

SYMPOSIUM ON WOMEN AND JEWISH EDUCATION

INTRODUCTION

It is axiomatic in Judaism that the study of Torah is not merely an intellectual option or a means of acquiring knowledge. It is a fulfillment of a divine imperative, a positive mitzva based on Devarim 6, "veshinantam levaneckha, and you shall teach them diligently to your children" (Kiddushin 29b).

This obligation has traditionally devolved upon men and not upon women. Maimonides, basing himself on an opinion in Mishna Sota 3:4, explicitly exempts women from the obligatory mitzva of Torah study (Hilkhot Talmud Torah 1:13).

Despite this technical exemption, pious Jewish women have always studied Torah, albeit its more practical elements rather than the theoretical—the Shulhan Arukh rather than the Talmud, the Written rather than the Oral Torah. Such study was not formalized or structured, and although the rather informal, home-based schooling produced many learned and pious women, it was not until this century that formal, structured, Orthodox schools—pioneered by Sarah Schenirer and the Bais Yaakov movement—began to emerge. Hafetz Haim supported this vigorously, and in a famous footnote (Likute Halakhot, Sota, folio 11, n. 3) points out that women in contemporary times no longer can learn all they need to know from their parents in the home, since parental authority has diminished and people do not live in the same places as their fathers, and therefore:

It is certainly a great mitzva to teach [women] the Five Books, the Prophets and the Writings, and . . . Pirkei Avot, Menorat Hamaor, and similar works. . . . If we do not do this, they may wander entirely from the path of God and violate the basic laws, God forbid."

While Hafetz Haim avoided giving a green light to the study of Mishna or Gemara, his comment added great momentum to the establishment of schools for Orthodox women.

As this century draws to a close, we are witness to a veritable explosion of Jewish learning for women, not only in elementary and high-schools, but also—and particularly—beyond high-school. A cornucopia of choices awaits today's Orthodox woman, from college level courses and majors in Judaica to intensive haredi and non-haredi Israeli seminaries and schools, geared to Hebrew and English-speaking students.

TRADITION

In recognition of the crucial importance of Torah education for the contemporary Jewish woman, and in an effort to focus on some of the issues involved, Tradition asked a representative group of working educators in the field to respond to a series of questions on this theme. In an effort both to ensure as broad a range of participants as possible and to achieve a balance among varying philosophic orientations, we invited men and women educators from across the Orthodox spectrum, from Israel and from America. Those who appear in this symposium are those who chose to participate.

—E.F.

The questions which our respondents were asked to consider are:

1. The past decade has witnessed an explosion of Jewish educational opportunities for women, with heightened intensity and deepened quality. This has been coupled with calls for still greater exposure to classic rabbinic texts, heretofore an area not fully available to women. Is this a natural and positive development in the Torah community or simply an intrusion of current secular feminist concerns?

2. In general, to what extent, if any, should Jewish education for men and women differ on the elementary, secondary and advanced levels with regard to such issues as competence in biblical, rabbinic and halakhic texts, secular studies and careers? Do any proposed differences reflect differing innate abilities between men and women, or, rather, do they reflect traditionally distinct gender roles within Judaism?

3. At a time of increased public opportunities for women, how do you reconcile the traditional meaning of Psalms 45:14, "*kol kevuda bat melekh penima* (the glory of the king's daughter is within)," which has traditionally been read as encompassing less public and more private roles for women? In general, how does one educate for *tzeniut* in an age of promiscuity, for *hesed* in an age of self-indulgence, and for genuine piety in an age of secularism?

4. Women have been assuming increased leadership roles in Jewish education, including heading co-ed and single-gender yeshivot, developing curricula, and supervising male and female teachers. Do you see them confronted with any special problems or limitations?

BEVERLY GRIBETZ

The question, "Is learning affected by gender?" came to me relatively late. I attended Yeshivat Ramaz, where boys and girls learn Talmud, like all their other subjects, together. My mother had studied Talmud at the Herzlia Hebrew Teachers Institute in the 1940s, and my grandmother had studied Talmud in the 1920s. It was only when I tried to continue my study of Talmud after high school that I encountered the stream in our tradition that

restricted women's study of *Torah shebe'al Peh* (so-called rabbinic literature). In those days, a generation ago, I was usually the only woman in the class.

The recent push for greater exposure to classic rabbinic texts for women in the traditional community can for me be nothing but a positive development. It may well be that the drive for higher levels of educational opportunity for women in the Torah community has been influenced by secular feminist concerns. Traditional Judaism has always integrated positive elements from the surrounding world and woven them into a distinctly Jewish fabric. In the traditional community, where public ritual is an area in which women do not see a place for themselves, learning serves a unique function for women who seek to enhance their religious participation.

As an educator, I do not believe that we should be determining curricula according to the gender of the student. The psychoeducational research on the subject is inconclusive. In a traditional Jewish context, any research would be skewed by the fact that the material that our boys and girls study, the sources of classical Judaism, is transmitted in the name of men and reflects a male point of view. The absence of female role models in the process of learning classical Jewish texts has surely been a factor influencing female students. My mentor and supervisor at Ramaz observed me teaching my co-ed seventh grade Talmud class recently. Among the many helpful and interesting things he later shared with me was his genuine surprise at the high level of engagement and participation of the girls. This was no surprise to me. My students, unlike the large majority of girls studying Talmud in yeshivot and day schools, have a female teacher with whom they can identify. If I can discuss Talmud, so can they.

The traditional interpretation of "*kol kevuda*" has, in my view, backfired against us. At a time when we wish to expand female roles in Jewish learning and religious life, we lack sufficient models. Jewish educators who wish to cultivate new female roles, must find and employ the women who exemplify them. Jewish women who have made learning their avocation, must "go public." Girls can, of course, learn much from men, as I have. But it is questionable if students can—or should—truly identify with teachers of the opposite sex.

In any event, I do not think we should educate our children according to any broad preconceptions, whether they relate to gender or to other kinds of categorization. We ought to look beyond group differences and the theories about them and focus on the individual. We must escape the macro-thinking that generalizes and attempt to educate each child at his or her micro-level, in his or her style, and work to make that learning as intensive as possible.

Nevertheless, the fact that girls are capable of learning Talmud as well as boys does not mean that girls do not tend to see things differently. I do not have systematic research, but I do have stories. *Ma'ase she'haya* (an

anecdote): I was teaching *Shabbat* 23b to an all-girls class at the Pelech High School in Jerusalem. The Gemara moves from the kindling of Shabbat lights to the kindling of Hanukka lights, and then presents the following *sugya*:

Rava said: It is obvious to me [that if one must choose between] *ner beito* ("the home light" = the Sabbath lights) and the Hanukka light, the former takes precedence on account of [the value of] *shelom beito* (peace at home). [If one must choose between] the home light and the Sanctification (*Kiddush*) of the Day (that is recited over wine), the home light takes precedence.

Rashi explains that the situation the *sugya* presupposes in this instance is a Shabbat that falls during Hanukka. What if a person cannot afford oil for both the Hanukka and the Shabbat kindling? Which takes precedence? The Talmud goes on to ask, in its typically associative style: What if on an ordinary Shabbat a person cannot afford both oil for the lights and wine for kiddush?

In both instances, the oil for the Shabbat lights takes precedence. The reason given is "peace at home." Rashi draws an explanation of the reason "peace at home" from a passage two pages below in the Gemara: the family would be unsettled—*mitztaarin*—to sit and eat in the dark on Shabbat. Where there is no light, there is no peace (Rashi, BT *Shabbat* 25b).

The first time I taught this passage, a young fifteen-year-old girl raised her hand and gave an interpretation at odds with Rashi's. The reason that the mitzva of kindling the Shabbat lights, which takes precedence over having wine for kiddush, produces "peace at home" is that this mitzva is one of the few that is reserved for women. If it were taken away, there would really be no peace at home. Recently I taught this passage again, to a class of women at a modern Orthodox synagogue in New York. This time an old and sage eighty-year-old woman raised her hand and suggested the same interpretation. The teenage girl and the older woman were doing what commentators throughout our history have done. They were looking deeply into their minds and hearts to uncover the truth that speaks to them.

Might a man have come up with the same insight as to the meaning of "peace at home?" I don't know. But I have no question about the fact that this interpretation enriches the text's meaning for us, for understanding how our lives intertwine with Judaism. That is, after all, the purpose of Jewish education: to make one of Torah and life.

Let us return to my Talmud class at Pelech. We began to discuss the halakhic decision holding that where one can only afford either oil or wine for Shabbat, one buys oil for kindling and makes kiddush over the halla. One of the girls said: "Oh, that's the *pesak halakha* that the old lady knew in the Bialik poem!" In a marvelous act of integrating her Hebrew literature material and the Talmud—and both subjects in turn with her life as an observant Jew—she evoked the poet's portrayal of his pious mother who, as Shabbat

approached, could find only two pennies, and knew she had to purchase candles. The particularity of a woman's experience within Judaism sheds unique light on the meaning of our texts and the relations between them.

The great developmental psychologist Carol Gilligan years ago criticized male colleagues who studied boys as the norm for their theories. She wrote that "adding a new line of interpretation based on the imagery of the girl's thought, makes it possible not only to see development where previously development was not discerned, but also to consider differences in understandings of relationships" (*In a Different Voice*, 1982, p. 25). Wouldn't adding a new line of interpreters—educated traditional Jewish women—enrich our own tradition with hitherto un(der)seen perspectives? Our Sages regarded the legitimate interpretations of later scholars to be the discovery of what is already there, at least by implication. If there are any differences between the psychologies of men and women, it can be expected that increased study of our sources by women could make it possible for us to see in them new patterns, new relationships, new outlooks (*hashkafot*), perhaps even new halakhot that are already there, awaiting discovery.

Those who would challenge the new movement towards opening up classical Jewish texts to women must ask themselves honestly what it is that they fear. Learning brings a share of power and authority to those who come to possess it. It also produces insight. Can those who take seriously the traditional value of extending the depth and influence of the Torah—*le'hagdil Torah uleha'adira*—fail to include the vast potential contribution of women, whose study and teaching of Torah will assuredly make a difference?

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