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THE FLOURISHING OF HIGHER JEWISH LEARNING FOR WOMEN

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This is written in memory of Daniel Elazar, whose sweet intelligence enriched the lives of all who touched him. His deep connectedness to *Am Yisrael*, his perception of human nature and the workings of the polity, his warmth, and yearning for justice and truth beyond the commonly accepted academic truths, made him a friend and mentor. Each time I spoke to him I came away with new insights about life and society, particularly Israeli society.

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Hundreds of Women Scholars

A revolution is taking place. Yet most of the orthodox community denies that it is a revolution. They look with wonder and pride at what is being created, and yet downplay the revolutionary aspect of this feminist development. To some extent, this soft-pedaling of the revolutionary aspect of women's study of Judaism is tactical. The leaders of the revolution are fearful of arousing the opposition of the conservative elements of the religious Establishment whom they need for both financial and institutional support. But most of all, revolution runs counter to the self-image of most of the orthodox women involved in women's study. Revolution is identified with the breakdown of tradition, and these women cherish and want to promote the tradition. "Study is part of a spiritual quest," says Dr. Vered Noam, former director of Midreshet Lindenbaum.

Within the last year there were two conferences in Jerusalem bringing together thousands of women of all age groups to study Torah at a high level. The significant aspect of these conferences is that the scholars who taught at these mass learn-ins were themselves learned women, *talmidot hachamot*, who teach at the scores of institutions for women's study that have mushroomed in the last decade. "It is clear," said one scholar, "that the energy in religious Jewish life in Israel today revolves around women's study of Jewish sources." This energy radiates from institutions in the religious Zionist sector, and the women involved are primarily of orthodox orientation, but it embraces and influences women from all parts of the Jewish spectrum. It is generating a chain reaction that is changing the quality of Jewish life.

There are hundreds of young women scholars who have by now attained extensive understanding of biblical texts, navigating easily among traditional and modern commentaries, revealing, in particular, the spiritual, psychological, and literary side of the texts. There are women who teach Kabbalah and Jewish philosophy. But the most revolutionary development has been the emergence of women who are studying Talmud and *halakhah*. A generation of *talmidot hachamot*, women talmudic authorities, is emerging. Slowly, women are penetrating this vast and complex literature, where a great investment of time is necessary to grasp the talmudic logic and master the extensive corpus of rabbinic material, enabling them to compare different approaches and come to conclusions.

In the past, it was claimed that women were unable to deal with such structured thinking. In addition, their roles as mothers and wives would not allow them the necessary stretches of time to become proficient in the large body of talmudic material. The learned women who today are becoming experts in *halakhah* are disproving that premise. Although the women initially entered the field "out of love of Torah for its own sake," their ability to negotiate talmudic texts has put them on the front lines of *halakhic* change, particularly as it pertains to women's issues, like the *agunah* issue and that of women rabbis.

The Hafetz Haim Supports Women's Study in 1918

There is no doubt that Jewish tradition has been ambivalent about women's education. But one must take into account that this was the way of the world until the last century. A high level of education was simply not the norm for women. In the Jewish tradition, the rabbis posited that, while it is a "*mitzvah*," a commandment, for all men to study Torah, this is not incumbent upon women. There is an argument among rabbis in the Talmud as to whether

fathers are permitted to teach their daughters Torah. "Ben Azzai claims that each man must teach his daughter Torah, while Rabbi Eliezar argues that he who teaches his daughters Torah, perpetrates foolishness" (Talmud Bavli, Masechet Sotah). This has been much quoted as an argument against women studying Torah.

Nonetheless, there were examples of individual women whose fathers were learned men and taught their daughters Torah, particularly if they had no sons. Bruria, for example, was a daughter of the scholar Hananiah b. Teradyon and was married to the second century scholar Rabbi Meir (a student of Rabbi Akiva who later helped compile the Mishnah). The stories about Bruria present a model of the learned woman. But a later *midrash*, depicting her downfall when tempted by her husband's students, might come to indicate that this is the fate that awaits the learned woman. At the same time, it is believed that Rashi's daughters studied Talmud.

There have been other models of women learned in Judaism throughout the centuries. In sixteenth century Poland, Rivka Tichtener wrote "*Myaneket Rivka*," a book of *halakhic* instruction for women which included moral teachings as well as selections from the Talmud and Mishnah. In the eighteenth century, Leah Horowitz, daughter of Yoel Segal Horowitz, rabbi in Bolichev and then in the large community of Broide, was known to be a learned woman. In his memoirs, a wine merchant named Ber Bolichev describes how, as a youth, he would come to study with Leah Horowitz's brother on Shabbat afternoon. When the brother left him to figure out the talmudic text on his own, Leah Horowitz would see that he was puzzled and she would help him work through the *sugia* in the Talmud. She later wrote "*Techinat Imahos*," a supplicatory prayer for Rosh Hodesh Elul, in which she writes that everyone can wear the crown of Torah, including women.

It is important to note that there was never a clear prohibition against women's studying. There were attempts to keep women out of the public realm, but teaching one's daughter was the private prerogative of the father, and its advisability was open to interpretation. By and large, it was not a relevant issue in a traditional world where, even if women were literate in Hebrew and could read a text as they would read the prayerbook, they were not in a position to interpret and analyze the text. In the early modern period, their knowledge of the tradition was imbibed from the home, and from Bible stories in the vernacular literatures such as Yiddish and Judeo-Arabic. There are ultra-orthodox groups in Meah Shearim where, to this day, women are not taught Torah text itself but study lore about the Torah and are nurtured on Bible stories. Nevertheless, direct access to biblical text and mastery of

commentaries has become a *sine qua non* in the rest of the orthodox world. The issue that remains is whether this will become the norm in the study of Talmud, which is still regarded by some as an exclusively male domain.

The question of higher Jewish learning for women only became critical in the twentieth century, as women's education, in general, became more common. Jewish women in Eastern Europe began to study secular studies in the Gymnasias, becoming more learned in secular studies than in Jewish religious studies. As a counter to this, Sara Schneirer established the first Bais Yaakov school in Cracow in 1918. She received permission to found this girl's seminary from Rabbi Yisrael Meir Hachohen, the *Hafetz Haim*, one of the important rabbinic leaders of the early twentieth century, who felt that, at a time when the Jewish community could not depend on the home to perpetuate the Jewish tradition, formal Jewish education was necessary for women. The lack of Jewish knowledge was undermining Jewish life.

Today, many rabbis interpret this momentous decision to mean that not only are women permitted to study Torah but they are obliged to do so. They point up the important distinction between what is normative and substantial, and what was a social assumption of the time. If women would have studied Torah texts when this was not socially acceptable, they might have misinterpreted and misconstrued the Torah, taking it out of the larger context. But now that it is acceptable, and there are responsible frameworks in which they can be taught to negotiate Torah texts, it is even admirable to do so.

The Hafetz Haim's decision was the great watershed in women's religious education. As the great waves of immigration of the twentieth century brought Jews to Western Europe, the U.S., and Israel, religious educators in these countries could look to this decision as justifying increasingly intense Jewish education for girls through high school.

Jewish Education Beyond High School

Eventually, the trend went even further. In the early 1950s, Stern College for Women of Yeshiva University was established in the United States with an advanced Jewish Studies Program. But it was in Israel that the real revolution in women's Jewish learning took place. In the mid-1960s in Israel, Dr. Yehuda Copperman, an Irish-born *oleh* who had studied at Hebron Yeshiva and was married to Chicago-born Tzipporah Pincus Copperman, realized that religious high school girls in Israel had developed expectations of high-level Jewish studies but had no place to further their Jewish education beyond high school. Teachers' seminaries existed, but they were not challenging enough for many

of these young orthodox women hungry for further Jewish knowledge. Consequently, Copperman created the Jerusalem College for Women, popularly known as the *Michlalah*, emphasizing close textual analysis of Tanach. It was the natural next step in women's education. Although technically a teachers' seminary, it set a higher standard than most seminaries, and many Israeli women attended more for their own self-development than to pursue professional goals. A one-year program for American women was also created. Women like the late Maida Katz, who was a model of a learned woman for many of her students, Malka Bina, and Bryna Levy, who later became pioneers in the field, studied at the *Michlalah*.

There was a confluence of forces after the Six-Day War which further contributed to the development of women's higher Jewish learning in Israel. After the war there was a spiritual awakening in the Jewish people, concomitant with the 1960s' search for new values and ethnic identity that brought many young people to Israel. American rabbis who had come to Israel in the wake of the war began to open yeshivot for these returnees to Judaism. Side by side with the men's yeshivot, there was a demand for intense study of Jewish sources among American Jewish women. Mainstream orthodox women from the diaspora also felt limited as far as their Jewish education was concerned. In addition, they sought the excitement of a year away from home, and began streaming to Israel for a year of Jewish study after high school. They came to the *Michlalah* and other women's schools which mushroomed and continue to flourish today.

These schools of higher Jewish study for women have become the finishing schools of the orthodox. Often, they interface with Israeli women's schools for higher education. A few of the schools have both Israeli and American programs for higher Jewish education for women. It is not unfair to speculate that there has been cross-fertilization between the two populations, with the Americans emphasizing self-fulfillment and the Israelis focusing on the mastery of texts. Moreover, the incubatory period of intensive study in Israel contributed to a new atmosphere of Jewish study for women in the U.S. and the flourishing of institutions there like the Drisha Institute.

The early 1970s was also a time of religious feminist stirrings in the U.S. The Reform and Conservative movements witnessed demands for empowerment in Jewish ritual as well as in the Jewish community, leading to a rethinking of the male structure that dominated Jewish religious and community life. While feminism revitalized Judaism in non-orthodox circles in the U.S. during the 1970s and 1980s, orthodox women only then began to sow the seeds that were to create the learning revolution in the 1990s in the U.S. and Israel. In

Israel, the massive presence of young English-speaking women, many of them returnees seeking their roots, served as a catalyst in bringing religious feminism to Israel, but it was transformed in Israel from an American synagogue-centered revolution to one which emphasizes Jewish women's study.

The charismatic Rabbi Chaim Brovender, a doctoral student in Semitics at the Hebrew University in the late 1960s, helped create the first *baal-teshuvah* yeshivot for men and women, in conjunction with the ITRI yeshiva. Believing that all Jews stood at Mt. Sinai, and both men and women can study the Oral Law, he also taught women Talmud, as well as Tanach on a high level. In 1976 he founded the Bruria Beit Midrash, using the *hevruta* model of the yeshiva where people study together in pairs, working through the text in preparation for the teacher's lecture. This eventually became Midreshet Lindenbaum, and was integrated into the Ohr Torah Institutions in 1986.

It is appropriate that Israel is the center for the new flourishing of Jewish study for women, expressing the traditional ideal, "From Zion Shall Come Forth Torah." In the Old Yishuv, men would study Torah in yeshivot supported by communities in the diaspora. A secularized version of this was the vision of the Hebrew University as the center of Jewish culture. The Zionist founders put great emphasis on the study of biblical text, but were often alienated from synagogue religion and religious ritual. In general, Torah study is viewed as the most authentic of Jewish activities, most deeply characterizing the Jewish religion: *Talmud Torah K'neged Kulam* (The Study of Torah is Equivalent to the Whole Jewish Religion). The great innovation is that it is women who are now involved in *Talmud Torah*.

Nechama Leibowitz

No discussion of women's study of the Bible can take place without recognizing the importance of Dr. Nechama Leibowitz as a model and inspiration for women studying and teaching the Bible in Israel. Dr. Leibowitz came to the Land of Israel in the 1930s after studying in Germany. According to Dr. Marla Frankel, who has done research on Nechama Leibowitz's educational approach, Leibowitz rejected the feminist agenda. Nevertheless, she made it in the male world of Torah study. Her method of analyzing text through questionnaires that compared and juxtaposed biblical text and commentaries was pioneering. She was a master teacher. She taught on the radio and appeared in almost every educational forum in Israel. She was known throughout the country in both secular and religious frameworks.

Frankel described Nechama Leibowitz's approach thus: "Nechama Leibowitz was entirely independent in her approach, integrating a literary approach to the Bible with other schools of thought which would help her in her quest to create, through the use of *midrashim* and the rabbinic tradition, a constructive meaning to the text. She attempted to resolve the seeming contradictions to create a harmonious whole."

Contemporary Jewish Studies for Women

There are many institutions that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s which became the institutional springboards for women's study in Israel. Midreshet Lindenbaum expanded its post-high school study program for women from the diaspora and created new programs including a national service/army program for women that incorporates higher Jewish learning, similar to the intense Hesder Yeshiva program for men. Lindenbaum also initiated the Monica Dennis Goldberg Women's Advocate Program for the Israeli rabbinical courts, which prepares women to be advocates in the religious courts.

Malka Bina was one of the pioneers in women's study, teaching Talmud to women at Bruria. In 1988 she went on to create the Jerusalem-based Matan, the Sadie Rennert Women's Institute for Torah Study. Matan today boasts some 1,300 women, learning in more than a dozen programs at its center in Jerusalem, as well as at branches in Ramat Hasharon-Raanana, Haifa, and Beersheba. There are adult education classes where as many as 70-80 women crowd into an auditorium - grandmothers and mothers of young children, women from kibbutzim, Jerusalem, and its suburbs - sitting side-by-side studying Torah.

At the core of Matan are the more intensive study programs for young women before entering university and parallel to their university studies. There are fifty scholars in the Scholars *Matmidot* program. Twenty women have been intensively studying Talmud for three years in the Advanced Talmud Students program, which combines yeshiva-type learning with an academic analysis of the texts, again breaking down barriers between the old and the new. "We are attempting to create a cadre of women who can teach in the *midrashot* for higher Jewish education for women that are mushrooming. The women's study revolution is like a pebble thrown into water, creating larger and larger circles."

Midreshet Lindenbaum and Matan were founded by observant American-born Israelis who have been inculcated with an open, democratic approach. This is equally the case with Nishmat, another elite school for Israeli and American

women, founded by American-born Chana Henkin, and emphasizing *beit midrash hevruta* study of Talmud. Nishmat boasts programs on all levels of Jewish study, and attracts highly intellectual post-college Israelis and Americans. There is a beginner's program as well as an Institute for Advanced Studies for Women. Nishmat has pioneered the program for "halakhic advisors" that might be called the first step toward creating women rabbis.

Other elite women's institutions where women study Talmud, Tanach, and Jewish Thought in a *beit midrash* framework are: the Bar-Ilan University Midrasha where, in addition to their university studies, women undertake a Jewish Studies program parallel to the Bar-Ilan men's *kollel* program; Beit Midrash Hagevoah L'Nashim at Kibbutz Migdal Oz where young women study a year before national service, often returning for intensive studies afterwards; and the Kibbutz Hadati (the religious kibbutz movement) women's Hesder program combining army and study at Kibbutz Ein Hanatziv. These institutions are directed to younger Israeli women, and indicate how the revolution is catching on. Women's study is becoming an authentic Israeli orthodox form.

The programs emphasizing Talmud might be considered the most radical ones, but there are also fifteen *midrashot* associated with the Mercaz HaRav yeshiva where girls study for a year after high school, where there is an emphasis on deepening spirituality. They justify their heavy curriculum and demands for mastery of biblical commentaries by claiming that young orthodox women must be spiritually strengthened and supported before going out to face the dangers of the secular world. These are institutions which do not teach Talmud directly, but their achievements in biblical studies, practical *halakhah*, and Jewish thought inevitably change the family constellation and expectations. Many of these young religious women see Torah study as central to their lives and study with their fiancés and husbands. The hierarchy of the learned husband and the Jewishly ignorant wife who looks to her husband as the authority in Jewish learning is breaking down in circles where women engage in higher Jewish learning.

There are scores of other study programs which are open to both men and women, religious and secular, where women are engaged in creative study of talmudic, biblical, and philosophical texts. The institutions in this category include Ellul, Yakar, the Beit Midrash of the Masorti movement, the Masorti yeshiva, and the Shalom Hartman Institute. An important one-woman institution is the weekly Torah portion class of Dr. Aviva Zornberg, attracting English-speaking women. There are also women studying for graduate degrees in Talmud and Bible at Israeli universities. These women might also

teach at a women's institution of higher Jewish learning.. Dr. Tamar Ross teaches Jewish philosophy at both Bar-Ilan University and Matan. Interestingly, there does not seem to be the same tension between the universities and orthodox women's institutions, as exists between the universities and the yeshivot. "Women act as bridges between worlds," claims Malka Bina.

However worthy the co-ed institutions might be, this report has chosen to concentrate on modern orthodox women's institutions which include programs for the study of Bible, Jewish philosophy, and Talmud. These can be perceived as being at "the eye of the storm." The intensity and high level of the studies in these institutions, combined with the women's commitment to *halakhah*, makes this a groundbreaking development that has the power to generate a change of thinking in Jewish life in general. "Women's study is restructuring the conceptual constellations of orthodoxy," says orthodox feminist psychologist Dr. Malka Enker. "These women are not willing to 'jump ship' because of what they see as the problems in orthodoxy. Instead, they are demanding a rethinking of these issues within a *halakhic* framework." This is also evident in the many orthodox women's websites such as "Kol Isha," "The Women's Tefila Network," and "Women in Orthodoxy" that have developed as new electronic forums for educated orthodox women.

The Ideology of Women's Study

In her book *Next Pesach: Literacy and Identity of Young Religious Zionist Women*, Tamar El-Or notes that, for some time, observant Israeli women have been participating in secular educational and professional realms, but this new dedication to Jewish study is the first area of change for women *qua* religious women. It is natural that change should begin with study, taking into account the centrality of Torah learning "for its own sake" in Jewish tradition. The joy of discovery can be felt in those institutions where women are grappling with Jewish texts. In Judaism, as in life in general, "knowledge is power," and below we will describe what changes in religious law women are effecting through their study. However, most observant women in Israel studying the sources do not view learning in an instrumental fashion, but rather as a value in its own right. Learning contributes to their spiritual development, their connection to God who gave the Torah. They seek the tools for independent study of the Torah as part of an unmediated channel to God.

Esther Rosenberg, the director of the Beit Midrash for Women at Migdal Oz, a yeshiva for religious women, describes the new developments in women's education in terms of Jewish women's aspirations for greater religious

autonomy. In a lecture given at a conference on "Challenges in the Education of Modern Orthodox Young Women," sponsored by the Fanya Gottesfeld Heller Center for the Study of Women in Judaism, of Bar-Ilan University, Rosenberg explained that religious high schools for girls provide their students with a good Jewish education, but the young women often feel they are being spoon-fed by their teachers. The curriculum is imposed upon them from above, compiled in a syllabus, "A Page of Sources." They felt they do not learn to negotiate the works themselves, to look up talmudic passages or understand the structure of Maimonides' works or the *Shulhan Aruch*. According to Rosenberg, the new movement of women's study, structured on the *beit midrash*, the study hall concept, allows them an unmediated relationship to text and an active rather than a passive relationship to study and prayer.

"The *batei midrash* promote independent mastery of the sources. The *hevruta* system, where two people study the material together prior to class, places the responsibility on the women for understanding the texts, and not on a frontal lesson given by the teacher," says Rosenberg. Finally, she points out that women are creating women's learning communities. They have no tradition in this respect and are forging something new. They are more interdisciplinary. Their course of study includes Bible and Jewish Thought as well as Talmud, and there is an experiential aspect to these learning communities, with women going on hiking trips together and discussing personal issues. Oshra Koren, director of Matan's Ramat Hasharon branch, has gone beyond study to create spiritual forms of art for women's communities. She has organized a troupe of dancers, singers, comediennes, and herself, a story-teller, bringing arts and entertainment of a Jewish, spiritual nature to women.

The teachers and leaders of this orthodox women's study movement claim that these strivings for higher Jewish education are a consequence of internal developments rather than an imitation of feminist currents in the West. Yet, even if their religious/educational goals are internal responses, motivated by the desire to expand upon their Jewish education and take it one step further, there is no doubt that the desires for autonomy and responsibility are basic values that drive this yearning for greater Jewish knowledge, values that stem from the democratic/feminist *weltanschauung* of contemporary life. Jewish women are affected by this no less than other groups. They are not satisfied with men mediating their religious life for them, any more than they want men to mediate their careers for them.

One might speculate that the single-valued emphasis on men's Torah study that has permeated religious life in the last three decades has had a spillover effect on women. If Torah study is the primary means of connecting to God, then women, too, must devote themselves to this goal. In contrast to other feminist aspirations, the striving for personal religious development and self-fulfillment are clearly spiritual goals which counteract the narcissism often imbedded in strivings for self-fulfillment.

Nevertheless, Chana Henkin, director of Nishmat, warns that the need for self-fulfillment, even in Torah study, can undermine family values if the woman is not careful. "Family values means giving to others, just as charity means surrendering to others' needs," says Henkin. "Along with the message of higher Torah goals to young women, we must transmit a clear message endorsing family values, and the values of giving to others."

Oshra Koren points out that orthodox women today study medicine, law, and psychology, investing much time in their professions away from the home. Why should women not give as much time to Torah learning and their spiritual development?

A theme that runs through all discussions related to "women's study" is the fear that it can lead to iconoclasm and breaking away from the Jewish tradition. This fear is perhaps the reason that leaders of the movement often deny that women's study is part of a Jewish feminist agenda.

Malka Bina admits that in the past she denied that a revolution was taking place. She spoke cautiously in evolutionary terms. But she is now willing to talk about a "quiet revolution that is getting louder." "More than two decades' experience has proven that women's study is not threatening the continuity of traditional Judaism," says Bina. "To the contrary, it enhances Jewish traditional values. We see that the women involved are deeply and sincerely religious. The movement did not undermine their religiosity. Their desire to study emerges from their religiosity and strengthens it. Most of all, after twenty years of women's study, we see that it does not undermine the value of family in Jewish life. Many of our women scholars combine career and family. Many of the young men are also studying. It forces young couples to work out new family patterns together. Women must juggle priorities. But the family also gives the woman-scholar support. She can allow herself this new, innovative way of life because she is anchored in a Jewish family situation."

Rabbinical Court Advocates

The explosion of learning for women emerged primarily out of a yearning for Torah study on the part of women, and not as a pragmatic strategy for bringing about change in relation to women's status in Judaism. Yet, this revolution in women's study has, in fact, become a primary force in effecting change. New *halakhic* possibilities are surfacing as a direct result of women's increasing *halakhic* knowledge. The most notable developments are courses of study leading to the creation of rabbinical court advocates and *halakhic* advisors.

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, head of Ohr Torah Institutions, pushed the boundaries of women's *halakhic* opportunities forward when he created the Monica Dennis Goldberg Women's Advocate Program for the rabbinical courts at Midreshet Lindenbaum in the early 1990s. This is an intense two-to-three-year course on complex *halakhic* texts dealing with marriage and divorce. Women interested in learning Talmud can now study it at the highest level ever afforded women, and this course of study also allows them to plead divorce cases before the rabbinic courts. After they pass the difficult advocate tests, they can represent women - and men - in cases of divorce, child custody, and financial arrangements when a marriage dissolves. Advocates have traditionally been men, although women lawyers can appear before the rabbinical courts.

Today, there are sixty women advocates. Many of them have also studied law and psychology. The law for advocates had to be changed with the permission of the chief rabbis of the time, Rabbi Mordechai Eliahu and Rabbi Avraham Shapiro. Originally, the law stated that to become an advocate, the candidate must be a yeshiva graduate. An amendment to the law stated that a candidate could come from any recognized Torah institution (which would then include women).

The justification given for training religious women as advocates is that a woman suing for divorce in the rabbinical courts will be better able to discuss marital issues with another woman, albeit one well-versed in *halakhah*. This portrayal of women as modest, sensitive creatures who cannot discuss personal matters with men is a traditional image of women, and not one which necessarily fits contemporary Israel. But it reflects the religious approach to change, where, instead of head-on confrontation, reshaping of the present situation is religiously motivated. It was also felt that since women advocates share religious values with the judges, they would welcome these initiatives. But acceptance has not been easy.

"At first," said Nurit Fried, director of the advocates program, "the rabbinic judges opposed women advocates, and they made the tests very difficult. But

since the women are highly serious, they were often more successful in the tests than the men. Over the years, the rabbis have seen how devoted and intelligent the female advocates are, how helpful they have been to women seeking divorce, and they admit that the program for women advocates has been a good thing," says Fried. She insists that the advocates are not attempting to change *halakhah*, but that they seek creative solutions within *halakhah* to influence the recalcitrant husband to grant his wife the requested divorce. Ultimately, she believes that women's learning will lead to women being involved in leadership and decision-making. They will become part of the learned elite.

Chana Kehat, head of Koleich, the religious feminist movement, claims that the Jewish study revolution has created a situation whereby women are learned enough to be able to distinguish between what is a social norm and what is a Torah value. "The women can argue with the rabbis in their own terms," says Kehat. She feels this is beginning to change the way rabbinic authorities relate to women's issues in general.

Today, women representing the religious feminist movement are involved in a dialogue with the rabbinic authorities, seeking larger global *halakhic* solutions to the *aguna* and divorce refusal issues. There is increasing consciousness of the injustice suffered by hundreds, if not thousands, of women who are refused a divorce. Rachel Levmore, an advocate in the rabbinical courts, has recently been appointed assistant director in the administration of the rabbinical courts, responsible for reviewing divorce files in order to find solutions for situations that have been pending for a long time. She is also working in concert with some of the rabbis on a pre-nuptial agreement to prevent refusal of divorce and blackmail in the rabbinical courts.

The goal of this agreement will be to establish more equitable terms within *halakhic* parameters, and coordinate the regulations of the religious and secular courts. It is in the interest of the rabbinical courts to find *halakhic* means of being more equitable to women. Israeli women are increasingly rejecting the religious court option in divorce situations, preferring civil courts which they feel are more equitable to women.

Sharon Shenhav, a lawyer who has worked many years representing *agunot* through the Na'amat women's organization, and is currently director of the International Jewish Women's Human Rights Watch, a joint project of the International Council for Jewish Women and the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, is pessimistic about orthodox women advocates effecting change. As a lawyer, she feels that lawyers are trained to argue

more effectively for their clients. "Lawyers can also appear in the family courts, which are more accommodating to women than the rabbinical courts," says Shenhav. She contends that the women advocates do not have any advantage because they are learned orthodox women, and rabbis are not more likely to force a divorce on a recalcitrant husband. In fact, she suspects that the advocates are more easily co-opted by the rabbinical courts to try and convince women to give in and pay the husbands off in order to obtain the divorce. Shenhav feels solutions will not necessarily come from working within the system, but by creating alternative systems to the rabbinical courts: civil divorce, Conservative and Reform options, or more liberal orthodox interpretations which have been suggested by scholars of Jewish law.

Women as Rabbinic Judges?

Yet, for those interested in promulgating change within the *halakhic* system, the advocates might offer an important channel of communication. The advocate course of study has also raised consciousness with regard to the issue of women as rabbinic judges. Although this has radical implications within the tradition and is usually rejected out of hand, Malka Bina points out that there is a precedent for this in the figure of the judge Deborah in the Bible. The *midrash* teaches that "the people came up to Deborah," i.e., she was popularly recognized as a leader. "When the religious community is ready to recognize a woman as a rabbinic judge, it will come about on its own," says Bina. "A judge needs a great deal of intellectual and emotional strength for legal decision-making, and women today increasingly exhibit these characteristics. Who knows what will develop?"

Bina suggests that *halakhic* qualifications will ensue when social changes are deep-rooted and people naturally accept women in positions of authority. This can be applied to the issue of women as rabbinic authorities. The authority in Jewish matters has always been the *talmid hacham*, the learned man. The question arises as to what happens now that women are becoming *talmidot hachamot*? Can they be considered rabbinic authorities?

Halakhic Advisors

The ten-year-old Nishmat Midrasha for Torah Study for Women under Chana Henkin can take credit for the first step in this direction within an orthodox framework. Nishmat has created an innovative two-year program for "*halakhic* advisors," where women study classic texts pertaining to the laws of *nida* (family purity) in order to be able to answer *halakhic* queries connected to menstruation and sexual relationships, and gynecological issues involving in

vitro conception, amniocentesis, etc. Again, the approach to innovation, as in the case of the advocates program, is to claim that modesty prevents women from discussing personal and intimate issues with male authorities. Women who are *halakhic* authorities can better relate to women's issues. In this way, the traditional forms are kept. But at the same time, there is an underlying quest for knowledge and its uses that is driving orthodox women to positions of Jewish authority. It is not labeled as "feminist," which is perceived in traditional circles as a movement toward androgyny, the breakdown of sexual roles. In the great leap forward of the last few decades, intellectual pursuits have increasingly been exempt from this threatening category. Women today can be highly learned without posing a threat to heterosexuality.

Chana Henkin, who created the course of study for *halakhic* advisors, admits that the new developments have been fertilized by the currents of the time, but that they represent a uniquely Jewish response to these feminist currents, one which remains deeply religious and family-oriented. "These women are among the most creative Jewish minds," says Henkin, "but they did not have the tools to make the difference. Now, the gates have opened. It is part of an evolutionary process of creating a new religious leadership. These women will determine how the process continues."

Four women have taken the very difficult examination to become "*halakhic* advisors." There is a strong medical component to the program, and among the four is a pediatrician/emergency room doctor, Deena Zimmerman. The aura of *halakhic* authority is reinforced by the medical knowledge and authority.

Henkin is cautious about calling these women "*poskot*" or "rabbinic authorities." "They are not replacing rabbis," says Henkin. "They have very special knowledge which they impart, in concert with rabbis." She explains that many rabbis have called upon them for their specialized knowledge. "But that is not the same as having a broad *halakhic* range that allows for creative decisions." Henkin feels that the word "*posek*" or "rabbinic authority" should apply only to the most learned and to use the term for women scholars is premature. However, she does not rule out the possibility that they might some day reach that level of learning. "How creatively they find solutions will determine how far they go," says Henkin. She has begun a process which could be radical, ultimately crowning women as rabbis. But Henkin is careful to proceed slowly and not alienate the rabbis whose cooperation she needs in conferring the title "*halakhic* authority" on her women scholars. Dr. Tamar Ross of the Jewish Philosophy Department of Bar-Ilan University maintains that rabbinic authorities receive their power from the people who turn to them.

"As soon as people will turn to women scholars, they will be considered authorities."

Women as Spiritual Leaders

This is true regarding women rabbis in general. There are women who serve as spiritual leaders of congregations because of the force of their learning and leadership. In Israeli congregations there is not always a formal rabbi, and learned women have stepped into this role. These women have often been American-born Israelis, like Deborah Weissman of the largely American Yedidya synagogue. Oshra Koren, the charismatic director of Matan in Raanana, works side-by-side with her husband, Rabbi Zvi Koren of Kinor David congregation. She gives a *drasha* on the second day of Rosh Hashanah before shofar-blowing, while Rabbi Zvi Koren gives the *drasha* the first day. "I feel that I'm giving the message that it is okay to hear Torah from women," says Oshra Koren.

Haviva Ner-David, who has written *Life on the Fringes: A Feminist Journey Toward Traditional Rabbinic Ordination*, has sought formal recognition as an orthodox rabbi. She applied to the Yeshiva University *semicha* program and was refused, but she found an Israeli orthodox rabbi, Aryeh Strikovsky, who is willing to teach women to become rabbis.

The confidence of women as a result of the access to Jewish sources is slowly growing, bringing about new developments. Women's Megillah readings, for example, have suddenly become accepted in many women's schools and synagogues. This is true of women's dancing with the Torah on Simchat Torah. Activities are being condoned where there is a vacuum and no clear prohibition exists. Opportunities are opening for women, but they are often allowed in exclusively women's societies: women teaching women or praying together, and women reading the Torah or Megillah for women.

In contrast to the more integrated Reform and Masorti movements in Israel, the orthodox are moving towards "women's societies" for much religious expression. In many cases there is overlap where women also take public roles in integrated communities. But orthodox women face the questions which have challenged equal rights situations in the past. Can there be separate but equal frameworks for women, or will the innovations currently developing lead to integrated study halls for men and women, as well as more integrated roles in the synagogue and home?

Women's Unique Approach to Study

The new movement of women's Jewish study is not only generating slow changes within Israeli orthodox life - careful to do so through the *halakhic* process. It is also creating a unique woman's approach to Jewish texts.

First, in the spirit of feminist criticism, scholars have discovered "forgotten" women in the Bible, or have interpreted well-known heroines from a unique angle of vision, often in a more empathetic mode. In the introduction to *Reading from Genesis*, an anthology of both religious and secular Israeli women commenting on the Bible, editor Ruti Ravitsky says that women involved in biblical interpretation today are listening to new tones that were hidden and dormant until now. She feels they are building a new *midrash*, looking at the forgotten women of the Bible, confronting Dina's cry, Hagar's suffering, Potiphar's wife, and Lot's wife.

Bryna Levy, head of the M.A. program in Biblical Studies at Matan, maintains that not only are women looking more closely at different types of women in the Bible, but their approach to the material is often different than that of the male reader. "In the course of seeking quantitative parity in the study of Torah, women have discovered that there is a qualitative difference in the way they learn Torah," writes Levy in the essay "Sense and Sensibilities." For women there is a dynamic meshing of text with life. While the male reader might be satisfied with a formalistic approach," claims Levy, "women are deeply rooted in psychological subtlety." The late Chana Beilinson, who taught at Matan, felt that women engage in "intellectual nurturing" as well as "physical nurturing."

Dr. Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg echoed this when she said, "Every feminist fiber in me wants to deny it, but I feel that many women bring a humanistic interest to their learning. The experiential and relational focus is stronger." But this does not mean that the interpretation of text is reduced to a simple moral. Zornberg's methodology, for example, is highly complex, influenced by her background in literature. She follows the recurrent motifs in the text as well as recurrent words and stories to discern a structure. She perceives the text as layered. Analysis does not proceed by logical argument but by association, casting a net of metaphor. "I look at the commentaries, especially Rashi," explains Zornberg, "and see what is 'hot' in the text, what explodes, almost psychedelically." There is an emotional-sensual-intellectual encounter. Rashi is the conduit for the *midrash* and Zornberg penetrates through to the mythical, universal issues of the *midrash*.

The women who are teaching at the front-line women's institutions like Matan, Nishmat, and Midreshet Lindenbaum are often more educated in secular

studies than many of the men who are teaching in the yeshivot, since men's yeshiva education is more constricted than that of women. Women scholars like Levy and Zornberg in Tanach and Ross in Jewish philosophy bring a strong comparative base to their teaching. Zornberg makes reference to Nietzsche, Kafka, and psychoanalytic theories. But this is not intellectual name-dropping. These thinkers are taken seriously, deeply integrated into Zornberg's vision of the text. "I believe in a holistic approach to learning, to fertilize all parts of existence, and be fertilized by them," says Zornberg. This reflects the new women's study in general. It is bringing a broader vision of the human condition to bear on biblical and philosophical texts. But it is still too early to determine whether women bring a unique feminine approach to the study of talmudic texts, as they are just beginning to gain mastery over this highly abstract legal realm.

"Women today are often attracted to the *midrashic* aspect of Talmud," says Malka Bina. However, there are a handful of observant women who are devoting long hours to the study of the complex legal argumentation. They have begun publishing articles on *halakhic* issues, as is evident by the publication of *Jewish Legal Writings*, edited by Micah D. Halpern and Chana Safrai, in which American and Israeli women analyze issues like "May Women Wear *Tefillin*?", "Women and *Tzitzit*," and "Artificial Insemination in Single Women." There are some larger, abstract discussions in the work, but in these early stages of women's study of Talmud, the new *talmidot hachamot* have basically applied their talmudic knowledge to practical decision-making involving women's issues. It remains to be seen whether they become erudite enough to affect the very body of knowledge that has guided Jewish life and thinking for centuries. This will be the final test of the Jewish women's study movement.

At the same time, there is no doubt that women's Torah study has added to the spiritual quality of Jewish life. Professor Susan Handelman discusses this in an analysis of "Women and the Study of Torah in the Thought of the Lubavitcher Rebbe," in *Jewish Legal Writings*. Handelman explains that Rabbi Schneerson attributed great importance to the increase in women's Torah study. According to kabbalistic and hassidic understanding, "all the 'feminine' aspects of the world will rise to the highest stature [and] emerge from their concealment" in the era of Redemption. Women's study is one component in creating this new, more spiritual world. Just as the Talmud teaches that Jews were redeemed from Egypt because of righteous women (who took initiative), perhaps it is the new righteous, the deeply learned and committed women of today, who will bring about a more redeemed creation.

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