, and get into the mindset. Ironically, committing oneself to a seven-and-a-half-year drive can be liberating. The knowledge that so many other people, known and unknown, are on the journey with you is truly exhilarating. If you are doing the *Daf* virtually, you will get to know the people in your online *shiur* or your podcast, and they will start to feel like family. Often, in conversations you are having around the Shabbat table,

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of what Torah is. The whole world is Torah. Every tool can be brought back in to the service of God and Torah—more recently, I have found myself drawn to the study of mindfulness, psychotherapy, and mysticism, and all of it opens my eyes to see new facets, new angles, new truths already in the Torah, but previously hidden to me. *Hafakh bah vehafakh bah dekula bah*: Keep turning it and turning it, for everything is contained in the Torah. I discover again and again that *ein od milvado*—there is nothing in the world that is outside of God; it is all God.

May we merit to raise children and students and grandchildren and grandstudents who continue to be links in the chain, to learn Torah for its own sake, and to experience the full breadth of the Torah’s wisdom.

Rachel Anisfeld holds a B.A. in religion from Princeton University and a Ph.D. in rabbinic literature from the University of Pennsylvania. Her book, Sustain Me with Raisin Cakes: Pesikta deRav Kahana and the Popularization of Rabbinic Midrash, was published by Brill in 2009. She currently lives in Atlanta, where she teaches Gemara at Atlanta Jewish Academy High School as well as adult education classes at Congregation Ohr HaTorah. She also writes a blog titled “Parsha Thoughts and More.”

you will discover someone else who is on the same journey as you, and whole new avenues and connections open up. The *Daf* truly is a world unto itself, and the knowledge that you are connecting and learning together with such a large cohort is inspiring.

Not to mention, of course, that you are traveling the same road that your ancestors traveled.

Parallel Spurs

Of course, it's not all about free-flowing information and ideas, and learning about what's on the two sides of the page assigned that day. Sometimes, I have the challenge many of us face of trying to reconcile my life as an Orthodox woman and my life as a woman in 2019. This challenge is brought to the fore even more as I navigate the *Daf* and often come across assumptions, assertions, and permissible behavior about and toward females that truly rankle. "Well, this is why they don't want us to learn this," I'll say to myself. Or "Some of these statements are made just to get to the extremes of an argument," or "That was then, this is ... oh yeah, the rabbi of my *shul* just told me to stay in my lane."

In addition, while on this parallel spur, I am generally listening to a *daf yomi shiur* being taught by a male teacher to male students. (Note: This is just what I have settled into. There are options to learn the *Daf* from women, and there are *shiurim* given to both genders.) Often, while listening, I feel like I'm eavesdropping. I am there listening in on what actually goes on when the *rebbe* is talking to his *talmidim*, but he has no knowledge of—and is thus in no way acknowledging—my presence or my gender. From this vantage point, I have been witness to any number of insensitive and frankly disturbing off-the-cuff comments that could easily have been avoided. "Well, don't listen, then," you might say. But the point is that I am getting a glimpse of what young, impressionable men who are the future of Orthodoxy are being taught, and at times it isn't pretty. This brings me to the next point, which is directed to driving instructors: Consider the alternate route.

The Alternate Route

Here's an example: Our learning for the day led us to a portion of the Gemara in which a comment is made that the *rabbanim* used to set the table for Shabbat. Great! A perfect opportunity for an educator of fine young minds to milk that idea for all it's worth. I can imagine saying, "Your role as future husbands will involve much more than taking out the garbage, as these role models in the Gemara exemplify," or, "You see, doing your part around the home is nothing new." Instead, to my chagrin, the comment went something like this: "There is a debate about whether this is mentioned here because it was a common occurrence, or because it was a distinctly uncommon one. So there is certainly a leg to stand on for not doing work in the house, but I wouldn't tell your wife that." What a missed opportunity to take that alternate route! In this instance, not only did the *rebbe* fail to spot an opening in which he could have inserted a modicum of parity into a truly

unbalanced system, but he also managed to perpetuate the old trope of placating the testy and nagging wife with a wink and a deception.

Another missed opportunity that I encountered was that I wanted to join the *Daf* in *shul* on Shabbat, since I couldn't listen to a podcast. In my *shul*, the *Daf shiur* is given between *Minha* and *Ma'ariv* (an inconvenient time for women), and in the men's section. To join, I needed to parade through the men's section, and then sit in one of the pews, as everyone but the *Daf* people were streaming out to *seudah shlishit*. I had no interest in making the de facto statement I was making, being the lone woman in this space. I felt uncomfortable and ill at ease. This was another juncture where an alternate route would have alleviated the issue. An easy fix would have been to have the *Daf* (ideally given at an easier time for women, but even if not) in a more neutral space, like a classroom.

Passing on the Right

I think I will, thanks.

Tolls

Of course, there are prices to be paid. One cannot seriously commit oneself to a multi-year project—and hope to get something from it—without thinking that there will be some sacrifice. For me, it comes as a trade-off for other types of learning that I might have wanted to do and that would have come more easily to me. The *Daf* also weighs on you until you lift it off yourself for the day, only to have it return the following morning. But the trade-off is well worth it. Every day, I arrive at an understanding of either something that I had no idea existed before, or one that I knew only tangentially. Often I arrive at the source of something that I had learned years before, but had never seen rooted in its original text. The *Daf* has served a crucial role in rounding out and strengthening my Jewish knowledge, particularly my Gemara literacy.

Additionally, nothing can replace the joy I feel when my younger children come into the car when I have been listening and say "not the *Daf* again!" If they grow up thinking that the *Daf* is the default radio setting in our lives, I will feel that I have succeeded in some small way.

Bumps in the Road

When undertaking a seven-and-a-half-year commitment, there are bound to be unpredictable potholes, and instances that will force you to yield or reevaluate your route. Whether it be a crisis at work, a family issue, or a *simhah* that needs your attention, you will likely find that you will miss a day or two (or a week) at some point during your journey. Do not be disheartened and do not give up. You can make up the lost learning and get back up to speed. You will feel accomplished, knowledgeable, Jewishly literate, and, above all, thirsty for more when you reach your destination. So buckle up, stay alert, and beware of other drivers who may want to cut you off. It's going to be a great ride.

Yonina Bendheim Jacobson is an attorney and educator. She lives with her husband and children in Lower Merion, PA.

Zakhar U'Nekeivah Bara Otam: Learning from Male and Female Teachers, Teaching Male and Female Students Differently

By Sharon Freundel

For many years, in the girls' *Tanakh* classes that I taught at a Modern Orthodox day school, I would help my students learn how to write and deliver a *d'var Torah*, which one student would present each Friday. The girls would sit and listen attentively to the speaker and then raise their hands to ask questions or delve deeper into a concept. It was a highlight of the week for them and for me.

When I accepted an invitation to teach boys' *Tanakh* classes, believing in equity in learning, I initiated the same approach to teaching *d'var Torah* skills to the boys that I had used with the girls. For those who have taught boys, the result won't surprise you. The first week, the presenter stood up, began sharing his *d'var Torah*, and within a sentence or two was interrupted by three classmates, correcting or questioning his thesis. It was an eye-opener for me, as I had never needed to direct the girls to wait with their questions and comments. It quickly became apparent that the boys needed explicit directions on what to do and what not to do. To their credit, once they were instructed on the rules of presentation, for the most part, they stuck to the structure.

This story captures in microcosm the differences between teaching boys' classes and girls' classes. It's worth noting that I have also taught *Tanakh* to coed classes, which creates a third dynamic: that of boys—as a general rule—being much less reticent than girls, who often need encouragement in a mixed classroom to avow firmly their ideas and opinions.

Granted, these are only anecdotes reflecting my experiences, yet, much of the research in the field confirms my perceptions.¹ Whether the differences between boys and girls are innate or socialized behavior is, frankly, beside the point. At the end of any research project,² debate, or discussion³ about the root causes of differences between genders, all parties come to the conclusion that nature and nurture are simultaneously responsible. There is no hard evidence to prove that one or the other

is the primary causative factor. However, it is clear that boys and girls learn differently,⁴ that their brains are wired differently,⁵ that they have been raised in a culture of different expectations and norms, and that even their moral development⁶ varies.

Importance of Having Teachers of Both Genders

Because of these differences, I would strongly suggest that it is important for everyone to be exposed to teachers of both genders (if this arrangement falls within the *hashkafic* boundaries of a school). In many Orthodox day schools, girls are more likely to be taught by men, and I believe it is just as critical for boys to be taught by women.

After my first week teaching the boys, one mother reported to me that her son came home incredulous, saying to her, "Did you know that women know Rashi and other *meforshim* [commentaries] and can actually teach them?" How sad that it took this child until eleventh grade to engage in deep learning from a Jewishly educated female teacher (beyond the primary grades).

The intrinsic differences between how males and females learn are consistent with their differing communication styles, as outlined in Deborah Tannen's book, *You Just Don't Understand*.⁷ Tannen's evidence underscores why, specifically, there is benefit for every person to experience Jewish learning with teachers of the same gender and the opposite gender.

The Evidence from the Song of Deborah

Males and females engage with the world differently, reflected by their communication and learning styles. As an example, I direct you to the Torah portion of *Beshalah* and its *haftarah*. In both, a song is sung—by Moshe and by Deborah, respectively—thanking God for protecting and saving the Jewish people. There is one subtheme that is absent in *Shirat Hayam* (the Song of the Sea) in

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In all too many schools, the *hashkafic* belief is that male students should be taught by men, whereas female students may be taught by either men or women.

¹ Research Spotlight on Single-Gender Education, September 20, 2019, <http://www.nea.org/tools/17061.htm>.

² Angela Josette Magon, "Gender, the Brain, and Education: Do Boys and Girls Learn Differently?" University of Victoria, April 2009, https://dspace.library.uvic.ca/bitstream/handle/1828/1411/magon_project_signatures_removed.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

³ Kim Parker, et al. "On Gender Differences, No Consensus on Nature vs. Nurture," Pew Research Center's Social and Demographic Trends Project, 22 Jan. 2019, <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2017/12/05/on-gender-differences-no-consensus-on-nature-vs-nurture/>.

⁴ Michael Gurian, *Boys and Girls Learn Differently! A Guide for Teachers and Parents*, John Wiley and Sons, October 19, 2010.

⁵ Margaret M. McCarthy, "Multifaceted Origins of Sex Differences in the Brain," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London, Series B, Biological Sciences*, the Royal Society, February 19, 2016, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4785894/>.

⁶ Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*, September 20, 2019, <http://ifkbb.tripod.com/eng24/gilliganstheory.html>.

⁷ Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation*, Ballantine Books, 1990.

Teaching Male and Female Students Differently

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the *parashah* that appears in *Shirat Devorah* (the Song of Deborah) in the *haftarah* (Judges 5:28): “Through the window Sisera’s mother peered, through the lattice she moaned, ‘Why is his chariot so long in coming? Why so late the clatter of his wheels?’” The answer given to Sisera’s mother by her female servants is contemptible, and yet is one with which she agrees, but that’s not the point. The point is that Devorah, in her womanhood, understood that even the evil Sisera was someone’s son and that there was a woman out there agonizing over the absence of her loved one. That is a quintessential female view, quite different from what we might expect from a male perspective. Perhaps this is one of the reasons for the juxtaposition of these two songs: to point out the difference in perspective between the genders. And that difference reinforces why every Jewish student should learn Torah from both men and women.

Role models of both genders can demonstrate for students what it means to be a righteous Jew and can elucidate in very different ways the beauty of our holy Torah.

The Barriers and the Rewards

Of course, the idea of all students being exposed to both male and female teachers is all well and good until reality kicks in. There are a number of barriers to implementing this optimal teaching paradigm:

- In too many schools, the *hashkafic* belief is that male students should be taught by men, whereas female students may be taught by either men or women. Certainly, the separation of the genders in some precincts has been taken to absurd levels, even with photographs of women being erased. I would maintain that it is precisely within these subgroups that boys need to be exposed to women’s intelligence, scholarship, and points of view. This model is necessary for Orthodox day schools of all stripes and approaches.
- The pool of available female teachers, especially at the high school level, is still remarkably shallow. Thanks to such institutes of higher learning as Yeshivat Maharatz, Yeshiva University’s GPATS (Graduate Program for Advanced Talmudic Study) and Azrieli School of Education in New York City, Nishmat and Matan in Israel, and others, the number of well-educated female Jewish studies professionals has increased. In terms of the history of the Jewish people, this expansion of women’s Judaic scholarship has been exponential. As a frame of reference, my grandmother was taught only the *Tzena U’reina* in Yiddish and could not read Hebrew; my mother was self-taught in *Tanakh*, and I—having attended a Jewish day school my entire

life—began learning Gemara only in college. Compare that to the education received by my daughter, who learned a much broader variety of *Torah Shebikhtav* (Written Torah) and *Torah Shebe’al Peh* (Oral Torah) literature during her day school tenure in the 2000s. It will take at least an additional generation to create a sufficient number of female teachers to allow each Jewish day school student to experience teachers of both genders.

- In my estimation, too many female Torah scholars continue to make the mistake of offering solely or primarily Torah lessons directly related to women’s issues. To be taken seriously, female Judaic studies teachers and scholars need to support the idea that the entire Torah applies to women—not just topics about women. They must begin to focus on Torah topics that are not gender-based, in order to put a female “lens” on everything in the Torah, all of which applies to every member of the Jewish people.

In the past few years, there has been an emphasis on raising the profile of women in STEM and on highlighting men in historically female roles such as caregivers and nurses. Similarly, let’s elevate to a norm the practice of everyone benefiting from having both male and female Torah teachers. Role models of both genders can demonstrate for students what it means to be a righteous Jew and can elucidate in very different ways the beauty and the secrets of our holy Torah.

The pool of available female teachers, especially at the high school level, is still remarkably shallow.

To date, I am not aware of any research that has been done to evaluate the outcomes of students learning Torah from both genders and the effect that might have on their Jewish connectedness and enduring identity. It would be interesting to assess whether this paradigm creates a significant difference in student learning outcomes. We surely need to do a better job of inculcating Jewish values into our children than we are currently doing. Perhaps this is one step that might help.

Sharon Freundel is the managing director of the Jewish Education Innovation Challenge whose mission is to catalyze radical improvement in Jewish day schools. Previously, she served as the Director of Jewish Life at the Milton Gottesman Jewish Day School of the Nation’s Capital in Washington, D.C.; before that, she taught and was the department chair for Tanakh (Bible) and Torah Shebe’al Peh (Rabbinics), and was the mashgiha ruhanit (spiritual guidance counselor) of the Upper School at the Berman Hebrew Academy in Rockville, MD. In addition, she teaches adult Jewish education classes.

A Yeshiva of One's Own

By Devora Steinmetz

“But why do you call it a *yeshiva*?? A *yeshiva* is for men. Women learn in *midrashot*!”

This is often the first question that people ask when they hear about the *yeshiva* that Drisha opened in Israel a year ago—especially in Israel, where there is no other learning program for women that is called a *yeshiva*. The word *yeshiva*—and the dissonance, and often discomfort, that it evokes for many people—offers a good focal point for discussion of the nature and goals of Drisha’s newest and most robust educational initiative.

The simplest answer to why the *yeshiva* is called a *yeshiva* is: Why not? What does it mean to create a full-time, multi-year intensive learning program and *not* to call it a *yeshiva*, because it is for women, not for men?

As a proud Barnard alumna, I like to say: Imagine if, when Columbia College refused to grant degrees to women, Frederick Barnard and Annie Nathan Meyer had decided to open a parallel educational program for women—but not to call it a *college*, because a college is for men! The whole point was to open the same opportunities for educational advancement for women that had for centuries been available to men. To call Barnard anything other than a college would be to concede that women are, in some fundamental way, different from men in their educational needs and in their educational horizons. Colleges are for men; for women ... well, they get something that’s not a college.

So, really, the question “Why do you call it a *yeshiva*?” doesn’t need answering at all. It’s called a *yeshiva* because it’s a *yeshiva*. Nevertheless, the word *yeshiva* is as evocative as it is old, and it carries a set of connotations that are worth unpacking in order to explain what is distinctive about the new learning environment that Drisha has created.

A *yeshiva* is a place where there are learners on many levels, all engaged in pursuit of a shared purpose. A first-year student can look up to second-year students; a second-year student can aspire to be like the fifth-year students; fifth-year students look up to the young *ramim*, who look up to the senior *ramim*, who look up to the *rashei yeshiva*. Not everyone will learn for five years or become a *ram* or a *rosh yeshiva*,

and that is as it should be. But everyone knows that, if they want to continue to learn and if they have the capacity to become great in learning, they can do so. There is no ceiling. Torah learning can be a lifelong pursuit; the only things that limit a person’s attainment are the individual’s own inclinations, capacities, and life choices.

Even though learning opportunities for women have increased dramatically over the past few decades, sadly there are still serious limitations on opportunities for women to become truly learned. Young women most often begin by having to play catch-up, not having been exposed to Talmud study in a serious way—and often not at all—before beginning post-high school study. Often there is little support for young women to learn past

the first year or two of *midrash*, and very few programs exist for women to continue learning for enough years to begin to become strong learners. Furthermore, only in rare settings do young women find role models of more advanced learners, *ramiot*, or learned female institutional leaders.

Yeshivat Drisha is structured differently. Led by Rosh Yeshiva Hanna Dreyfuss (Godinger) and Seganit Rosh Yeshiva Yael Shimoni, the *yeshiva* is a place where young women learn from *talmidot hakhamim*.

Rabbanivot Dreyfuss and Shimoni spend much of their time in the *beit midrash* learning together, growing in their own learning while modeling for the students that learning is a lifelong path, that everyone is a learner, and that all learners in the *beit midrash* are on a shared journey. The *yeshiva* opened with a cohort of students who had already learned for one or more years in a post-high school setting, and many of the students have committed to learning for at least three years in the *yeshiva*. The *yeshiva* will likely begin to accept *shana alef* (first-year) students in the not-too-distant future, but the core culture of the *beit midrash* is shaped by more-advanced learners who understand themselves to be only at the beginning of a long path of becoming learned.

A *yeshiva* is a place where people sit and learn—and, in sitting and learning, learn how to learn. There are no shortcuts, and a *yeshiva* schedule

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The simplest answer to why the *yeshiva* is called a *yeshiva* is: Why not? What does it mean to create a full-time, multi-year intensive learning program and not to call it a *yeshiva*, because it is for women, not for men?



Devora Steinmetz teaching a class at the Drisha Institute.

"My Body, Whose Decision?"

On July 29, at the Sixth Street Synagogue in New York City, JOFA held a panel on reproductive choices, looking at the issue from medical, halakhic, and legal perspectives. Dr. Susan Lobel spoke from her experience as an OB-GYN, describing the medical issues involved in abortion and fertility. Dr. Elana Stein-Hain reviewed the Jewish legal texts applicable to reproductive decisions and noted that *halakhah* does not speak of "reproductive rights" but of concern for life. Gail Katz, a lawyer, spoke about the potential conflicts that might arise from bringing the government into religiously based decisions. Dr. Michal Raucher was the moderator and guided the panel through many aspects of this complicated conversation.

More than 100 participants left the event thinking about several questions raised during the Q&A session, including "How do we expand the conversation so that it more actively engages those who are not women able to get pregnant?" and "What is the role of the Jewish people in engaging in this conversation on a national level?" Similar panels will take place under JOFA's auspices in Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles in the coming months.



"Finding the 'I' in Identity" Shabbaton

JOFA's "Finding the 'I' in Identity" Shabbaton was geared toward young, largely post-college, women and focused on the topic of identity—specifically, on the intersection of one's different identities. A particularly powerful activity involved discussing the identities that affect one's personal life the most: gender, sexuality, religion, socioeconomic status, citizenship, and race. From the discussion, participants realized how one aspect of their identity important to them might not manifest as strongly in another person.

Shabbat was spent singing and snacking; a warm and open space was created in which participants felt comfortable opening up with their personal stories. The Shabbaton ended with a period of silent reflection during which participants created art, meditated outside, or sat and read relevant articles and books.

JOFA and Yeshivat Maharat Summer Tour

For the third year, JOFA joined forces with Yeshivat Maharat to send women scholars all over the country in the summer. Some of the topics discussed were Miriam's legacy; grappling with potential conflicts between ethics and the Torah, as in the case of Amalek; and the Talmud and technology. The goal of the summer tour was to expose communities to the models of female scholarship and leadership espoused by JOFA and Yeshivat Maharat.

Megillat Ruth App

The new Megillat Ruth app launched shortly before Shavuot. Just as in JOFA's Megillat Esther app, this app helps users learn and practice chanting Megillat Ruth. It offers a translation of the entire text and switches easily from the Hebrew as a vowelized text to the unvocalized text as it appears in the *megillah* itself. JOFA received feedback from people all over the country who used the app to prepare themselves to read in front of a community for the first time.

93 Queen Movie Premiere

The 93 *Queen* movie premiere took place at Ohr Kodesh Congregation in Washington, D.C., this past June. This movie, directed by JOFA Board member Paula Eiselt, focuses on Rachel “Ruchie” Freier, a lawyer and mother of six who revolutionized the role of women in her ultra-Orthodox community by training them to work as EMTs. They established themselves as an alternative to Hatzolah, the all-male Jewish volunteer ambulance corps, despite the opposition of many in their community who felt this was not work that could be done by a woman. The movie showing was followed by a Q&A session with Paula Eiselt herself.

Screening of *The Unorthodox* at the Israeli Film Festival

JOFA and JCC Manhattan partnered to screen *The Unorthodox* at the Seventh Annual Israeli Film Festival in New York. This movie portrays the struggle of Yakov Cohen to establish Israel’s first ethnic political party to fight for the rights of Sephardic Jews. The event was attended by members of the New York City community and was reviewed on JOFA’s blog. (See review, page 31.)

Devorah Scholar Challenge Grant

The Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance seeks to expand the spiritual, ritual, intellectual, and leadership opportunities for women by advocating for meaningful participation and equality for women in family life, synagogues houses of learning, and Jewish communal organizations to the fullest extent possible within *halakhab*.

JOFA is pleased to announce the Devorah Scholar program, a new challenge grant opportunity generously made possible by Ann and Jeremy Pava. Orthodox synagogues may apply for a maximum grant of \$10,000 per year for up to two years for funding to support the hire of a Devorah Scholar, a woman who will hold a newly created spiritual leadership position within the synagogue.

Eligible applicants to be a Devorah Scholar include (but are not limited to) graduates of the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education, Nishmat, Ohr Torah Stone, Yeshivat Maharat, or Yeshiva University’s GPATS program.

The deadline to apply is March 1, 2020. To complete an application, visit JOFA.org. For more information, contact Daphne Lazar Price at daphne@jofa.org.



First Volume of *Hilkhot Nashim* Is Out: More to Come

The *Hilkhot Nashim* series, adapted from JOFA’s *Ta Shma* series, presents an in-depth review of laws relating to women in Jewish ritual life. Tracing the development of responses on a given topic, from Talmudic to Geonic to medieval to modern, each chapter reproduces all relevant halakhic sources in both Hebrew and English. This first volume is devoted to questions of women in the synagogue: Kaddish, *Birkat Hagomel*, and Megillah.

The book, published by Maggid Books, is the first in a series of four volumes. Subsequent books will deal with such questions as *Kiddush*, *Hamotzi*, *zimmun*, *she’lo asani ishah*, *minyan*, *kol ishah*, *tefillin*, *tallit*, and head covering. The book is now available for purchase at www.maggidbooks.com. Keep an eye out for the second volume coming in 2020!

Support JOFA on the DTT Slate for World Zionist Congress Elections

Be a part of history: Vote for Dorshei Torah v’Tzion (DTT) in the next World Zionist Congress.

Since 1897, the World Zionist Organization (WZO) has been holding elections once every five years to seat delegates to the World Zionist Congress (WZC). Today, the WZC focuses on improving the unity of the Jewish people and their connection to Israel, fighting anti-Semitism, creating a vibrant Jewish and democratic state, educating Jews around the world, and more.

JOFA, Yeshiva Chovevei Torah, the International Rabbinic Fellowship, and Porat have all partnered to form Dorshei Torah v’Tzion—Torah and Israel for All—to bring the voice of a committed and open-minded Modern Orthodox Zionist worldview to the congress. DTT is committed to Orthodoxy, dedicated to working with all Jews, open to expanding the role of women in all areas of religious, spiritual, and political life, and focused on strengthening the ties between the diaspora and the State of Israel.

To register to vote, visit www.ZionistElection.org. Elections will take place from January to March 2020. The actual World Zionist Congress will be called into session in October 2020.

A Yeshiva of One's Own

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reflects that. Rather than trying to offer a large range of lectures delivered by star teachers, many of whom teach part-time in several different settings, a yeshiva focuses on a few core disciplines with the goal of achieving mastery. At Yeshivat Drisha, the weekly schedule includes five morning *sedarim* (extended learning periods) of *gemara iyun* (depth) and four *sedarim* of *gemara bekiut* (breadth), as well as *sedarim* in *halakhah* and Jewish thought. Most of the time is spent learning in *havruta*, with *shiurim* that enrich and deepen the students' learning. There is a strong focus on learning how to learn, no matter how experienced the learner might be. Faculty meet regularly with individual students to cooperatively assess the student's skills, what the student needs to work on, and how the student will work to achieve her goals. In addition, one afternoon a week is set aside for individual research in an area that each learner chooses to pursue, supported by faculty who guide the students' research and writing.

We hope that some of our students will assume the mantle of leadership in Torah learning and help create a generation of true *talmidot hakhamim*.

A yeshiva is a total environment. Students learn traditional texts, and they also learn how to *daven*, how to be their best selves, and how to form a *tzibur* (collective). At Yeshivat Drisha, students are present morning through evening; they are supported by stipends so that they can devote all of their time to learning. The community *davens* together three times a day, exploring what it means to create a *tzibur* of women, how to be a prayer leader, and how to engage more deeply in prayer. *Selihot*, *shabbatot yeshiva*, *tikkun leil Shavuot*, *megillah* reading, and a variety of other shared experiences create a community centered on spiritual pursuit

and shared practice as well as on learning. Faculty and mentors support individual students in their personal, religious, and academic growth.

Whatever path [a woman] takes, the yeshiva will have equipped her with the knowledge, skills, self-awareness, and self-efficacy to build a life shaped by Torah learning.

A yeshiva is a place that trusts Torah and Torah learners. It is a place that is guided by aspiration rather than by fear. It is shaped by the assumption that learning will help bring learners to good places, to lives of goodness and service of God. The question we are most often asked in America about Yeshivat Drisha is "Are you giving *semikhah*?" No, the yeshiva is not giving *semikhah*. The yeshiva's goal is to enable women to learn Torah at the highest level, to become bearers and transmitters of Torah, in some cases to become *talmidot hakhamim*. Each woman will take her learning on the path that she chooses, whether she chooses to pursue *semikhah*, whether she chooses to become a Torah scholar and teacher, or whether she chooses to pursue a different calling. Whatever path she takes, the yeshiva will have equipped her with the knowledge, skills, self-awareness, and self-efficacy to build a life shaped by Torah learning. And we hope that some of our students will assume the mantle of leadership in Torah learning and help create a generation of true *talmidot hakhamim*.

Dr. Devora Steinmetz serves on the faculty of Drisha Institute in the United States and Israel and on the leadership team of Drisha's new yeshiva in Israel. She is the founder of Beit Rabban, a Jewish day school in New York City, and the author of scholarly articles and books on Talmud, Midrash, and Bible. Dr. Steinmetz also serves on the faculty of the Mandel Institute for Nonprofit Leadership.

JOFA is the place where you share ideas with like-minded people. JOFA is where you find the tools for advancing social change in your community. JOFA helps you connect with feminists who are on the same journey that you are on. JOFA is YOU. It's who you are. It's your identity, your voice, and your community.

Become a member of JOFA to ensure that you are part of the community of JOFA members.



WHERE YOU BELONG

For more information, go to www.jofa.org

Last Summer at Nishmat: How Torah Learning Refreshed My Soul

By Dvora Levy

As a psychotherapist, I am the instrument of my work.

In addition to my degree and education, my own personal experiences and the work I've done with myself are what I bring to the individuals and couples who entrust me to help them with their pain and their challenges.

I also bring my relationship to God. That relationship sustains me, and I have worked hard to keep that connection a part of my life. One of the ways I have maintained that connection is by hosting and teaching a Shabbat afternoon class for women in my home for the past 14 years. Studying and delving into Torah texts have given me the strength, perspective, and faith to face whatever challenges came my way over the years and to do the work I have chosen to do. The Torah texts strengthen my connection to God, which serves as the scaffolding beneath me.

Last summer, I underwent a particularly difficult experience in my personal life. It was also the summer I decided, for the first time, to go to Israel specifically for a week of Torah learning. I chose to learn in Gush Etzion at Michlelet Herzog's *yemei iyun* in *Tanakh*. I arrived at my hosts in Gush Etzion tired and emotionally drained. What I encountered was a smorgasbord of *Tanakh* learning—the most exquisite Torah learning from giants of teachers, imparting their insights. It was breathtaking to see thousands of men and women, from Israel and abroad, moving, with great efficiency, from room to room, tent to tent. The texts began to speak, reminding me of God's personal involvement in our lives—narratives that reinforce within the reader stronger *emunah* (faith). I was receiving a life-giving infusion from narratives such as that of Avigail (1 Samuel 25), who was put in the position of needing to save her family after her husband, Naval, triggered King David's wrath. But then Naval died, and Avigail married King David! The wheel of fate does turn, with God directing. The *Tanakh* texts transported me to a world where God is close and Man/Woman is not alone. The text had supported me and held me aloft once again.

Another Meaningful Opportunity

That meaningful experience led me to find another opportunity. This past summer I participated in a week of learning at Nishmat. In contrast to the Herzog smorgasbord, Nishmat was a gourmet meal, with a daily schedule that allowed for more in-depth learning and *havruta* (partner learning) time. The theme of Nishmat's summer program was "Power, Leadership, and Responsibility"; these topics were explored through the

lens of *Tanakh*, Gemara, *halakhah*, and Jewish thought.

Learning at Nishmat, I was surrounded by the echoing voices of sages from long ago, and, once again, the famous personalities of *Tanakh* with whom I was so familiar came to life. I was thrilled by the dramatic world of King David and resonated with the private supplications of Hannah. I followed Levi from his birth through generations of descendants. I absorbed the energy of the time of the

Prophets, those who still heard the voice of God, who spread their message to keep the faith, and who encourage us to hear, through our own still voice, the word of God.

A Click, and Then Understanding the Gemara

I had grown up with a *shul* in my basement. My fantasy, as I lay in bed on Shabbat mornings, was to cut a hole through the floor and slide down the support pole so I wouldn't need to exert myself by using the stairs. When asked what I wanted to

be when I grew up, my answer was to be a mom to 12 children (this was after reading *Cheaper by the Dozen*) and to be a rabbi. In the 1980s, rabbinic leadership was not an option for young women and neither was serious Gemara learning. At Nishmat, there was a significant amount of Gemara learning. In the *beit midrash*, my mind was challenged in a new and exciting way. At first, I was frustrated, trying to understand and analyze what the Gemara was saying. There is a unique type of logic to the text that takes getting used to. However, at one point, after great mental exertion, it clicked—I understood the Gemara! The feeling was euphoric.

In contrast to the Herzog smorgasbord, Nishmat was a gourmet meal, with a daily schedule that allowed for more in-depth learning and *havruta* time.

I am not a stranger to knowing how to connect with others. However, a new process for me—or, rather, one that I had not engaged in for many years—was *havruta* learning. I observed with fascination the process of putting two strangers together and having them meet over the intellectual exercise of study. Initially, there was an awkwardness in this encounter for me. My *havruta* was a stranger. On day one, I was aware that we were feeling out each other's strengths. She liked to read the

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Torah Lishmah: For Women's Sake

By Sophie Bigot-Goldblum

Camp was over, the children were being picked up by their anxious parents, and we, the exhausted staff, were finally relaxing a little.

"So what are you up to now?" asked my fellow *madrikh* (counselor). We had been so busy running after restless teens that we had not discussed our future projects.

"I'm going to a yeshiva in New York City," I answered genuinely.

"What do you study there?" he asked, puzzled.

"Well you know, the same old, same old: Gemara, halakhah, a bit of *Tanakh*, and some *hassidut* if we're lucky."

"But weren't you doing that last year too?" worried my young colleague.

I had no intention of worsening my case by correcting him. I had actually spent the past two years studying *Torah lishmah*—Torah for its own sake.

His anxiety for my future worsened. "Do they at least give you a diploma?" My answer would not appease his anguish.

"Then what are you supposed to do with all those studies?" he asked.

My Journey Causes Distress

Since I've embarked on this blessed journey of Torah studies, many a conversation with a stranger has turned into a weird replay of earlier talks with my necessar-

ily worried mother. I am very sorry for the distress my learning choices cause my community, but whenever the description of my occupation comes up and sparks well-meaning worries and interrogations, I cannot help but wonder: Would that conversation be identical if I could grow a beard?

Would my young Orthodox colleague at camp have asked me, "What do you study in yeshiva?" I had to bite my tongue not to answer, "*P'shita*"—the answer is obvious—the Gemara's favorite response to seemingly unnecessary questions.

The answer is not *p'shita* for this young man because he cannot truly believe that the place where I study is actually a yeshiva. I must either be misusing the term or the institution must be trying to pretend to be something it cannot be, because I, a woman, attend.

His second question was even more revealing. Most people, when they find out that I have been lingering on the benches of various yeshivot for more than a year, have a similar reaction. It seems clear that, in their eyes, I have overstayed my welcome. In an Orthodox context, one year spent in a women's seminary can only be positive; young women thereby affirm their commitment to Torah and generally deepen their connection to Israel by spending a year in Jerusalem's religious suburbs. However, even though taking one year "off" is acceptable, three years cannot but denote laziness. Among my male friends, to the contrary, one is deemed serious about Torah learning when he stays on for a second year at his yeshiva.

A man deciding to stay on at his yeshiva for a few more years than originally planned testifies that he has found the right path for himself. For a woman, on the other

How Torah Learning Refreshed My Soul *continued from page 19*

English, I the Hebrew. We soon realized that we would cover more text if I followed her aloud English reading in the Hebrew text with my eyes. The next day, we began straying from the actual text, sharing our ideas and the insights we had from our internal libraries of textual experiences. On day three, we began sharing more personal parts of ourselves. I began to feel an emotional connection. On days four and five, I felt as if I were learning with a good friend. I am left in awe of the power of the *havruta* relationship.

**I am left in awe of the power of the
havruta relationship.**

I listened intently in the *mussar* (moral teachings) class to see how psychotherapy dovetailed with *mussar*. Rabbi David Sperling taught how to work on one's *middot* (character), using the Ramban's letter to his son as a text. In addressing anger and how not to get angry, he spoke about being able to see the other person's perspective.

This got me very excited, as much of my work with couples involves helping each spouse hold two realities. I was so excited to hear him describe something that I was so passionate about that I went over to him after class and handed him my pen, on which "Hold Two Realities" and my website were printed. It didn't take long for my internal self-doubting voice to question whether I had been too forward, at which point I quickly engaged my reassuring voice and said with a quiet chuckle, "The therapist and the man of *mussar* probably share the attribute of not judging others."

I returned to the United States looking forward to resuming my work. Reality now seems to have a slightly different shade of color. There is a sense of well-being inside me. The text once again has helped me feel more connected to God. I bring that sense into my office. It fills my being. I am reminded that I am the instrument of my work.

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hand, staying on for too long makes her look as if she is running away from her responsibilities.

These diametrically opposite responses spring from a simple assumption: Torah study for men is an end goal, a sacred obligation, whereas for women, it is at best a means to stricter halakhic observance, if not merely an enjoyable, innocuous “gap year,” or some time off for oneself. Hence the recurring question, which I believe does not have an equivalent query for my male friends: “Are you getting a diploma?”

The Question of Diplomas vs. *Lishmah*

If Torah study is a valuable end in itself, there should be no need for a diploma to acknowledge my learning. A diploma is a piece of paper that, through society's common belief, translates knowledge into market value. This evaluation is quite at odds with the values of *Torah lishmah*, Torah for its own sake.

There is no denying that the question of diplomas and titles is crucial, because women need to be able to turn their years of studies into a source of social and professional recognition. I have observed that people from more liberal backgrounds are more willing to ask me whether I am becoming a rabbi rather than “Will you get a diploma for it?” However, these two questions, coming from different religious sensibilities, spring from the same source. While the Orthodox-leaning streams of the community recognize and value *Torah lishmah*, they do so only for men or apply a double standard for women, as illustrated above. At the more progressive fringes, women's learning is encouraged, but confined to professional training, and *Torah lishmah* for either men or women is uncommon.

While the number of places offering Torah study for women has increased over the past decade, what is striking is the percentage of those institutions that deliver diplomas or *semikhah* of some sort. It is still incredibly difficult for a woman to study Torah without committing to becoming some sort of communal leader of a specific denomination or movement.

My experience as a young European Jewish woman illustrates this lack: There was simply not one institution on the continent that would allow me to study Torah without having to commit to becoming a rabbi. Why would I not accept the rules of the game, and simply become a rabbi?

Why I Don't Seek the Title “Rabbi”

For women not a part of the Reform or Conservative denominations, the very choice of a title is not a straightforward one, and few feel they have the liberty to just be “a rabbi.” When their male peers receive *semikhah*, they do not need to ponder what title they will choose, weighing the social and professional implications of being recognized for what they are. They will become rabbis, regardless of the rabbinical school they attended or the denomination or movement they identify with. Whereas *rabbi* is a generic term for a learned male Jew, the mere use of the title by a woman is perceived either as a femi-

nist statement or at least affiliating its owner with a given denomination.

In the community I come from, a man who claims to be a rabbi is automatically assumed to be a strictly observant Jew, more so than if he were a layperson. However, if a woman makes a similar claim, she is paradoxically challenged and questioned on her halakhic observance. The assumption is that, if she is willing to depart from the tradition vis-à-vis role definition, she probably equally takes some liberties with halakhic practices. In this context, using the title of “rabbi” might, paradoxically, be the greatest obstacle to the propagation of one's Torah.

There's another, more personal reason for why I am reluctant to attend rabbinical school. I admire the achievements of previous generations and value the fight women have waged to take on roles and titles reserved for men. The earlier stages of feminism have pushed women to claim equal capability in exercising masculine roles. Women needed to prove that they could do it too. Many members of my generation believe that the point has been well made; women have shown that they can lead, teach, and nourish communities spiritually and intellectually just as well as their male counterparts do.

I believe that it is now time to show that we collectively—people of all genders—can function not just as well as men, but better. It is now time to move past this masculine model of leadership in which titles and a clear vertical hierarchy are central in establishing authority. Women have been successful in making a breach in the masculine monopoly on knowledge and leadership in Jewish communities, but it's the very monopoly of authority and thirst for symbols of power that should be questioned.

True Gender Equality = Torah *Lishmah* for Women

I understand the need to create institutions that will advance women within their communities; by delivering both high-quality training and ordination, they have opened a much-needed discussion about women's leadership roles in our praying and learning spaces and trained women who have served as role models for my generation.

However, my personal belief is that we will reach true gender equality only when women are also offered the possibility to study Torah for its own sake, without demanding of them that they make it their profession.

We know that double standards are at the core of every form of discrimination. By offering women few possibilities to learn and grow without having to take on the responsibility of guiding a community as a religious leader, are we not holding women to double standards and levying an expensive entry tax on women's Torah study?

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The Road Not (Yet) Taken: Creating a Coeducational *Beit Midrash* in France

By Myriam Ackermann Sommer

Some time ago, as I meandered through the streets of Paris and the historic Jewish district of Le Marais, I chanced upon the splendid synagogue on Rue Pavée (see photo). The verse “How goodly are thy dwellings, O Israel” (Numbers 24:5) naturally came to mind. It was interesting, I then reflected, that I had used the words of a non-Jew, Bilaam, to describe the beauty of this place and what it inspired in me. I was, like Bilaam, essentially an outsider trying to look in. Almost instantly, I thought of my male friends and cousins who could be studying inside at this very moment, sitting in the *beit midrash* with their *havrutot* (study partners), poring over volumes of Talmud and tomes of commentaries, benefiting from the guidance and spiritual aura of prominent rabbis, and enjoying the holy atmosphere of this unique place, where only wars of the mind are fought. A heavenly place, indeed! If, as *Mo’ed Katan* 29a suggests, the sages would never relinquish Torah study—not even in the world to come—then this is definitely what the world to come looks like to me.

So, as Jewish women, what will *olam haba* (the world to come) look like to us?

I never actually walked into the *beit midrash* on Rue Pavée. There had been no such place in the small town in the south of France where I was born and raised by very mildly observant parents, who gave me as much love as a child could hope for, but almost no taste of Jewish study. (For example, we kept kosher at home, but I had no idea why.) Then, I did enter a few Orthodox *batei midrash* in France—mostly in Strasbourg, Alsace—but I was almost immediately asked where my husband was and gently told to leave (because “the women’s section is upstairs”). There were a few exceptions—for instance, a *beit midrash* I went to in Lyons, where an older friend of mine allowed me to come in and introduced me to some of his study partners. But that was exceptional. What I could not do was simply walk into a *beit midrash* without having been introduced by an insider and study Torah or Talmud alone or with my husband, as I had tried to do in Strasbourg, without being told that I had to leave. It was always implied that I was distracting

the men at this specific time, in contrast to any other daily life setting, during which it would be considered acceptable for men and women to intermingle, even in Orthodox circles.

Looking for a *Beit Midrash* for Women

I was eighteen when I first came to Paris to finish my B.A. after studying in Lyons for two years. At the time I was extremely thirsty for Torah, and I looked for a place where women might come and study at any time—a *beit midrash* for women. I did not find it. Although there



The historic synagogue on Rue Pavée, Paris.

were, and still are, programs that call themselves “*Beit Midrash* for Women” in Paris and Strasbourg, to the best of my knowledge, they offer only lectures (*shiurim*) on a daily or weekly basis. This was not what I was looking for; I sought a space that would truly be ours to study in throughout the day, unsupervised, in pairs, whenever we might have some time to spare. (For what better way could there be to spend one’s spare time?) I tried to describe it this way to my non-Jewish friends from college: a library of sorts, but with the boisterous, loud, and passionate atmosphere that characterizes our *batei midrash* and is the pride and joy of our people.

Why, then, did it not already exist? Because, as some of my Orthodox friends told me, women do not study because they do not *have to*. They have other priorities and responsibilities. Those who do study do so at home, as female *hareidi* friends of mine have pointed out. And those who champion an egalitarian access to Jewish texts (as do most non-Orthodox Jews) do not always

imply that they are willing to invest several hours every day in the study of Torah or even study on a weekly basis. Some French Reform and Conservative Jews I know study at home and go to *shiurim* several times a week, but do not express a need to create a *beit midrash* that is available all day long, and I do not think that there exists a coeducational *beit midrash* among the Reform and Conservative *kehillot* in France.

When I realized how hard it would be for me to study in a proper *beit midrash*, which I consider to be a nexus of Jewish life (and perhaps the one I, a notorious bookworm, love the most), I turned to the United States for help and guidance. America's amazingly dynamic and committed Jewry has long been an inspiration to me.

My husband wanted to be a rabbi (and is currently studying at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah), and I was looking for an Orthodox school that would offer a similar orientation. I found Yeshivat Maharat. When I flew to New York City for the first time to meet the students and staff, I was thrilled to discover that I was not alone. What I had dreamt of, they had created and were using every single day—a *beit midrash* for observant, Torah-loving women to study all day long! Men could come in and study too, even though this was mainly a sanctified safe space for women. This became my ideal representation of a *beit midrash*, and I wished to create a similar “room of one's own” in France, emulating my American friends. It would be a place where free access to women was prioritized but men would be just as welcome, as they usually are.

A Solution to the Problem

This, I thought, was the solution to the problem that I had witnessed in France, and to the lack that I had experienced and deplored. But was it a problem per se? Was I fighting only for a place for *me* to study? I thought so at first, but it now seems to me that the segregation in *batei midrash* is part of the feeling of rejection that has turned several brilliant young women I know away from the Torah and Judaism. They have looked for a more egalitarian context in which to study and have turned to the realm of academia, where they excelled, or have turned their energies toward fighting for feminism in society at large (where they are supported, rather than derided, for their actions and struggles). Every time I have heard one of their stories, I am deeply hurt.

As Jewish women, what will *olam haba* look like to us?

As I realized how hurtful turning women away from Torah study could be, I kept my hopes high and decided that I would try to do something about this phenomenon: that I would find a place where I could study with my sisters and brothers in order to have a more meaningful Jewish life. Being a student at Yeshivat Maharat helped me realize that there are other women

who would gladly to come and study in a place where they feel welcome, that many of us are longing to know more about our tradition and our texts, but cannot or will not ask for it because they fear rejection.

I am now twenty-two years old. I received my M.A. in American Jewish literature a year ago and passed a competitive test that enables me to apply for a position as assistant professor in France. I was offered a position at the Sorbonne, but I decided to decline—for now. I have other plans: My husband, Emile, and I have moved to New York City to complete our rabbinical studies at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah and Yeshivat Maharat.

We dream of coming home to Paris in three years and creating an Orthodox community that is inclusive and welcoming, with a coeducational *beit midrash* where all will be able to study *lishmah*.

We believe that the purpose of our calling is to bring Jews closer to our heritage and to the mysteries and joys of Torah and Talmud study. We have tried to do so since we got married by giving weekly coeducational *shiurim* introducing young men and women to the joys of *havruta* learning through the association that we created together—Ayeka. We strongly believe that “study is greater [than deeds], for it leads to action” (*Kiddushin* 40b) and that men and women should have an equal share in text study, no matter what their level of halakhic obligation is.

We believe that this is one of the greatest challenges that Judaism must face in our time—the growing yearning for study that Jewish women express and that must be answered. In keeping with this ideal, we dream of coming home to Paris in three years and creating an Orthodox community that is inclusive and welcoming. In this community, there will be a coeducational *beit midrash* where all will be able to study *lishmah* (for the sake of Torah itself) and will feel free to speak up and eager to explore our shared legacy. This *beit midrash* will be one of a kind and will constitute our answer to the thirst for study. This, we believe, is the key to the preservation of our treasured Torah. And we will work as hard as necessary to get there. In Robert Frost's words, “I have promises to keep/And miles to go before I sleep.”

Myriam Ackermann-Sommer, born and raised in France, is currently a first-year student at Yeshivat Maharat. She is completing a Ph.D. in American Jewish literature at the Sorbonne and the Ecole Normale Supérieure. She and her husband, Emile, a rabbinical student at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, co-founded the association Ayeka, a co-ed study group for Parisian students and young professionals.

You Want Me to Teach?

By Abby Kogan

My teaching experiences began in May of last year when my synagogue's youth group was planning to do a joint *tikkun leil Shavuot* program with one of the synagogues in the neighborhood. They wanted teenagers to teach—not only to their peers, but to the adults there too. The theme chosen for the *tikkun* was supposed to draw in teenagers as well as adults. The topic was stories of #MeToo in the *Tanakh*—and I was very interested.

The story that I chose to prepare was *Megillat Esther*. I picked it because the story of Esther has always interested me, and I learned it in depth in my *Navi* class that year, as a freshman at Yeshiva University High School for Girls. Four other teenagers also volunteered to teach, and so the preparation began.

Each teenager was paired with a rabbi mentor to help prepare for the class, and I went to work right away. I looked through my notes to find sources that I wanted to present, and I thought of my outline of how I would teach it. Using Sefaria.org (see article by Sara Tillinger Wolkenfeld on page 8), I was able to build a source sheet that I was proud of. I had practiced teaching the class to my parents, hoping to make sure everything went smoothly. Later that night I walked over to the synagogue and was a bundle of nerves. I was confident about my source sheet, but I was terrified at the prospect of teaching adults who might know more than I did. I was even more nervous when I was told that my time slot to teach was at 3:30 in the morning.

By the time my class rolled around, I had already eaten too much sugar to keep myself awake, and I had only about fifteen students, many of whom were teenagers trying their hardest to stay awake. I had been hoping for a more promising crowd, but this was the moment I was waiting for; I had worked so hard, prepared so much, and now was my chance to prove myself. I stood up in front of seven adults and eight teenagers and began to speak. At first, my voice was shaky, and my sentences were choppy, but as I continued to speak, my voice grew stronger and more confident. I was finding a good pace and asking engaging questions. I loved the topic that I was teaching and that was clear to my audience. I was the most awake I'd ever been at 3:30 in the morning. After my 45 minutes were up, I stepped down and took a seat, receiving many compliments from my friends and adults. I was on a high and so extremely proud of myself.

Teaching a Weekly Class

I thought that would be the last of my teaching, but during the summer in between my freshman and sophomore years, I was approached by the rabbi of my synagogue (who also happens to be my dad). At my synagogue, there are classes a half hour before *minyan*

every day, taught by various members of the synagogue. The topics taught vary each day and are *Tanakh*, *Mussar* (ethics), *Gemara*, and *Mishneh Torah*. My dad informed me that the person who usually taught *Mishneh Torah* was stepping down, and he was looking for someone to fill the spot and thought of me. I was shocked. I asked him many questions and came up with many possible problems with my teaching: “I don’t know the material well enough.” “The adults won’t want to listen to some kid.” “I’m not even that good of a teacher.” My dad reassured me, telling me I would be fine. It was hard to believe because he’s my dad, and of course he would say that.

I was confident about my source sheet, but I was terrified at the prospect of teaching adults.

We prepared in advance, studied the material together, and worked on how I would structure my class. My dad was teaching another class at the same time as my class, so he wouldn’t be able to

be there to support me. I was worried about my lack of guidance, but I went to the first class very optimistic. I realized how many familiar people had come to hear me speak, and I immediately loosened up. These were members of the synagogue whom I’ve known almost my whole life. I decided that I would treat them as equals, and hopefully they would treat me the same. My biggest fear was not being taken seriously because I was just 15 years old. I had nothing to worry about. All the people who came to my classes valued my knowledge on the subject and listened to me when I spoke; they respected me and enjoyed my classes. Although it carved out a big part of my “busy high schooler” week, I enjoyed teaching. That same sense of pride that I had felt after the *tikkun* filled me, and I was so glad to be able to teach in a place where I was respected and valued.

When Shavuot rolled around again, I was ready to spend another *tikkun leil Shavuot* with my youth group and even more ready to teach. I remembered my past experience fondly and was desperate to recreate it. Then I was told that the youth group *tikkun leil Shavuot* would not be taking place this year due to lack of participation. I was so disappointed. I wanted to teach and believed I was good at it. My dad realized my disappointment and asked if I would like to teach at our synagogue without the affiliation of the youth group. I was hesitant to agree. My fear was rising again. Teaching to adults was fine if it was through a program in which teens were encouraged to teach, or if it was a small group, but this was just me, on my own, teaching more than 75 people—and not just people, but adults.

My dad eventually convinced me, and I began to work on a source sheet once again. The theme of this *tikkun* was “Struggles, Setbacks, and Second Chances,” and I decided to teach the story of Esav and Ya’akov. Many of my teachers, family members, and even friends could tell you that I was fascinated by the story of Esav and

Ya'akov, mainly because of the way the commentators depict them as villain and hero, respectively. From reading just the plain text, I had always thought that Esav was "in the right" and Ya'akov was very much "in the wrong." Therefore, I was eager to research this idea further and be able to share my opinions with a larger crowd who would be listening to what I had to say. My class outline was written, and the day came. The synagogue was packed. I was so nervous that I couldn't even eat dinner. I kept asking my dad questions about how I would teach so as to make sure my class was perfect. I had even done a practice presentation with my mom to make sure I stayed within my allotted 30-minute time frame. I had gone through the sources and questions a million times to make sure everything was exactly as I wanted it to be. I knew that I shouldn't be nervous, but couldn't help myself.

**I've learned that, even at 16,
I have knowledge that I can pass
on to other people.**

I went up to the podium and nervously began to speak. As I continued, my true self started to show through. My natural humor was present in my demeanor, though I continued to teach and discuss at a high level. I asked thoughtful questions and received insightful answers from the adults. I kept everyone engaged and interested. It was an amazing experience. I loved that I was able to command a room full of people, even though I'm only 16. I ended my class and received thundering applause, with nonstop compliments. Though it wasn't necessary, this validation made me so proud of all the work that I had done. It was such a rewarding experience, and though I had my doubts, I don't regret a thing. I loved it.

Always Wanted to Be a Teacher

For as long as I can remember, I've wanted to be a teacher. However, I thought that to be a teacher, I would first need to go to school and get a degree, or at least grow up. I realized through these three experiences that no matter the age, no matter the setting, you can always be a teacher. I've been so privileged to have these positive experiences and opportunities. I've learned that, even at 16, I have knowledge that I can pass on to other people, and, though it might be difficult, I have reached a stage of maturity at which I can receive the respect of people older than I. When I was first asked to teach a class, my answer was, "You want *me* to teach?" It is now, "I'd love to! When and where?"

Abby Kogan is a junior at Yeshiva University High School for Girls, where she thoroughly enjoys her Talmud and Tanakh classes. In YUHSG, she is an assistant editor for her school's newspaper. She looks forward to pursuing a career in education and loves to learn and teach whenever she can.

A Part in the Play: The Female Orthodox Semikhah Student Who Didn't Want to Become a Rabbi

By Mira Neshama Niculescu

I never saw myself as a feminist. That's because I never had to. I was born in the 1980s in Paris into a secular family. I was raised by an old angry Romanian intellectual (my father) and a nurse/social worker who was really a hidden intellectual (my mother). I never had to be a feminist because all the battles, it seemed, had been fought for me: I grew up in a world where women could dress as they liked without being called names, where they could work as they pleased without being seen as bad wives and mothers, and choose what they wanted to do, who they wanted to be, and who they wanted to be with, without anyone having the right to interfere in these choices.

Thanks to the battles fought by women before me, I was able to pursue a trajectory and a career in which I, as a woman, was fully empowered. I got to do everything men had been doing for centuries: I learned Gemara, completed a doctorate under conditions Virginia Woolf could only dream of, and became a Torah teacher and certified Jewish meditation teacher.

Pragmatic Ideologies: How Our Experiences Shape What We Believe

Yet I never considered becoming a rabbi. This position didn't come from any ideological basis for me. I have had female teachers and friends who are rabbis within all the denominations, and I think they are doing a fantastic job. For me, it was not an ideological issue, but rather an autobiographical one: coming from a family in which my father didn't embody the traditional patriarchal role—he neither earned money nor drove a car nor built shelves—while my mother assumed all those roles (in addition to the traditional women's tasks of cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the children), I was trying to become a woman. And for me, a congregational leader ought to be a man. Rather than being a feminist, I wanted to be feminine.

**Why would a woman who never
wanted to be a rabbi—
and still doesn't—pursue the
path of semikhah?**

Yet all the while I was aware of how much our ideologies are shaped by our lived experiences; how much our belief systems, which we defend so ardently,
continued on page 26

A Part in the Play

continued from page 25

are often nothing much more than our sublimated psychological needs. I always knew that my not wanting to be a woman rabbi was, rather than an ideological position, a very subjective one, based on my own personal needs.

Yet here I am, in October 2019, about to start learning in Beit Midrash Har'El, founded by Rabbis Daniel Sperber and Herzl Hefter, the first *beit midrash* in Israel to give Orthodox *semikhah* to both men and women. Everything I had been running away from for years, when I was learning at Drisha, sitting in close proximity to the first class of Yeshivat Maharat in 2012, has come back to confront me. Why would a woman who never wanted to be a rabbi—and still doesn't—pursue the path of *semikhah*?

Changed Priorities

It seems that my needs have changed—and that is because it seems that the feminist fight may not be finished, after all. I draw this conclusion from my own experience.

As a woman teaching Jewish meditation, I've often noticed a remarkable difference in the way students relate to me as compared with my male rabbi colleagues. The latter, from the start, are automatically given all the credit. Their title, together with their gender, seems to guarantee the seriousness and the Jewishness of what they are doing.

I, by contrast, have had to overcome obstacles to gain a similar level of authority. My Ph.D. or my being a long-time student of Jewish thought don't seem to make a difference. I am a woman—a young woman, and a single woman at that, not even a *rebbetzin*—and immediately all the clichés are trotted out. I have been asked: Am I doing some kind of yoga? Is this some kind of New-Age thing? Do I really know what I'm doing? Is it Jewishly approved? Is it halakhic?

Only after hearing me speak and teach would people trust me. While my male rabbi peers were given credit *lekhat'hila* (from the beginning). I often noticed that I became legit *bede'avad* (after the fact). Whereas they had to screw up for people to start doubting their skills, I had to work really hard for people to start believing in mine.

An Oxymoron? Being a Female Torah Teacher in Paris

It is even more so in Paris, where female Torah teachers are still rare¹ and where opportunities for women to study are still in their early stages. I remember that once a man came to a Jewish meditation class where I was presenting the *inyan hashkata*, the “subject of quieting,” by the Piaczesner rebbe, a hasidic meditation technique developed by the students of Reb Kalonymus Kalman

Shapiro in Poland in the early twentieth century. This is a wonderful contemplative method aimed at quieting the body–mind in order to retrieve inner clarity before asking God to help us fix our *middot*, our personality traits. The Piaczesner rebbe is largely unknown in France, as he hasn't been translated. Therefore, I had brought a source sheet, so that *frummer* (more religious) participants could be assured that this was, indeed, Jewish.

In came a man, with a dark suit and an open shirt, respectfully wearing the serious black *kippah*, someone not very religious, as he had told me in a previous conversation, but trying to get closer—and taking things very seriously.

In a lovely old Ashkenazi *shul* in le Marais, the old Parisian Jewish neighborhood, we sat around the table with the Hebrew text and its French translation. We did everything by the book. There were no cushions, no incense, no candles or the like. This was not the San Francisco Bay Area, and I was very mindful of the symbolic boundaries of a generally more traditional

French audience. But it wasn't enough. The man left the session looking very uncomfortable. The next day I wrote to him an email, saying I was checking in, as he seemed to have left distraught. He replied simply, “Could I have the source for this text?”

I sent him the reference, including the chapter and page number, with a link to where he could buy *Derekh Hamelekh*, the source book for the text.

I never heard from the man again.

A Stamp of Approval: Playing My Part in the Play

This experience made me realize two things: First, if I want my word to reach as many people as possible—which, I believe, is the goal of any teacher—it will be helpful to have the stamp of approval of a male Orthodox rabbi, which I'm going to ask for. Second, it may be useful to get my own stamp of approval too, my own credential—and that is *semikhah*. It probably still won't be enough for many Orthodox Jews, especially in France, but if that's the case, I can do nothing for them.

In the meantime, for those who believe a woman can indeed get Orthodox *semikhah*, the degree will help me take my place on the stage of Jewish religious teaching. Some call it “a seat at the table.” I call it “a part in the play.”

Fundamentally, though, this is not the main reason I'm pursuing *semikhah*. I'm doing this because I want to learn and grow. I want the tradition to go “through

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¹ Exceptions are Rebbetzin Joelle Bernheim, who has created MEJAF (Maison d'Études Juives au Féminin), a learning group for women, and my colleagues Nathalie Assal and Hannah Cassar, who have created the Devarim Project, a Talmud study group open to both women and men.

me.” I want its languages, texts, mindsets, and voices to flow through me and transform me, as I carry them toward others and toward the future.

I still don’t want to be a rabbi in the sense of leading a congregation. I’ll leave that to the men. I still want to feel like a woman, for what that means to me. I want to let the men play center stage, while I play hidden Rivka behind her veils, the invisible-but-not-so-invisible crown around, behind, or above her, on the other side of the *mehitzah*. I want to keep watching the sea of white *tallitot* swing gently, as I sing along, invisible, with the *shaliah tzibur* to create the harmony.

Then, of course, when I teach, I’ll be center stage too. Just not in the same place, not at the same time, nor in the same roles. After all, aren’t we meant to be complementary, so we can play together on the stage of life?

Dr. Mira Neshama Niculescu earned her Ph.D. in sociology of religion at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in Paris and learned Torah as an art fellow at the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education and at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies. She is a licensed Jewish mindfulness teacher from the Institute for Jewish Spirituality and teaches Jewish meditation at Pardes and Or HaLev Center for Jewish Spirituality in Israel. She can be contacted at <https://www.miraneshama.com/>.



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Song of Riddles: Deciphering the Song of Songs

By Geula Twersky

Gefen Publishing House, 2018, \$14

Review by Tammy Jacobowitz

For those privileged to grow up with Bible study as a steady companion, the Bible's distance from the sensibilities, assumptions, and conditions of our world may take time to detect. Among the gifts of immersion in the verses, chapters, and books of the Torah is a strong sense of familiarity with the Bible's contours, despite the seemingly unbridgeable gaps. To take a benign example, how many day school graduates pause when reading the translation "God spoke to Moshe," as if it were a perfectly relatable occurrence that God speaks to a human being? Yet for many adults who continue to read the Bible seriously, it may be necessary to achieve a certain degree of distance of separation to negotiate a sense of closeness. The breathing room, as it were, between the self and the text is precisely the space where meaning or sense-making can be forged. Geula Twersky's new book *Song of Riddles: Deciphering the Song of Songs* is a wonderful example of this sort of effort. Learned, erudite, and creative, Twersky boldly takes on the challenge of *Shir Hashirim*, a book ever in need of a balanced, "updated" interpretation. If you have been exposed to the *Song* within a traditional context, it is virtually inseparable from its ancient interpretation. As Rabbi Akiva famously taught, the love song ought to be read allegorically, to symbolize the longing and love felt between God and the Jewish people. But if you pick it up as an adult, it can be hard to ignore the evocative imagery and seamlessly assign it only symbolic value. Do you have to choose between a surface reading and its theological overlay?

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Twersky will not make you choose. Among the wonders of Twersky's book is the way in which she manages to occupy an insider's view of *Shir Hashirim*, a voice that is intimate with the text, while maintaining the clarity and incisive perspective of a trusty guide who surveys the text and its contours from without. Her insider-outsider

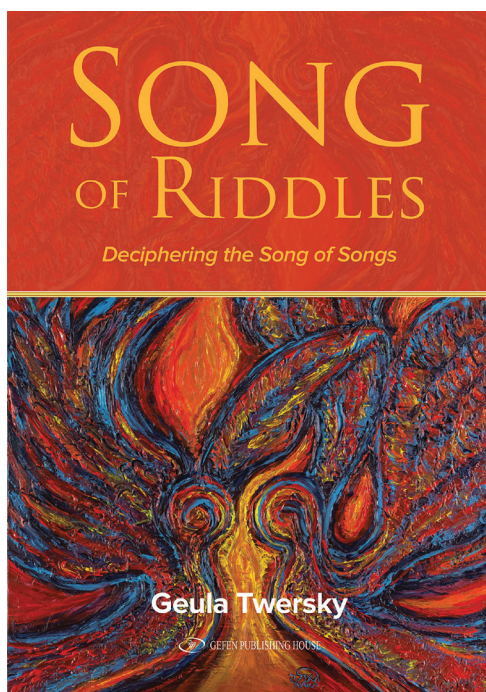
gaze is best experienced through her unique version of the rabbinic conclusion. Rather than adopt the allegorical reading wholesale, Twersky engages in a sophisticated analysis of the literary components of the book, drawing on a wide range of academic scholarship on riddles, metaphors, and the *Song* itself to deftly build her argument: the lovers represent the *keruvim* (cherubs, divine winged beings charged with guarding), which in turn capture the passionate, intimate connection between God and the Jewish people.

Twersky takes the reader on a fascinating tour inside the *Song*, exploring its style and alleyways, mining the text for "clues" to decode the larger message or meaning of the book. In her view, the *Song*'s theological message is deliberately hidden within the nooks and crannies of the *Song*, "shrouded in the poetic language of riddles." Obscured, layered, and composite, the oblique *keruvim* references reflect a paradoxical symbol. In the Temple and in the *Song*, the *keruvim* reflect both human yearning for intimacy with the divine, as well as an impossible distance from God.

Twersky takes the reader on a fascinating tour inside the *Song*, exploring its style and alleyways, mining the text for "clues" to decode the larger message or meaning of the book.

Twersky's book is filled with close, careful readings of verses, although the book is organized by topic, not by the order of the *Song*. As she tracks down textual anomalies, metaphors, and allusions, Twersky continuously comes to the conclusion that the *keruvim* are the best explanation for problems in the *Song* that have long vexed scholars in both the traditional and academic camps. Her arguments are creative and highly original, but one of the book's significant contributions is the footnotes, in which she reviews and summarizes a great deal of previous work on the *Song*. Newcomers to the *Song* will gain a thorough understanding of the book, and veteran readers will benefit from her novel suggestions and interpretations. Twersky's book is a wonderful read for all those looking to carve out space for an adult reading of the Bible.

Dr. Tammy Jacobowitz is the chair of the Tanakh department at SAR High School in Riverdale, New York, and is the founding director of Makom B'Siach at SAR, an immersive adult education program for parents. She is an adjunct faculty member of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, where she teaches the pedagogy of Tanakh.



Sarah Schenirer and the Bais Yaakov Movement: A Revolution in the Name of Tradition

By Naomi Seidman

The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization/Liverpool
University Press, 2019, \$44.95

Review by Roselyn Bell

If one wanted to trace the beginnings of formal Jewish education for women in the modern era, one could do no better than to read Naomi Seidman's *Sarah Schenirer and the Bais Yaakov Movement*. This volume is both a scholarly history of the movement and a translation of many of Schenirer's writings into English for the first time. Seidman is the ideal person to write this book, as she is a recipient of a Bais Yaakov education; the daughter of Hillel Seidman, an early historian of the movement and contributor to its journal, and Sara Seidman, a teacher in a Bais Yaakov school; and she is herself a professor of Jewish history and culture at the University of Toronto. With this background, Seidman has the empathy to capture Sarah Schenirer's voice and to admire her achievements, along with the academician's tools to put Bais Yaakov into its historical context and to show its ties to other modernizing movements of the interwar years in Europe.

Seidman is at her best when she applies her historian's tools to show how Bais Yaakov's culture was influenced by other Jewish movements and trends of the day.

Seidman admires the immensity of the changes that Schenirer brought about for Jewish women, both institutionally—in creating a vast network of supplementary schools, full-day schools, and teacher training seminaries—and personally, in providing space within the schools and the Bnos youth movement to nourish girls spiritually and give them a measure of independence. From the first Bais Yaakov school that opened in Krakow in 1917, the movement grew to some 225 schools with 36,000 students by the time of Sarah Schenirer's death in 1935. Together with the parallel boys' schools under the aegis of Agudath Israel, it was the largest private Jewish school network in interwar Poland. Seidman dispels some of the hagiographic myths that have surrounded the story of Bais Yaakov's founding. Schenirer was not simply a poor pious Polish seamstress, but rather a charismatic, intellectual, freedom-loving young woman whose inspiration for educating girls Jewishly came from a sermon she heard in Vienna, not Krakow.

In many ways, Sarah Schenirer was the right woman in the right place to take on a problem that everyone

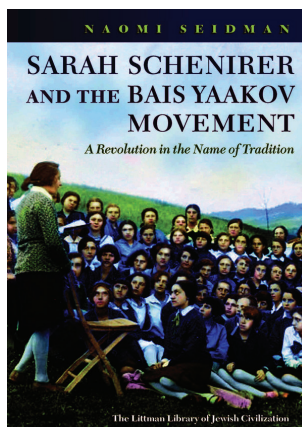
knew existed: the mismatch between the intensive Jewish education offered to boys in yeshivas and the totally secular education girls received in public schools or convent schools. This discrepancy created a “*shiddukh* crisis” of enormous proportions as well as leaving girls vulnerable to being caught up in the sex trafficking trade. The Polish Orthodox rabbis were aware of the problem, but couldn't overcome their institutional turf battles to solve it. Along came Sarah Schenirer, eschewing politics, deferential to the rabbis on matters of *halakhah*, yet pursuing her vision of a grassroots movement to educate and inspire Jewish girls. Seidman suggests that *because* she was a woman, Schenirer could avoid entering into the Talmudic debate between Rabbi Eliezer and Ben Azzai about the propriety of teaching a daughter Torah and simply go after her goal.

Schenirer quickly won the endorsement of the Belzer Rebbe (Yissachar Dov Rokeach), opened her first school in 1917, received the financial support of the Agudah of Krakow in 1919, founded a teachers' seminary in her apartment in 1923, brought the Bais Yaakov schools under the financial umbrella of Keren Hatorah (Agudath Israel's educational foundation) in 1923, and launched the Bnos Agudath Israel youth movement in 1926. Seidman views this rapid institutionalization as in tension with the charismatic and revolutionary nature of Bais Yaakov's founding. She notes that “the forces of charisma and institution, revolution and routine, centre and periphery, operated in tandem even after the institutionalization of the movement.”

A facet of the institutionalization was the creation of a publication to spread the religious perspectives of Bais Yaakov and to provide a platform for Jewish women to write. The *Bais Yaakov Journal* featured poetry and literature, exhortation and debate, written by men as well as women, by scholars of stature and by ordinary Bais Yaakov girls, sometimes using pseudonyms. Among the topics discussed was the “woman question.” Were the proponents of women's rights correct that the rabbis were treating women as second-class citizens? Although the responses of the rabbis in the journal would not warm the hearts of contemporary feminists, the fact that the discourse was allowed, and even encouraged, shows that such fundamental issues were engaged.

Seidman is at her best when she applies her historian's tools to show how Bais Yaakov's culture was influenced by other Jewish movements and trends of the day. She traces in rich detail Bais Yaakov's interactions with the German neo-Orthodoxy of Samson Raphael Hirsch, hasidism, socialism/communism, Zionism, Yiddishism, and feminism. From neo-Orthodoxy, Bais Yaakov borrowed modern educational methods such as a formal curriculum, pedagogical training of teachers, and textbooks. From hasidism came religious fervor expressed in singing and in pilgrimages to visit the rebbe—in this

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case, in visits to Schenirer's home and seminary. From socialism came espousal of principles of social justice and a glorification of living in "happy deprivation." Zionism, with its Tarbut school system, was perhaps Bais Yaakov's greatest competitor for students, yet some of Zionism's ideals seeped into the Bais Yaakov culture, as, for example, in the urban kibbutz established by Bnos of Lodz to prepare young women to emigrate to the Land of Israel. Orthodox Yiddishism, championed by the charismatic *ba'al teshuvah* Nathan Birnbaum, sought to return the Jewish masses to traditional Jewish life through their "language of the heart," Yiddish. In Bais Yaakov seminaries, where German was largely the language of instruction, returning to Yiddish was an ideological choice. Seidman points out that Schenirer herself embraced the cause before mastering the language; she was more linguistically at home in Polish and German than in Yiddish.

Bais Yaakov's relationship to feminism was complex—and interesting—as it stood both outside and inside the movement. Its leaders made common cause with organizations fighting the sex trafficking of Jewish girls, and Bertha Pappenheim, the founder of the *Judische Frauenband*, visited the Krakow seminary. On the other hand, the *Bais Yaakov Journal* disparaged the pursuit of equal rights and suffrage as "foolish," and championed a conservative ideal of "returning the Jewish home to its former glory." Protests against male privilege were few and far between, yet when Agudah tried to exclude Bnos young women from receiving scarce certificates for passage to the Land of Israel, a Bais Yaakov writer invoked the precedent of the daughters of Zelophehad to fight it. And Sarah Schenirer, a single woman for most of her life (though she married twice), kept her birth name (for the most part) and often called her students her "sisters."

This volume is packed with surprising and fascinating details that make the interwar era of Bais Yaakov come alive. All this rich culture and organizational flowering came to a tragic halt with the Holocaust. Bais Yaakov teachers taught in the ghettos and even in Auschwitz and Birkenau, but the institutional network of schools and seminaries, and most of the students, perished. After the war, Bais Yaakov reestablished itself in Israel and in New York, but with a more conservative and narrow base, geared to a more homogeneous and fully observant clientele. (Think more uniforms, fewer hikes in the woods.)

Seidman has performed an act of reclamation in assembling so many pieces of the picture of the Bais Yaakov culture that flourished for a brief while, and in translating to English Sarah Schenirer's diary and other writings. We can look back upon this brief "revolution in the name of tradition" and find inspiration, as well as cautionary tales, for our own pursuit of women's Torah education.

The Fortunate Ones

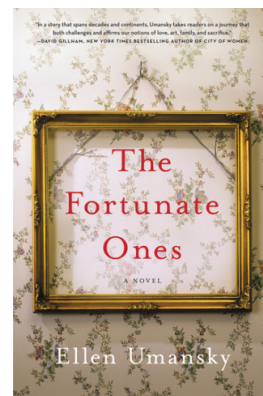
By Ellen Umansky

William Morrow, 2017, \$26.99

Review by Roselyn Bell

Lost family and restituted art are the themes that bind the many layers of this skillfully woven historical novel by Ellen Umansky.

The story begins in Vienna in 1936 with Rose Zimmer, a beloved child born into an *haute bourgeois* Jewish family that has collected a (fictional but historically credible) painting, *The Bellhop*, by Chaim Soutine. As events turn dark in Austria, Rose's parents send her and her brother by *Kindertransport* to England, where they survive but are bereft of their parents and of the beloved painting that embodies the culture and family they lost. Yet Rose and her brother are "the fortunate ones" in the context of the Holocaust.



Umansky is especially good at evoking the feel of different locations, and she has done her homework on the historical facts of the *Kindertransport* and of stolen art restitution.

A second strand of the story is set (mostly) in present-day Los Angeles, where Lizzie Goldstein, a hip but deeply alienated lawyer, returns for the funeral of her father. She, too, has memories of *The Bellhop*, which was once in her father's possession, but her associations with it arouse guilt and ambivalence. Rose and Lizzie, introduced by a family friend/lawyer, share their obsession with the painting and search for it together. In the process they become close and help heal one another's wounds.

The plot line skips back and forth over decades of history and over distinctive settings—Vienna, London, Los Angeles, and New York—at a dizzying pace. Umansky is especially good at evoking the feel of different locations, and she has done her homework on the historical facts of the *Kindertransport* and of stolen art restitution. Like many contemporary novelists, she turns the focus from past to present so frequently as to make both time frames seem interlocked.

The characters are easy to empathize with, but—trigger warning—are distinctly not *frum*, engaging in eating and sexual behaviors that are not "kosher." Yet they are very Jewish, shaped by Jewish history and by Jewish art.

This is Ellen Umansky's first novel, although she has published short stories and nonfiction in various distinguished publications. We hope there will be more novels to come—and if so, we will be the "fortunate ones."

The Unorthodox

The *Unorthodox*, a film sponsored by JOFA in the 2019 Israeli Film Festival at the Marlene Meyerson Jewish Community Center in Manhattan, is based on the true story of the early days of the Shas political party in Israel.

As I watched the film, I found myself wondering why JOFA had chosen this particular film to co-sponsor. The film features only a handful of women, clearly failing the Bechdel test for female representation. Furthermore, although the movie highlights the significant efforts of Shas to remedy discrimination against Sephardic Jews in Israel, it noticeably lacks any discussion of the treatment of women within the Israeli Orthodox political scene.

Feminism, particularly intersectional feminism, acknowledges that marginalization and discrimination do not exist in distinct and clear categories. The term “intersectional feminism” was coined by law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw in discussing a 1976 court case against General Motors in which the company had refused to hire black women but was found not guilty of both sex-based and race-based discrimination because the company did hire women (white women) and black people (black men). We now recognize that discrimination comes from a variety of factors, and we cannot ignore the experiences of other marginalized groups.

The Unorthodox tells the story of the founding of the Shas party in Israel. The protagonist, Yaakov Cohen (Shuli Rand), is motivated to create a religious Sephardic political party when his daughter Heli (Or Lumbroso) is expelled from a Bais Yaakov school because of her Sephardic lineage. In one particularly poignant scene, the school administrator accidentally refers to Heli by the name of a different Sephardic student, indicating that the school views Sephardic students as basically interchangeable. In another scene, an Ashkenazic client and politician refuses to pay Cohen for a significant amount of work he’s already completed. The client challenges Cohen to sue him in rabbinic court, knowing that the *beit din* will favor a well-respected Ashkenazic leader over a struggling Sephardic businessman. Turned off by the corruption within mainstream rabbinic institutions, Cohen is moved to put together a grassroots movement to advance the needs of the Sephardic Orthodox com-

munity. His movement eventually becomes the Shas party, now a major player on the Israeli political scene.

The film leaves a hopeful impression that over the years the Shas party has greatly improved the lives of Sephardic communities throughout Israel. However, as recently as 2010, Slonimer Hasidim in the Israeli town of Immanuel made headlines for refusing to comply with a court order requiring the town to integrate the Ashkenazic and Sephardic religious girls’ schools.

One might hope that Shas—and the country—would take the lessons learned from the party’s formation and rise to power to address the still-present discrimination against women. The film’s early scenes of Sephardic children being banned from schools and the violent intimidation of those who dared to oppose the mainstream rabbinic leadership are eerily reminiscent of the recent actions of leading *haredi* rabbis in Israel regarding women in politics. In response to some *haredi* women seeking representation within the religious political parties, Rabbi Mordechai Blau, a leader of the Agudat Yisrael party, was quoted by Israeli newspaper *Ha’aretz* as saying that any woman who “comes close to a party without the leadership of the great sages of Israel will find herself without a *ketubah*,

forbidden to study in the educational institutions, and her business boycotted.”

There has never been a female MK from Shas. Adina Bar-Shalom, the daughter of the late Shas leader Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, had to face the difficult choice of running for office under a different political party or remaining within Shas behind the scenes, as Shas still does not allow women to run for office. Ultimately, she chose to stay behind the scenes of her father’s party.

Shas has done significantly good work in fighting discrimination, but there is still much more work to be done. One should take to heart the messages of revolution, upheaval, and equality portrayed so elegantly within *The Unorthodox* to continue to fight injustice, be it race-based, sex-based, or any other combination of factors.

Beverly Gertler is an attorney and a feminist. She currently lives in New Jersey with her spouse and daughter.





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