

Women Learning Talmud: On the Recent Rabbinic Controversy

“While some [women] find deep religious meaning in pursuits such as prayer, community service, *chesed*, and activism, many are transformed into *ovdot Hashem* through their involvement in the awesome experience of challenging, rigorous *Talmud Torah*, which by definition includes *Gemara* study. We live in an age of education and reflection, and, for many women, a religious life devoid of advanced *Talmud Torah* is circumscribed and shallow. This is a point that is absolutely critical to understand: in our Modern Orthodox community, the alternative to advanced *Talmud Torah* is not *emunah*, but apathy.”

These words could have been uttered by Rabbi Chaim Brovender in 1976 when he first opened Midreshet Bruria (what became known as Brovender’s and later Midreshet Lindenbaum), a seminary in Israel in which women study Talmud. They could have been said by Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm in 1977; he was president of Yeshiva University when Rav Soloveitchik first gave a Talmud *shiur* to women at Stern College. Or perhaps they were written by Rabbi David Silber in 1979 when he founded the Drisha Institute.

Since the late 1970s, Talmud study has been *de riguer* for Modern Orthodox women in high school and post high school. The introduction of more religious opportunities for women has been one of the hallmarks of Modern Orthodoxy since then. But those words were penned three weeks ago by Mrs. Rivka Kahan, principal of Ma’ayanot Yeshiva High School in New Jersey. When it opened in almost twenty years ago, it was the first Orthodox Jewish all-girls high school to include Talmud study as an integral part of its curriculum. That choice was questioned earlier this month by a very prominent and extremely influential *rosh yeshiva* at Yeshiva University in what became a widely read and widely distributed controversial essay.

The conversation he began, though, is different than the conversation that took place thirty-five years ago. Then, the debate was about the permissibility of teaching Talmud to women; after all, the rabbis of the Talmud and the commentaries which followed explicitly discourage it. In this essay, the YU *rosh yeshiva* acknowledges that it is *halakhically* permissible for women to study Talmud.

However, he questions whether it was the right choice for the community to open up those doors. Recently, he observes, there have been many progressive infiltrations into the Modern Orthodox community. Women’s rabbinic ordination, egalitarian *minyanim*, even support for gay rights and same-sex marriage among not just the Modern Orthodox community but its rabbis too. How did this happen? Where did it all begin? This *rosh yeshiva* claims that it all started with women’s Talmud study. According to his sociological analysis, this was an example of *לפתח הטאת רובץ*, sin crouching at the door, or a slippery slope. Western, liberal, modern values, and what he calls “postmodernism,” were inching their way in; the Modern Orthodox community so wanted to let them in. Once the establishment accepted women’s Talmud learning as mainstream, the door was cracked open. Everything else could now come along through the door. He even quotes a supporter of women’s ordination, a “pioneer of the religious feminist wave,” who said, “What is happening today is a direct continuation of the beginning of Talmud studies for religious women in the 1980s.”

The *rosh yeshiva* concludes, “the inclusion of Talmud in curricula for women in Modern Orthodox schools needs to be reevaluated. While the *gedolim* of the twentieth century saw Torah study to be a way to keep women close to our *mesorah*, an egalitarian attitude has colored some women's study of Talmud and led them to embrace and advocate egalitarian ideas and practices which are unacceptable to those very *gedolim*.”

Over the last few weeks, there have been three major published critiques of this essay. The first was by Mrs. Kahan, the principal of Maayanot who I quoted earlier. The second was written by Shira Hecht-Koller, a Talmud teacher at SAR High School in Riverdale, and her husband, Rabbi Dr. Aaron Koller, a Bible professor at Yeshiva University. They praise the *rosh yeshiva* for being willing to change his mind from his former views on Talmud Torah for women (after all, he used to teach Talmud to women at Stern College), and they praise Yeshiva University for being such a “big tent” that can contain within it so many disparate views. However, they fundamentally disagree with the *rosh yeshiva*'s sociological analysis.

It's not that women's Talmud study led to an erosion of gender roles which then led to an erosion of other boundaries. Rather, the Kollers write, “broad cultural trends with deep roots have led to deep-seated egalitarianism and tolerance in large swaths of the Modern Orthodox community.” That is, there is a general milieu of egalitarianism (such as calls for equal pay and high management positions for women) and tolerance for alternative lifestyles in the world in general, and by extension, these deep feelings are held by many people in the Modern Orthodox community. Those feelings have led to all the phenomena with which the *rosh yeshiva* is so concerned: women's Talmud study, changed social roles for women, and views on homosexuality. It's not that one opened the door to the other, but rather a deep seated value that led to all of them.

Finally, my revered teacher, our very own resident scholar, and this rabbi's fellow YU *rosh yeshiva*, Rabbi Jeremy Wieder wrote a scathing critique of the essay. He attacks it both for pragmatic reasons and on principle.

Pragmatically, Rabbi Wieder refers to the historical record. The very same reason why the Bais Yaakov Schools were founded in 1917 and why Talmud study for women began in the 1970s remains true today: “having women who obtained an advanced education in worldly matters but remained ignorant or unsophisticated in Torah led to rapid assimilation and abandonment of commitment to Torah and *mitzvot*.” If this was true in 1917 and the 1970s, Rabbi Wieder notes, how much more so today. “The challenges of today's culture are even more powerful and more compelling. The antidote,” he says, “is more Torah study, not less. The less that a sophisticated understanding of Torah forms and informs our communal worldview, the greater the opportunity for that view to be informed and distorted by other values.” That is, the more Torah people know, the *less likely* they are to adopt values that are foreign to Judaism, not more likely, as the other *rosh yeshiva* would lead us to believe.

On principle, Rabbi Wieder says, “the study of Torah is one of the greatest gifts that the *Ribbono shel Olam* has given to the Jewish people.” And while “historical circumstances may once have allowed the possibility that young women receive no formal education in Torah...the

world has changed...one of the benefits of this change is that women now have the opportunity to enjoy [God's] greatness in having given us the Torah in whose study we toil."

He concludes by acknowledging that he shares a concern about the difficulties our community faces, but that "our response should not advocate diminishing Torah study but rather intensifying it for all of us, and especially for our young men and young women."

I identify very strongly with Rabbi Wieder's position, and his students and many other students and alumni of Yeshiva University have praised him for boldly and publicly critiquing this view of a very influential senior *rosh yeshiva*. Anecdotally, I can attest to Rabbi Wieder's claims. Many of my friends and peers are beneficiaries of the advances in Talmud study for women at institutions such as Midreshet Lindenbaum, Migdal Oz, Nishmat, Matan, Beit Morasha, GPATS, and others. I know that their religious lives would not be nearly as rich were it not for study opportunities that were offered to them. Furthermore, I know that the world *beit midrash* as a whole would not be as rich were it not for the voice and perspective that educated and learned women are now able to provide in understanding and analyzing Talmud and *halakha*.

At KJ and Ramaz we also applaud Rabbi Wieder and we support the various institutions that teach Talmud to women at a high level; most recently, we are proud to announce the appointment of our new *Yoetzet Halakha*, Julia Baruch, a Ramaz alumna who recently completed her exams for the confirmation of that title. The success of the *Yoetzot Halakha* program is itself evidence to the contrary of what this senior *rosh yeshiva* claims; its existence has certainly led to greater commitment to the *mesorah* and observance of *halakha* among many men and women through making the laws of family purity more accessible to women. It would not be possible without the availability of advanced Talmud study for women. This is on the pragmatic side—advanced Talmud study for women *has* in fact led to greater observance.

I would like to expand a little, however, on Rabbi Wieder's critique from principle as well. What distressed me most about the original essay is a statement in the *rosh yeshiva's* conclusion. "While the *gedolim* of the twentieth century saw Torah study to be a way to keep women close to our *mesorah*," he writes, its effects now drive people away from that very *mesorah*.

It is true that different people, men and women, react differently to intensive Torah study. For some, myself included, the fact of intense Torah study and Talmudic debate makes Judaism come alive. It shows us that the pursuit of *halakha* is serious, and that it's just as rigorous as the study in any other field. For others, however, regardless of gender, the legalism of Talmudic study is a turn-off from religion. For example, discovering that entire categories of our laws and traditions may exist only because two words happen to be found next to each other in a particular *passuk* may lead some people to question the validity of the entire system. I know men and women who feel that way.

One might suggest that we therefore limit Talmud study for anyone in that second category, male or female. That, however, would be intellectually dishonest and manipulative. As *Pirkei Avot* tells us, the world stands on *Torah*, *Avodah*, and *G'milut Hasadim*. Torah is its

own value, it is not merely a means to an end; it's not just a way to get people closer to the *mesorah*. Rather, like doing *mitzvot* and good deeds, Torah study is an end unto itself; it is its own value. Our Torah, as passed down from generation to generation, is an integral part our religion, and Judaism embraces critical thinking. The right kinds of *yeshivot* foster an environment where no question is prohibited—even one so basic that it questions how the system works. It's certainly true that good questions need good answers. But the answer is never to put a limit on thinking or on people's access to information, knowledge, or wisdom. On principle.

That's what troubled me most about the essay: that the answer to what a rabbi views as a problematic sociological phenomenon is to close the doors to learning. But that can never be the answer. That's not our Judaism and that's not our *mesorah*. I am relieved to see that the three published critiques we have reviewed have been so well received by the wider Modern Orthodox community. And I am proud to be a member of a community that does everything in its power to make Torah *more* accessible, not *less*, and that opens the doors for people to grow in their spirituality, learning, and *avodat Hashem*.