

A Convention Colloquium on Teaching Talmud to Women

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The following summary is based upon a colloquium at the ECA/TEN Convention held in October, 1987.

On the morning of November 1st, at the conclusion of this year's ECA/TEN conference at the Homowack Hotel in Glenville, N.Y., a session was held featuring presentations by two outstanding scholars, Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik, Professor of Jewish History at the Hebrew University and former Dean of Bernard Revel Graduate School; and Rabbi Hershel Schachter, Rosh Yeshiva at RIETS and head of its Marcos and Adina Katz Kollel.

Although the original title of the session was "Torah Education for Women," Dr. Soloveitchik opened his remarks by quickly and definitively stating that issues at hand were the appropriateness of the study of Talmud by women in general, and whether Talmud should be part of the curriculum for girls in the modern Orthodox day school in particular. Dr. Soloveitchik stressed his advocacy of both policies, and while he stated that he was prepared to present the halakhic basis for his position, he would prefer on this occasion to confine his remarks to educational considerations as to why

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such a positive approach is presently called for, once the position's halakhic permissibility is presumed. The speaker presented two possible models for the presentation of Torah to students in learning institutions: a) the school provides a context in which information is provided while the student plays the role of a passive recipient of the tradition being defined and illustrated by the instructor or b) learning as the active acquisition of intellectual tools by the student who by means of involvement in a give-and-take with the teacher, is taught how to think critically and analyze the ideas to which he/she is being exposed. Dr. Soloveitchik maintained that halakha constitutes the only intellectual discipline that Judaism has to offer to its adherents and students, now that a serious treatment of Jewish philosophy is no longer part of the curriculum comprising a Jewish education as was the case in the medieval period. Gemorah study, a discipline that has evolved over the course of myriad generations, assumes that no discussion is ever completely closed, and engages the mind limitlessly, allowing the student's thinking to grow in depth and complexity during the course of these studies. Whereas the supplying of information entails a "horizontal" spread and increase of knowledge, true Talmud learning trains the mind to rigorously follow an argument, draw correct inferences, and develop inductive reasoning in systematic fashion.

Aside from the intellectual attractions of Talmud study, Dr. Soloveitchik contended that familiarity with Gemorah idiom and frames of reference serve to allow the conversant individual entree into traditional Jewish culture. Just as Weinreich has written in his *History of the Jewish Language*, that Yiddish can only be understood in light of "Gemora culture", it is likewise clear that Gemora is the basic language of classical Jewish literature. Consequently, when a Jew has no access to the "language" of the Talmud, he/she will be deaf to the basic expressions of traditional Judaism. For both of these reasons, intellectual and cultural, Dr. Soloveitchik stated that it would be inappropriate to keep such a large percentage of the modern Orthodox population in the dark with regard to Talmudic thought and idiom.

The last portion of his prepared remarks dealt with the age at which a Talmudic education should optimally begin. Dr. Soloveitchik felt that those who delay beginning their Talmud studies until they complete their secondary educations (as is typical for many women interested in familiarizing themselves with Talmudic thought and substance), will unfortunately never be able to feel completely comfortable or become truly adept in their learning. It is at the age of ten or eleven that an elementary orientation to close, textual analysis should begin. If such a course is not followed, the individual

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will subsequently require tremendous determination and powers of concentration to overcome the obstacles of a lack of early basic training and to develop the needed skills and overall outlook to feel at home in the Talmud.

Rabbi Schachter began his presentation with a citation from a letter by Rabbi Joseph Rozin, "The Rogachover" (1858-1936) appearing in the collection *Tzafnat Paneach*. Responding to a question as to whether the egalitarian laws of inheritance being followed during this period in Eretz Yisrael were binding as a function of the principle *dinah demalchutah dinah*, the Rogotchover said no, and added that the presumption of the comprehensive equality of men and women is inherently a Christian rather than a Jewish idea. Rabbi Schachter implied that a similar alien premise informed the movement to create completely identical courses of study for men and women with regard to their respective Jewish education. Therefore he feels that those who uphold the approach that women ought to study only those areas of halakha immediately relevant to their lives, are following the truly traditional Jewish approach.

On a more pragmatic level, Rabbi Schachter claimed that in fact, the Jewish education that young women have been receiving until this point, heavily weighted in favor of *Tanakh*, *dinim*, and *hashkafah*, is actually a more fundamental and appropriate introduction to Judaism than the practically exclusive Talmudic preparation that comprises boys' curricula in

Judaic studies in the day schools. It would therefore be quite counterproductive to strive to make the education of Jewish females parallel to their male counterparts; in fact if changes are in order, it is the curricula of the boys that deserve enhancement in terms of greater exposure to *Tanakh* and *dinim*. Furthermore, in terms of when boys should optimally begin learning Gemora, Rabbi Schachter declared his belief that Rabbi Yehudah ben Temah's assertion that the age of fifteen coincides with the prerequisite cognitive readiness for beginning Talmudic study is supported not only by Jewish tradition, but also by personal, empirically validated experience. Although the modern Orthodox Jewish community expects its young men to study Talmud from a relatively early age, teachers should stress *pesukim* and *dinim* and no more than clothe them in Talmudic nomenclature until the students have reached the level of mental maturity necessary for a proper understanding of Gemora. Rabbi Schachter was not concerned about women not being exposed to intellectually challenging material, stating that in fact, most people will be satisfied with far less sophisticated subject matter than Talmud itself or even Talmudic presentations of *halakha* and *hashkafa*. However, in answer to a particular question, Rabbi Schachter did agree that women intending to make teaching *limudei kodesh* their profession should be given some preparation in Talmudic study in order to assist them in adequately preparing the material that they will be teaching. ■

TEN Summer Seminar

The Second Annual TEN Summer Seminar in Israel will focus on the theme *Jerusalem Through the Ages in Tanakh and Talmudic Literature*.

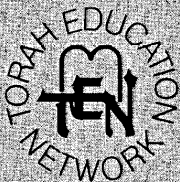
It is envisioned as an enriching educational experience which will include pre and post seminar orientation and follow up, respectively.

Lectures, workshops, field trips and individual projects will be molded into a memorable seminar open to all but geared toward high school faculty.

The Seminar will take place from July 17 to July 31 (before the CAJE Conference).

The Torah High School Network is planning a Student Seminar at the George Washington Lodge, Willowgrove, Pa. The Seminar will take place on March 3-10, and is featuring leadership training sessions as well as programs to be used on Yom Haatzmaut. Ten students will be accepted from each school, those interested should contact:

Rabbi Chaim Hisiger
181 Noe-Bixby Road
Columbus, Ohio 43213
1-614-864-0229



Please consider sharing your Yom Haatzmaut and Yom Hashoa Programs and Curriculum in our next issue of TEN DA'AT.

Material should be submitted by March 15.

