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The World of Women's  
Torah Learning:  
Developments, Directions,  
and Objectives

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The beginning of the third decade of the opening of the world of Torah to women is a fitting occasion to try and assess what has been achieved thus far, and to examine the connections and influences between the traditional Torah world, composed almost entirely of men studying in yeshivot, and the world of Torah developed by women over the past thirty years.<sup>1</sup> In order to accomplish this task in a thoroughgoing manner, we must examine the world of women's Torah study, its contents and distinctive features both scholastic-spiritual and sociological, as well as its successes and challenges.

This article makes no pretension of being academic; I shall neither present empirical data nor base my words upon sociological

theories. I shall try to describe the reality of the processes experienced by the world of women's Torah learning during the past thirty years, a world in which I was privileged to be involved and take part almost from its very establishment. The nature of personal involvement makes an objective account impossible, and perforce the narrative that I present here interweaves my own subjective experience and "objective" processes and changes that have transpired in the national religious community over the course of the period under discussion.

### **BIRTH PANGS: THE INITIAL STEP**

What is the world of women's Torah learning, and what were the stages of its development? Toward the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, several frameworks were established that offered women various opportunities for serious Torah learning. Midreshet Lindenbaum and Matan in Jerusalem, along with Midreshet HaKibbutz HaDati, were the first such frameworks. These institutions were a dream come true for many women (primarily older women, and a small group of younger women), before whom the gates to serious Torah study had until then been locked. Post-high school frameworks of Torah study for women were nonexistent, with the exception of Michlalah Jerusalem College, which had been established about twenty years earlier, and combined academic studies with Torah learning. The learning at Michlalah was at a high level, focused primarily on the teaching of *tanakh* and its commentaries. The idea of *gemara* study was unthinkable, and the *Torah shebe'al peh* program in which I was enrolled centered around the teaching of Mishnah and halakhah, and on isolated citations of Talmudic passages on photocopied pages. The general atmosphere promoted the building of a home and family, and a woman's spiritual virtue was measured by the level of her investment in nurturing her husband's development as a Torah scholar. As a young woman who wished to engage in serious *gemara* study, I had no independent opportunities for such study that were directed toward and designed for me. I could learn at home with my father, or sit in the women's section as a passive listener who hears but neither sees nor is seen. The strongest feeling that I remember from those days is that of jealousy;

we were jealous of boys and the wide variety of opportunities open to them for Torah study. I remember seeing a newspaper advertisement about a new institution aimed at training spiritual leadership, Beit Morasha. The advertisement did not mention that the new framework was intended solely for men, and I called to register. It goes without saying that I was rejected; it was clear that frameworks of this sort were designed exclusively for men. The desire to learn was found not only in me, but in other young women as well, and so too the frustration of not being able to fulfill it. It is, however, important to note that this feeling was not shared by all my friends; many young women as well as older women were comfortable with the status quo and did not quite understand the need for change.

The first frameworks established were intended for two different audiences. In Jerusalem a group of older women, predominantly Anglo-Saxon, organized themselves on their own to study *gemara* in the home of one of the group's members. This small group was very organized, composed of serious students and teachers, and its studies were challenging. Rabbanit Malka Bina and Rav Chaim Brovender were partners to this initiative. This modest beginning eventually led to two institutions that will be discussed below: Matan, which would continue to direct itself to an older audience, and Midreshet Lindenbaum, then called Midreshet Bruria, whose target audience would be young Israeli women before and after national or army service. Young women would learn for a year in this framework and then continue on to university studies.

These institutions chose for themselves the designation "midrasha" and thus distinguished themselves from the classical yeshiva. The distinction was significant, for the challenge facing the first generation of women's learning related to this important question. Until that time the sole frame of reference for Torah study had been the yeshiva model, and thus we came against the question whether the new model to be built for women should be identical to the yeshiva model or entirely different. On the one hand, at issue was a framework for women, and as such it would certainly have to be different from the yeshiva model, which was designed for men. On the other hand, there was a true and sincere desire to draw from the traditional world

and connect to the world of the yeshivot. I don't know who chose the term *midrasha*, but in my opinion it does not adequately convey this duality, for it is a new term in the domain of Torah study and does not sufficiently express the connection to the traditional world of Torah learning. About ten years later Herzog College and Yeshivat Har Etzion would ask me to establish a Torah framework for women at Kibbutz Migdal Oz in Gush Etzion, an institution we would call a "Beit Midrash for Women." The term *beit midrash* was chosen to signify that it constituted a direct continuation of the Torah study and service of God of generations of *batei midrash* throughout the Jewish world.

Torah study in the new *midrashot* (Midreshet Bruria and Midreshet Ein HaNetziv) was serious and at a high level, with *gemara* taught alongside *Tanakh* and Jewish thought. The main innovation in the teaching of *Tanakh* and Jewish thought was the introduction of the concepts of *seder* and *chavruta* for women's learning, a change that turned study from a passive activity in which the student listens to an "all-knowing" rabbi, into a learning activity in which the student stands at the center as an independent party with whom a dialogue must be conducted. It is, however, important to note that we were still dealing with a very small number of students—about thirty young women a year.

This process received the support and blessings of my father, the Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Har Etzion, Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, and the heads of Ohr Torah Institutions, Rav Chaim Brovender and Rav Shlomo Riskin. Most of the teachers in these institutions were graduates of Yeshivat Har Etzion who over the years had imbibed the teachings of Rav Yosef Soloveitchik, who three decades earlier had led the way for women to study *gemara* at the Maimonides School, which he established in Boston and, later, at Stern College for Women.

### **"WHAT WILL PEOPLE SAY?" REACTIONS TO THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE *MIDRASHOT***

The general atmosphere in the religious-*Torani* community in Israel was not especially sympathetic to this development. Part of the opposition was disagreement "for the sake of heaven"; the dispute focused on the fundamental question regarding the status and role of women in the

religious sphere, and Torah study by women in particular. The rabbinic establishment, which for the most part watched the process growing “from below,” was troubled by the following questions:

Are women permitted to study *gemara*? Should we encourage the opening of new areas of study which traditionally have been closed to women? Will the relocation of the sources of Torah knowledge undermine the status of the man in the family as the supreme Torah authority in the classical family structure? Is a woman permitted to ignore the exemption from time-bound positive precepts that is granted to women and decide that she wishes to intensively immerse herself in Torah, despite the fact that she is not commanded to study Torah? Doesn't this involve an upheaval of the natural order, and a lack of understanding regarding a woman's role as wife and mother? Doesn't the danger exist that in the wake of exposure to the profundity of Torah learning, women will invest themselves less in their homes, owing to the fact that they are busy with their studies?

And above everything else, additional questions hovered in the air regarding the “final destination” of this process: Will the women engaged in advanced Torah study become *poskim*? *Rabbaniyot*? Community leaders?

The fear of change and reform dictated the intensity of the spiritual opposition alongside additional social questions that disturbed the religious community. The issue of motives came up time and time again; did the recent development stem from a place of pure Torah motives, or from feminist ideals? The female students had to constantly prove their commitment to halakhah and rabbinic authority, and continuously protest that they were not feminists. These claims do not lend themselves to definition or proof, and therefore the women who engaged in Torah study were greatly frustrated by this issue of motives. In addition, questions arose regarding the “track” that a member of the national religious community should choose for herself: Did she have a year to “waste” on Torah study—a year for which she would not receive any social recognition in the form of a diploma? Doesn't this year of study delay marriage and push off childbearing? The crowning argument with which these women had to contend was that no man would want to marry a woman who knew

more than he did, and that Torah study itself puts finding a husband into jeopardy. The young women who studied in the *midrashot* during those early years were undoubtedly perceived at times as “strange” in the eyes of the surrounding society—the society of their peers and the society of their parents’ generation. The great majority of high schools and *ulpanot* refrained from encouraging their students to turn to Torah study upon completion of their secondary education for all the reasons mentioned above.

### **“DISAGREEMENT FOR THE SAKE OF HEAVEN”: THE RESPONSE TO THE OBJECTIONS**

Despite all the objections mentioned above, the first generation of female students was imbued with a pioneering and adventurous spirit along with abundant faith and confidence in the justice and urgency of their cause. There were two sources of this faith and zeal. The first source was the distinguished Torah leadership that accompanied the *midrashot* and invested ample time and effort both in teaching at the *midrashot* and in leading the ideological struggle on behalf of the entire process. Standing up against the rabbis who opposed the innovation were rabbis who encouraged the women to engage in Torah study. While it is true that at this stage of women’s Torah learning the rabbinic supporters, almost all of whom were students of Rav Soloveitchik, were in the minority, for most of the students this was enough.

The second source that assisted the pioneers in their struggle against the opponents of women’s Torah learning was the inner strength of the women themselves. These women, who had waited many long years for this development, deeply felt its importance for their religious world, and clearly understood that their desire to learn and to be partners in the world of Torah flowed from a yearning to draw closer to God. These women felt that their Torah study would deepen and intensify their religious world, as well as the religious world of their families and children. This conviction gave them the strength to stand up to their opponents and assume responsibility for their order of priorities in their religious life. Moreover, below the surface, some of the women, and perhaps even some of their teachers,

believed that women's learning could be beneficial not only to the women themselves, but also to the world of men's Torah study. At this stage, ideas of this nature were never expressed out loud, but it seems to me that the seeds of such thoughts were already sown, seeds that in another twenty years would find expression in a clear and articulate voice.

Despite everything stated above, and despite the zeal and vision that advanced the process, the objections to women's Torah learning were undoubtedly a significant factor in the development of this world. The need for extreme caution in order to remain within a broad rabbinic consensus resulted in slow and guarded progress, and may also have discouraged some women who wished to engage in Torah study, but were deterred by the reactions of their environment.

These frameworks continued for two or three years, with most of the time and effort being invested in educational advancement: the acquisition of tools, *sedarim* and *shi'urim* in *gemara*, proficiency in , and a deeper familiarity with basic Torah texts. Following this initial period, several things happened that would eventually influence the direction taken by women's Torah learning.

### **GROWING PAINS: DEVELOPMENTS INSIDE THE *MIDRASHOT***

In order to better understand what transpired within the world of the *midrashot*, I wish to relate to the structure of the classical yeshiva as it developed across the generations. Throughout the ages, the yeshiva operated on two axes at the same time: the first axis (in which most of the time was invested) was the *mitzvah* of Torah study: the intensive occupation with the debates of Abaye and Rava and understanding them and analyzing them. Parallel to this, the second axis was religious growth in the worship of God through prayer and "service of the heart." While it goes without saying that even the scholastic axis is directed at advancement in the service of God, it is nonetheless possible at times to draw a clear distinction between the two axes. For surely there are elements and times when emphasis is placed on the scholastic dimension (e.g., the *shi'ur kelali*, high-level *haburot*, and the like), and other aspects and times when spiritual development is emphasized

(Divine service is the focus of *sihot*, prayer, *musar*, and the like). It may even be argued that across the generations, yeshivot were distinguished one from the other based on the relative importance attached to each of these axes within the yeshiva. This distinction was already clear in the tension between the Volozhin Yeshiva and the Mussar yeshivot in Europe, and it can still be found—albeit in far less extreme form—in the yeshiva world in Israel. At the same time, the question was raised and discussed across the generations whether a yeshiva should be a melting pot for Torah scholars, its aspiration being to raise a scholarly elite, or whether, perhaps, it should direct itself at training *ba'alei batim* who would fix times for Torah study, and whose religious world would be more profound and meaningful as a result of their years in yeshiva.

This question is not the focus of our discussion, but when we examine the world of the midrashot we will certainly encounter it. Is the dream and vision underlying women's Torah learning to produce female Torah scholars who will be able to participate in scholarly Torah discussions at the highest level, or perhaps the primary goal is to raise *ba'alei batiyot* who are dedicated to and love the Torah?

The earliest institutions mentioned above were primarily learning frameworks. These frameworks did not host additional religious activities, whether joint observance of Shabbat and holidays, or prayer services. The shared experience centered exclusively on study. This was true in the institutions catering to older women (Matan), and also in the frameworks attracting younger women (the early period of Midreshet Lindenbaum). The first students did not ask for more than this or push for anything beyond the learning process.

Did these students not feel a need for the intensive, all-embracing experience of days and nights in the tent of Torah, communal prayer, and camaraderie on Shabbat and holidays? Did they want to enable women to study Torah, or did they perhaps wish to build a Torah world of Divine service that focuses upon study, but also offers the student a world of prayer, singing, and *Yamim Nora'im* that are celebrated together? I doubt whether a clear answer to this question was available during the early years.

The revolution in women's Torah learning transpired in two stages: during the first stage, new learning options were opened to



women; it was only several years later that the total and intensive experience of “dwelling in the house of the Lord all the days of my life” was added. With the passage of time, night *seder*, the celebration of holidays, and even total detachment from society in favor of immersion in the world of Torah eventually became the lot of the female Torah student, similar to the experience of her male counterpart.

This process stretched out over several years for a variety of reasons.

First, the intensity of the encounter with Torah study was so exciting and not taken for granted, and the opportunity to come into contact with the sources of the Oral Law was so new for the participants that they needed nothing else. The feeling of closeness to God resulting from the breaching of the gates of study was so overwhelming that there was no need for another dimension of “service of the heart.” Their hearts became sated by the learning endeavor itself.

Second, some of the women who led the revolution were already at a more advanced stage in their lives, married and the mothers of children, such that a more embracing course would have been entirely inappropriate for them. Several years later, with the entry of younger, eighteen-year-old women into this world, it became necessary to broaden the framework, as we shall see below.

Third, changes, especially in the religious domain, tend to advance slowly and in moderation. The women who participated in the process were happy with what they had. Most of the rabbis who were partners to the process taught these women at set times, at a high level, and with dedication, but they did not see this as their life project; their hearts and time were invested in the yeshivot in which they taught and in the educational processes taking place there. Thus, there was nobody to lead the next stage—joint observance of Shabbat, prayer services, personal discussions, and the like—and so the experience of women’s Torah learning was restricted to the learning process led by the rabbis.

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, the traditional *beit midrash* is largely built around “service of the heart,” in the sense of what the Sages said: “What is service of the heart? This is prayer.” A women’s *beit midrash*, however, lacks this dimension, inasmuch as the

women are halakhically incapable of creating *davar she-bi-kedushah*, and assembling together not only as a group that learns together, but also as a group that prays together. The inability to join together for a prayer quorum made it impossible to construct a world of prayer alongside the world of learning. If the women were to stay in the midrasha for Shabbat, how would they pray? And if they remained for Rosh Hashanah, how would they create the basic experience of a yeshiva in the absence of a *minyan* for the *Yamim Nora'im* services? How were they to draw physically close to the rabbi teaching them; could they dance with him on Purim night? And if the teacher was a woman, how could they honor her at their weddings?

The fear of dealing with these questions was great; both the students and their teachers tried not to raise these issues, based on the shared desire to progress with utmost caution, and without giving the impression that they were pushing for change that was too quick and too far-reaching. There may at times have been differences of opinion on these issues between the women themselves, or between the women and their teachers, but in general they carefully avoided dealing with these questions. As a result, they refrained from creating spiritual opportunities outside the learning experience, owing to the grief and distress that would result from their inability to actualize them.

It was almost impossible to build a serious world of Torah study without creating a complementary world of "service of the heart." The spiritual forces in Torah study and in the dedication to it are so powerful that it was impossible to separate between the world of study and the world of prayer over the long term. It also came to be understood that serious study requires a framework more all-embracing than the frameworks existing at that time. The women's desires deepened over the years: The younger students no longer yearned only for equal educational opportunities, the opening of Torah study to women, but also for equal spiritual opportunities, the world of the yeshiva and all that it entails.

It was at this stage that I began to serve as a leader for younger students. As the daughter of my father I was privileged to grow up in a yeshiva environment. I was exposed to the spiritual intensity of a *tisch* led by Rav Amital, I experienced *Yamim Nora'im* in the yeshiva all my

life, and I heard many talks given by my father. The yeshiva world with which I was familiar was, in fact, more a world of serving God, and less a world of day-to-day learning. I wanted to bestow upon my young students the full richness of my spiritual experiences. The dreams that I brought with me met the thirst in the hearts of my students. Several years later, additional women joined as key figures in the world of women's Torah learning and directed it not only toward scholastic goals, but to spiritual and moral ones as well.

### “DWELLING IN THE HOUSE OF THE LORD” THE SECOND STAGE

And, indeed, after about five years had passed, several groups of younger students (before national or army service) with a burning desire to learn demanded that the framework be more all-embracing, more serious, and more demanding of spiritual and scholastic connection to the Jewish calendar: They established a *mishmar* program on Thursdays, and joint celebration of Shabbat, Hoshana Rabba eve, Simchat Torah, Purim, and Shavuot. All these were the initial attempts to create a balance between the world of prayer and the world of learning, without violating the halakhic limitations regarding women's prayer.

The calf wanted to suckle and progress in a total world of serving God even more than the cow wanted to nurse. There were times that the teachers in the program—male and even female—did not approve of the great zeal that these women brought with them, and they feared the difficulties that their students would encounter upon leaving the midrasha, first in their national service and later in building their future homes. This notwithstanding, the vision and excitement “for the sake of heaven” were so great that nothing could stand in the way of these women.

The vision and dream of serious learning deepened and intensified, for there were more hours of study and greater fervor. Alongside the dream of learning, great effort was invested by both the staff and the students in the development and intensification of the axis of serving God in a more direct manner.

These women succeeded in their mission, and their small circle began to create an intensive *beit midrash* for young women as a

year-long framework, both for learning and spiritual growth. (Alongside the framework that I have described, frameworks for older women offering weekly *shi'urim* continued to develop.) It is, however, important to note that the qualitative breakthrough did not yet lead to a significant increase in the number of women students. We were still dealing with a very small and exclusive group, about thirty women in two frameworks. The Torah leadership most strongly identified with this process was Rav Lichtenstein and his students, who saw women's Torah learning in general, and their learning *gemara* in particular, as a positive *lekhatilah* development.

### A SURPRISING TURN: EXPANSION

At the end of the first decade to the breakthrough in women's Torah learning, and with its qualitative strengthening, both spiritual and scholastic (despite the quantitative limitations), a change took place, one that was surprising but at the same time foreseeable. The women ardently learning in small frameworks succeeded in broadening the fields of interest and occupation of the world of women's Torah learning. We were no longer dealing with a handful of women who perhaps posed a threat to the field of men's Torah knowledge, seeking entrance into areas where they did not belong, but with a group of women who wished to advance in their moral development, religiosity, and knowledge of Torah, and sought to deepen their commitment to halakhah through the study of halakhah and *gemara*. This dream seems to have found an attentive ear in other Torah circles as well. If the objective was not to produce female Torah scholars, but rather *ba'alei batiyot* or perhaps better mothers, then surely all strata of the national religious community could show interest.

Over the next two years, three new *midrashot* were opened whose spiritual and academic foundations were very different than those of the pioneering *midrashot*. They did not try to copy the existing *midrashot*, but they were undoubtedly established in their wake. These frameworks were also one-year Torah frameworks that adopted the designation of midrasha and were directed at young women following national service. They had similar frameworks, but different content, and sometimes even different goals.

Yeshivat Merkaz HaRav and later Har HaMor led to the establishment of Midreshet HaRova, Yeshivat Or Etzion established Midreshet Orot Etzion, and in the community of Maon a midrasha was established in the spirit of Yeshivat Merkaz HaRav and with a hasidic flavor. This expansion would influence the future course of the *midrashot's* development. The spiritual borders of the world of women's Torah learning were suddenly expanded, and so too its contents were at once broadened and modified. From a process involving a small spiritual group, it opened itself up and invited young women from diverse spiritual worlds to participate. Alongside the increase in the number of students, the religious and spiritual objections significantly diminished owing to the fact that these were *midrashot* of a different nature. Even in the *ulpanot* it now became possible to direct students to these frameworks, for they were regarded as "kosher" even in circles other than those emanating from Yeshivat Har Etzion. From a quantitative and attitudinal perspective, this was a significant change that has continued to intensify to this day. Over the years almost every yeshiva established a midrasha that adapted the spiritual statement of the yeshiva into a spiritual framework for women. As in the yeshiva world, different *midrashot* bear the same designation and the same framework, but are very different in their inner contents. In these new *midrashot*, *gemara* is hardly studied; the curriculum mostly revolves around issues of Jewish faith and thought, and preparation for a woman's most important role—motherhood. In many of these places, study is perceived not as a *lekhatilah* pursuit, but as a *be-di'eved* activity, in order to allow for the acquisition of tools with which to deal with the world and raising children. In a discussion that I participated in between several heads of *midrashot* in Israel, a woman who heads one midrasha argued that in her opinion, only young women with "psychological" problems who needed to "lounges" in the world of Torah should go to a midrasha. The difference between the original *midrashot* and the later ones is the difference between "lounging in Torah" and "toiling in Torah."

Today the world of women's Torah learning offers a wide variety of alternatives for Torah study. The original frameworks that promote deep and serious learning greatly expanded and today make up about

half of the women studying in the various institutions. They continue alongside many smaller frameworks that offer a one-year program that is primarily directed at religious strengthening. Regarding these frameworks, it is difficult to speak about opening the gates of Torah study to women, for the educational program is based primarily on talks and secondary sources. The gulf in the underlying assumptions regarding a woman's place in the world of Torah between these two ends of the spectrum is exceedingly wide.

### **“WE WERE LIKE DREAMERS”: NEW REALITIES AND DEVELOPMENTS**

Twenty-five years after the establishment of the earliest frameworks, the results are quite impressive: About 30 *midrashot* are scattered across the State of Israel, with a student population of about a thousand young women every year; serious frameworks of study for older women are found in several Israeli cities; the change in mentality regarding a woman's ability or perhaps even obligation to study Torah as part of her religious world embraces all streams of religious Zionism. Torah *shi'urim* in preparation for the holidays in communities and in *ulpanot* constitute a widespread and inspiring sight. The *midrashot* have banded together in the “midrashot Forum,” which is evidence of a well-grounded and organized phenomenon. These institutions receive government funding, and teachers' colleges boast about their joint-programs with various *midrashot*.

Another development that on the face of it may appear “material” or perhaps “technical” is the construction of permanent buildings for the *midrashot* over the last decade. The allocation of financial resources in the Jewish world for the specific purpose of building *batei midrash* for women testifies in a most concrete manner that the world of women's Torah learning has turned into an “everlasting edifice.” Magnificent *batei midrash* have been dedicated in Migdal Oz, in Nishmat, and in Midreshet Lindenbaum; each of them displays architectural sensitivity to creating a place that is, on the one hand, serious and dignified, while at the same time different from the classical yeshiva building.

During these years and parallel to the growth and flowering of the *midrashot*, we have been witness to other developments, all of which

draw on the phenomenon of the opening of the gates of Torah learning to women. Anyone who has been exposed to the world of Torah knows very well that it is impossible to confine Torah study within strict limits. The thirst is overpowering, and the feeling that the Torah is wider than the sea and requires long years of study stands before every student from the moment of entry into this world. This feeling led to the establishment of frameworks for continued study following the one-year program. Different dreams underlie the different programs.

### ***Training Programs for Torah-Spiritual Leadership***

In the women's *beit midrash* founded by Yeshivat Har Etzion and Herzog College, a three-year program was established whose primary interest is to train teachers for the next generation. The proposal that it submitted to various foundations spoke about "a training program for teachers for Torah-spiritual leadership." It was designed as at least a three-year program, in which the students receive teacher training at Herzog College, alongside intensive Torah study and full *beit midrash* life with all that this entails. The goal of the program is to train women to teach women teachers who would be forged, both scholastically and spiritually, in the world of Torah. This program has been running now for about seven years, alongside the regular one-year program. It is intended primarily for graduates of the one-year *beit midrash* program and constitutes a direct continuation of that program in both the intensity and the age of its students. The program's goal is to effect a change in the Torah education of girls in Israel on the elementary and high school levels, and to produce models for emulation and identification.

### ***The Advanced Talmudic Institute***

Matan established the Advanced Talmudic Institute, which operates a three-year program designed for women with a strong background who wish to engage in advanced *gemara* study and plan to teach *gemara* in different frameworks. The program awards its students generous scholarships in order to allow them to fully immerse themselves in Torah study. The program is intended for women with a B.A. or beyond, and operates four days a week between 8:30 a.m. and 3:30 p.m. Each

year about 10 women learn in this framework, and they constitute a high-quality cadre of advanced students. A similar program is offered in *Tanakh* that is combined with the pursuit of an M.A. The goal of this program is to produce highly educated women to teach in high schools and post-high school programs.

### ***Rabbinical Advocate Program for Women***

Ohr Torah Institutions, under the direction of Mrs. Nurit Fried, broke through from the world of Torah study in the *beit midrash* to the rabbinical courts. Following a prolonged struggle that included petitioning Israel's High Court of Justice (Bagatz) against the Ministry of Religions, women were granted the authority to represent women and men alike before a rabbinical court on matters relating to divorce. During the mid-1990s, the first class of women rabbinical court advocates (*to'anut rabbaniyot*) was opened. The program was open to women with a strong prior background, and for two years the students studied relevant sections of *Even HaEzer* and other sources. The program was supervised by Rav Shlomo Riskin and other figures expert in these areas. Following the two years of study, the women sat for examinations administered by the Rabbinate that would allow them to appear before a rabbinical court. The struggle for this change was very difficult; many rabbinical judges and rabbinical advocates opposed it. Nevertheless, owing to their perseverance as well as their understanding that a woman rabbinical advocate can often alleviate the distress of an *agunah*, the initiators did not give up, and indeed for many women female representation before the court eases the experience of divorce. A *to'enet rabbanit* needs a strong foundation in Torah knowledge, and the students had to demonstrate high proficiency in learning. A world that had been exclusively in the hands of men was forced to listen to and conduct a learned discussion with women as equals to the male advocates. The goal of this program was to effect a change in the rabbinical courts and produce women who can represent women in times of crisis.



***Kollel Halakhah for the Training of Yo'atzot Halakhah***

Ten years ago Midreshet Nishmat, headed by Rabbanit Chana Henkin (wife of Rav Yehuda Henkin), established a program that trains *yo'atzot halakhah* (women who are halakhic advisers, and not halakhic decisors) in matters pertaining to *taharat ha-mishpaha* (family purity). Later the Women's Halakhic Hotline was established, allowing women to anonymously call in questions relating to *taharat ha-mishpaha* to the *yo'atzot halakhah*. The program, which functions under the supervision of members of the Midreshet Nishmat rabbinic staff (Rav Yaakov Varhaftig, Rav Menachem Burstein from Machon Puah, and others), trained *yo'atzot halakhah*, focusing on one area of halakhah—*taharat ha-mishpaha*. It is a two-year program in which, alongside halakhah, which is studied at a very high level, the students also take courses on medical, psychological, and emotional issues relating to women. After two years the students undergo an oral examination administered by three rabbis in order to receive the title *yo'etzet halakhah*. The answers that the *yo'atzot* give to the halakhic queries addressed to them are given with the full consultation of the rabbis supervising the program. Some of the questions reaching the hotline are answered by the *yo'etzet* on the spot; regarding others she first consults with her rabbinic supervisor, and later gets back to the woman who posed the question. Questions relating to *taharat ha-mishpaha* are directed to the *yo'atzot* in the community as well. It took great courage to open this program, for here we are dealing not only with the opening of study to women, but also with the translation of the acquired knowledge into halakhic decision-making— a manifestly male and rabbinic domain. The program emphasizes that these women are advisers and not decisors, but nevertheless this is a real revolution. The motive was clear: introducing women into an exceedingly sensitive area in the encounter between women and halakhah, and thus enabling more women to ask halakhic questions in a pleasant and comfortable manner. Without a doubt, opening the gates of Torah knowledge to women hastened this development. Great caution is exercised with respect to formal titles, and the limits of the knowledge of the *yo'atzot*, who have studied for only two years, is clearly recognized, but nevertheless the rabbis who have accompanied this program have demonstrated great courage. As

for its acceptance by the community, here official recognition was not necessary (as opposed to the case of the rabbinical court advocates), and therefore everything was easier. The power of the *yo'atzot* stems from the many women who turn to them with questions and accept them warmly and with a sigh of relief. In one Diaspora community in which the services of a *yo'etzet halakhah* are offered as part of the community organization, the number of questions directed to the *yo'etzet* is nearly double the number of questions that had been previously directed to the community rabbi on the same topics. We see, then, that women who in the past refrained from asking halakhic questions are now doing so, and it would seem that they are also more meticulous in their halakhic observance. The program's goal is to train women to be capable of providing serious halakhic answers in the field of *taharat ha-mishpahah*.

### ***The World of Prayer***

Alongside the academic developments described above, I feel privileged to take note of another phenomenon that developed during these years. In the *beit midrash* in Migdal Oz, the gates of song and prayer were opened to hundreds of women during the week of *selihot* and on Yom Kippur. With the establishment of the *beit midrash* it was clear to us that it was incumbent upon us to provide the students with a *minyan* for the recitation of *selihot* in preparation for the *Yamim Nora'im* as part of the *beit midrash's* routine. A minimal *minyan* of men was arduously assembled from among the residents of the kibbutz and the staff of the *beit midrash*, and *selihot* were recited as in every Jewish community, a half an hour each night. A year later the students and educational staff decided to conclude the service with a song. The students (in the women's section, of course) were not satisfied with one song, but rather every night they continued to sing for an hour or more. The solemnity and excitement infected all those in attendance, including the *chazzanim*. A tradition of unhurried prayer that allowed for the thoughtful recitation of the *piyyutim* developed in the *beit midrash*; the verses in between the *piyyutim* were also recited slowly and with care. Passages from the *selihot* themselves were also sung (*Haneshama Lach, Ve-Havi'otim*, and others). The services were elevated

to the level of the prayers of the *Yamim Nora'im*; the excitement, the concentration, the pace were all similar to those of Yom Kippur, and not merely a hurdle that had to be passed on the way to the *Yamim Nora'im* prayers. It seemed as if the students were pouring out their hearts because they would not be together for Yom Kippur.

Over the years, and especially with the move to the new *beit midrash*, the word got out about the slow *selihot* accompanied by singing before, during, and after their recitation and spread across the country. Students who invited their friends and mothers, former students who returned to the *beit midrash* for the *selihot* years after having completed their studies, and teachers who brought their classes for the *selihot* service solidified into an enormous community of women. The number of men also grew from a *minyán* which had to be counted every night to make sure that there were ten to the situation today, when the men's section is frequently packed to capacity. Each night a larger number of women gather together from midnight until two or three in the morning. The participants are high school students arriving on their own, alongside high school and ulpana students coming as a group with their schools, together with women in their forties and fifties who come from all parts of the country in order to prepare for the *Yamim Nora'im* with prayer and song. It is important to note that each night before the *selihot* begin a talk is given by a member of the staff of the *beit midrash*, and various classes on timely issues are offered to the guests.

One personal memory: About twenty-five years ago a difficult task was cast upon my father's shoulders—to find the key to the women's section in the Katamon *shtiebl* so that I could recite the *selihot* inside, rather than outside below the shul's window. At Yeshivat Har Etzion, where I came as a child, I was also among the few women who recited *selihot* as part of their religious world. Today I stand in a packed *beit midrash* with five hundred other women who come each night to recite *selihot*.

The intensity of the *selihot* led directly to the question whether or not to have a *minyán* in the *beit midrash* on the *Yamim Nora'im*. The students repeatedly asked to arrange for a *minyán* in the *beit midrash* on Yom Kippur. Their desire to pray in their home on Yom Kippur

was easy to understand, and the feeling consolidated that a women's *beit midrash* can and should join together for community prayer on Yom Kippur. Despite the strong feelings, it seems that what is self-evident in the world of men's Torah learning requires clarification and discussion in a women's *beit midrash*. Today I am certain that, with all the difficulty it entails, this process of clarification sharpens the issues and demands truth and honesty that lead to deeper and more profound understanding.

Various issues were discussed in this context: Is it proper to conduct a service in a congregation comprised of forty men and five hundred women? Is such a service spiritually "kosher"—must not men constitute the backbone of the service? Or perhaps some of the spiritual elements can take place on the other side of the *mehitzah*, where great spiritual energy issues forth from a community of women? Is it proper to expose women to a meaningful experience of prayer when it is clear that later in their lives they will for many years spend their time taking care of their children outside the synagogue—will the transition be too difficult? Issues relating to women's singing and *kol ishah* were also raised.

After several years of discussion with the students, who felt a deep emotional involvement with the issue, we turned to the Roshei Yeshiva of Yeshivat Har Etzion, Rav Lichtenstein and Rav Amital, and asked for their blessings. Three conditions were attached to their affirmative answer: the contingent of men must be significant in number (about fifty); it must be composed solely of men who wish to pray there (and not men who were pressured to do so owing to the need for a sizable *minyan*); all the men must be married.

Yom Kippur services have been conducted in the *beit midrash* for the past five years. It is difficult to describe the excitement in the women's section and even in the men's section. The *minyan* is for the most part composed of members of the staff, parents of students, and husbands of former students. Members of the *beit midrash* staff lead the service, and I give the talks on the night of *Kol Nidrei* and before *Ne'ilah* from the women's section, the men listening in the men's section. Hundreds of women and young girls from near and far fill the *beit midrash*. We have demonstrated that it is indeed possible to

actualize a world of Torah and prayer in a women's *beit midrash* within the bounds of halakhah.

### MAKING A RECKONING: THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF WOMEN'S TORAH LEARNING

What were the achievements of the world of women's Torah learning over the past twenty-five years? In what ways did it succeed, and where is work still needed? How, if at all, has women's learning influenced men's Torah study in particular, and the religious world in general? Have the transformations and new emphases in the world of women's Torah learning changed the priorities of the religious community and the way of life of the religious family?

I will first address these questions from the perspective of the world of women, and then I will attempt to examine them with respect to the world of men's Torah study.

On the individual plane, we have enjoyed great success. The spiritual, religious, and even halakhic worlds of women have enjoyed unparalleled development and advance in recent years. More Torah classes are being offered to women and girls; women go to synagogue for Minchah and Ma'ariv more than ever before. The phenomenon of *selihot* described above and serious bat mitzvah celebrations all across the country point to spiritual seeking and a desire for religious intimacy. Women no longer see the religious world as the exclusive domain of men. The level of the Torah-related conversations among young religious women is certainly higher today than it was a generation ago. Every ulpana offers *Torah Lishmah* programs, and Torah classes are flourishing in national service settings. Guests arriving at a wedding find the bride and her friends immersed in spiritual singing and not only in small talk, as was the case in the past. Not every high school and ulpana graduate invests a year in Torah study, but the existence of the *midrashot* has influenced even those who have chosen not to study in them—through seminars, through the challenge that they pose to young women, and through the fundamental assumption that Torah learning is open to women. Many mothers are filled with envy when they see their daughters enjoying opportunities that they themselves

were never offered. Many frameworks are also available to older women—daily, weekly, and pre-holiday classes.

***“With our Faces Turned to the Community”***

In addition to the direct influence that it has had on each individual, the world of women's Torah learning has impacted upon the community as a whole and upon the community of women in particular. In this context, I wish to note three primary factors:

*Direct personal influence:* A woman who studies Torah in a *beit midrash* brings her husband and her family that which she has learned and experienced in her studies. The Torah discussions in the house, among the family in general and between husband and wife in particular, are directly influenced by the world of women's Torah learning. The level of conversation, the nature of the discussion, and the spiritual partnership have all immeasurably risen during these years. A mother's involvement in her children's Torah study sends an important message regarding the place of the religious world in the house and the centrality of Torah study in the life of the family. Women have begun to speak at their sons' bar mitzvah celebrations as perpetuators of the tradition. More and more women offer *divrei Torah* at family events (this last phenomenon may be limited to certain sectors of the community, but it is still important to note them).

*Female leadership:* Women who over the course of the years studied in these Torah frameworks today teach girls and women in community and high school frameworks. *Gemara* teachers in high schools and *midrashot* along with teachers of *Tanakh* and Jewish thought in community settings present a model of a serious Torah figure. A spiritual leadership is also growing in the *midrashot*, some of which are headed by women. In several communities in Israel women are actively involved in their synagogues. It is certainly possible to find women with intense spiritual strength and proficiency in learning who constitute models for inspiration and advancement in the service of God. In part of the community, this leadership is limited to the world of women: women leading women. In other parts of the community, however, women leaders play a role in forums of rabbis and male teachers. At the recent conference of Tzohar rabbis, women were

invited to sit on various panels as educational and *Torani* figures, and not only as professionals, such as psychologists and social workers.

I admit that that we still have a long way to go before the place of women as Torah leaders is fully recognized, but in parts of society we are certainly beginning to see a change. Part of Torah society views women speaking in mixed company as a violation of the required standards of modesty, and in that sector I do not foresee any breakthroughs or changes regarding female leadership outside the world of women.

*Answering the needs of the community:* In the framework of these influences, I include the work of the *yo'atzot halakhah* and the rabbinical court advocates. The world of women's Torah learning has enabled the training of these women as figures who are proficient in their areas of expertise and who significantly contribute to the entire community. The rabbinical court advocates directly impact upon one of the most important institutions in the religious world and in the encounter between the general community and the rabbinical court system in connection with the laws of marriage and divorce. In their professional capacity, they engage in legal proceedings before important Torah authorities alongside their male counterparts. In these court proceedings, the world of women's Torah learning directly encounters the world of male Torah learning. We are not dealing here with Torah scholarship for its own sake but rather with human lives and the practical application of Torah, and it is perhaps precisely for this reason that it is such a fascinating encounter. The rabbinical court advocates are also very active in the area of *agunot* and women who are refused a bill of divorce, and in this way they directly influence the nature of the religious community.

The *yo'atzot halakhah* also turn to the community and impact upon one of the most important *mitzvot* in the preservation of the Jewish community over the generations. The service that they provide women greatly influences the world of Jewish men. A halakhic discussion conducted between a *yo'etzet halakhah* and her rabbinic supervisor constitutes a direct meeting place between the two worlds. The *yo'etzet* brings to the halakhic discussion not only her Torah knowledge but also the fact that she is a woman in an area that is so sensitive to women. In a conversation I had with one of the *yo'atzot*,

she described the vibrant halakhic discourse that she maintains with her supervisor in which her halakhic judgment and experience as a *yo'etzet* is given great weight in the final ruling jointly reached by the rabbi and the *yo'etzet*. This is a concrete change in the community, and perhaps even in the halakhic decision-making process—a modest change, but nevertheless an important one.

From all that has been said above, it seems to me that without a doubt women's Torah learning has greatly impacted upon the religious community, on both the individual and the community level. An interesting question is whether the choices and initiatives to influence in the communal domain were conscious decisions connected to the nature of women and the most important circles in which women live on a day-to-day basis—the circles of family and community—or whether, perhaps, women were “pushed” into these areas of influence because they knew that it would be impossible for them to be involved in other areas of halakhah. It is difficult to answer this question, but it seems to me that the choice was not merely *be-di'eved*. It had a deep element of *lekhatilah*, a desire for involvement and influence in areas where women's sensitivity and sisterhood would be an advantage and in that way contribute to the religious community as a whole.

**“THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN”:  
THE INFLUENCE OF WOMEN'S TORAH LEARNING  
ON THE WORLD OF THE YESHIVOT**

One question remains unanswered: Has the world of women's Torah learning changed or influenced men's Torah institutions—the yeshivot? A certain difficulty lies in the very question. During this period, many transformations took place in the world of men's Torah learning: New yeshivot opened, the world of men's Torah learning expanded, and parts of it underwent significant changes. Yeshivot placing greater emphasis on the spiritual dimension became more dominant, while the number of students remaining for many years in the more scholastic yeshivot declined. The yeshiva curriculum, which twenty years ago centered primarily on the study of *gemara*, today addresses issues situated “between the holy and the profane.” In Yeshivat Har



Etzion, members of the educational staff lead discussions on matters relating to society, the state, and the like. These seminars are restricted to certain fixed occasions (e.g., on Hanukkah or on *Motza'ei Shabbat*), but twenty years ago even these times were dedicated exclusively to the debates of Abaye and Rava. Indeed, times have changed.

Can these changes be credited to the influence of women's Torah learning, or are we perhaps dealing with spiritual changes taking place in this generation that are part of broader developments in both the religious and the general world? The *midrashot* and the yeshivot experienced similar changes (though in entirely different proportions), but would it be presumptuous to attribute these changes to the world of the *midrashot*? Aren't both the yeshiva and the midrasha part of the postmodern (and perhaps also neo-hasidic) world, these influences being evident both in the midrasha that was taking form and in the yeshiva that was undergoing change during these years?

Is it possible to test this issue? I cannot offer a precise answer to this question, but I wish to add two more pieces of information relating to the connection between the world of the *midrashot* and the world of the yeshivot, which may contribute to the discussion.

Where are we likely to find a bridge between these different worlds of Torah?

First and foremost, in the world of learning, the primary focus of the yeshiva. In this area, I am sad to say, the world of women's Torah learning has not yet produced Torah scholars of the caliber that can influence Torah scholars in the yeshivot. Unfortunately, all the attempts made in this direction have been meager, and they do not pose a true challenge in the area of learning. Is it possible to develop into a real Torah scholar (in the full sense of the term, and without lowering the standards of the idea) while learning only four days a week until half past three? In order to produce women Torah scholars, we need ten-year frameworks of study from early in the morning to late at night, but such institutions do not yet exist. There are women who are proficient in Torah, but we have not yet produced Torah scholars in the original sense of the term. It is possible, but we have a long way to go, and in this sense we have not influenced the world of men's Torah learning.

I opened this essay with the question whether yeshivot direct themselves to producing Torah scholars or educated *ba'alei batim*. Over the years, attitudes on this issue within the yeshiva world have changed, and in recent years there have been an increasing number of voices calling for a strengthening of the class of *ba'alei batim* strongly connected to the world of Torah as the educational focus of the yeshiva. In this sense there has been an impressive cross-fertilization between the two worlds, and the changes in the world of the yeshivot may have influenced the world of women. An honest examination of the world of the *midrashot* reveals that we have undoubtedly produced *ba'alei batiyot* who love the Torah, are connected to it, and understand its value and halakhic demands, but we have not yet merited producing Torah authorities. Is this conclusion disappointing? It depends upon whom you ask. Personally, I am certain that at this initial stage we should be happy with our achievements.

Another important encounter between the two worlds takes place on the human level, both on the part of the rabbis who teach in both worlds, and on the part of the students. More than one teacher has told me that after beginning to teach in a midrasha, he changed the way he teaches in a yeshiva. One of the instructors at the *beit midrash* in Migdal Oz, who teaches Rav Soloveitchik's essay "*U-Bikkashtem Mi-sham*," told me: "The questions that women ask me are different than the questions raised by men, and I have begun to teach the men differently in light of the questions posed by the women, which provided me with new perspectives on the text being studied." Voices from the world of women's Torah study are definitely being passed to the world of men's Torah study and have an impact upon it.

As mentioned above, another point of transfer is found between individuals who live in the two different worlds. Parents and daughters, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives who share their experiences with each other create many different relationships and connections between the two worlds. Here too it is difficult to determine whether we are dealing with influences from the world of women upon the world of men, or with mutual influences streaming in the spiritual discussion being conducted by individuals who are troubled by

the same issues and bring their own worlds to a vibrant and living encounter with similar but different worlds. Even though it is difficult to answer this question, I am convinced that the personal channel is exceedingly important in creating connections and influences between the two worlds, and that both worlds are enriched by these encounters, influencing and being influenced at the same time.

## CONCLUSION

Let me conclude with a brief survey that I conducted “in the field” in anticipation of what I am saying here. I asked two instructors who teach in the *beit midrash* in Migdal Oz whether the *midrashot* have had any effect on the yeshivot. The first instructor teaches Ḥasidut in the *beit midrash* and is primarily occupied with hasidic thought: “Certainly,” he answered, “what kind of question is that? The spiritual discussion has changed in the yeshivot, the depth, the way that I teach, the questions that my wife raises while I prepare my class, the *midrashot* have surely greatly affected the yeshivot and what is taught in them.” Taking this answer as a compliment, I turned to the next teacher, an instructor of *gemara* who is primarily occupied with the debates of Abaye and Rava, but also teaches Jewish thought in the *beit midrash*. I asked the same question: “How, if at all, have the *midrashot* influenced the yeshivot?” The teacher looked at me in amazement as if he did not understand the question and immediately replied: “The *midrashot* influencing the yeshivot? Certainly not! Is it possible for the depth of learning in the *midrashot* to influence the yeshivot? Do the *mechinot* influence the yeshivot? The world of the *midrashot* is far from impacting upon the world of the yeshivot.”

I listened to the two answers and pondered about the personality and spiritual gap between these two teachers and the different ways in which they experience and define both the world of the *midrashot* and that of the yeshivot. I understood that I would never find a single answer to the question I had posed. As an interesting point to consider, let me add that when I pressed the *gemara* instructor and told him what his colleague had said, it was he who said what was cited above, that his teaching of “*U-Bikkatshtem Mi-sham*” in the yeshiva definitely

changed after he taught women precisely the same text. When I meet him again, I will ask him whether his *gemara* classes in the yeshiva also changed after teaching the same tractate to the women. I am not sure what his answer would be.

It is my hope that, with the help of “He who gave the Torah to His people Israel,” the next twenty-five years will be just as exciting, advancing us and bringing us closer to Him.

### NOTE

1. Editor's note: this article focuses exclusively on the development of advanced women's Torah learning in Israel. A separate treatment of the American scene, and a comparison between the two, is required.