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THE JOFA journal

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FROM OUR PRESIDENT

PUSHING THE ENVELOPE

By Judy Heicklen

On 28th Street between Park and Lexington Avenues in Manhattan, I discovered a small grocery store called Little India, where one can buy fresh fenugreek. Fenugreek is not something I usually buy (it's generally used in Indian and Middle Eastern cuisines), and I had been searching unsuccessfully for it for years. Even the produce managers at Fairway had given me a blank stare when I asked for it. But Little India came through for me.

You see, I wanted fenugreek for a specific purpose. On Rosh Hashanah every year I make a Seder. A Rosh Hashanah Seder is a series of wishes for the new year, using a variety of special foods known as *simanim*. Each *siman* has a "*yehi ratzon*" ("may it be Thy will") that either highlights a certain characteristic of the food (e.g., an apple dipped in honey for a sweet new year) or is a pun on the name of the food (e.g., may God *squash* our enemies). However, some of the *simanim* are a bit obscure, and there are different understandings of what they actually are. Such is the situation with *rubia*, which many traditions understand to be black-eyed peas or some kind of long bean. However, the Yemenite tradition, based on Rashi, is that *rubia* is fenugreek. Year in and year out, I have served black-eyed peas (based on the Avudraham's understanding), but I have always yearned to serve fenugreek as well, to fulfill all opinions.

Many of my guests had never even heard of a Rosh Hashanah Seder before. Despite its 1,700-year-old origins in the Talmud (see *Horayot* 12a or *Keritot* 6a), it is a custom that has fallen out of use in most Ashkenazic communities. Sephardic communities, on the other hand, generally do have a Seder ritual. Despite my lack of Sephardic roots, it is a ritual that I have embraced wholeheartedly.

Why do some rituals resonate so strongly with us, while others do not? Why have Sephardic Jews developed a Rosh Hashanah Seder and Ashkenazic Jews have not? Is it appropriate for me, an Ashkenazi Jew, to adopt a Sephardic ritual? Furthermore, would it be appropriate for me, a woman, to take on a ritual traditionally performed by men?

Over Rosh Hashanah we read about the weaning of Isaac and the weaning of Samuel. Abraham prepared a feast for Isaac's weaning. Why hasn't this ceremony caught on in Jewish circles? When I stopped nursing each of my three children, it was a bittersweet moment. I considered marking it in some way, as Abraham had, but it felt too inauthentic, too uncomfortable. For me, the power of ritual is in its connection to previous generations and the history of the Jewish people that has gone before us. For that reason, I named my daughters using a *zeved habat* ceremony, which goes back four centuries in the Italian tradition, instead of creating something new. To invent a new ritual felt oxymoronic to me. It felt fake and corny and "wrong." Even though others might revel in the creativity that could be expressed when there is no set text or activity to commemorate an event, that didn't work for me. Or so I thought.

Then, two years ago, I attended my niece's wedding in Israel. She asked me to prepare to *leyn* a chapter of *Shir Hashirim*. During her *kabbalat panim*, right before the *badeken*, eight women from her family and friends each chanted a chapter of *Shir Hashirim*. It was beautiful. It was moving. And though I had never seen it or heard of it before, it felt authentic and appropriate.

This issue of the *JOFA Journal* focuses on this cutting

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THE ROAD TO WEARING A *TALLIT:* Why This Orthodox Woman Wears a *Tallit*

By Bat Sheva Marcus

Author's note: This article has been updated and expanded from a piece I wrote nearly a decade ago.

I will never forget the first time I saw a woman wearing a *tallit*. I was twenty-seven years old, living in Israel, and attending the first International Conference on Women and Judaism. I came early, stumbled into the "wrong" room, and came upon a room full of women praying. Many had on *tallitot*, *tefillin*, and *kippot*.

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Correction: In "Meet the Glaser Sisters" in the Spring 2014 issue, Chaya Glaser is identified as teaching in middle school; however, she teaches in Ramaz Lower School.

O Pioneers!

By Sharon Weiss-Greenberg

"You are pioneers. You are taking the first steps just as the students of Sarah Schneirer did. Be proud. You are brave and leading this school by blazing unknown trails." These words marked the beginning of my career as a Bais Yaakov student. Although my family identified as Modern Orthodox, Minneapolis—or, for that matter, the state of Minnesota—was able to offer only one opportunity for a high school Jewish education, that of Twin Cities' Bais Yaakov. My class was dubbed the "Pioneer Class."

What made us pioneers? I was the sixth student to join the school, which was, in its first year, only the ninth grade. The school was thrilled because only then could we play three-on-three basketball. As a small, upstart school, every day was in a sort of limbo. How would we get to the pool this week for gym class? What was the microwave policy for lunchtime? What was considered "acceptable" reading material for English class? For example, approximately halfway through *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, our books were confiscated.

Most of these questions fell on the administration—although, as a student, I also had risked a lot to join the school. I did not know if I would become good friends with any of the other five students. I was not sure if I would be prepared for college. I could not align myself with all the values and even *halakhot* being taught in the classroom.

Many questions hang over one's head when one is the first.

In February of my freshman year, an elderly man with a white beard shuffled into the room. He was barely five feet tall and had a sweet, calm demeanor. Our principal walked in behind him and interrupted the class. This elderly man had been a young boy when Sarah Schenirer started her school in the back of a tailor shop. He told us how crazy everyone thought she and her students were. He explained the stigma attached to her students and followers and the gossip that ensued on a regular basis. This was pretty jarring, as I had found Bais Yaakov to be fairly conservative and traditional. I noticed my principal's and classmates' eyes light up as this man shared the revolution of the Bais Yaakov movement. He told us to be proud of our founder and to persevere as she had.

Not all revolutionaries or pioneers are legendary as is Sarah Schenirer. Most fail. Most often, that is because change is met with resistance. In Orthodoxy, when change is not in dialogue and compliance with *halakhah*, additions or alterations in observance cannot even be considered. Tradition is an important element of our belief and practice. Nonetheless, change has happened and traditions and *minhagim* (customs) will be added and/or adapted over time. Change is also a rich part of our tradition. If we had not allowed *minhagim* to develop over time, we would not drink white wine on Pesach, celebrate a bat mitzvah, or say prayers for the State of Israel and for our *hayalim* and *hayalot*. We would not prioritize and support our daughters' Jewish education as Sarah Schenirer did. We would not be living and practicing ideals close to our hearts.

In reflecting on the radicalism of the Bais Yaakov movement, a little less than a century later, the landscape has changed dramatically. It is in this spirit that we present this edition of our *JOFA Journal*. It would be difficult to envision an Orthodox world today without women's learning and scholarship. In this issue, women and men have shared rituals that have brought great meaning to their lives and the lives of others. Although some of these may seem more radical than others, this issue was meant to share experiences and models of Jewish engagement that others have found to be meaningful and within the framework of Orthodox *halakhah*. Will every ritual depicted in this issue become normative and mainstream within the next century? Maybe not. Will reading this issue and considering innovation in practice enrich our communities? That is our hope.

Sharon Weiss-Greenberg *is the executive director of JOFA. She earned her doctorate in education and Jewish studies from New York University. She was formerly codirector of the OU Seif Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus at Harvard Hillel and director of online engagement for the Consortium for Applied Studies in Jewish Education.*

From Our President, *continued from cover*

edge of ritual—whether it is the creation of new rituals that haven't existed before or taking on preexisting rituals that haven't been practiced by our slice of the community. Some of them feel natural to me, and some make me uncomfortable. Some have serious halakhic issues to be grappled with, and some have had no discussion in the halakhic literature at all. Some of our authors do not consider themselves Orthodox, whereas others do; we wanted to showcase a wide range of emerging activity in order to open up the conversation. We hope that the UnConference on November 23 will provide an opportunity to continue that conversation.

This year at my Rosh Hashanah Seder table, when I served fenugreek for the very first time, I had a Syrian Jew (whose family uses Chinese long beans for *rubia*) and a Yerushalmi (whose family uses black-eyed peas). I had a medical student (whose family doesn't have *rubia* at its Seder) who informed me that fenugreek is used to help nursing mothers increase their milk supply. We discussed a dish called *chilba* that Yemenite and Egyptian Jews make from fenugreek. So now I have a new dish to make for next year! I wish each of you a year of opportunities to explore and celebrate the diversity of our rich heritage. *Shana tova!*

Road to Wearing a *Tallit*, *continued from cover*

I thought I was going to throw up.

To me, it looked awful. It looked like a mockery of everything I loved. It seemed to me a caricature of the pictures I held close to my heart of my father standing in a faintly lit room in the early morning, wrapped in *tallit* and *tefillin*. I backed out of the room and went into the ladies' room to calm down. Even then, I was rational enough to be annoyed at myself for my violent overreaction.

So here I am, twenty-five years later, a *tallit* wearer. I often marvel at the transitions we go through in our lives.

I can't pinpoint exactly when my feelings began to change. When my sense of disgust transformed itself into an indefinable longing. When I began to look over the *mehitzah* at my husband wrapped in his white *tallit* and find that I too wished I could be wrapped in white, feeling cool cotton transport my existence into a space of holiness. But somewhere and somehow my feelings had changed.

Maybe it was partly that as I got older, the "right way" to do something often seemed less clear. Meeting different people, discussing issues openly, somehow I found out that in so many areas of my life, right and wrong were not quite as black and white as I had originally assumed them to be.

Maybe it was also that I couldn't "seem to get myself into a good space" for *tefillah*. I grew up in the day school system, praying daily. I grew up in a home where *tefillah* was expected to be a part of my daily life, even on vacation days. But I never really *davened*. Usually I daydreamed. Often I moved my lips to mimic the prayers. And then I found myself an adult, no longer praying to fulfill someone else's expectations, and unable to sustain regular, daily, ongoing prayer.

The agonizing fact was that, philosophically, I believe prayer to be critically important in our lives. It's a chance, amid the chaos and the self-centeredness of our generation, to stop and thank God for all of the everyday miracles: for our children, our community, and our health. So there I was, thirty-five years old, still struggling with daily prayer and full of frustration and guilt because of it.

A Turning Point: Birth of a Daughter

And then my daughter was born. If I knew one thing as a parent, it was that if she didn't see me *davening* daily, it would be hard, if not ridiculous, to expect her to do so. In my heart of hearts, I knew that if I didn't want her to grow up with the same struggle, it was time for me to resolve the issue once and for all.

A few years later, when my oldest son celebrated his bar mitzvah, I watched, with growing wonder and no small sense of envy, the excitement with which he approached the tangible elements of becoming an adult in prayer. The day his *tefillin* arrived from Israel, he ran to our neighbor to pick them up. He tried them on. He was in love with his *tefillin*. He went with my husband

Bat Sheva Marcus's daughter Shalhevet's first encounter with a *tallit*.

to buy a *tallit*. He tried it on. He looked at himself in the mirror. He tried it on again. I watched and my sense of amazement grew.

On the day of his school bar mitzvah, I went to his yeshiva. The pride and excitement of the boys, newly wearing *tefillin*, was tangible. They felt grown up. Much like a married couple wearing wedding rings, you could tell that they felt a sense of responsibility and a sense of commitment. And the girls? They sat, as they always had, on their side of the *mehitzah*, some *davening* quietly, some just moving their lips. I felt a sense of loss and sadness for my then three-year-old daughter. And I decided then and there that, at her bat mitzvah, my daughter too must have a tangible expression of her commitment to prayer and a transitional object that would allow her to feel like an adult in her relationship to *tefillah*.

I spent a great deal of time mulling over the issue. Somehow, *tefillin* seemed less obvious. For me, personally, there was always something decidedly masculine about *tefillin*. Furthermore, *tefillin* carried with it potentially so many more halakhic concerns. But *tallit*—that seemed almost perfect. White cotton, white silk, soft cloth, wrapping yourself in gentleness, in holiness—all tied to the *tzitzit,* to which so many prayers refer. And this garment carried with it negligible, if any, halakhic concerns. The Rambam (*Hilkhot Tzitzit,* III, 9) states that a woman may wear a *tallit*. And although the Rama, in the *Shulhan Arukh*, disputes this position, the only reason given is *yuhara*, or religious arrogance.

So I made the decision that I would wear a *tallit*.

That was thirteen years ago. From that day to this, I have rarely missed a day of *davening*, at home or at *shul*. I love the soft feel of the *tallit* as I wrap it around me. Whenever possible, I *daven* outside, on the porch, so that the sun can shine through on me, and in my fantasy, I am wrapping myself in the warmth of the *Shekhinah*.

So that's where you might think the story would end. But the transition to wearing the *tallit* publicly was a complicated one, and it is one that I have struggled with often and still struggle with today, thirteen years later.

First, there was the question of wearing the *tallit* in *shul*. Blessedly, I live in a community where one of the local Orthodox *shuls* (the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale) is supportive of women wearing *tallitot*. Even though I am still one of only a handful of women who wear a *tallit,* I wasn't the first. But I still struggled with wearing the *tallit* in public. I didn't want to be seen as "holier-than-thou." I didn't want anyone else to think I thought as myself as "special" with regard to prayer. And even if others didn't suspect me of arrogance, I was ambivalent about others potentially seeing me as a role model for *tefillah*—because *tefillah* is something that doesn't come naturally to me; it's something I continually struggle with. It's an area in which I truly do not see myself as a role model.

An Epiphany

But then I had an epiphany. As an Orthodox feminist, I had long since decided that I wouldn't change my behavior if I thought it was right just because others would think less of me. I had always stuck to my guns in the face of ridicule and criticism. I did what I thought was right, even if often others judged me badly for it. I would be damned now if I would change my behavior in the fear that others would think too much of me!

So I wrapped up my *tallit* in my beautiful new *tallit* bag and I started taking it to *shul*. And usually that works out for me. But sometimes it doesn't.

When I move out of the lovely comfort zone of my own *shul*, I face an ongoing dilemma. I know that wearing the *tallit* makes other people uncomfortable. And I feel bad about that. I also know that the only way to make people more comfortable is to see Orthodox women wearing *tallitot* more often. So which should win out here: the part of me that is an activist/feminist, not afraid of acting for change? Or the part of me that seriously cares about her community and does not want to make people uncomfortable in the places they pray?

I wish I had a simple answer for all of these questions. I don't.

The guidelines I generally use now when I go away to a place that isn't "*tallit* friendly" are these: How does my host feel? Will the fuss that is created really affect anyone besides me? Do I think the good that will be done will outweigh the bad?

If I am going to an *aufruf* or a bar mitzvah, the last thing I want is to deflect attention to me. And it is only when my hosts truly feel that it is fine for me to wear the *tallit* that I take it out of its bag. But if my hosts are cool with it, then I certainly don't mind the whispers or comments. They are just par for the course, and they are just one more stone laid in the path of change.

I would be lying, though, if I said it doesn't bother me that something that has become such an important part of *tefillah* for me is questioned, doubted, or makes me agonize on certain days. And I wish the critics understood that. Because of all the things they might think about me, I doubt that "Wow. This must be hard, but it must mean a lot to her" is the conclusion they come to.

On the whole, I'd say it's worth it. Do I concentrate on *tefillah* every day, or even most days? Certainly not all the time. Is my *davening* where I'd like it to be? No. But it is so much better than before. And my daughter? Shalhevet received a *tallit* on the day of her bat mitzvah and, whenever she *davens* from the *amud* or *leyns* with a *minyan* (which is—lucky for all of us—quite often), she wears her *tallit*. For the moment, she has chosen not to wear it every day. But perhaps even more important to me is that my daughter seems to struggle not a whit with this. She *davens* three times a day, in *shul* whenever possible. *Davening* is as essential a part of her life as it is of my sons'.

Am I seeing the *tallit* as a magical solution? For me it was. Well, perhaps not magical. Maybe mystical. But somehow it manages to serve for me as both an expression of serious and deep commitment and a tactile experience with which I can connect daily.

And, like many other things in my life, it is a work in progress.

Bat Sheva Marcus is a founding member of JOFA and a past chair of the International Women's Tefillah Network. She serves as both the chief operating officer of M.A.Z.E. Fertility Laboratories and clinical director of the Medical Center for Female Sexuality.

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Women Learn *Daf Yomi* from a Woman

By Michelle Cohen Farber

Six mornings a week, rain or shine, a diverse group of women in central Israel, aged thirty to fifty, gather together for forty-five minutes to study Talmud. Each of the participants brings her own unique perspective to the table. One member of the group is an interior designer who always finds the aesthetic beauty in a textual description. Another is an architect who is vocal when learning *sugyot* in *masekhet Sukkah* and other tractates dealing with structural or spatial issues. And a professor of law contributes her insights when discussing rabbinic legal analysis and innovation.

Michelle Farber's *daf yomi shiur* engages in a lively discussion.

The conventional wisdom is that men and women have different approaches to texts—that men tend to focus on the theoretical, whereas women are much more practical-minded. In our class and in my experience in teaching women, this is only a half-truth. One woman in my class has a *Tosafot*-like approach, frequently identifying contradictions from other texts we have learned. Another shows a great interest in the reality of the lives of the scholars and questions the historical influences that shaped rabbinic writing. A third participant is interested in exploring whether the seemingly abstract discussions of the Talmudic sages are purely hypothetical or whether they reflect reality. The questions that the women in my class ask also reflect their particular attitudes. Texts referring to ghosts, *mezikin* (harmful spirits), dreams, or stories often prompt lively group discussions, as they relate to the most basic issues of the human psyche.

The Talmud deals with anything and everything—from health to eating habits to sex to human behavior. No topic was taboo for the rabbis. Recently, in our study of the tractate *Hagigah*, we discussed the reliability of a non-religious Jew. The general rule is that items belonging to someone not committed to *halakhah* (an *am ha'aretz*) are assumed to be impure, even if the *am ha'aretz* claims they are pure. However, regarding items brought to the Temple for sacrifices, an *am ha'aretz* is trusted to say that they are pure. The rationale for this ruling is that barring these people from bringing offerings to the Temple (due to reasons of impurity) will cause them to hold religious Jews in contempt and ultimately to create their own religion. Accordingly, what is halakhically problematic as a general matter becomes permissible. Our class noted the flexibility of *halakhah* in the interest of not ostracizing people from the religious community and maintaining good relations among Jews. In this instance, as in many others, learning Talmud teaches us the flexibility of the halakhic system. The variety of opinions and the ability to constantly interpret and reinterpret earlier texts demonstrates how open-minded Jewish tradition is meant to be. The questions that are needed to be asked today, however, are different from the ones the Talmud was interested in. Today, these issues would be framed more in terms of human dignity.

A Tradition Begins

What drew me to *daf yomi*? Teaching Talmud has been my passion for years. In my twenties and thirties, I taught in Jerusalem-based *batei midrash*. Since our family moved to central Israel, however, I have struggled to find a place in which to teach Talmud in a serious environment that involved more than one or two classes a week. I approached several high schools to interest them in developing a serious *Gemara* curriculum, but they could not find more than a few hours a week in their schedules. It is very hard to progress in Talmud without the rigorous discipline of more consistent (ideally, a daily) time investment—especially for women who have had little, if any, exposure to Talmud study.

This search was taking place at the same time as the *daf yomi* cycle was about to begin again. *Daf yomi* is a system of learning that began in 1923 (initiated by Rabbi Meir Shapiro in Lublin) to learn a page (*daf*) of Talmud each day to complete the entire 2,711 pages of the Talmud in seven and a half years. Each *daf* is crammed with lots of information—a *daf* may contain ten different topics and sometimes one topic can be analyzed in great detail, spanning many pages. Studying *daf yomi* has become very popular in recent years and *shiurim* are given all over the world. More recently, the Internet has bred a completely new set of *daf yomi* options.

My husband suggested starting a *daf yomi* class, and at first I thought the idea was absurd. I have always taught in an in-depth manner—how could I teach an entire *daf* in 45 minutes? I always teach with *hevruta* (allowing the students to learn the text on their own with a study partner)—why would I want to teach by spoon-feeding the material? How would I ever attract a committed group of learners? How many women have 45 minutes a day to

dedicate to this? As I started thinking the matter over and started making some calls, though, I discovered that this approach really had appeal.

The Appeal of *Daf Yomi*

One appeal of *daf yomi* is that if you are going to dedicate time in your busy life to learning, the idea of being able to quantify what you are learning is very attractive. Women (and men, for that matter) who are balancing work and family life consider time very precious. If they want to dedicate time to learning Torah, they want to know that they will make the most of that time. By structuring their learning time around *daf yomi*, they know that they will study a prescribed body of knowledge and get through the entire Talmud (or, if they stay for just a year, a few tractates)—the text that stands as the basis for almost everything else in Jewish learning.

One of Rabbi Meir Shapiro's goals in initiating the idea of *daf yomi* was to unify world Jewry. If everyone is learning the same thing everywhere, he reasoned, when Jews get together, they can engage in shared discussion about what they are learning. I have experienced this many times at a *simhah* or even on the street. The moment someone studying the *daf* sees me, she comes over to me and starts discussing something that came up in the day's *daf*. Some of the women in my class have husbands who are learning and like the idea of doing likewise. In a different way, this sort of bonding was reflected at our first *siyum*, upon completion of our study of *Berakhot*. Two women mentioned that studying the *daf* held a special place for them, as each had a father or grandfather who had passed away who had always learned the *daf*, and they felt that through their learning they were better able to understand why the *daf* had played such a central role in their lives.

A Significant Statement about Women's Learning

The *shiur* makes a significant statement about women's learning. All the participants talk about the impact it has had on their families, particularly their daughters. Once, at the end of a class, a woman told me that her teenage daughter was having a crisis that morning. As she sat helping her through it, the daughter noticed the time and said to her mother, "I don't want you to miss the *daf*," and encouraged her to go. (Incidentally, a number of the participants' daughters also learn with me in an evening *shiur* that I conduct for girls.) Another class member has commented on the positive impact her learning has had on her sons: "They see me taking this seriously; they see my husband being completely supportive of my running out to *shiur*. They will know that they and their wives can someday learn together, another bond, another shared link in a long chain." When I went on vacation, one student, for whom daily learning was just such a fixed part of her routine, went to a local *shul* to ask if they would allow her to attend their class, to which one of the men replied, "There's a women's *daf yomi shiur*—why don't you join them?" Our class is affecting the broader community as well.

It should not come as a surprise that quite a few of the women in the class have careers, have large families, chair *hesed* projects, run marathons, and have many other familial and communal responsibilities. One morning, a woman at the table looked around at a number of women in their gym gear and said, "Am I the only normal one who just gets her kids out in the morning?" Notwithstanding their otherwise busy lives, however, each of the women in my class recognizes the importance of carving out time for serious study and values how rewarding it is to start the day with a religious, intellectual, and social experience.

The diversity in the class is part of what makes the experience unique. Friendships created through learning are very meaningful. I have witnessed close relationships develop between the women in the group. Even though there isn't much time for chitchat in a *daf yomi* class, there are always a few brief moments of interchange among the women. The consistency of the daily contact has only enhanced this aspect of the learning experience. Participants are always exchanging all sorts of messages on our WhatsApp group, whether it be *mazal tov*s or *hesed* opportunities.

I appreciate the fact that initially many women are daunted by the thought of committing to a daily regimen of learning. However, the ones who were willing to try realized in short order that it was not as great a challenge as they imagined. In fact, a class member who has already been through the cycle once has commented that she has no difficulty finding the time—it is just a part of her day, along with eating, *davening*, carpooling, and so on.

When I decided to teach the class, I discovered that there were hundreds of *daf yomi shiurim* available online, but none offered by a woman. From the start, it was my intention to record the class and upload it to the Internet. In this way, my *shiur* could reach women all over the world. It also meant that the women who attend the *shiur* would have a backup for the days they were unable to attend. Every day, an audio version of the *shiur* (in English) is uploaded, along with a study sheet that includes charts and other aids to help understand the often complicated structure of that page of Talmud. It can be found at **www.dafyomi4women.org** or the first entry on a Google search for "*daf yomi* women." The website also functions as a resource for women who want to study Talmud not necessarily at the pace of *daf yomi*. The convenience of the Internet allows for a learning experience that isn't dependent on a daily commitment. The listener can choose which *masekhet* to learn, and at what pace.

I have met people who have been following me online from around the world. One is studying to be a Reconstructionist rabbi in New York and is currently studying in Jerusalem for the year. I look forward to her upcoming stay with us in Ra'anana for a Shabbat. For our *siyum* of the tractate *Yoma* (which deals with the tasks that the High Priest performed in the Temple on Yom Kippur), our group went on a tour of the Temple Mount to visualize where the ceremonies had taken place. Imagine our

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Doing *Hoshanot* on the Women's Side of the *Mehitzah*

By Elisha Gechter

I held up the *etrog*, inspecting it not only for the black spots that my father taught me would render it unkosher, but also for an overall esthetic appearance that would appeal to me personally. (Bumpy, hourglass-shaped, green, and *pitom*less are my preferences.) And so it went with the branches of the *lulav*, the leaves of the *hadasim* and the *aravot*—I knew the *halakhot* and what to look for, but I had also been schooled in developing personal taste and a proactive approach to *hiddur mitzvah* (enhancement of the *mitzvah)*. Being raised in the Open Orthodox Hebrew Institute of Riverdale (HIR), I knew from elementary school age that my family wanted to be sure I was well versed in Jewish tradition, but that I also found a way to be personally expressive. This was true all year long, but Sukkot was a time that highlighted these values for me.

Elisha Gechter and her daughter say the *berakhot* on the *arba minim* in their *sukkah*.

I have enjoyed picking out my own set of *arba minim* (four species) for almost two decades in places that ranged from the open streets of the Lower East Side of Manhattan to the Israel Book Shop in Brookline, Massachusetts. A highlight of taking the four species is the *hoshanot* prayer on the first two days of the *hag* when *shul* is full to *yom tov* capacity. Growing up in the HIR, I observed a majority of women bringing their own sets of *arba minim*. Even though the circle of women participating in *hoshanot* was not as large as the men's march, it was sizable. Our circle did not snake up the *bimah* in front of the *aron kodesh*, but did encircle a woman holding a *sefer Torah*, who centered us as we marched around. We followed as the *hazzan* chanted the lines of the *hoshanot,* and we added our voices to singing the refrains and choruses of "*hoshana*."

After moving out of Riverdale, I struggled to find such an atmosphere elsewhere. I have been living in Cambridge, Massachusetts, for the past nine years, and the first few Sukkots were lonely for me on the women's side of the *mehitzah* at Harvard Hillel. In the optimal case, there would be three other women with their greenery in hand—not enough to make a circle or to have the "oomph" to request a *sefer Torah* for "our side." Finally, a friend who moved to town proved to be not only a good listener, but a huge help. Sharon Weiss-Greenberg (now executive director of JOFA) and her husband, Rabbi Ben Greenberg, had just come to Harvard Hillel to serve as the JLIC (Heshe and Harriet Seif Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus) couple and were already making inroads for Jewish involvement and expression. Sharon's relationship-building and halakhic knowhow enabled us to organize a women's circle for *hoshanot*. A Torah on the women's side provided us space and grace to encourage more female community members to participate.

Opportunity for Inclusive Sukkot *Davening*

Fast-forward a few years, and another option emerged for inclusive Sukkot *davening* in Cambridge. My husband and I attend Minyan Tehillah, a ten-year-old partnership minyan that regularly meets two Shabbat mornings and one Friday night a month. They had been adding a new *yom tov davening* each year, and I suggested holding Sukkot *davening*. My husband and I had just stepped down as co-chairs, and I was assuming the role of chair of the ritual committee. Following a discussion of the topic, the committee was interested in exploring the halakhic ins and outs of the roles of men and women in Sukkot *davening*. Together with our halakhic advisor, we determined what would be most appropriate for the community in light of *halakhah* and our minyan's makeup, arriving at an arrangement for both a man and a woman to lead the *hoshanot*. There would be two circles—one on each side of the *mehitzah*—and each would circle either a man or woman holding a Torah. The *hazzanit* and the *hazzan* would switch off calling out blocks of four responsive *hoshanot*. I volunteered to be the first *hazzanit*, paired with a male *hazzan* with whom I already had a good *davening* rapport from leading *tefillah* on Rosh Hashanah together.

In advance of Sukkot, we put out the word about this *davening*, so men and women who might otherwise not have purchased a *lulav* and *etrog* or who might not have stayed in town could choose to do so. The experience of selecting a set of *arba minim* that year was so

much sweeter knowing how I would be using them at the beginning of the *hag*. The minyan leadership even provided extra *lulavim* and *etrogim* to have on hand so everyone who wanted to could participate (a tradition that continues). We ended up with a full house at *davening* and very lively *hoshanot*. Many were moved by the model. A mother of a young pre-bat-mitzvah daughter remarked, "I never want to leave Cambridge again for Sukkot—that *davening* was so meaningful for the two of us and for our family."

That was four years ago; Sukkot *davening* continues to be strong in Cambridge. I am proud to have carved out a place where I can again find the balance between adherence to Jewish tradition and personal choice. Together with the various segments of my community, we respect legal considerations as well as social concerns. I continue to incorporate the lessons of a personally expressive approach to *mitzvot*. I now also enjoy the pleasure of teaching my young daughter, who I hope will also take an active role in shaping her community.

***Elisha Gechter** is program manager for the Wexner Israel Fellowship and the Wexner Senior Leadership Program at the Harvard Kennedy School.*

The *Etrog* as a Marker of Passage

It was Hoshana Rabba, the last day of Sukkot on which we use the *arba minim*, and I was sitting in my office with my *etrog* occupying a prominent place on my desk. This year I had been fortunate to find a real beauty, and I was reluctant to put it away for the last time.

The *mitzvah* of *arba minim* has had a particularly personal meaning for me over time. When I was married, I "shared" my husband's *arba minim*, making the *berakhah* on it, but merely watching him during *hoshanot*. After we separated, one of the first *mitzvot* that I was able to take on for myself was that of *arba minim*, which I felt was a symbol of my independence. However, during *hoshanot* I generally found myself alone or almost alone in the women's section, with no one to join me in *hoshanot*. Although I had my own *arba minim*, I still did not feel as if I were participating fully in the *mitzvah*.

Time passed. My son, who was just going off to college at the time of my divorce, has married and now lives in Atlanta. For the past several years, I have had the privilege of joining him and his family and *davening* at the Young Israel of Toco Hills, where women's *hoshanot* participation is similar to that described in the preceding article. At last, I can enjoy my *arba minim* to the fullest!

When Sukkot ends, I will keep my *etrog* in its tightly closed box (a family heirloom) until the following year, when I will remove the dried-out—but still very fragrant—remnant of the previous year's *etrog* and replace it with a new one. I keep all the old ones in a large vase—a reminder of the passage of time, the independence I now enjoy, and my gratitude at being able to perform this *mitzvah* year after year.

—Deborah Wenger

Women Learn *Daf Yomi*, *continued from page 7*

surprise when one of the guides turned to me and said, "I just realized why your voice sounds so familiar. My wife listens to your *shiur* every day."

For me personally, this has been a most rewarding step. I love teaching Talmud, as it encompasses so many significant themes—from *halakhah* to health, psychology, behavior, human nature, and the like. It is a book filled with diversity of opinions on every topic and fascinating conversations and deliberations. I enjoy being able to share my thoughts with others who are dedicated to learning and have excellent insights into the texts. I start my day with the Talmud; I fall asleep with the Talmud. (Managing a household with five young children means that I often don't find time to prepare a *shiur* until everyone in the house has gone to bed!) I value the regularity of it, the stability it provides in my life. Not a day goes by that I haven't studied. Every *daf* brings new ideas and new challenges.

Being part of the first women's online *daf yomi shiur* on the one hand is ground breaking (albeit probably not what Rabbi Meir Shapiro had in mind). At the same time, though, it creates that link between ourselves and the covenant, carrying on the traditions and innovative nobility of the scholars of the Mishna and Talmud.

***Michelle Cohen Farber** founded and teaches at dafyomi4women. She is co-founder of Kehillat Netivot in Ra'anana. She has taught Talmud and* halakhah *at Pelech High School, Midreshet Lindenbaum, and MATAN. She lives in Ra'anana with her husband and their five children.*

Editor's Note: *Michelle Farber is the daughter-in-law of Esther Farber, z"l, who was the creator and first editor of the* JOFA Journal *and a founding board member of JOFA.*

Women as Circumcisers: Are *Mohalot* Kosher?

By Barbara Trainin Blank

Anyone who has attended more than a few *britei milah* is likely to compare them: How fast did the *mohel* work? Did the baby cry a lot? How pale did the male family members become? But the guests at a *brit milah* of the grandson of Marcie and Tsvi Lieber in Silver Spring, Maryland, in August 2014 had one more factor to consider: A woman wearing a richly painted *tallit* called for attention and began the ceremony. No one among the attendees—a religiously mixed crowd that included many members of the maternal grandparents' Modern Orthodox congregation—had ever seen a *mohelet,* yet they seemed more mystified than miffed. No one voiced objections, but the circumciser's gender certainly fueled conversation during the *seudat mitzvah* (festive meal following the *brit*).

Surprisingly, the issue of whether women are permitted to perform a *brit milah* seems to have garnered less attention than other new roles on the Orthodox feminist agenda. In fact, in Exodus 4: 24–26, there is a precedent: When Moses did not circumcise his son on the prescribed eighth day and God sought to kill him, his wife, Tzipporah, saved the day by grabbing a flint and cutting off her son's foreskin. (According to tradition, Moses then took the flint from her hand and completed the task, but it's clear who the initiator was.)

Based on this biblical story, some rabbis in the Talmud and later sources seem to express no objection to a woman performing a *brit milah*. However, the practice doesn't seem to have gained traction, at least among the Orthodox.

The Liebers' *mohelet* describes herself as an observant Conservative Jew. An ob-gyn in the Washington, D.C. area for more than thirty years, Dr. April Rubin frequently has performed non-ritual circumcisions. But it was only in 2003 that she decided to "add another dimension" to her Jewish life by becoming a *mohelet*.

A member of Congregation Adas Israel in Washington, Dr. Rubin had long considered taking that course. But it was only when her rabbi, during a study session attended by Dr. Rubin's husband, mentioned *mohel* training at the Jewish Theological Seminary and bemoaned the fact that his congregation had no *mohel* of its own, that she received the needed nudge.

"I hadn't really investigated the possibility because I was uncertain the Conservative movement would accept women as *mohalot,*" she said. "Then it fell into my lap."

Dr. Rubin attended an intense five-day "total immersion" course at JTS, which she called a "fantastic experience." Of the nineteen people in her class, five were women, including two from Germany. (One has since made *aliyah*.)

A 'Righteous Jew'

"The interesting thing is that, according to the *Shulhan Arukh*, the only requirement is that the person doing a *brit milah* be a 'righteous Jew.' There is nothing about gender," Dr. Rubin said.

When she asked a Lubavitcher friend to research the acceptability of *mohalot*, he responded that he couldn't find anything wrong with it, but just said that it's "not right."

Marcie Lieber, the grandmother of the baby mentioned earlier, who describes herself and her husband as Torah-observant, Modern Orthodox Jews, didn't object when her son and daughter-in-law, members of a Conservative congregation, said they would be using a Conservative *mohelet*. "My only desire was that the *brit* be kosher

On Being a *Sandakit*

By Belda Lindenbaum

Editor's note: This article first appeared in the Spring 2012 issue of the JOFA Journal.

When my daughter had her first child, a boy, sixteen years ago, she called and asked me to fill the role of *sandak*, or, in my case, *sandakit*. I was excited to take part in this ceremony, as I remembered from the *britot* of my own three sons that I had been pretty much a nonparticipant.

Quite apart from that memory, it seemed so right to be performing this mitzvah. I remember hearing Reuven Kimelman, a Brandeis professor of rabbinic literature, speak at the first JOFA Conference about the Israelite women in Egypt holding their babies for the *brit* until the men complained. They said it was a dishonor for the men to be passed over, and so the women were excluded. I think women *sandakot* were the norm until the thirteenth century.

On the day, I held my grandson, watched the *mohel* enter him into the *brit,* without feeling the angst a male might have felt, and comforted him tenderly as his mother would have and as I had tended her as a child. My son-in-law's mother held him for the naming, as he was named in memory of her husband. My husband was given a separate role, and so we were all represented on the *bima*.

Since that *brit* I have been *sandakit* at number of my grandsons' ceremonies, and the thrill of holding and comforting them has never diminished. We have found *mohalim* who were sympathetic to the practice of using a woman as *sandakit*, and the synagogues we attend are welcoming, which is, of course, a precondition for such a service. Moreover, expanding one's rabbi's vision of what is permissible within *halakhah* is also satisfying to me.

Belda Lindenbaum, a JOFA board member, is past president of American Friends of Bar-Ilan University and past president of Drisha Institute.

according to *halakhah*," Lieber said. "Since I had never heard about a woman performing a *brit,* I had a conversation with an Orthodox rabbi, who researched the issue in the Talmud and *Shulhan Arukh*. He responded that although a *mohelet* would be an unusual presence in Orthodox circles, and that such a presence may not conform to Orthodox social mores, a *brit* performed by a woman, pursuant to all Jewish laws, is a kosher *brit.*"

Possible Issues

Some possible issues, however, were raised by Cantor Philip L. Sherman, a long-time New York-based *mohel.*

"There is a general halakhic principle that a person who is not obligated to perform a specific *mitzvah* cannot fulfill that obligation for a person who is," he said. "This is not necessarily a gender issue. In the traditional/Orthodox world, the differences are often illustrated between a Jew and a non-Jew, observant and non-observant, a minor and an adult, or male and female. A father is obligated to perform the *brit milah* for his son. A woman is not obligated in the *mitzvah*."

However, he clarified, that is *l'khathila* (a priori). *B'di'avad* (after the fact), any Jew can perform a *brit milah*. If a family lives in Yemen, for example, and the only person available to perform the *brit* is a nonobservant Jewish physician, male or female, the circumcision may be considered a kosher *brit milah* retroactively (although there are some who would require *hatafat dam brit* [a symbolic drop of blood], later).

"There may be other issues, such as modesty and *kevod hatzibbur*," Cantor Sherman continued. "If the community objects, whether the person is nonobservant or female, it would not be allowed. Some observant Jewish communities will allow a woman to be a *sandakit,* and some will not." (See the sidebar about being a *sandakit* at a *brit milah*.)

Another consideration, regardless of gender, is whether the *mohel/mohelet* is *shomer/et mitzvot*.

In Times of Duress

Women have performed *brit milah* during times of duress. According to an August 2010 article by Alma Heckman on the Jewish Women's Archive website, Yaffa Eliach's *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust* recounts a time when a Jewish woman in a concentration camp grabbed a knife from a guard to circumcise her son.

Ms. Heckman cites an article by journalist Sue Fishkoff that at the time (in 2010) there were thirty-five Reform and four Conservative-trained *mohalot.* There still may be some resistance because of the issues of modesty—perhaps less so with a physician who is a *mohelet*—and *kevod hatzibbur,* as mentioned by Cantor Sherman. However, with training programs now open to women, perhaps this number has grown by now and will soon be making an impact on the Modern Orthodox world as well.

Barbara Trainin Blank *is a journalist, playwright, and co-author of* What to Do About Mama: A Guide to Caring for Aging Family Members *(Sunbury Press).*

A New Bat Mitzvah Ritual: *Kos Shel Berakhah*

By Naftali Brawer

A little more than a year ago I was approached by a former congregant who wanted advice on how to create a greater sense of ritual for his daughter's upcoming bat mitzvah.

The bat mitzvah was going to be held on a Sunday, and he wanted to go beyond the conventional *dvar Torah* to create a real sense of a religious occasion.

After some thought, I drew together two sources of inspiration to create a bat mitzvah ritual called *kos shel berakhah*.

The first source of inspiration was a practice I had read about some years ago and have since integrated it into our family's Seder ritual. The hasidic master Rabbi Naftali of Ropshitz had the custom of inviting all the participants at his Seder table to pour a little bit of wine into the *kos shel Eliyahu* (Elijah's cup). In doing so, he encouraged everyone to blend their deepest hopes and dreams into this collective symbol of redemption. Each year at our Seder we all take turns pouring a little bit of wine into Elijah's cup while verbalizing our hopes for the coming year. This practice has elevated an often overlooked part of the Seder, bringing together our family in a very profound way.

The second source of inspiration was the kabbalistic/Hasidic idea concerning the symbolism of wine and its centrality in sacred ritual. The grape, according to this idea, symbolizes untapped potential, whereas wine represents the fulfillment and fruition of that potential. The reason that wine features so prominently in key time and life-cycle events, such as *kiddush, havdalah, brit milah, pidyon haben,* and *huppah*, is that we mark these occasions with a blessing over wine to express our thanksgiving to the Almighty for enabling us to have reached these moments of completion, as well as to request the opportunity for future fulfillment.

An Innovative Bat Mitzvah Ceremony

Blending these two sources of inspiration, we created an innovative bat mitzvah ceremony that combined ritual and meaning.

We began with *minhah*, followed by the bat mitzvah girl's *d'var Torah*. I then introduced the Hasidic concept of wine, and explained that a bat mitzvah is a celebration of the fulfillment of potential as we mark the transformation of a child into a young woman. At the same time, it also marks the beginning of new potential, beginning a journey of fulfillment in the years ahead as the bat mitzvah grows intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually.

The bat mitzvah's parents then presented a grandfather's *kiddush* cup and invited family members to each pour in a little wine and share a personal prayer or *berakhah*.

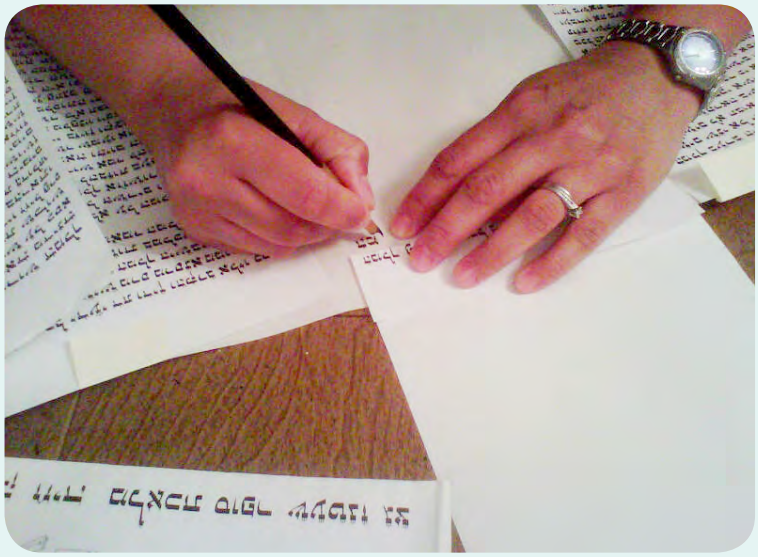
continued on page 13

Learning *Sofrut* to Write a *Megillat Esther*

By Phyllis Shapiro

A *megillat Esther* written by women is an idea whose time has come. The experience of a group of women in St. Louis, Missouri, who completed a *megillah* in 2012 may serve to encourage other Orthodox women to come together to learn to be scribes and to write a *megillah*. This is an incredible opportunity for Orthodox women to access, within *halakhah*, a *mitzvah* and ritual that has until now remained untapped.

Traditionally, the image of a *sofer* (scribe) has been that of a man. However, *sofrut*, which by definition requires a combination of calligraphic skill and halakhic knowledge, has a creative and artistic aspect that is undeniably feminine. When I came to write on the *klaf,* the parchment—after months and months of learning the *halakhot* and practicing formation of the letters—I felt a tactile connection to the text that is hard to parallel. The other three writers and I were often overwhelmed by the knowledge that we were doing something in the same way in which it has been done for hundreds of years by our people—using the same materials, forming the letters of our sacred alphabet in the same way—and yet, at the same time, doing something revolutionary.



The first letters of the *Megillah* are written on a *klaf.*

Steps in the Project

There were eight steps to our project: (1) learning the *halakhot* of writing a *megillah* (which took several months); (2) purchasing the materials; (3) finding a *sofer* who would teach us how to write *sta'm,* the special script used to write a *sefer Torah*, *tefillin,* a *mezuzah*, and a *megillah*; (4) classes with the *sofer*; (5) practice, practice, practice; (6) the actual writing on the *klaf;* (7) sewing the pieces of the *klaf* together; and (8) the illumination. Finally, we added a ninth step—a community-wide celebration of our *siyum megillah* (completion of the *megillah*).

I documented our group's experience each step of the way through a blog, **womensmegillah.blogspot.com**. The site also contains links to other sites explaining the *halakhot* involved in each step, including the overarching *halakhah* of women writing a *megillah*.[1]

All the materials are easy enough to obtain. You must first acquire a *klaf*—or, to be more precise, pieces of parchment that will later be sewn together. One of the fortunate *halakhot* is that the *klaf* must be scored with the lines for writing, much as in old *mahbarot*, Hebrew notebooks—a preparatory step that makes things a lot easier. A special black ink made for this very purpose must be used. Nibs or pen points are required. *Halakhah* requires that the writing tool not be made of metal, as that is a material of warfare. Nibs made of resin that fit over a holder (such as a pencil) are widely used, although an actual quill cut to form a pen can also be used. Thread for sewing the *megillah*—again, special for the task—must be made from the sinew of a kosher animal. And finally, if illumination is added, then inks and brushes for illuminating will be needed.[2]

Finding a *sofer* to teach the skills was a challenge in St. Louis, as none of the three *sofrim* in the Orthodox world there would teach us. By luck, we discovered that the rabbi of a local Conservative *shul,* Rabbi Mark Fasman, was a skilled *sofer*—and was happy to teach us, for which we will always be grateful. We spent hours and hours, months and months, learning from him how to form each letter. The *alef,* for example, is formed with nine strokes. One of the scribes in the group, Aviva Buck-Yael, created an invaluable resource for us (which is available to all[3]), a step-by-step guide to forming each letter, including the *tagim,* the little crowns that top some letters. Aviva also created practice sheets that helped us immeasurably, again made available to others undertaking the task.

Taking pen to *klaf* was an awesome experience for us all. One of the interesting *halakhot* of writing a *megillah* is that the intention—the *kavannah*—must be to write each section for the sake of the *mitzvah*. Therefore, before each session of writing on the *klaf,* we would say the time-honored *pasuk*, "*Hareini kotevet leshem kiddushat megillah*" ("Behold, I am writing for the sake of the sanctity of the *megillah*"). Actually, using the feminine form of the verb, *kotevet,* in the sentence is not so time-honored—it's groundbreaking!

Once we overcame our trepidation, our years of preparations showed and the writing flowed. We progressed quickly and smoothly, with each of the four writers writing three *amudim* (columns). We had a few "guest *sofrot*"—including the daughter of our own Judy Heicklen, Ricki, who happened to be in St. Louis during

the summer of the writing. She was at our house for a Shabbat meal and saw my writing desk set up and got excited about the project. One evening that week I taught her how to hold the pen and form a *yud* and a *resh*, and she wrote a few letters in the section I was writing.

Another member of the group sewed the four pieces of *klaf* together (with the stitches on the underside), after repeatedly watching a YouTube video on how to do so.[4] Here was another traditional feminine skill being put to nontraditional use.

The illuminated *megillah* is completed.

Illumination

With regard to illumination, many of us have admired gorgeous *megillot* from the past with elaborate pictures depicting the story of Purim interspersed between the columns of writing. However, the halakhic preference is for no or little illumination, lest it interfere with the reader's concentration. We decided to add illumination only to the opening and closing panels, and to add only the most traditional form of illumination for a *megillah*—the little crowns over the word *hamelekh*, which begins each column.[5] We had several local women artists do each one. Of course, there are also *halakhot* about the colored inks and the brushes, rather than metal pens, to be used.

I would encourage Jewish women who have done calligraphy or have a steady hand and artistic flair to get together with other Orthodox women and turn your skills into creating a new sacred text for your community and for the Jewish people. At the same time, you will be expanding Orthodox women's accessibility to Jewish ritual and tradition.

***Phyllis Shapiro**, a lawyer, is the immediate past president of Bais Abraham Congregation in St. Louis and a member of the JOFA Board.*

[1] See www.hasoferet.com/halakha-about-female-scribes/women-and-writing-the-megillah/.
[2] For supplies, go to http://merkazhasofrim.com/sofrus.html.
[3] See www.youtube.com/watch?v=POQU4pLPskU.
[4] See www.youtube.com/watch?v=J3wfOblV85Y.
[5] Some say that the word *hamelekh* at the top of the column is a reference to God, who is not mentioned directly in the *megillah*.

***Kos Shel Berakhah**, continued from page 11*

The bat mitzvah then recited *borei peri hagafen* over the full cup of wine and shared it with her parents and grandparents. She concluded the ceremony by reciting the *berakhah aharonah "al hagefen."*

This simple yet meaningful ceremony resonated deeply with the family and apparently with many of those in attendance, as in the following months many of them duplicated this ritual at their own daughters' *b'not mitzvah*.

Because the event was held on a Sunday, aside from the symbolic meaning of the ritual, the cup of wine lacked the halakhic status of a *kos shel berakhah*. If, however, the ceremony had taken place on Shabbat, the bat mitzvah could have recited *kiddush* over the wine, rendering it a genuine *kos shel berakhah*. The same would hold for *havdalah* if the ceremony took place on *motza'ei Shabbat*.

The ceremony also creates an occasion for the parents or the community to present the bat mitzvah with her own *kiddush* cup (which could be a family heirloom), along with the opportunity to use it immediately. This gift could provide the inspiration for the bat mitzvah to make *kiddush* routinely in the months and years ahead.

***Rabbi Dr. Naftali Brawer** is an intellectual and author who speaks to diverse audiences on the intersection among faith, ethics, and society. He currently heads Spiritual Capital Foundation, a London-based nonprofit that helps leaders and organizations articulate their values. He previously served as senior rabbi at the Borehamwood and Elstree United Synagogue, one of the largest Orthodox synagogues in the UK.*

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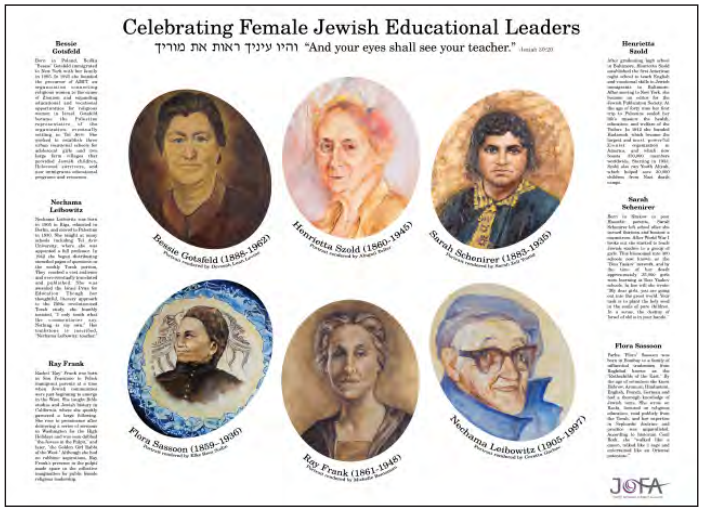
Sukkot Kickstarter Initiative

Looking around at the *rebbe* posters hanging on so many *sukkah* walls, Michelle Bentsman, an artist in her twenties, asked herself a question: "Where are the uncelebrated, unsung Jewish women who have taught us throughout history?" With those words, a Kickstarter campaign was launched. JOFA teamed up with six young Jewish female artists to create a piece of art featuring portraits of six Jewish female educational leaders, suitable for hanging in a *sukkah*, and to fund its printing and distribution.

The process of choosing women to feature on this poster was not simple because there were so many compelling and inspiring women to choose from. Ultimately, the artists decided not to include anyone still alive and to depict only women with existing photographs or portraits, which narrowed the field considerably and made the selection process somewhat easier. The six women JOFA chose were Ray Frank, Bessie Gotsfeld, Nechama Leibowitz, Flora Sasson, Sarah Schenirer, and Henrietta Szold.

Kickstarter is a global crowdfunding platform that allows individuals and groups to collect pledges and raise money to bring a project from concept to execution. Over a short six-week Kickstarter campaign, JOFA sold more than 550 posters and raised over $11,000—more than double its original fundraising goal.



To cap off this spectacular fundraising campaign, JOFA organized a gallery event to showcase the six original portraits, along with other original works of art by the project's artists. As the lead artist, Michelle spoke on behalf of the group, expounding on the significance and spirituality of the visual arts. Dr. Sylvia Barack Fishman, a longtime JOFA board member, presented a fascinating lightning round of short biographies of each of the women, highlighting their unique roles in and contributions to Jewish education and scholarship.

You can learn more about this project and purchase a copy of the poster at **www.jofa.org/kickstarter.**

It's never too early to get started organizing a women's or partnership megillah reading!

JOFA has the resources you need, and will get your reading onto our Project Esther world map.

www.jofa.org/Community/Project_Esther

Women Blowing *Shofar*

Women have been excluded from many Jewish rituals for centuries, and many times the reason is more sociological than halakhic. One of JOFA's main missions is to educate the community as to what the various halakhic opinions are, and what role women can play in various rituals while staying within the confines of Jewish law.

Toward the end of the summer, we had the opportunity to educate the community about women's obligation in blowing *shofar* during Elul, Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur. JOFA launched a *Hilkhot Shofar* Guide, a *shofar*-blowing workshop, and a series of *shiurim* delivered in synagogues and online. Yeshivat Maharat student Alissa Thomas-Newborn spent months researching the topic and writing an essay that explored the *halakhot* of women blowing shofar in a way that had not been done before. Her article on this topic can be found at **www.jofa.org/shofarguide**; click on "A Cry for the Soul: Women and *Hilkhot Shofar.*"

Blowing the *shofar* in Orthodox settings, whether on Rosh Hashanah or throughout the month of Elul, is generally done by a man. Some partnership minyanim have incorporated women into the *shofar* blowing, but it simply has not been a ritual in which Orthodox women have been engaged. This guide opened a door to other opportunities and settings for women to blow *shofar* that had not been widely considered or discussed before. You can download the guide and learn more at **www.jofa.org/shofarguide**.

JOFA is the place where you share ideas with like-minded people. JOFA is where you find the tools for advancing social change in your community. JOFA helps you connect with feminists who are on the same journey that you are on. JOFA is YOU. It's who you are. It's your identity, your voice, and your community.

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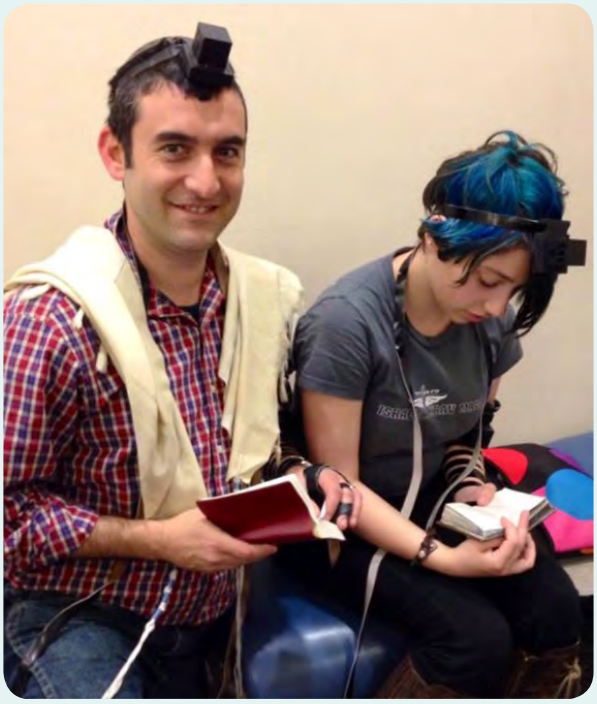
JUDGING A BOOK BY ITS COVER:

On Valuing the External Dimensions of *Tefillah*

By Eden Farber

When I was a young girl, I would stand next to my father while he was *davening* and mimic him. I would wrap myself in a blanket, trying to emulate his *tallit,* hold a Dr. Seuss story book close to my face in the manner that he held his *siddur*, and *shuckle* beside him. That is what *davening* meant to me. I understood Jewish prayer to be more than just reciting the "right" words, more than a meditative experience. To me, it was a set of customs and motions made clear and fresh through vivid physical rituals.



Eden Farber "does a *daven*" with her father.

At age seventeen, this understanding reverberated to me when I took on the *mitzvah* of *tefillin*. It was a step in my life for which I had spent a lot of time preparing; I spent years saving money to buy my pair of *tefillin* and years finding a *sofer* who would make *tefillin shel shlil*, *tefillin* from an animal that had died naturally, as I am very concerned about *tza'ar baalei haim,* inflicting pain on animals. Finally, having saved my funds and found a pair I was comfortable purchasing, the day came that I was able to bring this *mitzvah* into my daily life.

Since taking on the practice of *davening* regularly, I had made my *makom kavua* (the place I pray regularly) the family living room. I wanted my younger siblings to see how I expressed my commitment to *mitzvot* as a young Jewish woman. I thought it would be good for them, my brothers as well as my sisters, to live in a world where women wearing *tefillin* seemed natural. A woman wearing *tefillin* would become as unexceptional an image as a woman eating breakfast or watching television.

One of my sisters was about two years old when I started this practice. Being young, she liked to describe things as they were happening: "Eden is sleeping!" "Eden is eating!" and, of course, "Eden is reading!" Reading was her description of Eden holding a *siddur* close to her and whispering the words inside. To be clear, it's not that reading was her choice of word because she didn't know what *davening* was. She had grown up in a house where a man *davens* every day with *tefillin* and *tallit*. "Abba is doing a *daven*!" she would exclaim, using the household colloquialism, when she saw him rocking back and forth, his *tallit* wrapped around his shoulders and *tefillin* hanging down along his chest.

On the second day I *davened* with *tefillin*, still adjusting to the wrapping business and how the act influenced my prayer, my baby sister waddled into the room. She looked at me for a second and then ran into the other room and exclaimed to my mom, "Eden is doing a *daven*!"

It was amazing; suddenly, she understood. I don't know what *davening* could mean to a two-year-old, but the actions and accoutrements defined the act in a way that even a two-year-old could feel. Whatever "doing a *daven*" might be, it came with identifiable trappings.

Reactions Encountered

Although I come from a home that is supportive of my views about creating a more egalitarian approach to *mitzvah* observance in the Orthodox world, support is certainly not the only reaction I have received in response to my wearing *tefillin*. In fact, I often encounter reactions that are suspicious of my behavior. "Do you really need *tefillin*?" they ask. "Women aren't supposed to need *tefillin* to connect to *davening*." "Oh, you're doing that only because you're trying to be like men." Nevertheless, these aggressive comments—and that is what they are—simply don't speak to the issues as I experience them.

The idea that women should wear *tefillin* on a need-only basis is sexism. Wearing *tefillin* is a Jewish ritual, not a gender ritual. We do not ask men if they really *need* this *mitzvah*. We do not question their motives or agendas for wearing *tefillin*. Women's motivations and religiosity should be treated with the same courtesy.

Sometimes it's the smallest moments that mean the most. A two-year-old's less-than-thought-out words might seem trivial, yet their innocence and simplicity give us a window into what we all see when we notice something at first glance.

This first-glance impression was something I have suddenly become very aware of this month, as I have begun studying in a *midrashah* in Israel. I'm one of two

FILLING IN THE TRANSITIONAL BLANKS:

Creating Rituals for Miscarriage and Weaning

By Haviva Ner-David

Some other societies have paid much more attention to transition than we have, and in doing so they prepared people much more effectively for the experience of being in transition than our society has prepared us. Those societies typically had rituals (we call them "rites of passage") to help individuals let go of their outlived life chapter and find a new one to replace it.… We are going to have to learn to do individually and consciously for ourselves that which once was done for people automatically and collectively by their society.

—*William Bridges, from* Transitions: Making Sense of Life's Changes

One might have thought that "we" in the preceding quote would not apply to observant Jews, because when Bridges wrote "other societies," he was referring to societies with strong religious rituals, such as ours. Interestingly, however, I, a Jewish woman deeply steeped in Jewish religious ritual, find that his quote rings true for me in many ways as well.

Although classical Judaism has life-cycle rituals, they are relatively minimal, and they were, for the most part, established for men, from a male perspective. We mark birth, coming of age, marriage, and death. Are there no significant life transitions between standing beneath the *huppah* and being buried beneath the earth?

For me, this omission became most apparent twice in connection with passages that only women experience. The first time was during an especially difficult miscarriage. I had five children at the time, ranging from three to twelve years old. I wanted one more, but it seemed that my body did not. This was my third miscarriage in six months, and I was over thirty-five years old. I was told at the end of the first trimester that the pregnancy was not viable, that the heart was not beating. But it took another few weeks before the miscarriage happened naturally.

I carried around this dead fetus long enough to come to terms with what seemed like the likelihood that I would not be birthing any more babies. It was an intense three weeks, in which I felt viscerally that this pregnancy was meant not to birth a baby, but rather to birth *me* in some way that was not clear to me at the time.

Then I started to bleed. I gave birth to my dead fetus—a mass of bloody tissue—on the toilet in a public bathroom. It was one of the most painful experiences of my life—both physically and emotionally. But I got through it. And then I had another couple of weeks of bleeding to decide how to mark this significant transition. With no traditional precedents but much rich Jewish and feminist material to guide me, I created a ritual for myself.

The Ritual in the *Mikveh*

Because I was living in Jerusalem at the time and did not have access to a *mikveh* that would welcome my novel ceremony, I could not hold the entire ritual in the *mikveh*. But I wanted it to at least begin in the *mikveh*—which is not only the site of transition, rebirth, and renewal in Jewish tradition, but is also the place where Jews have gone for centuries to touch the Divine Spirit of the primordial waters (which are those same waters recycled over and again to this day).

Serendipitously, my *mikveh* night after my post-miscarriage bleeding fell out on *motzei Shabbat*, nine days after *Rosh Hodesh*. This was the night to recite *Kiddush Levanah*, the prayer sanctifying the new moon—an appropriate prayer to incorporate into my ritual, with its themes of rebirth and renewal.

When it came time to immerse, I slowly walked down the steps into the warm water, descending into the unknown. Over those three weeks of waiting to bleed, I had learned to find holiness and peace in that wide open space. I dunked and felt the waters envelop me like a

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women who pray with *tefillin* there, and being that we pray individually throughout the morning, I'm often the only one doing so. Suddenly, taken out of my safe living-room space and thrown into a room full of inquisitive faces and unconscious judgments, I feel that my identity has become that of "the girl who wears *tefillin* every morning." Although it is a strange image for some, I believe the image of a woman in *tefillin* is, at its core, a truly Jewish image, so I'm proud to be one of the models.

We have a first impression when we think of *tefillah*—and more often than not, it is about the accoutrements. Whether these are the way we stand and sit, the direction we face, or what we wear, the external dimensions of *tefillah* are just as dear to our hearts as the internal ones. The significance of not barring women from performing these rituals is that women, too, need to be able to be a part of Jewish culture in this significant way. We cannot seal away access to rituals that, for many, are core to Jewish practice and identity. *Tefillah* is my *mitzvah*, and *tefillin* is a vital part of it.

***Eden Farber** recently made aliyah and is living on Kibbutz Ein Hanatziv, where she is preparing to join the Israeli Defense Forces. She blogs for The Torch, Fresh Ink for Teens, and the Times of Israel.*

Rituals for Miscarriage, *continued from page 17*

hug. I stayed under for as long as I could, suspended yet totally immersed. With complete trust, I let myself go—put myself into the hands of God.

I immersed six more times (seven being the number of wholeness, creation, and divine earthly presence). On the seventh immersion, I decided to stay longer in the water, alone in my newly discovered space of peace. No hopes. No wishes. No expectations. Just total surrender. But I knew I could not stay much longer. I had entered the womb, only to be born again. It was time to begin the return to the reality of my life.

I had entered the womb, only to be born again. It was time to begin the return to the reality of my life.

As I ascended the stairs, I sang aloud Psalm 118:23. A friend had composed a *niggun* for me to the words of this psalm, which I had chosen: "*Me'et Adonai haytah zot, hi niflat be'eineinu.*" "This was from God; it is wondrous in our eyes." I concentrated on these words. This was a wondrous journey indeed! The blood and pain and tears were all from God.

A Ritual Among Friends

The second part of the evening took place immediately after my *mikveh* immersion, at the home of a friend who lived across the street from our neighborhood *mikveh*. When I walked in, the women I had invited were gathered in the living room. We sang the *niggun*. "This was from God; it is wondrous in our eyes!" When the singing faded out, then stopped, I looked around the room and saw one face after another of amazing women. As I told my miscarriage story, I turned to one woman at a time, explaining how each had helped and supported me.

Then I read a poem I had composed for the occasion. The poem begins on Rosh Hashanah, a week before my first ultrasound. During the *haftarah* reading on Rosh Hashanah, when I thought I was carrying a viable pregnancy, I was so upset by Chanah's willingness to give up her child that I closed my prayer book. Then the poem moves to Yom Kippur, after the ultrasound, when I was waiting to miscarry. On that Yom Kippur, I felt so intensely the verse we sing during the 25-hour fast: "We are like clay in the hands of the Creator." I prayed on that Yom Kippur for guidance from Chanah, who, only ten days before, had made me close my prayer book in disbelief. Now I wanted to know her secret—to understand how she had the courage to surrender to God's will. I wanted to learn from her how to grow from my pain, rather than wallow in it.

After I read the poem, I took out something I had been holding on to for some time: my pregnancy box, which I was planning to bury as part of this ritual. It contained three positive pregnancy tests, my ultrasound results, a timeline of my pregnancy provided by a new computer program on my first prenatal visit to the doctor, and some other papers from the doctor: a prescription for three months' worth of folic acid and iron, and some referrals for further tests.

It also contained a photograph my then four-and-a-half-year-old daughter Hallel had cut out of a magazine a few days earlier: a picture of a beautiful blond woman with a smiling, content baby. I told the women that I was prepared to bury that part of my life if need be. Not buried and forgotten. But buried in my heart—a fond memory, but not a whole life, not the end of the story.

Now it was time for sharing. I invited my friends to tell their stories, share their thoughts. After each woman spoke, she drank pomegranate juice from my glass goblet, decorated with roses—the Miriam's Cup I use for Passover Seders.

After sharing, we went out into the clear, dark night to recite *Kiddush Levanah*—the prayer recited as the moon works toward its half-month fullness—together. Like the moon, I had been filled and emptied, emptied and filled. I prayed to be renewed like the moon, but by that I did not mean simply to be filled again with blood and the potential to conceive and birth another life. No, I meant a renewal of spirit, a rebirth of me. My womb was empty, and I, too, had been empty. But I could live in that empty space, and I could fill that empty space. And I could praise God for bringing me to a place where I could look up at the moon, marvel at its splendor, and truly be content in that moment.

As I started to walk home, I realized that I still had one thing left to do. I knelt down next to some overgrown bushes and began to dig with my bare hands to bury the box. I did not shed a tear as I covered the box with stones and earth. The time was right. I was past this. I was headed down a path, and while I was not sure where this process would take me, I knew I was on my way toward birthing what was meant to come of this pregnancy. I felt God's hands guiding me, moving me forward.

A few months after burying my box, I had a revelation. This pregnancy was indeed not meant to birth another child. It was meant to put me in a place of peace and acceptance, fertile ground for realizing that there was a soul waiting to join our family, but not one birthed from my womb. My sixth child was meant to join our family through adoption. Thankfully, my husband felt the same way. And that is how Mishael Adar Binyamin entered our family at age five months.

Three years later, I discovered, much to my surprise, that I was pregnant. At age forty-two, I gave birth to Shefa Lee, my seventh child and sixth C-section, after which I had my tubes tied. This time it was final. No more babies! When I began the process of weaning Shefa, she was already two-and-a-half years old. It took me almost a year to wean her—and not only because she resisted. In fact, her resistance was in large part in response to my own. That last pregnancy, birth, and nursing experience felt like a last-chance gift given to me directly by God. I cherished every moment, and I was not to ready or willing to let go again. My inner

peace had been upset. I needed help once again to get me through the process.

A Ritual for Weaning

My plan was to do a weaning ritual prior to speaking at *Mayyim Hayyim*, a vibrant community *mikveh* in Newton, Massachusetts. This choice was symbolic, as I was away from Shefa for a full week while on a book tour and was determined not to let her nurse again when I returned home. I also liked the idea of doing the ritual somewhere other than my familiar Shmaya *mikveh*, to make it more momentous, which is what a ritual should be.

As I recited the final blessing —"Blessed are You, majestic Spirit of the universe, who gives me life, sustains the rhythms of my body, and brings me to this moment of renewal" —my tears mixed with the living waters of the *mikveh*.

At the water's edge, I read from the book I had compiled the night before in my lonely—yet liberatingly so!—hotel room by cutting and pasting printed e-mails I had requested from friends and family for the occasion. I was touched by the candor and intimacy of these personal stories and blessings whose general theme was to embrace this new stage in my life while also appreciating what I was leaving behind.

As I descended the circular staircase with its seven steps leading down into the black-bottomed oval *mikveh*, its underwater lights slowly changing color, I tried to be mindful of the many steps along my journey of birthing and raising my children thus far: During my first immersion, I tried to recall life without children. I visualized myself back in college—always busy, but mostly with my own needs, rarely the needs of others. After reciting a blessing "upon immersing in the living waters," I immersed a second time, this time trying to be present in the moment, to truly tune into what it feels like to be me, now, in this intense period of caring for others while also trying to care for myself. I then recited a blessing a friend had composed for my ritual: "Blessed are You, Source of all life, who sanctifies transitions."

Then, as I immersed my entire body for a third and last time, I tried to visualize myself with an empty nest. Although I am the mother of two adult children, they have not exactly left the nest yet. One has returned home while starting her studies after two years of national service, and one will just be beginning his three-year army service this winter. So I can really only imagine what it will be like to have all seven of the kids' bedrooms empty, to cook for only one or two people at a time, and to have twenty-four hours in a day to devote only to work and my own needs.

As I recited the final blessing—"Blessed are You, majestic Spirit of the universe, who gives me life, sustains the rhythms of my body, and brings me to this moment of renewal"—my tears mixed with the living waters of the *mikveh*. I was overcome with the emotion of having reached this moment after months and months of anticipation, planning, and fear.

But fear of what? I asked myself. Fear of having no one to take care of but myself. Fear of having my life back and not knowing what to do with it. Fear of the unknown. Although I thought I had conquered that fear during my miscarriage ritual, it seems I still had work to do.

After I returned to Israel, as I waited at passport control in Ben-Gurion Airport, I noticed a woman ahead of me in line with a baby strapped to her back. Unlike in past similar scenarios, I did not feel my heartbeat quicken with pangs of jealousy and longing. I could not imagine myself lugging a baby on my back.

That evening, jet lag convinced me it was only early afternoon. I could not fall asleep. Suddenly, I heard the pitter-patter of three-and-a-half-year-old feet. It was Shefa, whose eyes lit up when she saw me. I kissed her cheek, which was even softer than I remembered it being, and stroked her disheveled hair. She snuggled right into me and peacefully fell back to sleep. No reaching inside my pajama shirt. No begging for "just a little." No nursing. I realized then that the ritual had worked; I was again at peace.

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New Rituals for Women's *Tefillah* Groups

By Susan Hornstein

What is the first step in coming up with a new ritual? It seems that the need always arises from a hole, an emptiness, a sense that something is missing.

Sometimes it is a hole in the order of the *tefillah* itself, as in the time that our Women's Tefillah Group of Raritan Valley, now in its twenty-fourth year, instituted reciting a *pasuk* (biblical verse) to serve as an introduction to the *haftarah*. We were not saying the traditional blessing before the *haftarah*, on the advice of our *posek*. That left us with a hole that made us say, "Um, OK, now here's the *haftarah*." But it was also a hole that came from the other big role that the *berakhah* there serves—to ease the transition from Torah *trop* to *haftarah trop*. How can you get *haftarah trop* into your head without the big *kadmah v'azlah* that comes with the "*Barukh ata-a-a-*" at the beginning of the *berakhah* before the *haftarah*? So we chose a verse from the Song of Devorah in the Book of Judges, read in *haftarah trop*, to fill up the hole.

Innovation in Mourning Ritual

Our innovation in the rituals of mourning came from a different kind of hole. The *tefillah* is complete without Mourner's Kaddish; in fact, that prayer rather pointedly sits outside the order of the service and is not said in women's *tefillah* groups because it requires a *minyan*. Here our hole was more emotional, more personal. Many members of our *tefillah* group are in a period of our lives when we are losing loved ones—and being a very close, supportive community, we want to be there for one another in going through the process of *aveilut* (mourning). It seemed ironic that at the very moment we most wanted to be together, our members were running off to *shul* to say Kaddish with a *minyan*.

We knew that instituting a new practice in this area would require more delving. For us, that meant study as a group. We bought a stack of copies of JOFA's halakhic source guide, *A Daughter's Recitation of Mourner's Kaddish* by Rahel Berkovits, and proceeded to learn the sources together over a number of months. We drew two conclusions from our study: first, that women reciting Mourner's Kaddish with a *minyan* has a rich history and an important place in our lives today, and second, that there is a place outside a *minyan* for a ritual that would fulfill the main purposes of the Kaddish.

The original purpose of Mourner's Kaddish was to elevate the soul of the deceased. This has generally been accomplished by the mourner either leading the *tefillah* or reciting Kaddish—in both cases, reciting a passage that praises God and eliciting a response from the community that does the same. We believe that the merit of making a group of people praise God in memory of a deceased loved one elevates that loved one's soul.

Most people who have recited Mourner's Kaddish will attest that it accomplishes a purpose for the mourner as well. Whether it is the support of the community, the feeling of honoring the loved one, or just a way to mark time through the mourning process, saying Kaddish can help the mourner deal with the loss. Clearly, our ritual for our *tefillah* group needed to serve both these purposes: to provide a passage praising God with a response by the community similarly praising God, and to be something that people in *aveilut* could recite over the prescribed time period, in the group of their choice.

We decided that having the mourner recite a chapter of Psalms, followed by a response from the entire *tefillah* group, would be appropriate. But which chapter should we choose? It couldn't be too long or it wouldn't fulfill the second requirement—that people recite it regularly.

What should it say? This requires a peek into the content of the Kaddish. The Kaddish says nothing about mourning. Rather, it seems to reflect the emotions that we *wish* we had during the mourning period, not necessarily the ones that we *actually* have during that period. The amazing thing about the Book of Psalms is the extent to which it reflects a huge breadth of human emotions. We sought a chapter that included darker emotions, but also faith and hope.

This description of the desired emotions led us to Chapter 13—short, full of the despair and the gloom of mourning, but ending on a high note of trust, of praising God.

תהלים פרק יג

א לַמְנַצֵּחַ מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד
ב עַד־אָנָה ה' תִּשְׁכָּחֵנִי נֶצַח עַד־אָנָה | תַּסְתִּיר אֶת־פָּנֶיךָ מִמֶּנִּי:
ג עַד־אָנָה אָשִׁית עֵצוֹת בְּנַפְשִׁי יָגוֹן בִּלְבָבִי יוֹמָם עַד־אָנָה |
יָרוּם אֹיְבִי עָלָי:
ד הַבִּיטָה עֲנֵנִי ה' אֱלֹקָי הָאִירָה עֵינַי פֶּן־אִישַׁן הַמָּוֶת:
ה פֶּן־יֹאמַר אֹיְבִי יְכָלְתִּיו צָרַי יָגִילוּ כִּי אֶמּוֹט:
ו וַאֲנִי בְחַסְדְּךָ בָטָחְתִּי יָגֶל לִבִּי בִּישׁוּעָתֶךָ
אָשִׁירָה לַה' כִּי גָמַל עָלָי:

1 For the leader. A psalm of David.
2 How long, O Lord?! Will You forget me forever?
How long will You hide Your face from me?
3 How long will I have cares in my soul, grief in my heart
all day? How long will my enemy loom over me?
4 Look, answer me, O Lord, my God! Light up my eyes,
lest I sleep the sleep of death;
5 Lest my enemy say, "I have overcome him," my foes
exult when I stumble.
6 But I trust in Your faithfulness. My heart will exult in
Your deliverance, I will sing to the Lord, for He has dealt
bountifully with me.

After this recitation by the mourner, what was the appropriate response? We chose the Hebrew version of the Kaddish response, usually said in Aramaic: "*Yehi*

Solving the *Mamzerut* Problem

By Rivkah Lubitch

It is time to face the issue of *mamzerut*. It is a subject that I was exposed to as a result of my work in Israel as a rabbinic advocate, working with women denied divorces (*mesoravot get)* and *agunot*. While separated from their husbands, some of these women became pregnant by other men and gave birth. I learned of women who had abortions rather than give birth to a child who would be labeled a *mamzer* and of rabbis who suggested that women abort rather than give birth to a *mamzer*. I learned of unwanted children and of mothers who were sorry that they had not aborted their children.

A woman once said to me, "I waited twenty-five years for a divorce from a recalcitrant husband. I became pregnant by another man, but I aborted the fetus rather than give birth to a child who would be stained with the stigma of *mamzerut*. This child would be twenty-one today, and he cries out to me: 'How awful that you aborted me! I wanted to be born and to live!'" This woman is now aging and has no children at all. This case is but one of the personal tragedies created by *mamzerut*.

A *mamzer* is defined as one who is born as a result of incestuous sexual relations specifically prohibited by the Torah or of relations between a married Jewish woman and a Jewish man (married or not) who is not her husband. A *mamzer* is forbidden to marry someone considered part of the community of Israel. He or she is permitted to marry only another *mamzer* or a convert, and their offspring will be forever considered *mamzerim* according to Jewish law, even after ten generations. Even though the sages theoretically ascribed priority to a *mamzer* who was learned in Torah over a high priest who was unlearned, the conventional attitude to *mamzerim* has been closer to that expressed by a rabbi who asked me, "Would you let your child play with a *mamzer*? Would you let your child sit in school next to a *mamzer*?"

A Data Bank of Those Forbidden to Marry

From 1979, the State of Israel has been compiling a digitalized data bank of people who are forbidden to marry by Jewish law. The list includes those suspected to be *mamzerim,* women and men who have committed adultery, converts whose conversions have been annulled, divorcees whose *gittin* have been annulled, and more. Because all Jewish marriages in the state of Israel may take place only through the rabbinate, a person with a questionable family history cannot find himself or herself a more lenient rabbi who might agree to marry him or her. Also, because there is no civil marriage in Israel, those on the list are not able to marry at all in Israel.

The subject of *mamzerut* has been kept quiet. More than any other group, *mamzerim* live in terrible isolation, struggling all their lives to conceal their problem and somehow to solve it. A *mamzer* fears that publicizing his or her status would injure not only himself or herself, but his or her family and offspring as well. Beyond this, though, a *mamzer* feels that there is no reason to contact other *mamzerim*. The *mamzer* is convinced, and perhaps rightly so, that each case needs to be solved individually, and seeking out others would not help him or her. If the problem does get resolved, it is all the more reason to conceal it. On the contrary, people permitted to join the general Jewish community will be the last ones to wish to publicize that they were once "suspected" of *mamzerut*. They will do everything in their power to permanently "bury" their story. In fact, one who has been rescued from *mamzerut*—the only person able to tell the story—is the least likely one to tell it.

Halakhic Possibilities

I would like to suggest the lines of several general halakhic solutions. The first suggestion relates to the possibility of erasing the transmission of *mamzerut* to the children of *mamzerim*. According to some leading halakhic decisors, *mamzerut* is transmitted only when fertilization takes place within the body. In vitro fertilization involves both sperm and egg outside the body, and therefore *mamzerut* is not transmitted in this way. I would argue that this approach can save *mamzerim* themselves from the stigma, not only working as a possible solution for coming generations. Who knows whether they themselves were born through in vitro fertilization? Modern technology can certainly permit us to assert this argument today—or might be able to in the near future.

The second suggestion relates only to *mamzerim* who

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shem Adonai mevorakh me'atah v'ad olam." "May the name of the Lord be blessed from now and forever."

This is our new ritual. After *Aleinu* and the psalm of the day, the mourners recite Psalm 13. At the end, the whole group responds with praise of God. We elevate the soul of the deceased loved one, in the loving embrace of our group. We praise God. We recite a psalm at a point of the service when psalms are traditionally recited.

We are still working out the kinks: Hebrew and English? Hebrew only? The cadences are not the familiar staccato of the Kaddish, but it seems to feel right to the mourners to recite this psalm and to be responded to by the group. It's new, but it's old. Our purpose is old. Our way is new. We're not moving too fast, but neither are we standing still.

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TAKING *SHEHITAH* INTO OUR OWN HANDS:

My Journey to Become a *Shohetet*

By Rachel Marder

Rachel Marder learns how to *sheht* a chicken.

It is clear that there is a renewed interest in *shehitah* among Jews from across the religious spectrum. Two recent Jewish news stories, "Backyard Kosher: Observant Jews Take Meat Ritual into Their Own Hands" (in *jweekly,* the Jewish newsweekly of Northern California) and "DIY Shechita" (from JTA, the Jewish Telegraphic Agency), explore what is motivating this new strain of *shohetim*. These articles suggest that a desire to combat the stranglehold that large and, at times, unethical factory farms have on the kosher meat industry plays a big role. Another motivator, found as well in the larger culture, is a desire to know the precise circumstances of food production and to learn where our food originates.

A spiritual element is also present, as these *shohtim* aim to change the way we perceive the impersonal meat industry. They hope that those who eat their meat will feel a closer connection to the animals they consume and become mindful of the animals' deaths. If it becomes widespread, "backyard *shehitah*" may affect the amount of meat we eat and how we relate to the food industry.

My Journey into *Shehitah*

My journey to studying *shehitah* this year was born out of intellectual curiosity. A vegetarian since age ten, I have no interest in eating animals. I grew up, however, hearing that kosher slaughter is quicker, less painful, and more compassionate than other types of slaughter. I wondered whether this was true—and if so, specifically how so. When a student at my seminary in Los Angeles, the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, advertised last fall that Rabbi Gabriel Botnick would be teaching a course on *hilkhot shehitah* (the laws of slaughter) of livestock this year, I was intrigued. I entered Rabbi Botnick's course with the intention of merely learning the laws, but not actually performing *shehitah* and pursuing certification. However, the more *halakhot* I studied with Rabbi Botnick, who was certified by the Israeli rabbinate and ordained last May, and the more I considered the ethical issues regarding the *kashrut* industry's treatment of its workers and animals, the more I considered learning the practical side of the trade as well.

I see a growing need for more local *shohetim* among Jews who keep kosher. As we become more concerned with how the animals we eat are raised and the conditions in which they live, which can be unhealthy, we, the *kashrut* consumers, should be more willing to buy from a *shohet* we know and whose expertise we trust.

Women and *Shehitah*

Growing up in the liberal Jewish community, I cannot recall a time when I was told I could not perform a ritual act because of my gender. On the first night of *shehitah* class, Rabbi Botnick taught us the first *siman* of the first *saif* of *Hilkhot Shehitah* in the *Shulhan Arukh*: "Everyone can slaughter from the outset (*l'khathilah*), even women." How surprisingly inclusive, I thought, trying to recall ever hearing of a female *shohetet*. (I could not.) The Rama, Rav Moshe Isserles, however, commented, "There are those who say we do not permit women to slaughter, that we already have the custom that women do not slaughter." At least by the sixteenth century in Ashkenazi communities, where Rav Isserles lived, it had become the *minhag* that women do not perform *shehitah*. It is unclear when that became the case in Sephardi communities.

Sephardi *posek* Yaakov Chaim Sofer (1870–1939) explains the Rama's statement in his seminal work *Kaf Hahayim* ("The Palm of Life"), a commentary on the *Shulhan Arukh*'s *shehitah* laws: "The reasoning behind not permitting women to slaughter is that their minds are weak and they might faint." I found this answer unsatisfying, of course, as is any generalization about one gender. This fear of a *shohet* fainting and thus being ineligible for ritual slaughter is not limited to women. The Rama states: "One who tends to faint and we know he isn't able, and he slaughtered and said, 'It's clear to me that I didn't faint,' he is believed if he knows the laws of *shehitah*" (*Yoreh De'ah* 1:3). Someone who is known to faint should not slaughter. However, we trust the *shehitah* of one who is educated in the laws. His knowledge and his word take precedence over his reputation.

The *Shulhan Arukh* also rules on other categories of people who may be unfit to slaughter, such as minors; blind, deaf, and mute people; and people who flout Jewish law. Rav Sofer asks whether any man can truly slaughter from the outset, as Rav Caro wrote in the first *siman*. Rav Sofer's answer is beautiful and could provide a basis for giving men and women equal opportunity in studying and performing *shehitah*: "We should judge every man based on his strength. If someone is young and weak, he shouldn't slaughter, but someone old and strong should be permitted to do so." Without adding too much to Rav Sofer's words, I believe that his position could be used to argue for judging any individual on merits, not merely on age or gender, in determining whether he or she is fit to become a *shohet(et)*. Rav Sofer also notes that a teacher training a student in *shehitah* must see that the student "is of good character and is God-fearing, can read Torah on his own, [and] can understand a little Talmud with Rashi's commentary." Women who meet these standards would thus be just as capable of providing *shehitah* to their communities. There is nothing innate about women to disqualify them from the outset, according to Rav Sofer.

I am hopeful that this field will become more open to

Orthodox women as well, just as positions in *hashgahah* (halakhic supervision of food preparation) already have become and continue to expand. (See sidebar about programs for women *mashgihot*.)

The Spiritual Nature of *Shehitah*

From Rabbi Botnick I learned that, in addition to knowing the laws and being competent in slaughter, a *shohet(et)* must bring proper *kavannah* (intention) to the act, must understand the gravity of taking an animal's life, and must strive to prevent unnecessary *tza'ar ba'alei hayim*, suffering of God's creatures. Rambam explains that we are not violating *tza'ar ba'alei hayim* when we *sheht* because when a person consumes an animal, it is elevated to a higher spiritual level.

Be that as it may, it seems that animals do suffer when they are slaughtered, even though we do not know what they feel in the moment. In my course of study, I learned that, if done properly, kosher slaughter is more humane and probably less painful to the animal than other methods. By performing each *shehitah* with *kavod* (respect) for the animal's comfort (by holding it in a specific position) and at a slow pace (not one after the other speedily, as in kosher factory farms), we show that we value animal life. We learned that the Ba'al Shem Tov, who worked as a *shohet*, would wet his sharpening stone with his tears.

Slaughtering an animal is not to be taken lightly. Checking that one's knife is *had v'halak,* as sharp and as smooth as possible, before making the cut prevents prolonged pain for the animal. By performing the cut swiftly and properly (not digging, lifting the knife, or pressing the knife into the animal's neck, which would render it *neveila,* improperly slaughtered and therefore not kosher), a *shohet(et)* can elevate slaughter to a more holy and sensitive act.

I feel the intensely spiritual nature of *shehitah*. We humbly accept that one of God's creatures sacrificed its life for our sustenance. As a vegetarian, I bring keen interest to the ethical dimensions of the meat industry and our consumption habits. As a liberal Jew, I am excited that as we participate in this holy ritual, we are creatively expanding it through the Magen Tzedek *hekhsher* movement, which works to infuse social values into the *kashrut* industry, including fair treatment of workers, animal welfare, and environmental impact.

[*Editor's Note: Out of similar concerns, the Orthodox social justice organization Uri L'Tzedek has created its* Tav HaYosher *program. See* www.utzedek.org/tavhayosher.html.]

Looking to the Future

For now, I am working on passing my *shehitah* exams, which will enable me to become, I am told, the only *shohetet* in the world. For those in my community who know me and trust me, I am looking forward to providing them with kosher meat and to teaching them about *shehitah*. I have passed my knife-sharpening test, have slaughtered three chickens for practice (and did not feel like fainting at any point) ahead of the practical exam, and am reviewing the laws for the written test. I look forward to sharing the spiritual meaning and the moral and practical implications of *shehitah* in the community that I will eventually serve.

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Women as *Mashgihot*

Jewish women have long been the guardians of the *kashrut* of their home kitchens and often of their synagogue kitchens. Now, however, women are entering the ranks of *mashgihot* of commercial and communal establishments as well.

A recent article in *jweekly,* the Jewish newsweekly of Northern California,[1] documented the hiring of several female *mashgihot* to inspect the *kashrut* of restaurants and food services in the Bay Area. Rabbi Zvi Goldberg, a *kashrut* administrator with the Star K in Baltimore, said, "We've used women as *mashgihot* for decades and we've found them to be better than men sometimes. They know their way around the kitchen and they follow the rules."

The Star K was the first *kashrut* supervision agency to offer a training course for *mashgihot*, and has run several such courses since 2009. However, completion of the training program does not guarantee a job with the Star K itself. According to an article in the New York *Jewish Week*,[2] the goal is "to share our knowledge and experience for local kosher organizations from the many town and cities" from which the trainees hail.

The OU also holds a training session for women every other summer, with the next one scheduled for the summer of 2015. However, the OU does not bill its program as training to be a *mashgihah,* but rather for "women interested in a higher level of *kashrut* awareness."[3]

Another place that Jewish women may get training and work as *mashgihot* is on the college campus. At Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, which operates a dining facility that serves the needs of both kosher and vegan students, the *mashgihot* are Louise Powers and Ricki Gold. At Rutgers University, the JLIC rabbi offered to train students in *kashrut* supervision, and four of the trainees were young women. "I don't know of anyone who thought it was remarkable," said Andrew Getraer, executive director of Rutgers Hillel.

Hopefully, it will become even more unremarkable as more women join the ranks of official *mashgihot*.

[1] http://www.jweekly.com/article/full/71883/higher-authorities-women-join-the-ranks-of-kosher-supervisors-in-bay-area/.
[2] http://www.thejewishweek.com/special_sections/new_appetite/womans_place_kosher_kitchen.
[3] Ibid.

Mah She'elatekh Esther Vate'as

By Idit Bartov and Anat Novoselsky
Ohr Torah Stone, 2014

By Johnny Solomon

For twenty years I have been deeply interested in contemporary responsa literature as a source of halakhic discussion, and have specifically taken an interest in the contributions of women to the halakhic discourse.

In 1998 we saw the publication of *Jewish Legal Writings by Women*, which broke new ground as the first book "by observant women writing on halakhah"[1] and was considered proof that "halakhic scholarship is no longer a male-only bastion."[2] Since then, there has been a steady stream of articles written by women on matters of *halakhah*, as well as a few books by women on *halakhah*.[3] However, there is a marked difference between halakhic articles and responsa (halakhic rulings). As Norma Baumel Joseph has observed, "in terms of responsa specifically, women ask the questions and live with the decision, but they do not create—and have no part in the creation of—the legal text."[4] Therefore, when I read about the publication of the first volume of halakhic responsa written by women,[5] I was keen to get my hands on a copy.

The eighty-five-page Hebrew booklet, entitled *Mah She'elatekh Esther Vate'as*[6] (literally, "What is your question, Esther, and it shall be fulfilled," a quotation from the Book of Esther), was published in June 2014 by the Ohr Torah Stone network of religious educational institutes. It contains five responsa and one article written by HaRabbanit[7] Idit Bartov (IB), and two responsa written by HaRabbanit Anat Novoselsky (AN).[8] The respondents, graduates of the five-year ordination course at the Susi Bradfield Women's Institute for Halakhic Leadership at Midreshet Lindenbaum, were ordained by Rabbi Shlomo Riskin and Rabbi Yehoshua (Shuki) Reich in 2011 and awarded a *heter hora'ah*—a license to answer questions in areas of *kashrut*, Shabbat and festivals, family ritual purity, and mourning practices. This background is relevant because:

> While important Torah articles by female *Talmidot Chachamim* have previously appeared that have addressed halakhic topics, nonetheless … this is the first time where women, who have been ordained to decide *halakha* ([through] *semicha* which is traditionally known as a '*heter hora'ah*') have written halakhic responsa as opposed to articles. [Thus, in contrast to previous publications], behind the writing stands [the] halakhic authority of those who have accepted the responsibility to teach the people of Israel the way that they should go.[9]

This statement, printed on the back cover, clearly distinguishes this work from all previous articles written by women on halakhic matters in that, unlike articles that examine primary sources, *Mah She'elatekh* is itself a primary source written by respondents who have the authority to determine—rather than merely examine—Jewish law. Although Norma Baumel Joseph was correct that until now, "women ask the questions … but they do not create … the legal text," *Mah She'elatekh* is a watershed moment wherein women create—and, in fact, are the sole creators of, the legal text.

Moreover, in addition to this "historic entry of learned women to the halakhic conversation,"[10] the fact that there are two respondents included in this volume also points to a further innovation. As Rabbi Shuki Reich explains in his introduction: "What is a new phenomenon is that here, in our study hall, the women sit, study and teach not as individuals, but as a group. Moreover, they respond to those who turn [to them for halakhic rulings] from within their own learning [environment]."[11]

What Rabbi Reich is *not* saying is that the responsa were written collaboratively. However, what he *does* say is that the process of writing these responsa included discussion between peers. This is important because, as Aviad Hollander has pointed out, a successful and accepted halakhist takes the opinion of his—or her—peers into consideration.[12] Thus, although in the past

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[1] Micah D. Halpern and Chana Safrai, eds. *Jewish Legal Writings by Women.* Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 1998, p. 6.
[2] Ibid.
[3] For example, Deena Zimmerman's *A Lifetime Companion to the Laws of Jewish Family Life,* Urim Publications, 2005.
[4] Norma Baumel Joseph, "Searching for a Woman's Voice in Responsa Literature." *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies,* Vol. 16, No. 4 (Summer 1998), p. 41.
[5] See http://www.jpost.com/Jewish-World/Jewish-News/Orthodox-women-launch-book-on-Jewish-law-360598.
[6] This is an abridged version of Esther 7:2, chosen both given the presence of the Hebrew word *"She'elatekh*—your question," which is fitting for a volume of responsa, and also because the booklet is dedicated to a former Lindenbaum student and Israeli activist Esther Karish, *z"l,* who passed away in March 2013.
[7] I specifically refer to both respondents as "HaRabbanit," as this is the title used throughout *Mah She'elatekh.* Rabbi Riskin explains elsewhere that "we opt… not to use the title 'rabbi' for our graduates because, especially in smaller congregations through the Diaspora, the rabbi is expected to read from the Torah and lead the congregation in prayer, functions that we believe women may not discharge for congregations consisting of both men and women." Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, *"Heter Hora'ah:* From Women Pleaders to Women Leaders," *JOFA Journal,* Fall 2013), p. 18.
[8] The booklet is divided into three categories: (I) Shabbat and Festivals (four responsa), (II) Society and State (one article), and (III) Niddah and Purity (three responsa).
[9] *Mah She'elatekh,* back cover.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid., p. 5.
[12] See Aviad Yehiel Hollander, "The Relationship between Halakhic Decisors and their Peers as a Determining Factor in the Acceptance of their Decisions: A Step in Understanding Interpeer Effects in Halakhic Discourse." Jewish Law Association Studies XX: *Manchester Conference Volume,* ed., Leib Moscovitz. The Jewish Law Association, 2010, pp. 96–108.

there have been individual women who have "studied, taught and ruled," the very fact that women are now learning *together*, talking *together,* and consulting *together* on halakhic rulings is of great significance.

Yet, despite the uniqueness and historical significance of this volume, I believe that the most important consideration regarding any volume of responsa should concern the quality of the responsa rather than just the gender of the respondents. There is much more to these responsa than the fact that they have been written by women, and, as with *Jewish Legal Writings by Women*, although these responsa are "written by women … they are as relevant for men as for women."[13]

Two of the seven responsa in *Mah She'elatekh* are non–gender-specific. The first, answered by HaRabbanit Bartov, addresses the question of whether it is permitted to smoke on *yom tov*, and the second, also answered by HaRabbanit Bartov, addresses the question of whether hot water heated by a *dud shemesh* (a solar-heated water tank) can be used on Shabbat. However, even though the other five questions and one article address matters of Jewish law as they apply to women, they would not be out of place in any other traditional responsa work.

To demonstrate this, I will briefly analyze aspects of two responsa and one article in terms of their style, substance, and sensitivity.

Bathing and Smoking on *Yom Tov* (IB)

The question being addressed here concerns smoking on *yom tov*. However, Rabbanit Bartov also chooses to discuss the topic of bathing on *yom tov* in order to "shed light on the question being examined"[14] by drawing a comparison between the question of bathing and that of smoking. By doing so, Rabbanit Bartov not only illustrates how responsa can be used as a vehicle for halakhic education, but also demonstrates her deep understanding of the halakhic process.

The Rosh famously explained that a halakhic decisor must be able to be *medameh milta le-milta*—able to draw comparisons in reaching halakhic decisions.[15] A reason that this skill is so important is because "the practice of analogical reasoning reflects the ongoing dialectic between deference to early authorities and creative innovation … a spur to creativity, but equally a motive for restraint."[16] Thus, by (successfully) drawing such a comparison, HaRabbanit Bartov demonstrates her familiarity with not only halakhic sources but also the halakhic process.

Can a Woman Be Appointed as a *Dayenet* (a Female Rabbinic Judge)? (IB)

In contrast to the responsa found in *Mah She'elatekh*, this is a lengthy halakhic article (twenty-three pages, with a six-page appendix) written by HaRabbanit Bartov to examine the halakhic propriety of appointing women as female rabbinic judges. As with her other responsa, HaRabbanit Bartov provides a thorough examination of the halakhic issues, specifically focusing on the question of whether women can hold positions of authority and whether woman can testify in a *beit din* (rabbinic court). At the same time, HaRabbanit Bartov also identifies the nonhalakhic reasons that have previously been cited as justification of the policy against the appointment of women as female rabbinic judges, clearly yet forcefully rebutting each of them. It is clear from her article that HaRabbanit Bartov believes that routes should be provided for the training and appointment of women as *dayanot*, and it is therefore noteworthy that in 2013 Ohr Torah Stone launched a *dayanut* track for women who have completed the *heter hora'ah* program.[17]

Lighting of Shabbat Candles in a Hotel (AN)

In this question, HaRabbanit Novoselsky is asked for her halakhic guidance concerning a situation in which the questioner is staying over Shabbat in a hotel that allows guests to light candles only in the hotel lobby (as opposed to the dining room). The questioner writes, "I know that we need to light in the place where we are eating. So what should I do in this situation? Do I fulfill my duty to light candles [if I light them] in the lobby?"[18]

This situation does not require any particular explanation. Therefore, HaRabbanit Novoselsky begins her responsum by presenting three distinct reasons that we light candles on Friday night. It is clear from her comments that through understanding the rationale for lighting candles, we can establish whether someone who lights candles not in the proximity of the Shabbat meal has fulfilled his or her duty.

Following her detailed examination including a discussion of whether the use of electric lights or a flashlight prior to the onset of Shabbat itself fulfills the duty of candle lighting, HaRabbanit Novoselsky offers three suggestions to the questioner, each of which shows an understanding of the halakhic requirements to light candles as well as the pragmatic considerations for a hotel guest. Rather than telling her questioner what to do, HaRabbanit Novoselsky explains what can be done, and leaves it to the questioner to decide what best suits her situation. By employing this technique, it would appear that HaRabbanit Novoselsky understands the writing of responsa as being a partnership between the *shoel* (questioner) and the *meishiv* (respondent), and, given that her questioner is familiar with many aspects of Jewish law, she simply lays out the different halakhic opinions from which her questioner may choose.

Conclusion

The significance of *Mah She'elatekh* as the first volume of responsa written by women cannot be overestimated. However, there is much more to *Mah She'elatekh* than

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[13] *Jewish Legal Writings by Women,* p. 7.
[14] *Mah She'elatekh,* p. 7.
[15] *Teshuvot HaRosh,* Klal 55:9 and 78:3.
[16] Yehuda Warburg, *Rabbinic Authority: The Vision and the Reality.* Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2013, p. 54.
[17] http://ots.org.il/program/susi-bradfield-wihl/.
[18] *Mah She'elatekh,* p. 18.

that the two respondents are women. This volume contains thoroughly researched responsa written with clarity. Especially given the proliferation in recent years of pseudo-responsa, such as those that appear on popular "Ask the Rabbi" websites, it is refreshing to read contemporary halakhic issues treated both seriously and thoroughly. It is clear that both respondents are unafraid to employ the halakhic authority that has been bestowed on them.

At the same time, *Mah She'elatekh* contains responsa that seek to educate rather than merely legislate and, especially as evident from the responsa of HaRabbanit Novoselsky, there seems to be a desire to empower questioners with both halakhic knowledge and, where appropriate, halakhic choices. In responsa that address emotional as well as halakhic issues, such as "The duty of women to be happy on a festival" (AN) and "Delaying the night of immersion" (IB), we find a unique blend of pragmatic empathy that may not have been possible had the respondent been a man. At the same time, this pragmatic empathy does not imply any misplaced compromises. Instead, *Mah She'elatekh* demonstrates the familiarity of both respondents with a wide range of halakhic sources and methods used within traditional responsa literature to determine *halakhah* for centuries.

Clearly, some may continue to regard works such as *Mah She'elatekh* with suspicion, claiming that women's responsa are just not, well, "traditional." HaRabbanit Bartov concludes her article on whether a woman can be appointed as a *dayenet* by quoting *Eliyahu Rabbah*: "'I call Heaven and earth to witness that, whether Israelite or non-Israelite, whether man or woman, whether male or female slave, the Holy Spirit rests upon a person according to his deeds."[19] *Mah She'elatekh* is proof that this is the case.

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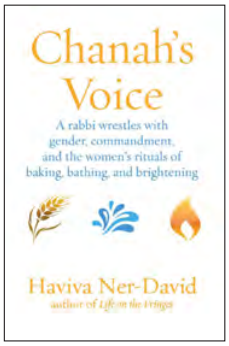
Midreshet Lindenbaum has made *Mah She'elatekh* available as a free pdf at http://www.lind.org.il/files/.57294719.pdf.

[19] *Eliyahu Rabbah*, Ch. 10.

Chanah's Voice: A Rabbi Wrestles with Gender, Commandment, and the Women's Rituals of Baking, Bathing, and Brightening

By Haviva Ner-David
Ben Yehuda Press, 2014, $16.95

By Roselyn Bell



The "Chanah" in the title of this book is a double entendre, referring both to an acronym for the three special women's commandments of *challah*, *nidah*, and *hadlakat nerot*—taking dough in baking *challah*, immersing in the *mikveh*, and lighting Shabbat candles—and to the biblical woman who serves as our model for how to pray to and seek God. Like the title, this book works at several levels, exploring these *mitzvot* in depth and at the same time tracing the spiritual journey of the author as she studies, grows, and revises her opinion with regard to these *mitzvot*. It is a fascinating but bumpy ride, as she is constantly questioning and wrestling with her beliefs.

Inspired by a teaching of the Sefat Emet and the example of a women's group she has joined, she begins to make *challah* on a weekly basis. When she is away from home just before Shabbat, her children and her husband step in to bake the *challah*. But soon she is questioning, insisting that "the traditional assignment of roles along gender lines no longer makes sense" and wanting to encourage everyone to try out all the *mitzvot*, regardless of gender. This "message of total equality," which she believes will lead to "a new paradigm of balance," comes very close to a notion of voluntary covenant.

In the section on *nidah*, Ner-David shows great erudition, having examined in depth the development of these laws in her rabbinical studies. But here too she questions, deciding for herself to revert to the biblical pattern of *nidah* and eliminating the seven clean days, because as one ages this can create a situation of "halakhic infertility." She uses the *mikveh* in some unconventional and creative ways, as in the ritual she develops for miscarriage (see article, p. 17), and she sometimes shares her immersions with her husband in natural *mikveh mayim* settings.

In the section on lighting candles, she struggles with her need to swim daily and to eat only one meal a day due to a medical condition, and how to accommodate these health needs with the pattern of Shabbat. In trying to find her own way to live within the *halakhah*, she "felt that my voice was still being stifled, or more accurately, that I was silencing my own voice in order to earn social acceptability."

As is clear from these examples, this is a deeply personal book. As Ner-David traverses her own spiritual arc, she comes to listen more and more to her own inner

voice—which she identifies with the voice of Chanah in prayer. Along that trajectory, though, she also pushes beyond the boundaries of Orthodoxy on a number of "hot-button" issues. For example, she endorses for marriage a "*brit ahuvim,*" a partnership agreement in which couples pledge mutual support, monogamy, and fidelity, instead of the unequal arrangement inherent in any *kinyan*-based ceremony. She counts women for a *minyan* at a private family service, and she encourages a woman to say Kaddish with the Women of the Wall.

Her motivations are of the highest order—"to open myself up to and grow to cherish a whole world of transformative ritual that I once devalued as feminine" and to give "Chanah and other powerful-in-their-own-way Jewish women throughout the centuries a voice." For myself, as a Jewish feminist who has struggled with many of the issues that she raises, her explorations and ruminations are both inspiring and challenging, promising and provocative. One does not have to agree with all of her resolutions to appreciate the seriousness of her religious search.

Enchantress: A Novel of Rav Hisda's Daughter

By Maggie Anton
Plume, 2014, $17

By Rachel Lieberman

Maggie Anton's latest novel, *Enchantress*, may be set in ancient Talmudic times, but it grapples with modern feminist themes. It is the story of Hisdadukh rising in her profession as a *harasheta* (sorceress), negotiating difficult relationships with other women in her field, as well as with her strong-willed husband, Rava. Hisdadukh and Rava struggle with how to excel professionally in similar fields—working together to help each other succeed, learning from each other, as well as setting strict boundaries between their professions and keeping secrets from one another.

The novel's heroine, Hisdadukh, daughter of the talmudic sage Rav Hisda, goes unnamed by Talmud, yet Anton creates two entire novels about her, giving her not only a name, but a colorful personality and professional agency. This is the second novel in a two-part series on Rav Hisda's daughter, but it can easily stand alone without reading the first book.

As is her forte, Anton does a wonderful job of fleshing out the talmudic characters, their daily lives, and the superstitions with which they lived. Magic is a prominent theme in the book, and a number of demons are important characters in the book. The demons, and the context of Hisdadukh's profession as a sorceress, bring to life the many talmudic references to demons and superstitions, and remind us that the talmudic world depended not only on logic and rational arguments, but also on a belief in the presence of and ability to negotiate with the supernatural.

Anton does take liberties with some of the characters, perhaps straying from the texts and historical context to make a more scintillating story—for example, she insinuates that Yalta had lesbian tendencies.

Talmudic passages are skillfully woven into the narrative, and you will likely find yourself stumbling across familiar talmudic quotations throughout the novel. I enjoyed that the passages were incorporated into the narrative, but would also have liked to see the direct references in the text or in an appendix for easier reference. I also would have liked to see a family tree of the generations of sages (in addition to a cast of characters) to keep straight all the generations and relationships.

Overall, I found this to be an interesting narrative, and was pleasantly surprised by the modern and feminist themes present in the book, as well as the attention to ancient and talmudic details.

Mamzerut, *continued from page 21*

were born of married women who became pregnant by men other than their husbands and not to those born of incestuous unions. I would advocate promoting conditional marriages that could be annulled if a *mamzer* were to be born.

The third suggestion is to rule that today no one can declare *mamzerut*. After all, a *mamzer* does not come out of the womb with the label of *mamzer.* The ruling is a status declared by a religious court, and the court itself could decide never to declare anyone a *mamzer*. This approach could be based on a ruling that one must not accept any testimony on the question of *mamzerut*.

The fourth suggestion is to declare in an all-inclusive way that the entire community is in the category of *mamzerut*. This declaration could be made based upon a simple calculation: According to *halakhah*, if one parent is a *mamzer,* all the children are *mamzerim,* and the status is passed to all their descendants forever. Without a doubt, throughout the generations many *mamzerim* have "passed" and assimilated into the general community, which has remained ignorant of their *mamzerut*. It is thus possible that the majority, if not all, of the Jewish people are *mamzerim*.

Rabbis have found ways to get around many other issues. I am convinced that the only reason we have not yet sorted out the issue of *mamzerut* is because it is so hushed up that most of us do not know that the issue exists. I truly believe that the time has come to face the topic of *mamzerut* courageously—saving innocent children from being ostracized and saving the Torah from the *hillul Hashem* of having such an immoral rule.

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