

## Women's Learning

Feb 2018

There is a revolution in women's learning, and orthodox women's learning at that.

*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.<sup>1</sup>*

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.

Rabbi Yehuda Henkin has a responsa regarding the halachic status of women's learning Torah, the written and the oral Torah/Law. His wife Rabbanit Henkin, encourages her students in learning Torah at her now famous Nishmat Seminary in Jerusalem as well as Rebbetzin Cohen of the Renaissance Centers in New York, both of who post Rav Henkin's *T'shuva* on their websites.<sup>2</sup>

His tortuous, albeit erudite review of the *poskim* from the Talmud on, reflects the difficulties he encounters with Halacha's attitude and unbending attitude towards women's learning. In the end he fails to make a convincing legal argument resorting to polemic arguing the change on the nature of women's roles and their motive being "lishma" and not to seek academic credentials or other unworthy uses of their learning. This Volozhyner<sup>3</sup> notion of *Torah Lishma*, he hopes, might establish their credentials as a new type of women's learning, a new halachic status.

*"The more that women today can be seen as different from women of past generations, the more they can be taught the Oral Torah. Women who seek to learn and are not studying Torah for the sake of an academic degree, and all the more so when they are no longer supported by their parents, are not part of the historical majority of women and may be taught even Gemara. It is certainly better to draw them to study in a women's bet midrash rather than study*

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.jcpa.org/jl/jl429.htm> Rochelle Furstenberg is a Jerusalem-based writer specializing in cultural, social, and religious issues. She is a columnist for *Hadassah Magazine*, and has been a frequent contributor to the *Jerusalem Post* and the *Jerusalem Report*. She is the author of "Post-Zionism: The Challenge to Israel" and "The Women's Movement in Israel" (American Jewish Committee and the Argov Center at Bar-Ilan University), and has contributed essays on "Culture in Israel" to the *American Jewish Yearbook* (1995, 1997, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> The Renaissance Center: <http://www.jewishrenaissance.org/>

<sup>3</sup> See Norman Lamm's *Torah Lishma*....

*Talmud in a secular framework.*"<sup>4</sup>

Taking cue from other revolutionary movements within Judaism, for instance Hassidut, the first generation of disciples of the BESHT did not seek halachic approval for their new approaches to Avodas Hashem.<sup>5</sup> And just to be sure, we are speaking of changes in halachic practice, ritual slaughter, Nusach in Davening, priorities in curricula and the focus on the Zaddik not the Poseik. This drew the ire of the establishment resulting in the famous *Cherem* of the Vilna Gaon.<sup>6</sup>

I believe that their motives were *leshem shamayim* and they focused only on their goal, to increase spirituality and *dveykut* to the Almighty basing their rationale on "*eis laasos Leshem, hefeiru torasecha*"<sup>7</sup> much like Rabbi Henkin's initial motivation in his *t'shuva*. Clearly great Poskim held otherwise:

***And according to me, this is a bad illness in our generation. And those generations that came before our time would toil in Torah all their days, and in mitzvos, everything according to the Torah, and the poskim, their words like a spring of the water of life... But in our generation, we have left the Torah of God, and the spring of the water of life that is the Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem Talmud; we have chiseled in them holes and broken them, and have become arrogant in our hearts, such that each one says "I am the one who sees," and "for me the gates of heaven are open" and "for me the world was created," but these people are the destroyers of the generation. And on this orphaned generation I say "the straight is the path of God, and the righteous will follow it, but the Chassidim will fail." There is much to say, but just as it is a mitzvah to repeat that which is sound, so too it is a mitzvah not to repeat that which is not, and may God have mercy upon us.***

***Responsa of Noda B'Yehuda Mehadura Kama: Y.D. 93:***

In the eye of the storm all seems calm however. It may be that in the eye of this cultural storm grabbing the Jewish World, there is a calm and unawareness of the radical nature of this revolution, as radical as the effect Hassidut has had on all walks of Jewish life over the last two centuries. In the last 75 years the integration of Hassidut into orthodoxy has changed both forever. Hassidut lost its revolutionary character as it became absorbed into mainstream Judaism as much as Orthodoxy was changed by absorbing many of the spiritual demands for intentionality in prayer and learning.

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.nishmat.net/Uploads/files/R\\_Henkin\\_Talmud\\_Study\\_by\\_Women.pdf](https://www.nishmat.net/Uploads/files/R_Henkin_Talmud_Study_by_Women.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> See the writings of the Toldos Yaakov Yoseif of Polnoye who routinely uses this theory. [https://www.sefaria.org/Toldot\\_Yaakov\\_Yosef?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Toldot_Yaakov_Yosef?lang=bi)

<sup>6</sup> See Alan Nadler The Faith of the Mitnagdim: <https://jhupbooks.press.jhu.edu/content/faith-mithnagdim>  
[www.yutorah.com/download.cfm?materialID=528556](http://www.yutorah.com/download.cfm?materialID=528556)

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.mesora.org/chassidism.html>

Women's learning is now over two decades old, the revolution in women's spirituality, learning, minyanim (to various degrees depending upon where in the orthodox spectrum) and even legislative changes (the Kotel/supreme court decision) are fully documented. Yet we post T'shuvos in order to legitimize these radical changes to our inner communal conservative Halachic self and, of course, to the Charedi world we see over our right-wing shoulder.

Truth be told, it was not the 'revolutionary' ideas of Sara Schneider and the Beis Yaakov movement that started all this. As Alan Brill<sup>8</sup> has shown, women's learning was already encouraged in the curricular of schools in Italy, Germany and Hungary 100 years prior to Beis Yaakov. The Mekor Baruch speaks of seeing Rebbetzin Reyna Basya (wife of the Netziv of Volozhyn) with a pile of *seforim* on her kitchen table including the Talmud and *poskim*, bewailing the absence of opportunities for women to learn *tora shbeal peh*.<sup>9</sup>

What is however, revolutionary, is the learning of Talmud.

There is no going around the weight of traditional sources and *Poskim* who decry the practice.

Despite the accusation of antinomian tendencies in Hassidut, and a wealth of polemic connecting the sect to *Shabbtai Zvi*, and the *Gra's Cherem*, the movement survived, by slowly showing its conservative character with respect and obeisance towards *Halacha*<sup>10</sup> which has been shown to be conservative in nature.<sup>11</sup>

The same analysis might be applied to the study of secular subjects in the curricular of reform schools in nineteenth century Western Europe and its leakage into the Eastern European then United States curricula of orthodox systems.<sup>12</sup>

Women's learning will continue to flourish because women's spirituality has come out of the closet, and in an orthodox world, this will resist the need for donning *t'fillin*, and other reform minded rituals women appropriated in their egalitarian search for equality.

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<sup>8</sup> Alan Brill: <http://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/710544/rabbi-alan-brill/lecture-modern-orthodoxy-16/>

<sup>9</sup> Mekor Baruch, Reb Boruch Epstein.....see also "My Uncle the Netziv" .... [http://seforimcenter.com/Mekor-Baruch---Rabbi-Baruch-HaLevi-Epstein-4-Vol.\\_p-1943.aspx](http://seforimcenter.com/Mekor-Baruch---Rabbi-Baruch-HaLevi-Epstein-4-Vol._p-1943.aspx), <https://www.amazon.com/My-Uncle-Netziv-Illustrious-ArtScroll/dp/0899064922>

<sup>10</sup> The famous story of when the son of Reb Shlomo, Reb Leibele Eiger *zt"l*, went to Kotsk, he became extremely drawn to the Kotsker Rebbe. It pained Reb Shlomo (a great mitnaged) to see his son follow such a path in *avodas Hashem* and he poured out his bitterness to his father, R' Akiva Eiger.

"Travel to Kotsk," advised his father, "and check if your son is particular with the laws of *nettilas yodayim*. If he is stringent in all the laws of *Shulchan Oruch* that concern *nettilas yodayim*, then he's an *ehrllicher Yid* and you have nothing to fear."

<http://www.chareidi.org/archives5774/vayigash/fsrseigrvyg74.htm>

<sup>11</sup> See the work of Chayim Soloveitchik and his study of halachic historiography in *Responsa as an Historical Source*, Jerusalem 1990.

<sup>12</sup> For more on this see... <https://www.amazon.com/gp/search?index=books&linkCode=qs&keywords=9780867051834> and the arguments in Chaim Potok's *The Chosen*, the two academies a veiled reference to The Jewish Theological Seminary and Yeshiva College in NY. [https://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb\\_sb\\_noss?url=search-alias%3Dstripbooks&field-keywords=the+chosen](https://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_sb_noss?url=search-alias%3Dstripbooks&field-keywords=the+chosen)

Reading the book today I am reminded of my pithy aphorism, "yesterday's *Apikorsus* is tomorrow's *frunkeit*"

The orthodox path will seek the learning and spirituality for women as a unique and separate path than men's. Talmud and Poskim will be part of that learning experience whereas those Mitzvot applying to men will not because orthodox women continue to embrace *Halacha* in all other areas of Jewish life.

And herein lies the paradox. How to negotiate the minefields of the Charedi resistance on the right, and the glare from the Women of the Wall and the Reform movement who accuse them of not going far enough.

I am confident however, that the effect of an educated women's laity is pushing the men to deepen their experience of *Yahadut* just like Hassidut affected every area of Jewish/Halachic/Spiritual life.

So my response to R Henkin is "no need to kvetch a path" the revolution is already taking place! And women? Push on, in the eye of the storm all appears calm!