A Bet-Midrash of Her Own: 
Women's Contribution to the Study and Knowledge of Torah

Tamar Ross

The feminist revolution in Jewish studies began over 25 years ago. One of the earlier signs of its effect was the establishment of the women's caucus that has now become a permanent feature in annual meetings of the American Association for Jewish Studies. Another testimony to its influence is an excellent anthology of articles published in the beginning of the 1990s entitled: Feminist Perspectives on Jewish Studies which seeks to take stock of the current impact of feminism in the field. By contrast, Israeli scholars - to the extent they did at all relate to the topic - have tended until recently to view the notion of a uniquely feminine contribution to Jewish studies rather disparagingly, as yet another symptom of the lack of rigor typifying Jewish scholarship beyond the confines of this country. But like most cultural phenomena of the Western world, this trend has eventually penetrated Israel as well and is now being given a big boost with the introduction of gender studies in various universities in Israel. The fruits of this development can be seen in the very convening of a special session devoted to 'Women and the Study of Judaism' in the conference upon which this book is based, as well as a day devoted to the topic of 'Knowledge and Creativity of Jewish Women', scheduled by the division for History of Women and Gender of the Israeli Historical Society in

* This article is a much expanded version of my Hebrew article, 'Hark my Son to the Moral Teachings of your Father, and Do Not Abandon the Torah of your Mother - the Women's Learning Revolution', to appear in a volume on yeshivot and batei-midrash edited by I. Etkes and published by Mercaz Shazar. Also included are selections from my book, Expanding the Palace of Torah: Orthodoxy and Feminism, Hanover and London 2004, and additional new material.

conjunction with the World Jewish Congress of 2005. These are two phenomena that Israeli scholars would not have dreamed of a few years ago.

When discussing Jewish studies, however, it is important to remember that we are actually referring to two levels of learning at least. The first level deals with what has always been regarded as the primary raw material of Jewish studies - what for generations has been defined in the language of tradition as *limmudei qodesh* (holy studies) in the classic sense of the term. Study on this level is ordinarily conducted from within the confines of the traditional bet-midrash (Torah study hall), and - employing the hallowed traditions of the past - its purpose is to understand and also to create that body of knowledge which serves as the basis of living Judaism. Another second order and more derivative level of learning engages first order material from a scientific-historic perspective through the lenses of the external observer. This type of study, which is conducted within the academic universe of discourse, strives to examine and interpret rather than constitute the initial body of knowledge and is aided by tools that are foreign to the system itself. When speaking of a feminist perspective in Jewish studies, the reference is usually to study conducted on this secondary level (which includes biblical and rabbinic studies and modern Hebrew literature, as well as the field of Jewish thought, history and sociology) and not to the traditional manner of study from within the main body of knowledge itself.

Several explanations can be offered for this lack of symmetry in the feminist influence. The most obvious of these is that knowledge of the first order demands a degree of skill and depth of training and proficiency in primary sources that has been virtually inaccessible to women at large until the 20th century. A less obvious explanation is that admitting women to traditional Jewish study poses considerable challenges to established religious traditions on a sociological plane. On a more profound level the very notion of a feminist influence upon Jewish study of the first order might be even more problematic from a theological point of view; to the extent that such texts purport to deal with essential and eternal truths, there is a difficulty in uncovering and acknowledging the existence of a male-conditioned gender bias and its
limitations and in speaking of the importance of redressing these with the benefits of a feminine perspective. Nevertheless, it is my contention that as the barriers to traditional learning are being broken down for women on an institutional level, traditional Judaism will be forced to face the implications of women's first order study on a sociological and substantive plane as well. Moreover, one of the fascinating by-products of this process is a partial dissolution of the sharp ideological distinction between Jewish studies of the first and second order that has characterized traditional learning ever since the establishment of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* in the 19th century. In order to substantiate these claims and fully understand their import, let us first follow the institutional changes leading to such developments, as evidenced in the astounding revolution that Torah study for women has undergone in the last quarter of the 20th century.

**The Institutional Background**

Learning Torah is not defined by halakhah (Jewish law) as a time-bound mitzvah. Nevertheless Jewish law establishes that women are exempt from this obligation, and - in accordance with the famous talmudic statement of R. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus: 'Rather that the words of Torah be burnt than handed over to women (*yisarfu divrei Torah ve-al yimasru le-nashim*) - the dominant tradition over the generations has been to discourage women from engaging in this activity.

---

2 PT Sotah 3. 4, 16a. See also BT Yoma 66b where R. Eliezer reiterates his opinion that women's wisdom applies only to the loom. His negative opinion regarding the desirability of teaching a woman Torah is further expressed in the context of a discussion in BT Sotah 21b regarding women's drinking of the bitter waters in order to detect whether she is an adulteress. Because the merit of studying Torah has the power to delay punishment, Ben Azzai regards it as a father's obligation to teach his daughter Torah, whereas R. Eliezer declares that this is as if he were to teach her lewdness. According to Rashi, this is because R. Eliezer suspects that woman's knowledge of Torah will encourage her to use this merit unscrupulously as an antidote to the punishment due to her for promiscuous behavior.

The objection to women's learning was generally limited to muted disapproval in light of Maimonides’ position. As Maimonides formulates it, women are not to be taught because most of them are not attuned to study. If they do take up study on their own initiative, however, they merit reward, although this reward is less than that of the male who is halakhically obligated to engage in such activity. Maimonides also distinguishes in this context between the Oral and Written Torah, regarding the prohibition against teaching women the former as more severe.

Despite this negative attitude toward women's learning, a few unusual women (generally from learned rabbinic families) did manage over the generations to reach noteworthy levels of proficiency in Torah. There are also accounts of several institutional efforts in medieval and pre-modern times to grant young girls a rudimentary level of formal religious education, although such programs never strove for the same standard as those set for boys. As a rule, women's education was oriented towards practical objectives; what was important was that they should know how to perform their basic religious tasks with a whole heart, but certainly not that they should dedicate themselves to learning at a very deep level or for its own sake in order to fulfill a mitzvah.

The first dramatic breakthrough in the education of Jewish girls and women in recent times began in Krakow, Poland, prior to World War I, and was instigated by a woman. Enlisting the support of Rabbi Yisrael Meir Hacohen Kagan (better known as the Ḥafetz Ḥayyim), Sarah Schenirer, a traditional Jewish woman and a seamstress by profession, founded what eventually became the Beth Jacob network of schools for girls. This network in due course spread to Israel, the

4 Shulhan āRukh, Yoreh De'ah 246:6.
5 MT Hilkhōt Talmud Torah 1:13.
6 For an account of some of these women, see S. Ashkenazi, Nashim Lamdaniyot, Tel Aviv 1942; Ha-Ishah be-Aspaqlarot ha-Yehadut, vol. 1, Tel Aviv 1953; Zolty, 'And All Your Children Shall be Learned', pp. 140-146, 159-162, 177-184, 202-208, 246-256.
8 For additional details regarding the founding of the Beth Jacob network and its
United States, and other countries in the Diaspora, flourishing to the present day. As understood by the Beth Jacob system, however, the chief purpose of educating women was still to enhance their effectiveness in their traditional role of wife and mother. The innovation lay in recognizing that in the modern context, this task demands more formal inculcation of that same essential practical knowledge which daughters of past generations absorbed with their mother's milk. Aside from vocational training that would allow women to supplement - or even undertake full responsibility for - the family income, this educational objective called for more extensive knowledge of practical halakhah, and the imbibing of other spiritual fare likely to deepen their religious devotion. Such knowledge included study of the Bible, aggadah, musar (ethical) literature and other matters of faith, and even selective exposure to general culture to the extent that this too could contribute to the practical and spiritual objectives involved in women fulfilling their primary domestic functions. Although the education of the girls was mediated by male teachers, no attempt was made to duplicate established male patterns of study. Instead, the education of girls sought to preserve their unique qualities, building upon what was regarded as their innate capacity for greater emotional sensitivity. The hope was that such training would produce graduates who would excel in those areas that were cut out for them by tradition - maintaining the Jewish family and household. Despite the struggle that accompanied it initially, the Beth Jacob movement quickly became established and appropriated by the haredi (ultra-Orthodox) world, and has amassed to its credit many impressive accomplishments to this day.

---

As against the educational policy of Beth Jacob, the type of education available to girls in Modern Orthodox day schools (some for girls only, others co-ed) took on a somewhat different form, offering a well-rounded secular education, but usually limiting the curriculum and lowering the standards for girls in religious studies. There were, however, exceptions. A few of the Modern Orthodox institutions developed within the day school movement in the United States had already begun to provide their students with an elementary introduction to the world of the Oral Law in the 1950s. Concomitantly, a few high schools in Israel (most notably within the religious kibbutz movement) began enriching the program of religious studies for their female students.10 A number of teachers' seminaries were also established, providing women with some opportunities for attaining post high-school levels of proficiency, mainly in the realm of biblical studies. In the 1960's the Jerusalem Michlala for women was established. It offered a post high school program for women in limmudei qodesh that had a more traditionalist flavor to it and was more connected to the Yeshiva world of the men; the women students it turned out achieved new standards of proficiency in the field of biblical exegesis, halakhah and Jewish thought. Even though this institution initially earned, at least temporarily, the unique distinction of a religious boycott by Rabbi M. Shakl (the Rosh Yeshiva of Ponevez in Bnei Brak), eventually its very establishment pushed even the Beth Jacob post high school seminaries to raise the standard of studies offered to their students, and to enhance the ability of women to approach the sources independently. In the Michlala women were offered a limited amount of talmudic study, although not directly from the sources and in the original context, but rather from selected sections on stenciled sheets, as occasional supplement to the more direct topic of study at hand.

In the last quarter century, however, the call to equalize the education of boys and girls joined forces with a more significant revolution.

---

A Bet-Midrash of Her Own

This period witnessed an enormous explosion of interest on the part of Modern Orthodox women in intense study of Jewish sources, a phenomenon following upon the spiritual euphoria induced by the Israeli Six-Day War and the religious revival movement of 'returnees' (ba’alei teshuvah) that developed in its wake.

What was unique in the learning revolution instituted by Modern Orthodox women in the following decade was not simply the level of literacy they sought, but also its subject matter and institutional setting. The women involved were not content with what had come to be regarded as the 'softer' areas of Jewish study (Bible, aggadah, Jewish thought, and the pietistic writings of the musar teachers). These had already come to be accepted as legitimate subjects for women, because they could still be construed as enhancing their ability to function as enablers. What the initial pioneers of the new learning revolution now sought was the real core of in-depth halakhic erudition. Moreover, while a few alternative possibilities for approaching study of the Oral Law had already opened up for women in teacher training seminaries or university settings, these women preferred a rarefied spiritual atmosphere akin to that of a men's yeshiva. This meant replication of the same institutional methods of study - the bet-midrash, the appointment of a spiritual guide (mashgiach ruhani) and head of the academy (rosh metivta) as role models, havruta-style learning emphasizing independent study with learning partners, and all the experiential benefits of joint prayer and communal celebration of Shabbat and festivals. Such learning is not achievement-oriented; the study is conducted without exams, grades, and other external measures of success. The goal is the learning itself, which is conducted 'for its own sake' (lishmah) rather than for any practical benefit.

In 1976, Midreshet Lindenbaum (then known as Michlelet Bruria, or simply as Brovender's, after the name of its founder, R. Chaim Brovender) in Jerusalem, launched the first program for women in which study of the Oral Law figured as the main component. Its initial year began with four university students from the United States who had come to Israel for the express purpose of gaining greater proficiency in Jewish sources. Although Bruria originally was oriented more to
women who stemmed from the outskirts rather than the well-established circles of mainstream Orthodoxy, this initiative apparently addressed a more widely felt yet previously unarticulated need. As a result the institution expanded significantly, eventually housing an array of educational programs for women of various ages from Israel and the Diaspora - one of which combines military service with religious studies, in a manner paralleling what are known in Israel as hesder yeshivot for males.

More significantly, at least thirty more such institutions developed in Israel in Bruria's wake. Several of these cater to students from abroad, in particular from North America where within a relatively short period it has become a matter of course for both male and female graduates of religious high schools to spend at least a year of post-high school study in Israel. Similar study programs for women were established abroad as well (most notably the Drisha Institute, founded in New York in 1985, in which study of the Oral Law features prominently), in order to meet the educational needs of women returning home after their year of learning in Israel. From the 1980's the practice

11 For a partial and brief characterization of those institutions that cater to Israelis, see T. El-Or, Next Year I Will Know More: Literacy and Identity among Young Orthodox Women in Israel, H. Watzman trans., Detroit 2002, pp. 32-35.

12 A fair indication of the state of educational opportunities available to women in North America interested in study of the Oral Law in those years is reflected in the reminiscences of Dvora Steinmetz, written on Dec. 14th 1997, on the occasion of the gathering of over a hundred men and women who came together to celebrate completion of an undertaking to study of the entire Mishnah in a year, in commemoration of her deceased study partner (havruta), Maidi Katz. The event was coordinated and celebrated in Drisha:

I want to take you back in time, for a moment, to a time not so long ago, just a little more than a decade, to share a very different picture of Talmud study. Maidi and I were both in our early twenties; Maidi had just finished Barnard and was teaching at Ramaz; I was finishing graduate school. In those days, it was almost impossible for a woman to find a havruta, so Maidi and I naturally arranged to learn together. Where could we learn? There was no Bet-midrash in those days in which Maidi and I could learn, so I traveled once or twice a week to the East Side and we found a room in Ramaz - an empty, silent room where the lights were programmed to turn off if no motion was detected for a period of five minutes. [...] How should we learn? Our skills were good, but we did not know enough to pick out the 'important issues' - the concepts, that is, which would be focused on and developed in a traditional shiur. But Maidi found out that one of the male
of devoting one year after high school to religious studies is encouraged by many of the high schools for girls of religious Zionist circles in Israel, on the understanding that such a step constitutes an essential contribution to a young woman's spiritual development. The male norm of dedicating fixed times to the study of Torah (qevi'at ṭittim la-Torah) is spreading among the graduates of such midrashot as a desirable value even after completing the actual year of study in the midrashah itself.

**Sociological Ramifications**

Although the original struggle of Modern Orthodox women for greater learning opportunities was not consciously motivated by a wish to challenge the halakhic status quo in terms of gender roles, or to develop new feminine ways of thinking which challenge existing norms, initially the halakhic establishment resisted, with only a few maverick male sympathizers aiding and abetting the new feminine zeal for learning. These educators and mentors, mainly disciples of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, no doubt drew moral support from the positive attitude of ’the Rav’ himself to women’s learning. R. Soloveitchik was responsible for establishing one of the first day schools in the United States to foster the principle of an identical religious studies curriculum for girls and boys, even forgoing any halakhic requirement of segregating the sexes in separate classrooms for this purpose. He also demonstrated

teachers at Ramaz had notes from the Rav’s shiur [the reference is to Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik], so she borrowed a copy of the notes to work with. So there we would sit, puzzling over a chapter whose words we could decipher but whose significance in the culture which we valued eluded us. When we thought quietly about a passage for awhile, instead of engaging in our usual heavily gesticulated debate, the lights would go out. We got used to waving at the ceiling every three or our minutes, and we continued to meet, Maudi trying to decipher the borrowed notes, I wondering when the interesting and important material would emerge. That is how women learned just over a decade ago - in an empty room, with borrowed notes, seeking the ideas of a closed-off world, beckoning to the lights to keep them from going out.

13 Maimonides High School, founded by Rabbi Soloveitchik in Boston, conducted co-ed Torah studies. In a letter to Rabbi Leonard Rosenfeld on May 27th, 1953, Rabbi Soloveitchik writes: ‘As to your question with regard to a curriculum in a co-educational school, I expressed my opinion to you long ago that it would be a very regrettable oversight on our part if we were to arrange separate Hebrew
his belief in the importance of women's learning by delivering the opening *shi’ur* (Torah lecture) in the bet-midrash established in Stern College - the women's division of Yeshiva University - in 1978. Nevertheless, at that time the phenomenon of women wishing to devote themselves to full-time study of Torah after the fashion of men was regarded even in Yeshiva University circles with great reserve. Some of the earlier graduates of Midreshet Lindenbaum who returned to study at Stern College were made to feel that they were ruining their prospects for marriage by championing the cause of women's learning.

Despite the initial suspicion surrounding the revolutionary character of yeshiva-style institutions of higher study for women, the deep visceral reactions of discomfort originally evoked by the sight of a woman poring over a tome of Talmud were overcome fairly quickly. By now many regard the struggle of Modern Orthodox women for equal learning opportunities as a battle that has been won in all but the most diehard reactionary circles. This is an arguable claim, for to this day there is no women's bet-midrash for study of Talmud and halakhah that can compare with that of men of a parallel age group and socio-economic background, in terms of the number of years of background study upon which the program is based or of the anticipated standards of achievement. But in principle, women's desire for higher levels of learning is generally encouraged, at least on the level of lip-service, out of an appreciation of the importance of greater understanding of the values and implications of religious belief in the face of challenges from the 'outside' world of modernity. The greater erudition of women is tolerated to varying degrees even when it crosses the border between Written and Oral Law. So long as it is understood as strengthening women's participation in the existing structure, it is not regarded as radical or threatening.

courses for girls. Not only is the teaching of Torah *she-be-al peh* to girls permissible but it is nowadays an absolute imperative. This policy of discrimination between the sexes as to subject matter and method of instruction which is still advocated by certain groups within our Orthodox community, has contributed greatly to the deterioration and downfall of traditional Judaism. Boys and girls alike should be introduced into the inner halls of Torah *she-be-al peh*. My thanks to Joel Wolowelsky for alerting my attention to this missive, and to Ezra Rosenfeld, R. Leonard Rosenfeld's son, for sharing it with me.
The interesting question, of course, is: to what extent can the women's learning phenomenon actually fulfill its promise of fortifying the religious status quo and its existing norms and teachings? Despite the declared interest of the women themselves to continue the tradition as it stands, merely deepening their attachment to it, I would argue that there are aspects of the women's learning movement that do not allow it to be fully incorporated into the existing system without introducing significant changes in the traditional Jewish way of life as it has been known to us for generations. Irrespective of questions of motivation, the revolutionary potential of this phenomenon has already begun to make its mark on the Orthodox community.

A. Transformation of Traditional Gender Role on the Personal Level

One of the features that affords the women's Bet-Midrash movement today its particular interest - as pointed out by the anthropologist Tamar El-Or - is an inherent tension between the wish of women to participate more fully in the practice of study of the Oral law and traditional Jewish norms. The very penetration of women as a class into this area is in and of itself a revolutionary event that stands at odds with the private and collective images we carry of the Jewish way of life and worship.

Regarding the study of Torah as the exclusive preserve of men has served for generations to demarcate and define the difference between men and women. It is not accidental that many talmudic aggadot portray the values of talmud Torah and the values of women, home and family as conflicting. Even on a symbolic level, tradition presents the relationship of the student of Torah with the Torah as suffused with erotic connotations. Those who begin and end the yearly cycle of Torah readings are called the bridegrooms of Torah (hatanei Torah); they dress the Torah in a garment and adorn her with ornaments. The

---

14 See T. El-Or, *Next Year I Will Know More*, pp. 50-51.
15 See, for example, the passage in BT Ketubot 62b-63a that includes a number of anecdotes portraying tensions between the practice of Torah students to 'be exiled to a place of Torah' (goleh li-megom Torah) and family responsibilities. See also C. Safrai, 'Women in the Bet Midrash - Challenge and Dispute', in: N. Ilan ed., *Ayin Tovah: Du-Sia u-Pulmus be-Tarbut Yisrael*, Tel Aviv 1999, pp. 16-179.
Sages have taught us: ‘do not call the Torah morashah (tradition) but rather me’orasah (betrothed)’. In this connection the words of R. Yeruham of Levovitz, the mashgiḥaḥ musar, are instructive when he declares that the Torah is her own boss, she opens herself up only to the student who took the trouble to adjust his nature exclusively to that of hers and removed from his mind all other thoughts; Torah without purification cannot be studied. Disrupting the accepted role distinction between men and women challenges primeval gender conceptions deeply embedded in tradition, and raises the need for formulating new definitions.

On a superficial level this problem comes to light in the emergence of new halakhic anomalies. Thus, for example, a recent documentary of the women’s learning revolution (‘Created me a Woman’) portrays the embarrassing circumstances whereby a group of over a hundred women, accustomed to a sense of themselves as independent agents in their study of Torah, suddenly find themselves having to wait until a required quorum of ten men is drawn into their bet-midrash from the outside, in order to begin the recitation of seliḥot. But in addition to such technical difficulties on the halakhic level, the women’s bet-midrash raises deeper problems in the effect it has upon a woman’s self-perception, and in her understanding of her place in the family, the community, and in her form of religious worship (‘avodat Hashem).

Remaining a year or more in the bet-midrash undoubtedly has an

16 Sifrei Devarim, section 445, beginning with the words 'davar aḥer'; Sefer Tashbez Qatan, 464, beginning with the words 'mah sheha-ḥatanim'; Responsa Ḥayyim ba-Yad, section 52, beginning with the words 've-nir'eh lehavi'. For further applications of erotic imagery in the context of religious worship, see: R. Weiss-Goldman, ‘I Want to Bind You in Tefillin: Women Adopting Mitzvot of Men’ (Hebrew), in: D. Ariel, M. Leibowitz, Y. Mazor eds., Barukh she-’Asani Ishah? Ha-Ishah ba-Yahadut: Meha-Tanakh ve-’ad Yameinu, Tel-Aviv 1999, pp. 105-121.


18 Ibid., vol. 2, p. 343.

19 Ibid., vol. 1, pp. 53-54.

20 This scene, taken from a true to life situation, is depicted in Yaakov Friedland's documentary film: Created me a Woman, produced in 1999, which surveys some of the current repercussions of the women's learning revolution.
impact on the degree of importance she attaches to her own spiritual ambitions. Such a year also changes her attitudes regarding the type of relationship she expects with her husband in married life. Who will be her husband's helpmate and enabler, his ezer kenegdo, if she too seeks to dedicate time to learning and to her own spiritual fulfillment? On several occasions, former students have confessed to me that all their time in the midrasha did not prepare them for their need as mothers to lower expectations regarding their capacity for intense prayer on the High Holidays and their accompanying feelings of disappointment with themselves if and when they made peace with this idea.

B. Dissolution of Hierarchies on the Communal Level
Beyond questions of gender definitions and roles on the individual level and in the family, discouraging women from learning is symptomatic of a more thoroughgoing hierarchy on the communal level, which has always been one of the distinguishing features of Jewish tradition.21

Some would regard the very success of a grass roots movement initiated from the bottom up, as it were, without the blessing of the great Torah luminaries of the generation (gedolei ha-Torah) and to a certain extent even in tension with them, as an implicit threat to the formal authority of the rabbinic establishment. And indeed, despite revisionist history which has today's rabbis vying for the privilege of claiming to be the first or the most enthusiastic supporter of the movement, there is no denying that this revolution was born in sin, out of the wish of women to take matters in their own hands, forming a type of underground movement, and resolving problems that were not being addressed from above. To a limited extent the same may be said of the Beth Jacob initiative, which most rabbis opposed at the time; even the Hafetz Hayyim's infamous statement 'rather this folly than another' (mutav tiflut zu me-asher tiflut aheret) is clearly a half-hearted response, indicating a wish that things were otherwise, and that women

21 This phenomenon has brought several feminist theologians to posit an inherent connection between monotheism in general and hierarchic social orders; See, for example, M. Daly, Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation, Boston 1973; D. Hampson, After Christianity, Harrisburg 1996.
could continue to be educated in the religious security of their own homes. But beyond debates regarding the source of authority and power of the present women's learning revolution, literacy itself is a great democratic equalizer, blotting out class differences as it grants access to power and privilege. Especially in a society that accords highest value to learning as a religious activity, every student of Torah is in principle on his or her way to becoming a fully active participant in the interpretive process. Just as the technical difficulty in the traditional role allocation leads to obliteration of the clear distinction between the role of the 'student' and the role of the 'enabler' within the home and family, so the change in gender identity of the students on the communal level also leads to greater egalitarianism even in the highest centers of privilege and authority.

Institutional Responses
To what extent are the powers that be aware of these challenges to traditional hierarchies and gender roles, and if so, what is their reaction? It appears that since their establishment, the women's batei-midrash have developed a split in orientation in response to such questions, so that the revolutionary potential of any given bet-midrash might ostensibly be measured in accordance with the general orientation it has adopted. As a rule, one can distinguish between two tracks, which despite their common starting point, reveal significant differences in the degree of their loyalty to the original objectives of the first Bruria students and the vision they had for themselves.

A. The Distinctively Feminine Track
One track, which I will call the track of 'feminine distinctiveness', arose from within those religious-Zionist circles that bear an affinity to the ideology of Yeshivat Mercaz Harav Kook. This track seeks to

---

22 See Yisrael Meir Hacohen (Kagan), *Liqqutei Halakhot, Sotah* 20, p. 2, and his lesser known epistle, written on the 23rd of Shevat, 1933 regarding this matter, which was published in *Bet Yaakov* (Adar 1960). Most of the prominent rabbis of Eastern Europe were initially opposed to Shenirer's initiative.

23 See T. El-Or, *Next Year I Will Know More*, regarding the interface between religious women, Torah literacy and active participation.
minimize the revolutionary potential of the women's learning movement by preserving and encouraging role stratification even within the learning itself. One sign of the influence of this tendency is the fact that all the women's institutions today are called midrasha, makhon, mikhlala, or institute. This is in contrast to the self-perception of the original Bruria girls who, when asked where they were studying, quite simply replied that they were learning in a 'women's yeshiva'. The educators of the distinctively feminine track believe that women's learning should not mimic that of the men. Instead, emphasis should be placed upon women's unique sensitivities and practical wisdom even in their learning.24

In this connection, the entry of women into intensive study of Torah without the benefit of a longstanding tradition of learning is regarded not necessarily as a lack but even as a virtue, because this affords them the opportunity to think afresh regarding the question whether Talmud study is really the most suitable subject matter for everyone, and whether the elitist model of the Lithuanian yeshivot should serve as an ideal for women as well. The answer the distinctively feminine track arrives at is an emphatic 'no'. Therefore, despite the great importance attached to women's study, the program of learning in midrashot of this track still focuses upon the traditional topics allocated to women, the study of Talmud not occupying a central place in their learning. Instead, their schedule is typified by many hours devoted to frontal lectures on subjects such as emunah (religious faith) and matters relating to the woman and her home, with little emphasis on in-depth study of halakhah. Moreover, the understanding is that a woman's bet-midrash may, and even should, occupy itself not only with book learning; such an institution is also to act upon the recognition that there is a life of Torah outside of the bet-midrash in the area of spiritual growth, moral behavior, performing good works (acts of hesed), and in the appreciation of nature.25 Even the atmosphere in which the studies are conducted is different; as one of the rabbis who teaches

women expressed it: 'With women one does not engage in *harba'at Torah* (beating Torah into them), by which, following upon an idea expressed in various midrashim regarding Miriam's well,\(^{26}\) he apparently wished to convey the notion that for women Torah is not experienced as an external obligation imposed from above, but rather as flowing naturally from their inner being.

The ambition of such batei-midrash is to produce women who excel in their refined character traits, spirituality, and depth of piety - assets geared to prepare them for the main task allotted to them by tradition, i.e., setting up a good Jewish home and family. In this sense, the approach of the track of feminine distinctiveness is faithful to the tried and true formula of Beth Jacob, except for an additional Zionist dimension encouraging the students to contribute their share to the national effort and to display a healthy volunteering spirit. This aim, which looks with favor upon female initiative in the public realm is somewhat removed from the emphasis upon personal development and concentration upon more sectarian interests typifying the *haredi* segment of the population in Israel.

Nevertheless, this encouragement for nationalist activity derives its inspiration from the virtuous women of biblical times, who are described in talmudic midrashim as preserving Jewish existence in Egypt and in the desert. Women who are the products of this educational track, even when engaged in more communal interest and not only in the house or supporting the studies of their husband, do not feel any conflict between this type of activism and the image of women as it appears in tradition. Despite the glorification of women's culture, the dedication to public activity on the part of women does not lead to any blurring of gender identities, and the role stratification between the sexes is preserved. In this framework, Torah study which aims to

\(^{26}\) Several midrashim speak of Miriam's Torah as flowing from her inner spiritual well so that it was only when she died that Moses had to hit the rock in order to derive the water of Torah. See, for example, Rabbi Kalonimus Shapira, *Esh Qodesh*, Jerusalem 1960, p. 183. Admittedly, this quality is not always cited in women's favor, see Rabbi Zadok Ha-Cohen, *Liqqutei Ma'amorim*, Bnei Brak 1973 [imprint of Lublin 1913], p. 91, columns 1-4, par. 16; idem, 'Derashah le-Siyyum ha-Shas', p. 116, columns 2-4; idem, *Poqed 'Aqarim*, Bnei Brak 1933 [imprint of Pietrikov 1922], pp. 26 (columns 3-4) - 27 (column 1).
produce talmidot hakhamim who will use their knowledge for purposes beyond that of personal development, such as entering the centers of power and authority usually reserved for men, is regarded as problematic and dangerous.

B. The Egalitarian Track
A second track, which I will term 'egalitarian', is closer to the school of Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik, and parallels the trend known in feminist theory as 'liberal feminism', i.e., accepting the educational ideal of the men as suitable for all, without regard to gender, and seeking equal opportunities for women in achieving an identical portion of the male share. The basic assumption of this track is that women should adopt for themselves exactly the same norms that are assumed by men, and develop equal learning skills in accordance with men's criteria and standards. Thus the success of the female student is measured by the degree to which she can hold her own in the male discourse. In midrashot belonging to this track, Talmud is the chief subject of study, and the learning of the women, at least during the limited period devoted to such study, is expected to parallel that which is customary in the men's yeshivot in terms of diligence, breadth and intensity. The emphasis placed on musar and development of fine character traits (middot) - such as the charity, grace and modesty that have traditionally been attributed to women - is low-keyed, in accordance with the well-known mitnaggedic principle that intellectual grappling with Torah (amal ba-Torah) and learning for its own sake are the tried and true formula for avoiding sin and building up a Torah-true personality.

All this is what an egalitarian approach calls for in theory, but as the practice of devoting a year after high school to studying limmudei qodesh became more widespread among young religious women, even the educators of the egalitarian track were forced to face up to the fact

---

27 Among my memories as a teacher during the first year at Midreshet Lindenbaum was the need to mediate debates between the four original students (whose three room apartment also served as their place of study) as to whether their living room (generally functioning as their bet-midrash) could also occasionally double as a place for entertaining guests.

28 See, for example, Rabbi Hayyim Volozhin, Nefesh ha-Hayyim, Bnei Brak 1989, sec. 4, chap. 9; BT Kiddushin 30b.
that intensive focus upon the Oral Law was not every woman's predilection. As a result, a certain flexibility (or regression, depending on one's point of view) was introduced, and most of the midrashot adopting this approach now provide a choice between several programs of learning for those students who intend to devote only one year to Torah studies after matriculation. Even those who choose to focus upon study of Bible or Jewish philosophy are still expected to 'dip their feet' in the ocean of Talmud, but a distinction is made between basic familiarity (knowing how to decipher a simple page of Gemara with Rashi and Tosfot) and the skills required for deeper delving. Moreover, the timetable of one-year programs even in the egalitarian track now features many hours of frontal teaching at the cost of time spent on independent study in the bet-midrash. They also include extra-curricular hours earmarked for voluntary heseited projects, creative arts, music, and nature hikes. Even within the classroom, it is not unusual to encounter analysis of literary works, and particularly works of poetry, as a tool to illuminate a chapter of Torah or to transmit a moral insight.

Critics from the ranks of egalitarian purism regard such dilution of intensive Torah study as a regrettable vestige of traditional reservations regarding unbridled Torah study for women, one which shortchanges their true interests. They will argue that so long as women make do with anything less than the rigorous and single-minded study of the Oral Law, they will never gain entry into the 'real thing'. On the other hand, what does distinguish between the distinctively feminine track and midrashot assuming a more egalitarian approach, is the evident interest of the latter to encourage the development of an elite class of students who continue beyond the first year, and at this stage do indeed devote the major portion of their time to studying Talmud after the fashion of the men. Several of these second and third year programs (which are offered by Matan, Nishmat, Bet Morasha, Migdal Oz, and Lindenbaum in Israel and Drisha Institute and a new program offered

---

29 See A. Gevaryahu, 'Come, Come, Come, Girls' (Hebrew), De'ot 18 (2004), pp. 19-23, who, beyond acquiescence to mediocre standards, sees in the maintaining of different educational ideals for men and women a danger of creating two Torahs, and two distinct systems of worship.
by Stern College in New York) have also adopted the concept of a kollel for women - i.e., a full time study program which offers students a monetary stipend so that they can continue to devote themselves to intensive learning with relative freedom from financial worry. Several years ago the head of Nishmat was successful in her appeal to the Israeli Supreme Court against the Ministry of Religions which discriminated against women in the amount of stipend allocated to male and female students in institutions for the advanced study of Talmud.

C. Advanced Study Programs

When Nechama Leibowitz once asked Rabbi Cahaneman, the rosh yeshiva of Ponevez, what was the justification for encouraging an entire community of men to engage exclusively in the study of Torah when only a few were really capable of deriving full benefit from this activity, his answer to her was to quote a midrash which states that the custom of the world is that a thousand enter the study of Bible, a hundred proceed to Mishnah, ten continue to Talmud, and one emerges to instruct the law.30 Taking our cue from this, if we really want to assess the full significance and potential of the women's learning movement, it would be worthwhile to turn our attention from what is taking place in the one year programs of both tracks and take a closer look at what is happening in the second and third year programs. Even a superficial glance in this direction leads to the conclusion that - in contrast to the first breakthrough marked by the founding of the Beth Jacob school system - the fruits of the current revolution cannot be as seamlessly integrated into the age-old fabric of Jewish tradition.

This prediction is not based on a deliberate plan on the part of the women themselves. Even after having tasted of the 'forbidden fruit', many of the women participating in second and third year programs of talmudic study are still content with their lot and find in it a complete world of spiritual satisfaction. Some of them will vigorously object to any attempt to connect their study of Torah with new social and cultural

30 Vayikra Rabba (M. Margaliyot edition), parsha 2[a]. One may assume that Rabbi Cahaneman spared her the end of this quote which reads: 'and a woman among all these I did not find'.
tendencies that smack of feminism. Torah study, they will say, need not spill over into any more revolutionary changes in the status quo. Despite such protest, however, the phenomenon of advanced women's learning has already begun to make deep inroads in the texture of contemporary religious life.

Ramifications of Substance

A. Threat to Male Exclusivity in the Realm of Halakhic Authority

On a communal level, the very establishment of learned women as a class leads to the extension of their activity beyond the tried and true outlets of teaching and education, spilling over into more authoritative centers of influence in the realm of religious leadership and practical halakhic deliberation. Inevitably, a religious society which has traditionally ranked its leaders on the basis of their learning prowess in Torah is gradually being forced to confront the unprecedented issue of learned women's formal status within the halakhic community.\footnote{For illustration of the connection between the blurring of gender distinctions and the blurring of hierarchical role stratification in general and the problems this raises, see E. Fisher, ‘Value Judgments in Halakhic Decision-Making Regarding the Study of Torah for Women’, in: \textit{Lihyot Ishah Yehudiyah}, p. 104.}

Symptomatic of this new phenomenon and its problematic aspects for Orthodoxy was a Torah-learning marathon organized for and by women that took place in Jerusalem in May 1999. An overwhelming portion of the presenters were associated with midrashot adopting the approach of feminine distinctiveness and were not the educational by-products of more formal program of advanced Torah study. Their added proficiency was acquired by hook or by crook, between the pans and the diapers, taking counsel from their husbands or through autodidactic study, without any thought of gaining entry into areas of learning and activity traditionally regarded as exclusively male territory. Yet the fact that the organizers of this mammoth event, who were certainly far removed from any revolutionary political intentions, decided to grant all presenters the title of ‘rabbanit’,\footnote{The feminine form for rabbi, but traditionally used to designate the rabbi's wife.} despite the fact that most of the women concerned were not married to rabbis, inadvertently highlighted the untraditional communal implications of...
the women's learning revolution. While their particular choice made do with the appropriation of a traditional title,\textsuperscript{33} simply investing it with new meaning, the very need to improvise upon it in this manner was significant, testifying to the growth of an unprecedented phenomenon: a cadre of women gradually taking upon themselves roles which in the past were the exclusive preserve of men, as natural outlets for the added Torah scholarship that they have acquired.

Women studying in the distinctively feminine track, limit their realm of activity to women-only forums. But as the continuing programs of the egalitarian track become increasingly established, it is gradually becoming evident that one cannot restrict the more authoritative roles of women graduates to exclusively female targets. The tasks that they are now taking on include a number of inroads into the traditionally male role of pulpit rabbi (as in the official appointment of female 'rabbinic interns' at two avant-garde Orthodox synagogues in New York and in the unofficial function of a handful of learned women who serve in pastoral and educational capacities in privately organized synagogue communities in Israel). Women's newfound proficiency in learning has also found an outlet in their assumption of teaching positions in top-level areas of learning previously relegated only to men. Female instructors are teaching Talmud in women's yeshivot and in private study circles or batei-midrash, and their husbands are already developing a new counter-culture of complaint at having to drag themselves and their children to participate along with their wives in a Shabbat at the yeshiva. Perhaps the most significant development is the initial signs of challenge to male exclusivity in the halakhic establishment proper, beginning with the training of female pleaders (to\'anot) in the rabbinic courts and halakhic advisors (yo\'a\'ot halakhah) in matters of menstrual law (hilkhot niddah), and with the production of the first book of Jewish legal writings by women.\textsuperscript{34} All this testifies to the growth of a new religious leadership of women that penetrates the public realm.

---

\textsuperscript{33} Because the term 'rabbanit' has been generally employed to designate the rabbi's wife, non-Orthodox denominations, which now accept women rabbis, prefer to grant them the title of 'rabbah'.

\textsuperscript{34} See M. Halpern and C. Safrai eds.,\textit{ Jewish Legal Writings by Women} (Hebrew), Efrat 1998.
Tamar Ross

and even the most authoritative sphere of all - halakhic interpretation. Such developments cannot help but be accompanied by gradual erosion of exclusive male privilege in this area as well. Just as the Ḥafetz Ḥayyim's original dispensation allowing women to learn simple religious texts of Torah opened the gates - from the study of the commentaries on the Bible to the study of the Mishnah and Talmud on stenciled sheets and then to learning Talmud from the talmudic text itself - so too we now witness the 'slippery slope' of women assuming active roles in various new areas of religious leadership, including increased participation in the practice of halakhic deliberation.

Given the link between literacy and authority, it is not surprising that many traditionalists today, though ostensibly supporting the women's learning revolution, still make a great effort to prevent women from entering the field of Oral Law. When this proves difficult, they strive at the very least to introduce new distinctions, approving women's study for practical purposes (leading either to greater appreciation of the law or to intensification of religious commitment) but endorsing in-depth study 'for its own sake' only for men. Such innovations as women learning Talmud may thereby be assimilated by the existing hierarchy. Thus, for example, Rabbi Yaakov Ariel, chief rabbi of Ramat Gan and one of the principal exponents of this policy, declares:

Indeed today's woman must be bound to Torah in order to cultivate her religious personality, but the spiritual food required for such cultivation does not obligate in-depth study of halakhic issues as delineated in the works of the Rishonim and Aḥaronim. There are many areas of Torah that are capable of nourishing a thirsty soul and which are better suited to this task than complicated theoretical halakhot.35

Such traditionalists are also fond of creating a mystique around the dedication required of any student of halakhah who would qualify as a rabbinic decisor, the implication being that no woman with normal motherly instincts would wish to take on such a burden.

As a rule, the women themselves willingly comply with this rabbinic

expectation, out of a shared interest in avoiding any rocking of the
boat in the struggle for recognition and acceptance. This is evidenced
in the caution taken by the initiators of training for the family purity
counselors, who insist that their graduates be called yo‘etzot (advisors)
and not posqot (female halakhic decisors), or to‘anot bet-din (pleaders
of the court) rather than to‘anot rabbaniyot (rabbinic pleaders), or in
the practice of women to conceal their female identity when offering
contributions to halakhic journals, by signing their name with initials
only. But it is doubtful whether even diplomacy and a rhetoric of
distinction can continue to disguise the revolutionary thrust of such
innovations for long, and leave the thickness of the glass ceiling
preventing women’s entry into the greater halakhic participation intact.
Barring a flagging of interest on the part of the women themselves, no
degree of effort expended upon making fine distinctions (between
learning for general purposes of spiritual enrichment or for practical
knowledge of halakhah versus learning for the sake of more informed
influence upon halakhic decision making) will be able to keep the lid
on agitation for greater participation by women in the halakhic process.

B. Redressing Male Bias in the Realm of Interpretation
The sociological ramifications of women taking on positions of religious
authority are not insignificant, even in forms that are clearly condoned
by halakhah. Such developments will serve to further erode the role
stratification that has marked Jewish society for centuries. But the
implications of women’s gradual entry into the realm of halakhic
deliberation are likely to prove far more profound than this, influencing
matters of substance as well. Irrespective of whether the women involved
seek to engage in traditional male interpretive practices proper, or to
develop their own distinctive methods and predilections alongside the
men’s Torah world and not within it, it is already possible to discern -
in addition to the appropriation of women’s learning activity and its
adaptation in the service of tradition - negotiation of a different sort

36 See, in this connection, Rabbi Y. Henkin’s remarks in: M. Chabin, ‘The New
Posek: Orthodox Women’, The Jewish Week, New York, October 8, 1999; C.
Henkin, ‘Women and the Issuing of Halakhic Rulings’, in: Jewish Legal Writings,
that augurs significant innovations not only on the sociological level but in matters of substance as well.

To draw a parallel, no one expected women who took up senior positions in the medical establishment to suggest different medical strategies for known diseases. Yet, as more female oncologists and gynecologists entered senior positions, they developed new alternatives to radical mastectomies and instituted changes in the facilities of hospital delivery rooms. A comparable process is already underway as a result of women's increased involvement in the study of Torah. Although the interpretive tradition of the Oral law is based on conventions and procedures attributed to Sinai, it is an illusion to think that even this activity can remain immune to the effects of introducing an additional feminine perspective. Given the thousands of years that Torah has evolved without the direct input of women, the ramifications are likely to be all the more pronounced.

In this sense, a few of the more advanced programs for higher-level learning that have opened up for women in North America and in Israel can be viewed as serving a similar function to that of the women's consciousness-raising groups in the 1960s and 1970s. At that time, it was the very convening of women as women to discuss issues related to home and family without a male presence which encouraged development of their own perspective on their situation. In like manner, the concentration of women now opening up the books on their own and gradually gaining the competence to confront their image as 'a people by themselves', without having these texts necessarily mediated by male authority figures, provides them for the first time with the opportunity to express specifically feminine concerns and to develop their own responses to a tradition of learning that has always been based on the assumption that women are not active partners in the discussion. Under such conditions, women's ability to approach the material with fresh eyes, unhampered by longstanding conventions emerges as a double-edged sword; it may leave women free to reject appropriating the male elitist ideal for themselves, but it may also prove more subversive, challenging some of the basic assumptions of

37 BT Shabbat 62a.
that same ideal. The lack of habituation in traditional ways of reading texts, which may leave them unconvinced by male interpretations, is the 'price' - as Orthodox feminist Rivka Lubitch has put it 38 - that men must now pay for two thousand years of female exclusion from halakhic discourse. The criticism leveled by rabbis that women's autodidactic Torah study is not authentic because it does not continue the chain of learning that originated in Sinai 39 cannot count for much when women were never part of that chain.

Apparently Rabbi Ariel himself is aware of this problem when he contends that the main question that arises from the great expansion in women's learning is: 'Will the women's bet-midrash, which is being constructed before our very eyes, constitute a continuation of the traditional bet-midrash to which we have been accustomed for generations, or will it be a tottering tent that stands outside the fence?' 40

Indeed, in order to insure that the Torah studied in the women's bet-midrash is part and parcel of that same Torah which stems from Sinai and continues to the present day, Rabbi Ariel recommends that every creative activity that leaves the confines of this bet-midrash should be subjected to the scrutiny of established Torah scholars (talmidei ḥakhamim) who represent the 'pure tradition'. But history teaches us that spiritual movements have a life of their own which is not always given to control.

Stages in the Development of Women's Torah
Following upon their struggle to simply gain entry into the male world of learning, the first level of difficulty that women experience in their unmediated confrontation with the sacred texts begins with discovery of the extent to which they are not the intended audience of the sources being studied, and are not treated as autonomous agents with independent concerns of their own. Women's interests generally appear, if at all, merely as a postscript and exception or as defined by the norms and needs of men.

38 In her lecture, 'Women in Judaism: From When to Where?' delivered in 1999 at Kenes Lavi, a convention dedicated to issues of Israeli Modern Orthodoxy.
39 As does Rabbi Ariel; See 'The Women's Bet Midrash', pp. 94-95.
40 Ibid.
Thus, for example, when I teach *Nefesh ha-Hayyim* by R. Hayyim of Volozhin in Midreshet Lindenbaum, the text is approached in an atmosphere of awe and with every intention of identifying with the author's message. But when R. Hayyim argues that study of the Torah for the sake of fulfilling the mitzvah (*lishmah*) is the one true means of cleaving to God, I have on occasion had a female student raise her hand to ask: What about us (i.e., women, who are not commanded to observe this mitzvah)? Do we have no true method of cleaving to God? To this I can only reply that R. Hayyim surely did not have us in mind when writing his book. But how is a woman to relate to study of sources that are sanctified in the eyes of tradition, yet grant her no more than a sense of eavesdropping on a conversation that was not meant for her ears, because she and her spiritual needs don't figure and have not been taken into account?

In the world of academia, where the material studied is presented merely as a matter of cultural interest, the feminist reaction to discovery of women's exclusion may suffice with a critical approach. Students and scholars in this context seek to lay bare for scrutiny the degree of androcentricism revealed in the material and to uncover the extent of hidden gender assumptions. Appreciating the influence such texts have had on almost all modes of Jewish discourse, personal, socio-political and ideological, often leads to a desire to redress this lack and to compensate for the imbalance by enlisting supplementary material from other disciplines. Admittedly, as American professor of religious studies, Elizabeth Shanks Alexander notes: 'Even scholars whose explicit aim is to uncover historical information about the status of women's agency often do so in a manner that makes the texts more palatable for those who have difficulty with the gender dynamics they encode'. 41 Even

---

41 See E. S. Alexander, 'The Impact of Gender on Rabbinic Studies', in: J. Frankel ed., *Jews and Gender: The Challenge to Hierarchy - Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 16, Oxford and New York 2000, p. 103. A contrasting approach, however, is recommended by Jenny Kien, who, rather than seeking to redeem traditional texts with more charitable interpretations, recommends 'a more backwards-going working with text'; that is, to engage in 'historical exegesis of the text', 'honoring the reality of the text rather than [...] seeing it merely as a vehicle for reaching the other levels'. In her opinion this manner of reading the canonical texts and honestly confronting what they may have meant at the time they were written is preferable, because it 'offers a chance for women to come to grips with the fact
for academicians, the past is not simply a relic to be observed with dispassionate interest, but a heritage that offers a clue as to who we are today. This is doubly so for the women of the bet-midrash. For them, the sacred texts are more than a source of interest, of educational enrichment, or even of cultural influence; they are a reflection of God's word and meant to exercise a normative influence upon their daily lives, in thought and in practice. In the context of the bet-midrash, the missing pieces of their story in Jewish tradition are not merely a historical riddle to be solved; the absence of these pieces is also an ideological and practical problem bearing more immediate and personal implications.

For this very reason, the initial tendency of women who are confronted by male bias in the texts they study is to minimize its significance and to stay away as far as possible from any hint of radical thinking, preferring to attribute this difficulty to technical, formal or sociological factors that can fairly easily be overcome. As one of the veteran students of the learning revolution has confessed to me, her manner of dealing with problematic texts is to maintain an attitude of cognitive dissonance. She is well aware of the gap between modern notions of equality and what she finds in tradition, but she also is aware of the fact that not everything that is written in the books is what nurtures religious life in practice. However, women's growing sensitivity to the gap and tension between a male perspective and women's self-perception does not always render such remedies sufficient.

On an ideological level, commitment to the normative import of canonical texts that exhibit a male bias demands religious and moral justification. On a practical level, women's need to appropriate for themselves a tradition which ignores their existence as subjects impels them to seek methods that will allow the old and hallowed texts to continue functioning as the authoritative basis for their religious way that these forces [of sexual degradation of women] are real in the world. It also offers them a chance to identify with traces of the former glory of a matricentric culture still evident in the text as it stands, despite the struggle of a new patriarchal order to suppress it. See J. Kien, Reinstating the Divine Woman in Judaism, Florida 2000, pp. 214-221.
of life. The desire to ground their religious universe and their commitment to mitzvah observance on strong foundations drives women to examine the sources, to re-read them, and to scour their depths for religiously legitimate responses to their dilemma.

In most cases, this activity does not take place overtly within the bet-midrash itself. Here the success of the women's learning even in the more advanced programs of study is still measured in terms of women's ability to work in accordance with traditional male standards. This general impression carries over into the anthologies of divrei Torah and learned articles published by the midrashot, where the Torah discourse essentially comports with that of the men. The feminine touch appears chiefly in a propensity for women-related issues, a greater emphasis upon aesthetics and a more polished and non-rabbinic literary style. An indirect feminine message might also be gleaned from the choice of titles typical of such anthologies (Geranot, Ba-Sadeh, Bikkurim), which could be construed as testimony to women's sense of connection between Torah and nature. But if, as one of the students of Matan has testified to me, expressions of unease with the sources are unlikely to be voiced during a study session in the bet-midrash, they will occasionally arise in informal discussion that follows in the cafeteria.

The problems discussed in the cafeteria demand response, and the arena for its formulation is located for the moment in a broader cultural periphery surrounding the women's bet-midrash, which is increasingly addressing itself to this task. The very existence of a women's learning movement has served as catalyst for the emergence of a cadre of mature and articulate women (and men) possessed of a distinctive awareness born of the experience gained in their years of learning and teaching in the women's bet-midrash and of a retrospective view of the problems and tensions that this experience has raised for them.42 This

42 I would argue that this is the crucial difference between the self-perception of such women and that of Nechama Leibowitz, the noted teacher of Torah who served as inspiration for younger talmidot hakhamim of today. Even some aspects of Nechama's teaching, however, might be construed as a reflection of current feminine predilections, e.g., her willingness to incorporate some of the benefits of academia in her teaching, her heavy interest in pedagogy, psychology, and human relations, and her focusing upon commentaries with distinctly moral concerns; see A. Strikovsky, 'Nehama on Women and Womanhood' (Hebrew),
A Bet-Midrash of Her Own

awareness finds its expression in a variety of forums. Indirect evidence of its existence can be discerned in the academic studies of women graduates of the bet-midrash and others sympathetic to their interests. More direct efforts at addressing issues arising from women's learning experience appear in biblical exegesis conducted by teachers involved in adult education for women, or in other attempts to grapple with the implications of women's years of study and its outgrowths. Some of this material has been published in book form or in sheets of commentary on the weekly Torah reading (parshat ha-shavu'a sheets) such as Bat Qol (produced by Midreshet Ha-Rova), Qolekh (produced by the Orthodox women's lobby) or Ha-Ra'ah ha-Hayyah (produced by Habad women) and other divrei Torah that are disseminated in Israeli synagogues at Sabbath services. It is also evident in the contributions of religiously educated women to discussions of a more ideological nature that appear in the journals of modern Orthodoxy.

in: O. Wiskind Elper ed., Traditions and Celebrations for the Bat Mitzvah, Jerusalem 2003, pp. 1861-195. To what extent an identifiably feminine way of learning Torah has infiltrated the Beth Jacob network is a topic still worthy of research.

43 To mention but a few: T. El-Or, Next Year I Will Know More; V. Ochs, Words on Fire: One Woman's Journey into the Sacred, Boulder 1999; L. B. Granite, 'Tradition as a Modality of Religious Change: Talmud Study in the Lives of Orthodox Jewish Women', Ph.D. dissertation, Drew University (1995). At least three doctoral theses are now being written at Bar Ilan University on: (1) the social and cultural impact of women's entry into the field of halakhic discourse; (2) the influence of gender conceptions upon halakhic decision-making with respect to issues of women's reproduction; (3) the influence of gender conceptions on the laws of niddah. A research study is being conducted by Eli Holzer, faculty member of Bar Ilan's dept. of education, regarding educational methods for overcoming problems arising from women's confrontation with texts that are problematic from a gender perspective.


45 The proliferation of such sheets by various religious organizations and the creatively imaginative use made of the biblical text for supporting widely varying and even conflicting ideologies on the contemporary scene merits a separate study.
indication of the substantive contribution of women to traditional study and knowledge of Torah, an already flourishing activity which promises to snowball in the years to come.

Responses to the difficulties of women in approaching their marginalized image in the sources can be roughly divided into three approaches: conservative, revisionist and pro-active. Common to all is a tendency to override the strict dichotomy between the detached perspective of the outsider and involvement from within the religious tradition. Nevertheless, each response can be distinguished by the interpretive tactics it favors, the body of study to which it relates, and the nature of the resources which it tends to enlist for its support.

A. The Essentialist Approach of the Conservatives
Initially, women who raise 'the woman question' are not particularly interested in creating new feminine messages in their study of Torah. All that concerns them is that they and their perspective should become part of the discussion. The need to offset the male bias of the sources by deliberately highlighting those texts in which women figure prominently has led in the last few decades to the flourishing of a new genre of writing featuring the 'image of women' in the Bible, in the Talmud, and in Judaism in general. Even the most conservative circles contribute their share to the flood of popular articles and more serious scholarly studies that now seek to redress the long absence of direct addressing of women in the sources, the silencing of their voices, and the ignoring of their role in the fashioning of the tradition. This drives the authors to place new emphasis upon issues of special concern to women, asking the questions that are particularly relevant to them.46

Although highlighting the role of the foremothers, prophetesses, and rare women in the Talmud who are mentioned by name, and creating new literature addressing contemporary women's concerns is helpful in practice, such an approach obviously cannot serve as an

overall solution to the ideological problem of women's apparent marginalization in the traditional sources. Hence, another common response of women studying in the distinctively feminine midrashot is to turn the 'oversight' of women on the part of tradition into a virtue, and to contend that despite their silenced voice, the hallowed sources do not devalue the status of women and their unique contribution in the development of Jewish tradition. In this connection a conclusion that Aviva Zornberg, a noted teacher of Torah, draws from Rashi's midrashic comment on the final census of the people of Israel before entering the Promised Land is instructive. Relating to this assembly, the Torah tells us that no 'man' (ish) counted in the censuses previously taken by Moses and Aaron the priest in the Sinai desert remained, for the Lord said that they will die in the desert (Num. 26: 64-65). Taking 'man' literally, Rashi limits the destruction of a generation, in punishment for the sin of the spies, to the males only. He seizes upon the term ish in this verse in order to conclude that contrary to the men, all the women of the desert generation merited entry into the holy land, due to their special affection for it. To this Zornberg comments:

The compelling implication of Rashi's comment, however, is not the demographic one. Rather it is that the absence of women from the text does not necessarily mean that they are assimilated into the general 'children of Israel', as the plain meaning (peshat) of the text might indicate. Women have a separate, hidden history, which is not conveyed on the surface of the text. This history is a faithful, loving, and vital one, which excludes them from the dramas of sin and punishment that constitute the narrative of the wilderness. […] Like the unconscious in the psychic economy, women remain a latent presence in their very absence; they represent the 'hidden sphere' which must remain hidden if it is to do its work with full power, but which must be revealed in some form if that work is to be integrated.47

Contentions such as these, that glorify the hidden functioning of the women, have been made by men from the time of Rabbi S. R. Hirsch

and on, but their added interest today is that for the first time in the history of Jewish thought such arguments appear in a literary genre that is being created for women by the women themselves. 48

The apologetic character of this literature carries new overtones which derive from several factors. Contrary to Zornberg, who, for various reasons, is not a typical representative of the conservative approach, most of the women producing this literature were not raised in religiously observant families, but joined a contemporary wave of return to tradition as a matter of deliberate choice, after fully experiencing the secular world. Some of them, involved in the outreach efforts of the teshuvah movement, are still in close contact with the secular world, attempting to attract the non-Orthodox to return to the fold. Another segment belongs to the ranks of women established by the Rebbe of Lubavitch on the basis of his halakhic recognition that the obligation to study Torah applies to women as well and his estimation of the tactical advantage of enlisting educated women in the battle for Torah. Due to their broader upbringing and background, these women are often quite familiar with the major arguments of the feminist critique. Their own counter ideology utilizes some of the same central concepts and symbols, but reverses their underlying values and conclusions in order to defend the Orthodox way of life.49

In their defense of the so-called deprived status of women in tradition, these apologists distance themselves from formal halakhic thinking and the assertion of responsibility to subjugate oneself blindly to a

---


49 See D. R. Kaufman, *Rachel’s Daughters: Newly Orthodox Jewish Women*, New Brunswick and London 1991; L. Davidman, *Tradition in a Rootless World: Women Turn to Orthodox Judaism*, Berkeley 1991. Both studies demonstrate that many secular women are drawn to Orthodoxy not necessarily because of religious belief, but because it gives them ‘space’ and respect for bearing and raising children. While feminism has given them great expectations for what they could achieve, in an untransformed society these expectations are not met.
higher authority. Such contentions might be suitable for women of the Beth Jacob variety, who have been raised with a more traditional outlook, but returnees require a rationale that is more spiritually meaningful in their eyes. To this end, the women enlist a metaphysical symbolism that had previously been appropriated only by men, and add to it their own original interpretation, in order to justify the silencing of woman's voice in the sources. This new theology infers the higher divine reality above from the social reality on earth, after the manner of classical kabbalah, except that in the women's writings, it is the female aspect of God that is given prominence, glorifying the hidden aspect of women here on earth.

Much of this genre of women-initiated apologetics focuses upon the three commandments that the Mishnah regards as a unique preserve of women (laxity in the observance of which is associated with the punishment of death in childbirth):\(^{50}\) hafrashat ḥallah (burning a bit of the dough before baking bread to commemorate the ancient priestly portion); hadlaqat ha-ner (lighting the Sabbath candles); and niddah (laws specific to married women, which involve immersion in a ritual bath after a period of sexual abstinence following menstruation). This is done in order to prove that in observing these special mitzvot women give expression to their unique ability to exert cosmic influence upon the world. The acts of the women both reflect and have influence upon God's creative powers and enable a mystic merging with them. The lighting of the Sabbath candles - originating primarily in the mundane interest of creating conviviality around the Sabbath table - is now understood to re-enact God's primordial creation of light. Hafrashat ḥallah is understood on the basis of women's ability to sanctify the physical. The rhythm of woman's sexual life becomes a metaphor for the process of divine creativity. Just as the menstrual woman has fixed periods of separation from her husband, so does God have fixed periods of distance from the world that afford the opportunity to amass new creative powers. If, within all forms of Jewish mysticism, menstrual impurity has been associated with demonic forces while semen became sanctified, now it is God as 'female' who is the focus of purification and protection.

\(^{50}\) M Shabbat 2:6.
Such conflating of the life of earthly woman and the rhythm of divine existence not only confirms the necessity of women's religious observance; it also affirms women's own sense of worth, by portraying God in their likeness. As Jody Myers and Jane Littman - two Jewish feminists who researched this literature - point out,51 the type of Orthodox woman who identifies with this thinking stands in direct opposition to Orthodox feminists who promote Talmud study for women and advocate their greater participation in the sphere of communal leadership. The mystic apologists are more deeply traditional in their outward practice and pose less of a threat to the status quo. Nevertheless, a theology that strives to insinuate a female rationale in place of a religiosity whose forms are predominantly male-centered, and that elevates women's role in the home above men's activity in the communal realm, is in an important sense more radical and innovative than a theology that strives merely to give women an equal share in the religion as currently conceived. The popularity of this literature is an indication of how successful it is in addressing a genuinely felt need.

B. The Sociological Approach of the Revisionists

Not all women are prepared to suffice with a glorification of their position that is realized only in the metaphysical realm. All the more so when lack of representation in the here-and-now leads to misrepresentation as well. Thus, for example, when a woman student notices that not only is she not being addressed and does not figure prominently in the talmudic text she is studying, but she encounters passages purporting to know her and the nature of her psyche, yet describe these in a stereotypical manner that does not tally with her own personal experience. How is she to react when she confronts rabbinic descriptions of women's physiological processes that are not exactly accurate?52 In graver instances, how is she to grapple with


52 Thus, for example, the assumption regarding women's lack of sexual desire (BT Niddah 13a). Another example female students have puzzled over is the rabbinic
texts in which she and all members of her sex are represented in an uncomplimentary or demeaning manner, especially when such depictions are employed in order to limit in advance the range of sources that she is allowed to study?

Such questions arise more often in midrashot of the egalitarian variety that already harbor an untraditional sense of women in their educational objectives. In addition, their program of study provides greater occasion for confrontation with problematic halakhic sources, where the clash between traditionalist and modern assumptions regarding women is most obvious and explicit. These factors create dissonances that are more difficult to handle and seem to demand a more complicated response.

Here too, the effort of female students to overcome a sense of dissonance may begin simply by seeking greater inclusiveness within the existing texts. Thus, in response to the need for more inclusiveness, Dvora Zlochower, formerly a student and now a teacher of Talmud at Drisha Institute, relates a simple strategy that she and her women havrutot adopted when they customarily substituted their names for the standard Reuben and Shimon that appear in talmudic texts dealing with matters of lost property and the like. This innovation seemed a trivial matter, yet proved to be an ingenious and innocuous method of involving women in a body of literature where they are not generally mentioned by name and are not expected to figure as active participants in its discussions.53

Not always, however, do such strategies suffice. Occasionally even students of the one year programs of the more egalitarian variety may still be offered a diluted variety of the traditionalist line of apologetics in the attempt to justify the sources. Aside from serving as a basis for

---

responding to their concealed role in the sources, classes in mysticism, kabbalah and particularly hassidut fulfill a less direct but important function in appealing to the emotional and spiritual needs of the students. But more typical of approaches to the 'woman question' in this context is the attempt of some of the older students and their teachers to develop alternative readings of the sources which are better equipped to handle their disparity with contemporary women's real life situation, self-perception, and notions of justice. This often leads them to adopt a more contextual and sociological reading, which introduces a distinction between various strands within the tradition: those which are a true reflection of its essence, and those which represent the influence of contingent factors that have more to do with the cultural milieu in which the sources were written than with its inherent principles.

Such a distinction informs the work of Orthodox feminist Judith Antonelli, who writes in the introduction to her comprehensive feminist commentary to the Torah:

Misogyny and male supremacy are not inherently 'Jewish'; that is, not endemic to Judaism. This does not deny, however, that misogyny and male supremacy have entered Jewish culture as a sociological phenomenon. Just as this book refutes feminist anti-Judaism, so too does it seek to separate Torah (divine law) from men's sexism, which is an unfortunate and all-too-widespread part of Jewish sociology. For all its loyalty to tradition, a sociological view obliges the student to adopt or improvise techniques that deviate from traditional methods of study. In this case, women's relative freedom from well-established patterns of learning serves even women ostensibly striving to master classically male models of study, enabling them to look at the texts in fresh ways that are unencumbered by past conventions. Unlike their male counterparts, women interested in advanced Talmud study are generally women who have also been exposed to academia. This facilitates a certain measure of incorporation of scientific method into their study. The same may be said for a few of their male teachers,

who prefer to teach in the women's framework because of its greater flexibility in content and method. A natural and unabashed use of the tools of textual and historical analysis helps those who cannot identify with essentialist apologetics develop new interpretive techniques that are designed to provide answers to the tensions created by evidence of androcentric bias in traditional texts. In this sense, Rabbi Ariel is surely justified in his fear that women's relative freedom from existing traditions of learning will lead them to build 'a tent that stands outside the fence', because of its untraditional interests and methods.

One technique characteristic of the sociological approach employs what the post-Christian feminist theologian Daphne Hampson has termed 'golden thread methodology'. It looks at sacred texts that have become overlaid with sexist interpretations and purports to find underlying messages that could be read as supportive of women's interests. By paying attention to two conflicting viewpoints in the same story, the reader can expose a complex interplay of voices, whereby the less patriarchal one is divine. The claim is that the sexist overlay was able to develop either because the original texts did not apply their message specifically to the reality at hand, or because the texts themselves speak in more than one voice.

Antonelli's commentary on the Torah employs this method when she asserts that sexist overlays could develop in Jewish tradition because the Torah deliberately does not speak in one voice. In this argument, she relies upon Maimonides' explanation of biblical compliance with the mitzvah of sacrifices as a compromise with the limitations of human nature which requires gradual preparation towards the ideal. On the strength of this view she adopts a distinction that was already set out before her by Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits in his book *Women in Time and Torah* between Torah authentic ideals and Torah tolerated ones, in order to understand the patriarchal aspects of the Torah as merely provisional messages.

---

C. The Multi-Layered Approach of the Pro-Activists

Strategies of distinction between sociology and essence, however, do not work equally well with all texts. Over the years, women's awareness of the depth of the androcentric thrust of tradition has deepened. Of particular importance in this connection is their increasing exposure to the expanding influence of gender studies upon various disciplines, which trains women to look more critically at the background narrative of the sources they study and to recognize the limitations of a sociological approach in dealing with texts that are saturated with gender biases that are far more subtle, deep-seated, and pervasive.

To cite but one example: Rachel Adler, one of the foremost articulators of Jewish feminism, describes her reaction as a woman to the talmudic discussion (BT Ketubot 11a-b) regarding a female child raped by a grown male before reaching the age of three. The only question raised in this context is whether the little girl's virginity is considered to have been destroyed, in which case she would only be entitled to half her ketubah payment. Since the assumption of the Sages is that the hymen of such a young girl would grow back, the final ruling is that she is entitled to the full ketubah of a virgin. In this connection, Rava declares, 'When an adult male has intercourse with a little girl, it is nothing, for when the girl is less than this (i.e., three), it is as if one puts a finger into the eye' (ke-notel ezba' ba-ayin dami). To this Adler remarks that as a psychotherapist working with sexual abuse victims, she frequently sees women recount, or in some way relive, their experience of sexual abuse in childhood, and never has she encountered a case which warranted comparing the rape experience of a toddler to putting a finger in her eye. Granted that in a culture where women were resigned to being possessed by men at will, they might not have felt the sense of outrage felt by her clients today; nevertheless, given the physical disparities between grown men and little girls, penetration would surely occasion severe pain and at times even long-term injury to the child. A woman's questions about the case, then, would focus on the pain, injury and terror felt by the little girl. She might ask how the man was to be held morally accountable for his behavior, and what compensation was due the child.57

57 To be fair, it should be acknowledged that Rava is speaking specifically of the
Occasionally, the response of the women students in such cases is to opt for a more pro-active approach. Such an approach openly acknowledges that in many of the sources the female students encounter, the regnant voice is inimical to women but nevertheless suggests that other voices do exist and can be extracted or extrapolated from the text to women's advantage. Unique to those adopting this method is a willingness to frankly admit that their study is not a simple and obvious continuation of the dominant tradition of the past. As against the approach of the essentialists, or of those who adopt the 'golden thread methodology', this interpretive practice abandons from the outset the assumption that there is one uniform - or, at the very least, ideal - conception of women and their place in tradition that informs Judaism throughout the generations.

Thus the approach of 'multiple thread methodology' is designed to uncover traces of protest against the dominant culture, revealing whatever evidence of discomfort with the existing order that can be found buried within the tradition itself, as precedent and support for current reform. To this end the pro-active method enlists sophisticated literary and psychoanalytic methods, source criticism and feminist theory in order to arrive at a more nuanced reading of texts. Typical of this approach is the ignoring of standard distinctions in the compartmentalization of knowledge, and a crossing of borders between philosophy, history, mysticism and halakhah. Only by employing such an inter-disciplinary approach is it possible to contemplate the overcoming of existing norms in an attempt to resolve the gap between tradition and feminine sensibilities.

physical result of the rapes. Moreover, a few chapters down (see BT Ketubot 39a–40a) there does appear a discussion of fines men must pay in instances of rape which cause physical damage to the woman. Rape even appears in subsequent halakhic literature as paradigmatic of the type of damages in which the shame or the anguish incurred by the offense figures as a factor requiring compensation; see Maimonides, *MT Hilkhot Na'arah Betulah*, 2:1-17; *Hilkhot Hovel u-Meziq*, 1:7. However, there is no special regard for the particular damage incurred in the case of a little girl; one might also imagine that comparing rape in this context to 'putting a finger into the eye' would never pass in the presence of women. Feminists might object to the very treatment of the case as it appears in Ketubot 11a-b, merely in terms of abstract principles and syllogisms, without recourse to the real-life circumstances of the situation.
Thus, for example, in a Torah study program that took place in a recent feminism and Orthodoxy conference in the United States, a session was devoted to accounts of the horrifying treatment of women in the Book of Judges. The suggestion offered was that these should not be taken at face-value. Rather, such accounts should be understood as a literary parody that comes to prove that attitudes displayed toward women serve as barometer for the moral condition of the society at large.58 Tools that had been developed in academic study of the Bible, such as focusing on sub-plots and sub-narratives within the biblical text rather than on the main story, or following up on intra-textual connections (understanding one text as complement, critical commentary or antithesis to another) were introduced in order to discover traces of motifs that challenge a patriarchal social order that permits the oppression of women. Remarkable to this presentation was not only the message, but the fact that it was delivered by a young male rabbi in a bet-midrash setting. Moreover, the interpretive move was strikingly reminiscent of that made by the Christian biblical scholar and feminist theologian, Phyllis Trible, in her method of treating 'texts of terror' in the Old Testament.59

In another presentation delivered on that same occasion,60 women students donned their feminist spectacles in order to examine afresh a cluster of puzzling talmudic tales (BT Niddah 20b) relating to the exaggerated rabbinic proficiency required in examining women's sample blood spots in order to determine their menstrual status. A heightened feminine sensibility led them to see these aggadot not as fictional embellishments of real life incidents that come to convey the messages of the dominant culture, but rather as a subtle literary device expressing a message of discontent with an arrangement that systematically prioritizes formal male authority over and above the reliability of

59 See P. Trible, God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality, Philadelphia 1978. Trible acknowledges the male bias of Christian tradition, but denies that biblical texts themselves are misogynist, arguing that even the more flagrantly biased ones can be read differently. She contends that because the texts are often ambiguous, how they are understood depends much on the prior assumptions of the reader.
60 D. Zlochower, 'Is Knowledge always Power?'.

348
women's intimate and immediate knowledge of their own bodies. This allowed them to reveal instances of protest on the part of some of the rabbis themselves at the disparity between formal rabbinic expertise and women's natural knowledge, and a more humane recognition of the embarrassment incurred by women who must submit their most intimate questions to the scrutiny of male authorities. In this case too the subversive reading of the women participants of the bet-midrash did not vary noticeably from the research agenda and tools of analysis developed in academic study of midrash by scholars such as Daniel Boyarin, Chana Safrai, and Shulamit Valler. Amongst other objectives, such studies strive to reveal how even a comparison of variant readings of aggadot relating to women and the chronological development of these stylistic changes can serve as testimony to variety and change in cultural attitudes. When applied in a bet-midrash setting, the techniques of this multiple thread approach allow women to hear a 'second voice' of their own in many narratives that are scattered in the Talmud and to sense a feeling of connection with unexpected expressions of empathy for feminine sensibilities and values.

A more audacious technique for presenting the manifold voices of tradition goes beyond the attempt to eke out neglected sources in the tradition. Instead, some women students also engage in the composition of new midrashim in the attempt to compensate for lacunae in the collective national memory. In the words of Rivka Lubitch, one of the prominent representatives of this genre:

"Creative midrash is a literary tool that I use in order to express new exegetical ideas. Midrash such as this strives to reveal the"

---

61 Daniel Boyarin, for example, understands two incidents recorded in the Tosefta, in which Beruryah's halakhic opinion is validated by an important rabbinic authority, as against a male who disagrees with her, as testimony to some men's opposition to women's exclusion from Torah study. See his 'Rabbinic Resistance to Male Domination: A Case Study in Talmudic Cultural Poetics', in: S. Kepnes ed., *Critical Jewish Hermeneutics*, New York 1993, pp. 124-126. Chana Safrai employs a similar technique in 'Women in the Bet Midrash' (above n. 15), pp. 160-179, as does Shulamit Valler, *Nashim be-Sifrut Hazal: Ha-Talmud ha-Bavli*, Tel Aviv 1993. For applications of the same method to Bible study, see I. Pardes, *Counter-Traditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach*, Cambridge, MA 1992.
other voice, including that of the woman, which was pushed to the margins of the text, and to give this voice a different weight than was accorded to it in the normative text and in the religious consciousness until now. But as opposed to Boyarin’s approach, which searches after rejected voices, creative midrash dares to create voices that are not heard.62

Even more conservative circles occasionally engage in creative midrash in order to flesh out existing material relevant to the experience of women. The underlying assumption of these circles, however, is that one predefined and eternal view of woman is being played out consistently throughout the generations.63 Thus the final message of their midrashic enterprise is that the rare exceptions to the rule of female invisibility in the sources essentially corroborate traditional conceptions of role stratification and confirm the halakhic status quo. Such midrashim will focus on Rachel, the wife of R. Akiva, who suffered 24 years of poverty in order to enable her husband to study Torah, rather than on Yalta who shattered forty barrels of wine in a fit of rage when Ulla, her male houseguest refused to hand her the customary cup of wine before the grace after meals.64 The more fanciful midrashic efforts of the pro-activists, by contrast, function largely as a political vehicle for enlarging upon the conventional view of tradition, embellishing upon the biblical texts in fulfillment of current egalitarian visions.65 Although such efforts are often regarded by the Orthodox as in poor taste, if not downright sacrilege, some of the inventive biblical interpretations now emanating from the periphery of more traditional batel-midrash bear striking affinity to those produced by non-traditional feminists in their robust and independent vision of female spirituality.66

64 See BT Berakhot 51b; BT Niddah 20b.
66 A prime source for such examples is the feminist commentary to the weekly Torah reading produced by the Israeli Orthodox women’s lobby, Qolekh,
Creative appropriation of midrash by women, especially in the service of unconventional interpretations to hallowed texts, is regarded in traditional quarters as an unacceptable expression of irreverence, usurping the unique status and authority of the Sages. This objection highlights the theological problem in a feminist approach that strives to undermine claims to objectivity of a tradition that is attributed to a divine source and imply that it is incomplete. It is perhaps for this reason that such midrashic interpretations often appear in poetic form, or are incorporated in theatrical adaptations that allow far more license for innovative expression and do not mimic the classic midrashic form. Lubitch herself is aware of the problem, but argues in her defense that 'a good midrash is one that succeeds in convincing the reader that the voice it expresses is also present in the text, even if only between the lines, and that it is indeed an authentic voice of the text that we do not always manage to hear in a simple reading'.

Lubitch's response tallies with postmodern hermeneutic methodologies which dissolve the sharp distinction between objective and subjective, between authorial intent and reader response, preferring to gauge the acceptability of an interpretive stance according to its ability to convince the reader of its correctness. But a religious interest in granting the pro-active move greater metaphysical weight leads some feminist sympathizers to return to mystic discourse in order to provide a basis for the new approach. Contrary to conservative representatives of the mystic approach, claims for a connection between the earthly and the divine are not brought in this context in order to defend the status quo in the sources, but rather to stipulate a connection between the progressive development of women's status in history and the dynamic character of God and His Torah. Susan Schneider, founder of 'A Still Small Voice', a correspondence course in classic sources of Jewish spirituality on the internet, and Dr. Daniel Shalit, a Jewish thinker who struggles with the implications of postmodernism for religious belief, are both representatives of this trend. Each of them distributed in Modern Orthodox synagogues throughout the country. See also R. Lubitch, 'Feminist Midrashim' (Hebrew), in: N. Ilan ed., 'Ayin Tova' (above n. 15), pp. 302-310; idem, 'The Story of Dinah' (above n. 62), pp. 742-754.

Tamar Ross has written a book regarding the Jewish conception of male and female, relying on kabbalistic sources as support for the notion that reforms in the male/female relationship on the anthropological level and in the understanding of Torah are integrally connected with parallel processes in the cosmic order, reflecting a metaphysical movement towards perfection (*tiqqun olam*). My own attempt to ground a view of revelation on traditionalist sources which understand the development of history and human understanding as the cumulative unfolding of God's word also bears some affinity with this move.68

D. Applications to Practical Halakhah

Although the urge to raise ‘the woman question’ is a general one that cuts across all areas of limmudei kodesh, it is arguably felt most acutely by women whose study of the Oral Law moves from Talmud to in-depth study of halakhah and the more recent responsa literature. Because of its centrality in determining the shape of Jewish belief and practice, and the immediacy and concreteness of its applications, confrontation with denigrating attitudes to women in this most explicit of forms is not only difficult to reconcile with an apologetic approach glorifying the status of women on a spiritual sphere. It does not work well with a sociological one either.

As Rabbi David Bigman (rosh yeshiva of Yeshivat Ma'ale Gilboa and founder of Midreshet 'Ein ha-Netziv) has observed,69 students engaged in the theoretical study of Talmud may more easily attribute unfavorable statements about women that appear there to an antiquated social order. They can also be comforted by other remarks in the Talmud that are favorable to women and included in its pages. Such is not the case with regard to some of the contemporary halakhic discussions. Here, the demeaning nature of some of the gender assumptions or arguments cited cannot so readily be dismissed as relics of a bygone age. Often such assumptions and arguments are employed in an exclusionary manner to ban women from activities

---

A Bet-Midrash of Her Own

that from a strictly formal halakhic perspective are admittedly permitted.\footnote{Among Bigman’s examples: the contention that although women may recite the kiddush for men, this nevertheless constitutes zila milta (See Mishnah Berurah 271:4); or the acknowledgement that although women have taken upon themselves the mitzvah of counting the omer, this is nevertheless undesirable as most would no doubt make mistakes in the counting and in any case would be incapable of understanding the words of the blessing (ibid., 489).}

At other times they seem to employ a double standard for men and for women.\footnote{For example, rigorous standards of modesty imposed upon women that are not matched by parallel demands made of men; waiving strictures on sexual relations because of claims regarding men’s more powerful sexual drive (see, for example, R. Ovadyah Yosef, Yabi Omer, vol. 1, Yoreh De’ah, 15) or their requirement to procreate, without equal recognition or consideration of women’s needs in these matters; greater scrutiny of motivation with regard to women’s desire to assume mitzvot for which they are not obliged.} But even when the bottom line of the halakhic deliberations in which they appear emerges as equitable or favorable to women, neither sophisticated exegetical techniques nor fanciful midrashic creativity will sweeten the pill of an unnecessarily perpetuated male bias. Such strategies cannot overcome the sense of dissonance and irrelevance that these sources and their antiquated lines of argument often create in the mind of the woman student who encounters their language.

Yoel Finkelman, a Talmud teacher in Midreshet Lindenbaum illustrates this dilemma, when he confesses:

The seriousness of the issue […] was made quite clear to me in a recent class I taught to Orthodox Jewish women taking their first steps in Talmud study. We interrupted our regular learning to study the issue of women's obligations to study Torah. The sources, by our reading, not only defended, but encouraged, women’s study of any field of Torah. However, my students asked a set of questions to which I had no adequate response. 'We understand that we can and should study Torah. We do not understand why we need a special dispensation to do so. We do not understand why our Torah study is justified by the claim that it will defend us from punishment in a case of adultery! (Mishnah Sotah 3:4). We do not see ourselves as exceptions to the general rule that most women are neither smart nor serious
Tamar Ross

enough for Torah study!' 72 I had, and still have, no adequate response. 73

Instances of demeaning language may occasionally still be handled by simple and non-radical 'first aid' tactics. Thus, for example, Zlochower relates the practice she instituted in the above-mentioned Talmud class at Drisha to consistently exchange the term qever (grave), often employed in the later halakhic literature to designate the womb, for the more dignified term maqor (source). A solution suggested by Rabbi Bigman for countering more extensive arguments that are outdated and insulting would have women create their own Shulhan ŠArukh with glosses after the manner that the Hazon Ish annotated the Mishnah Berurah. Such glosses would supplement discussion of halakhic issues that repeat outworn assumptions and arguments offensive to contemporary women - even while dismissing them - with alternative discussions that manage without mention of these. 74 Similarly, Orthodox

72 See Maimonides, MT Hilkhot Talmud Torah 1:13.
73 See in Y. Finkelman's critique of my book, Expanding the Palace of Torah, in The Edah Journal (December 2004). Two additional examples cited by Bigman and belonging to this category are: (a) Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach's ruling permitting a male to fulfill his obligation to honor the wife of a talmid hakham by allowing her precedence in entering a bus (despite rulings against walking behind a woman), due to the widespread mingling of the sexes in the contemporary marketplace (see Auerbach's responsa Minhat Shelomo, part 1, 91). The favorable thrust of this ruling is offset by the implication that this situation is regrettable and that ideally, women should still remain largely confined to their homes, as had been their custom in the past; (b) Rabbi Tzvi Pesach Frank's ruling (Har Ševi, Orah Hayyim, 1:78) regarding the permissibility of destroying an original synagogue wall in order to enlarge the women's section. Here too, although the ruling is that this is generally permitted, the reason for this is because one can ordinarily rely upon the fact that such a renovation can also be construed as improvement of the men's section - accepting the opinion that the women's section does not bear an independent status of sanctity.

74 Ibid., p. 120. Bigman's suggestion here include contrasting the Mishnah Berurah's treatment of women and kiddush or of counting of the omer with that of the ŠArukh ha-Shulhan 482:4, which, although written in more or less the same time period, makes no mention of the zila milta consideration, or of women's inability to count or to understand Hebrew; or Rabbi Tzvi Pesach Frank's ruling regarding synagogue renovations (see above n. 73) with that of Rabbi Yitzhak Yaakov Weiss (Minhat Yitzhek, part 1, 33), a contemporary of Rabbi Frank, who cites earlier opinions that the women's section of the synagogue bears equal sanctity to that of the men's.

354
feminist Debby Koren is engaged in compiling a halakhic compendium which collects various halakhic sources relating favorably to women's greater participation in ritual practice, thereby empowering women interested in taking on such practices when confronted by exclusionary arguments that have taken hold in the halakhic community but have no firm formal grounding. Joel B. Wolowelsky's book, *Women, Jewish Law and Modernity: New Opportunities in a Post-Feminist Age* also constitutes a significant contribution to this newly accumulating body of knowledge.

A more ambitious scenario entertained by some sympathizers of the women's learning revolution envisions a flood of new responsa literature, initiated in part by the women themselves, whose innovative suggestions and interpretations would be so strikingly convincing that the sheer force of their brilliance serves to override the old exclusionary and demeaning language and argumentation of the past. But beyond the time required for producing an adequate number of women possessing the wealth of knowledge and skills necessary for acceptance by the community of the halakhically committed as major league players, the reality of communal politics and the inbuilt conservatism of institutional law and religious tradition render such a vision of direct female advocacy for legal reform a very long-term vision, if not a Utopian dream. A far more profound, if indirect, influence of the women's learning revolution upon the method and study of practical halakhah has, however, already taken hold.

Even when lacking authority or religious license for more institutional responses on the legal plane, 'asking the woman question' in matters of halakhah, as in all areas of Jewish study, is a method that cuts across individual applications in specific instances and carries more powerful ideological baggage. It is a method that does not suffice with attacking this or that particular ruling or understanding, but questions the entire grounding on which such rulings and understandings are based. Rather than allowing the evolvement of women's status in tradition to continue to function merely as the intellectual manipulation

---

of abstract precepts, when this question is asked over and over again it implicitly asserts that the background narrative lending the question its significance and sense is inadequate and requires a more global adjustment. In contesting the appropriateness of demeaning language and archaic judgments regarding their nature when discussing issues of their concern, women effectively reject that narrative and situate halakhic discourse in another context. 'Asking the woman question' also forces the women concerned to articulate their tensions with the unilaterally male perspective that shapes halakhic texts and to voice openly their hitherto unspoken skepticism regarding its objectivity. It induces them to find their own voice, to speak for themselves, and to more clearly and consciously articulate the precise nature of the disparity they experience between their understanding of themselves as women and the understanding implicit in the material being studied. To the extent that this sense of disparity with the regnant narrative persists, it is a disparity of the most destabilizing sort.

A striking example of this newfound 'audacity' on the part of Orthodox women (and a glimpse of its potential in shaping the future context of halakhic deliberation) emerged at the first international conference of Kolech in the summer of 1999. On this occasion each of the hundreds of Torah-observant women attending found a detailed scientific questionnaire in her conference packet. The purpose of this questionnaire, composed by rabbinic pleader Rachel Levmore, was to check the current validity of the talmudic statement that women prefer to be married to any man, no matter what his shortcomings may be, rather than live alone (tav le-meitav tan du mi-le-meitav armelu).76 As a halakhic assumption upon which rabbinic courts operate to this day, this statement serves as justification for pressuring women to remain locked in undesired and sometimes physically abusive marriages. Although Levmore's initiative was conducted in the form of an academic survey, and the questions were carefully worded so as not to affect the answers, pro or con, the very impetus for conducting such a survey implies the understanding that invalidation of the original assumption could ultimately affect halakhic rulings in our day. By challenging

76 See, for example, BT Yebamot 118b; Ketubot 75a.
paternalistic rabbinic observations (which may have held true under certain socio-economic circumstances, but do not apply universally today) and even subjecting these to empiric examination, women are expressing their refusal to allow male judgments about their nature to play a determining role in halakhic deliberations.

The cumulative effect of 'asking the woman question', contextualizing the sources, and providing them with new narratives, is already proving to be a powerful method of negotiation with the dominant tradition of Torah study, allowing for the introduction of new and distinctly feminine messages to color its development. Despite the variety of forms this negotiation has taken on the halakhic plane and in other areas of limmudei qodesh, the influence of a feminine perspective on Torah study in the classic sense nevertheless is still in its infancy. It will be a sign of the maturity of women's Torah to see it weaned of the need to deal exclusively with questions relating to women, and to apply the insights arising from women's study to more general questions of Jewish thought. When women will be free to do this, we can expect some interesting additions to the range of religious discussion. Although the delicate dance of negotiation between tradition and innovation will no doubt persist, the word 'change' will no longer be dismissed as off-bounds; awareness of the relative importance of formal and value-laden considerations in halakhic decision making will be increased, and the relationship between midrashic creativity, halakhic critique, an academic approach and mystic traditions regarding the nature of Torah bordering on postmodernist theories of interpretation will yield a new wealth.

Although I, along with Rabbi Ariel, appreciate the need for continuity and see the dangers in a fly-by-night counterculture that has no roots, I have no doubt that the deep attachment of the women of the bet-midrash to a two thousand year old tradition, and their sincere identification with its major tenets, no matter how male their origins, are capable of preventing a major rupture with tradition. In order for such identification to continue, it is of the essence that women immerse themselves in the language, the rigor, the full wealth, and the spirit of the existing tradition. On the other hand, by forcing the study of Torah to reject the claim to exclusivity and objectivity of one particular viewpoint, the women's
revolution in learning, even though it began with very innocent motives, may eventually serve as the most serious catalyst this century has witnessed for rejuvenating not only the face of the bet-midrash, but also the face of traditional Jewish life in general.