

Educating the Jewish Woman of the Twenty-First Century:

A MODEST PROPOSAL

Esther Krauss

We stand again at a crossroads on the path that Sara Schnirer paved earlier in this century when she opened the doors of formal Jewish education to women. We are called upon, as Sara Schnirer was in her time, to confront the social realities of 1989 and to continue to develop, based on that, a philosophy and a program of education for women that addresses the needs of Jewish women *today* honestly and realistically.

It is my intention to focus primarily on attitudes — of parents, of communal and religious leaders, of general populace, as well as of educators — because the home, the community and the school are partners in the educational process. Although schools do, in some ways, shape and mold the community, yet the home and the community must be prepared to accept, to implement, and, yes, to supplement the educational direction and philosophy of the school if the educational process is to be a successful one. It would be unfair, even futile, to educate our students towards goals that will only be frustrated by the lack of opportunities to fulfill them once they have advanced beyond the confines of the school.

I will borrow my frame of reference from *Pirkei Avot*, and address myself to the major categories — the pillars of

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Judaism — as they are there defined: *Torah, Avodah, Gemillut Chasadim*. My proposal is simple though not simplistic I trust, since it is not original with me. I take my cue from a tradition which has unequivocally placed *talmud Torah* at the center of all Jewish life, observance and thought.

Our sources make it abundantly clear that aside from the inherent value of learning Torah for its own sake, its goal and purpose is to lead to greater observance, to a keener understanding of G-d, to a heightened appreciation of His ways, and ultimately to religious communion with Him — *to ahavat Hashem*.

The mitzvah of *hakhel*, the commandment to regularly read the words of the Torah before the *entire* community of Israel — men, women and children, explicitly states as its goal: "... that they may hear and so learn to revere the Lord their G-d and to observe faithfully every word of His teaching."¹ Furthermore, the *Sefer Hachinukh*, in a prescription for fulfilling the commandment to love G-d, which it concludes is incumbent on both men and women, states that "... with the intensive study of Torah, love of G-d will, of necessity, be implanted in one's heart."²

We need no further documentation to conclude that Judaism views *talmud Torah* as the most effective means to fashion a good Jew. Surely this is not a new insight. It has always been the compelling force in Jewish education from time immemorial. It must now be viewed as a pivotal factor in the re-evaluation of Jewish education for women that has taken place in the twentieth century.

As long as Jewish women functioned in, and perceived themselves primarily in terms of the domestic scene, that educational process took place in the warm and enclosed safe environment of the home. Parents, very successfully for the most part, taught their daughters Torah in ways commensurate with their needs and expectations — through actions, through deeds, through role-modeling, by the very ambience of the home that was permeated with Torah.

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Girls learned to identify Jewishly and assumed Torah personalities via what they and those around them viewed as their very significant role and function in the home. They took themselves seriously in this very Jewish role — they knew who they were, where they fitted into the religious scheme of things, and that they were making a vital contribution to Jewish continuity. For those who were more intellectually inclined, there was ample opportunity, even within that restricted framework, to absorb a great deal of knowledge from the Torah talk around them, and exceptional women usually found the means to satisfy their intellectual needs.

Although somewhat idealized, as nostalgia tends to be, girls were successfully educated in this environment. That atmosphere, that lifestyle, that clear definition of roles, that self-image, no longer exists *anywhere* in the Orthodox community. It had already changed in pre-war Europe, a situation which gave rise to the Bais Yaakov movement, and it has changed even more radically today.

We have two options. We can lament the change, and try to resurrect a former era and transplant it to the foreign soil and the new realities of twentieth century America, as some are attempting to do. Or we can, as we have always done when faced with new and challenging situations, find new ways of translating eternal truths and a timeless message into contemporary terms that suit the present reality.

We cannot turn back the clock, even if we are so inclined. Let us instead take a long and hard look at how our young women view themselves today and then consider, without looking over our shoulders to the right or to the left, how we can intensify their religious self-perception.

Women are being taken ever more seriously in the professional, business, academic and political worlds in which we, as Centrist Orthodox Jews, have chosen to live. We cannot afford to do less for them Jewishly, lest they end up taking Judaism less seriously than they do the secular world which they perceive as more hospitable to them as women. If we permit this, we run the risk of encouraging them to dichotomize, to fragmentize and compartmentalize their religious selves. They will probably continue traditional Jewish observances, but it is highly un-

likely that they will choose to invest their emotions, their passion, their talents and creative energies Jewishly.

I propose, therefore, that we take them seriously as Jews in ways that women were not and perhaps didn't need to be when their turf was more clearly defined and delineated. That can be done in a variety of ways, all of which can be reduced to one common factor — *obligation*. Obligation is a powerful, compelling force that influences the way one views oneself and the way one is viewed by others. According to Maimonides,³ only 14 of the 613 commandments are not obligatory for women, yet the exemption of women from these few, mostly time-bound positive commandments, has created an aura and an attitude of non-obligation for women that translates itself into a less serious attitude toward their general observance of mitzvot. The attitude is subtle, insidious and pervasive. For example, is there any reason why a girl's observance of fast days after Bat Mitzvah is any less obligatory than a boy's? Yet somehow only Tisha B'Av and Yom Kippur are viewed by many women as obligatory fast days.

Furthermore, of the relatively few laws from which women are exempt, some have, and most can and should, become obligatory. What self-respecting, traditional Eastern European woman would, for example, miss hearing the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah or taking the *lulav* on Succot? Yet these laws, technically, are not obligatory for women. I submit that *talmud Torah* in some form, and for those who are so inclined and capable in all its dimensions, must become similarly obligatory for women and continue throughout their lives.

It troubles me to think that a bright, articulate, sophisticated and intelligent young woman for whom a college and even a university education is a given, can complacently accept the fact that she has exhausted her need to learn Torah after a year of post-high school Jewish education in Israel. Unfortunately there are many such girls among our best graduates all across the religious spectrum. We can effect a change in this area by both concrete and subtle means. It mandates that we begin to teach *all* areas of Torah to our girls early — in elementary school. Early exposure communicates importance and relevance, motivates, and

teaches fundamental skills — all of which will contribute to greater interest and enthusiasm later on. It necessitates the proliferation of camp experiences for girls which include serious learning programs. Why not an intensive summer program for capable high school and college girls to parallel the summer *kolelim* for young men? I applaud Drisha's initiative in creating such a program in New York City. We need to inspire our girls to see the participation in such a program as natural, attractive, and prestigious. It requires the community to greet the birth of a girl with the blessing *shetizku ligadlah l'Torah l'chupah u-l'maasim tovim*, and for us to then continue to expect our daughters to live up to that blessing by learning Torah every day — including Shabbat, Sundays and vacations. It means developing the custom of presenting Bat Mitzvah girls with Jewish books instead of trinkets. It requires the establishment, in Israel as well as in the United States, of more rigorous, more demanding, more serious and more comprehensive learning programs to challenge our most intellectually capable and serious high school graduates. And, it necessitates the creation of places and opportunities for women to learn, and to feel comfortable doing so, after they have left the structured confines of the school system.

The Jewish community, much to its credit, has established during the past twenty years, an impressively comprehensive network of educational opportunities for busy professional and business laymen to spend their leisure time learning Torah. Daily *shiurim*, Torah tapes for use in the car or by phone have become routine in the busy life of professional Jewish men. On a recent New Year's Eve, two hundred men gathered to participate in a *shiur* that lasted until after midnight. In contrast, although I commend the progress it demonstrates, one of the foremost women's communal organizations now sponsors an *annual* Torah study day. What message do we communicate by the statement that a woman's need for Torah learning can be satisfied once a year?

Within the school itself, we need to make all the sources available to our girls, teach the skills necessary to master the sources and continue to

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develop the skills so that our young women will be able to learn *all* areas of Torah independently. What self-respecting student would accept the need to always turn to someone else for help because certain areas of a subject have been intentionally kept closed? Our brightest girls will surely turn their backs on us intellectually if we persist in restricting their Jewish intellectual horizons.

Finally, we must encourage and train women to undertake teaching the intricacies of Torah in all its dimensions, and we must expect them to be as well-versed as their male counterparts. Young women need female role models with whom to identify religiously and intellectually. They need to relate to women who will share their passionate quest for intellectual and spiritual growth, but who will also share with them the conflicts and challenges inherent in that quest. We need to find ways to encourage our young men and young women to enter *chinukh* and to welcome the prospect and the challenge of teaching girls. It is an exciting new area offering unparalleled opportunities for innovation and for experimentation because it is not encumbered by traditional ideas, methods and limitations.

A second major area of concern is that of *tefilla*. Our grandmothers were paragons of sincere Jewish prayer. They excelled in the art and heart of Jewish prayer. They found solace and comfort in every line of *Tehillim*, investing the words with profound hope for the welfare of their family and people, and with a most perfect and simple faith in the power of their prayers. It's been a long time since I've witnessed a Yom Kippur prayer accompanied by the passionate tears I remember flowing in the women's section of the shul of my youth. *Tefilla* was a profound psychological, emotional and religious experience for our grandmothers. Though few could translate the words, they possessed deep spiritual meaning for them.

I would venture to say that even the most devout young Jewish women don't *daven* that way today, nor do I have a program that will bring it back. But here, too, our realistic appraisal of the situation, and of our attitudes, can help us bring women closer to prayer.

Whereas, for our grandmothers *tefilla* was largely a private, individual experience, fraught with personal mean-

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ing and immediacy, today communal prayer is the more prominent arena of *tefilla*, even for women. The shul, and not the home, is the place most commonly associated with prayer for all Jews.

I would, therefore, suggest that we listen closely to the message that women are sending us, via the proliferation of women's *tefilla* groups, about their desire to make prayer a more personal, meaningful, and immediate spiritual experience. Rabbi Saul Berman, in one of the earliest and still seminal articles on Jewish women, challenged women to demand that shuls be physically constructed in such a way as to make women feel more involved without infringing on halakha.

I place that challenge before schools and parents — motivate your students and your daughters to make such demands. All schools — elementary and high school, co-ed and single-sex schools, including all-girls schools — need to have an authentic *beit kneset* on the premises, just as they need a library, a science lab and, today, a computer lab.⁵ Girls will begin to see themselves as Jews in need of prayer and will be inspired by that need and by the very experience of prayer — the setting, the emotional ambience created by unselfconscious communal singing of the *tefillot*, and the authenticity of the full synagogue service. All prayers that may halakhically be said in such a group, should be said, and on the days that a Torah reading is part of the service, it should be incorporated in some acceptable form.⁶ I would add that those parts of the service that must halakhically differ from the regular shul service should be discussed openly with the students and the halakhic sources that re-

quire such divergence should be investigated with them. I have no doubt that they will thereby gain a healthy respect for the halakhic process. They should have no more difficulty accepting the halakhic limitations placed on them in this area than we all do, both men and women, in accepting halakhic restrictions in other areas.

But the schools cannot do it alone. The Friday night prayer service is a moving one, stirring in its combination of beautiful prayers with the unparalleled tranquillity and warmth of the Friday night atmosphere. What better setting for mothers and daughters, whose busy lives offer little enough opportunity for quality time to be spent together, to intensify their bond, to reach out to each other emotionally and spiritually by welcoming the *Shabbat* together through prayer and song. It may be unnatural, at first, but it has the potential for their achieving great spiritual heights together.

These may be some ways to make prayer more meaningful for women. But they must be accompanied by an air of seriousness which can only be conveyed by the consciousness of *obligation*. Parents must educate their daughters at a young age to the fact that their *tefilla* is halakhically obligatory and serious and that their expectations in this area are uncompromising. Responses are commensurate with expectations. More women will come to shul on time if they view their *tefilla* as obligatory, necessary, and important. We should be as rigorous about our expectations regarding our daughter's *davening*, both before and certainly after Bat Mitzvah, as we are about our son's.

Before concluding with some comments on *gemillut chassadim* as it relates to women, I'd like to digress to an area of Jewish observance that has become erroneously perceived as the sole province of women, and which has, unfortunately, come to be viewed as a strictly external observance. As a result, it has lost the power to properly influence and inform the totality of Jewish life. I refer to the area of *tzniut*, which often becomes a source of resentment and conflict for many girls, because it is confined to a concept that primarily governs what they wear and which is too frequently defined as the major expression of their religiosity.

We must somehow teach the centrality of *tzniut* in Jewish life and attitude as it was perceived by the prophet Micah (6:8), who defined it as a fundamental religious requirement for Jewish existence. Both men and women need to be educated to the meaning of that mandate, which can be summarized as the need for the kind of humility that enables us to view ourselves and the world through G-d's lenses. Only through such a theocentric perspective can we hope to successfully inculcate the external observances of *tzniut*, which are ideally but one expression of a deeply religious inner life.

I might add that this area needs to be taught to our girls and boys, as all other halakhic areas should, in a manner that pays our students the respect due them as intelligent, sensitive, spiritually directed and motivated people. They need to be taught the intricacies, details, philosophical reasons, as well as the mystical inferences of the many external requirements of *tzniut*, which in-

clude issues of language and culture as well as of dress, instead of merely dictating, mandating and coercing and then, in helpless resignation, often abdicating responsibility altogether.

Finally a brief word about *chessed*, that realm of Judaism in which Jewish women have traditionally been expected to excel and in which they have indeed distinguished themselves through the ages. Surely, today's young women are not sufficiently involved in *chessed*, as young men are not, and we need to investigate ways to heighten their awareness and consciousness of what it means and entails to be part of a community.

We will gain very little, however, by answering the requests of women who wish to become more religiously involved and who strive to participate in Judaism more fully in their intellectual and spiritual capacities, by suggesting that they perfect themselves in *chessed*. I submit that the successful education of a totally integrated Jewish personality will yield a Jew who doesn't see her commitment to Judaism solely as a personal, intellectual, emotional, or spiritual relationship with her Creator, but who sees it also as a bond that links her to all Jews and that makes her responsible for their well-being and happiness. If we have fallen short of our goal to produce such Jews we must re-evaluate the educational process, but let us not allow that failure to foster an approach to education for women that will deprive them of an essential source of intellectual and spiritual inspiration.

Some of the issues, suggestions, and requests that the feminist era have engendered may sound foreign, discon-

certing, dissonant, and thus threatening to the finely-tuned, sensitive, traditional, halakhic ear. I firmly believe that there is an important place in Judaism for a stubborn, uncompromising, conservative, unyielding position. It helps us all to maintain a balanced perspective. I welcome the vocal, albeit often strident, opposition from that corner of Judaism to anything that smacks of feminism.

There has, however, always been and there must continue to be a strong, courageous, balanced, objective and responsive sensibility to the issues raised, which can sift out the false, inauthentic, jarring notes of both the radical and conservative extremes.

We can't afford to capitulate to the extremist position as the only valid passport to Orthodox legitimacy and to authentic Judaism, just as we cannot permit ourselves to be swept away by the spurious, momentarily intoxicating allures of modernity.

Centrist leadership demands that we articulate a well-considered, clear, firm, intellectually honest and empathetic response to feminist issues, as we must respond to the myriad of issues that continue to arise with time and change.

Some of our finest, most creative, most committed young women have already embarked on a spiritual journey of their own. They are grappling, they are groping, they are searching, often self-consciously and warily, for satisfactory authentic answers. We have a responsibility to take them *very* seriously — to listen carefully to what they say, to support them, to guide and direct them, to encourage them in their genuine spiritual quest. If we assume this responsibility conscientiously, we will have earned the right and the opportunity to expect them to reward our efforts by reinvesting their newly discovered energies, talents and resources in the Jewish community that nurtured them, for the enhancement and enrichment of us all.

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1. *Devarim* 31:12
2. *Sefer Hachinukh* commandment 418
3. Rambam, *Sefer Hamitzvot*, ed. Chavel, p. 242 (end of positive commandments)
4. *Tradition*, Vol. 14, no. 2, Fall 1973
5. My thanks to Ms. Dina Pack for this observation.
6. Incidentally, learning *trop* is an invaluable tool in the proper study of Tanakh.