

# THE JOFA Journal

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FROM OUR PRESIDENT

## RAISING OUR VOICES

By Judy Hecklen

My first-grade daughter's semi-annual dance recital is approaching next month. She takes ballet and tap at the JCC, so twice a year we order a special frilly costume, ensure that the bag is packed with both sets of shoes, and send her off to appear on stage. We sit with the other admiring parents, moonstruck grandparents, and disinterested siblings, as the various classes each perform their three-minute routines. We collectively "aww" as the youngest group toddles out, and we hold our collective breath, hoping none of them will fall off the edge of the stage. For forty-five minutes we clap enthusiastically as the girls—and they are almost always girls—get their individual moments in the sun.



My daughter also takes ukulele lessons at the JCC. Who knew that they made pink ukuleles? I know that many feminists hate pink, but I don't mind it. I also don't mind the frilly costumes and the princess fantasies. More important to me is that my daughter is gaining an appreciation for music and is trying new things. I can hardly wait for the ukulele recitals to start.

She also plays soccer in the fall and softball in the spring in the local Teaneck leagues. On a recent morning, before her game, she told me she wanted to quit the softball team. We talked about her having made a commitment to the team; she reluctantly agreed to play for that one day. When we got there, she was happy to go out into the field, but became nervous at the thought of batting. It was the first year that the girls were being pitched to instead of hitting off a tee, and she was anxious. Her first at-bat was three swinging strikes—but she was just glad to get it over with. When she realized she was going to have to bat again, she became morose—but she went out there and got her first hit. She was bursting with pride the rest of the day. When I asked her later if she wanted to quit, she said, "No, my team needs me." She'll be back on the field for the next game.

Confidence, poise, self-expression, a sense of pride and accomplishment, teamwork, a lifelong love of music, and an appreciation for fitness—these are what I hope she has gotten and will continue to get out of these activities. But I think of them as just that—activities,

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## Rivka Haut— An Appreciation

By Blu Greenberg

One evening last February, a woman named Chani called me. As she related her problem—when she asked her husband, from whom she had been separated for eighteen months, for a *get*, he once again ignored her and sent flowers instead—I knew just what to do: I gave her Rivka Haut's phone number. Not only would Rivka seek a *get* for this woman, but she would also understand the feelings of a spurned husband and handle this case gently.

What I did not know then was that Rivka was just beginning her battle against the cancer that would shortly take her life.

As we all began to grasp the seriousness of her ill-

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## A Holy Calling

By Neshama Carlebach

Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov (1698–1760), the founder of the Chassidic movement, was once asked: "Why is it that Chassidim burst into song and dance at the slightest provocation? Is this the behavior of a healthy, sane individual?"

The Baal Shem Tov responded with a story:

*Once, a musician came to town—a musician of great but unknown talent. He stood on a street corner and began to play.*

*Those who stopped to listen could not tear themselves away, and soon a large crowd stood enthralled by the glorious music, whose equal they had never heard. Before long, they were moving to its rhythm, and the entire street was transformed into a dancing mass of humanity.*

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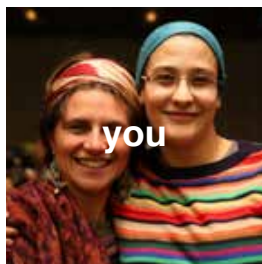
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**From Our President,** *continued from cover*

to be pursued as long as she enjoys them, and to be discontinued if (or when) she no longer has the time and/or inclination to participate.

There are others, however, for whom these are more than just activities to pursue in their free time. They have a dream, a talent, a discipline, an inner voice calling for expression. And I think that one of the challenges they face is how to reconcile that passion and that drive with an observant life. Here in Teaneck we are lucky because both the JCC and the sports leagues are *shomrei Shabbat*, and the concession stands are kosher. The larger world is not so accommodating.

As an observant woman, one also must grapple with the questions of voice and dress. At our December conference, one of the documentaries we screened was *The Bulletproof Stockings*, about a hard-rock women’s group that plays only for all-female audiences. Perl Wolfe and Dalia Shusterman, members of the band,

joined the session for a Q&A, and they both spoke of the strong desire they had to make music and how they reconciled that with their religious sensibilities. (See article, p. 24.) We also had an appearance from Ofir ben Shitrit, the teenage Israeli singing sensation who was thrown out of school for performing in public. She spoke of how her religious thinking influenced her, including in how she dresses and moves when singing. (See article, p. 13.)

On Pesach we read *Shir HaShirim*, the *Song of Songs*, in *shul*. *Shabbat Chol HaMoed* is usually the first chance I get on Pesach to go to shul, and one of the reasons I push myself to go is because I love the *Song of Songs*. It speaks of love and yearning, of an equal partnership between the two protagonists. One of my favorite verses is 2:14, הֲשִׁמִּיעֵנִי אֶת-קוֹלֵךְ: כִּי-קוֹלֵךְ עֲרֹב, “Let me hear thy voice, for sweet is thy voice.” I hope that however each of us chooses to raise our voice, it will be heard and thought sweet.

**A Holy Calling,** *continued from cover*

*A deaf man walking by wondered: Has the world gone mad? Why are the townspeople jumping up and down, waving their arms and turning in circles in middle of the street?*

*Chassidim are moved by the melody that issues forth from every creature in God’s creation. If this makes them appear mad to those with less sensitive ears, should they therefore cease to dance?!*

It is that “melody that issues forth from every creature in God’s creation” that has been the focus of most of my life. I was raised listening to it in my father’s voice and was blessed to join him in making that music. Sadly, not every person is able to be moved by the music my father and I embraced.

*Kol isha*, the Orthodox Jewish prohibition against men hearing a woman’s singing voice, has been a tumultuous struggle for me for much of my adult life. I am well aware that many observe this custom religiously and with great conviction. To them, it is reasonable to insist that women refrain from singing to ensure that religious men avoid distraction from holier thoughts.

I have chosen not to adhere to this rule of *kol isha*. I perform in front of women, men, adults, children, Jews, and non-Jews. The joy music brings, its power to unite and inspire, are too important to limit my audience. At the same time, though, there are many within the Orthodox community who criticize my choice on the basis of *kol isha*.

As perhaps the most prominent Orthodox Jewish woman to publicly ignore this custom—which, I believe, is an antiquated, misogynistic concept that has no place in our modern society—my position is, unfortunately,

often met with anger and rage. Some openly blame me for being a bad influence on their daughters and community, while others imply that I am somehow responsible for the impending demise of my own tradition.

For me, the most painful allegation is that I am regularly told that I bring shame to my father’s great name and cause his soul to suffer in the hereafter.

When I was sixteen years old, I had the privilege of singing with my father on a TV show in Israel. The host disliked my father’s approach to Judaism, and at one point in the program, in an attempt to antagonize him, he began to attack my father for his having invited me to join him in song.

My father rarely became angry. That moment, though, was one instance I remember clearly. My father stared into the eyes of the host, and said:

*This world is falling apart. There are women in the world who don’t light Shabbat candles, who don’t know God, who feel like they don’t have a place in this world. My daughter is singing for them! We don’t live in the shtetl anymore. The world is changing, and my daughter needs to sing! When someone is dying of a heart attack, you don’t give them a Band-Aid!*

At that moment I knew that my path was laid out for me. I knew that my work had a holy calling.

The moment on that television show was the first turning point of my life. When people berate me, I think about my father’s eyes on that day. He spoke with such clarity as he voiced his conviction that women need to be heard as surely as men.

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Neshama Carlebach in concert

## A Holy Calling, *continued from page 3*

*Kol isha* does not belong in twenty-first-century Jewish life. It should not be a woman's responsibility to protect men from themselves. Rather, if men are so easily consumed by sexual or less-than-holy thoughts, it is *their* responsibility to get help. It is each person—man and woman—who is accountable for his or her own behavior—not someone who, through music, has chosen to bring light, laughter, and love into the world.

We are taught that we are each created *b'tzelem Elokim*, in the image of God. We learn that we are each responsible for our own actions and behaviors during our time on this planet.

Rav Kook once wrote:

*Sometimes we rigidly cling to a state of consciousness or point of view that keeps us stuck in wrongness—whether wrong acts or wrong viewpoints. And that has become our norm. This rigidity is an illness that comes from having being immersed in a terrible slave mentality, a mentality that does not allow the liberating light of teshuvah to illumine, with its awesome strength.<sup>2</sup>*



Neshama Carlebach: "Singing is what I do, and I will continue to do my part to create goodness and positive change."

To the point: We are, as Rav Kook writes, "stuck in wrongness."

God does not want women to be silent. Men do. Or at least, men did, many years ago. We no longer sacrifice animals. We no longer stone people to death. Yet we allow too many people to claim that this archaic, excessively strict *minhag* represents the uplifting and sanctifying best of our tradition. This is, I believe, a distortion of Judaism

and a misrepresentation of God's word. We are given the gift of free will, and we are commanded to cherish and celebrate it.

Simply put, *kol isha* is a construct that, in a modern age, serves only to repress and silence. In our own holy community, women are abused, but counseled to remain silent. Women die alone as *agunot*, unable to remarry when they are left without a *get*. Women must sit idly by, must quietly remain at the back, and must collectively accept a position as second-class individuals, people, and Jews. Such constructs are at once appalling, roguish, and blisteringly defaming of this spiritual and communal culture we celebrate and honor.

No more. I renounce it. So should you.

How odd that in a culture so proud of its willingness to question, argue, and debate, certain issues are still swept under the rug. I believe that this is emblematic of Rav Kook's point. We are, in fact, "stuck in wrongness."

Sometimes, when we are wrong, when that to which we have previously subscribed is suddenly changed or discredited, we are afraid that this means that the core of our beliefs is also wrong. However, the truth is that Judaism and our community have always changed, grown, and evolved to address the challenges of the age. The time has come for change in our community that allows women to be whole people—wives, mothers and teachers, but also singers, writers, and leaders.

It is time for women to rise and redeem themselves from artificial bonds of slavery. As I write this, we are approaching Pesach. Let us all find our own redemption from whatever enslaves us. Let us stop being afraid, and let us create a world where all of God's children can sit in the beauty of God's light, without prejudice and without fear.

As for me, I know this: I was born to sing, to heal, and to bring light to the darkness. I was born to lend my voice to those who suffer, who rise up, and who bring peace in this world. Will there be those who criticize me? Certainly. But singing is what I do, and I will continue to do my part to create goodness and positive change.

I pray that everyone will have clarity of mind and spirit in this way as well. I pray that each of us will be able to make the choice to hear the voice of our own soul and live in the way that we know is real and true. I have no doubt that at the end and beginning of all things, this gift was meant to be ours.

*Ken y'hi ratzon.* May it be God's will. And may God hear our collective song.

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*Neshama Carlebach has performed in cities worldwide, sung on the Broadway stage, sold more than one million records, and was a six-time nominee in the 2011 Grammy Awards. Neshama is currently touring with a new band and gospel choir, releasing her ninth recording, Soul Daughter, and joyfully raising her two sons, Rafael and Micah.*

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/36751/jewish/The-Dancing-Jews.htm](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/36751/jewish/The-Dancing-Jews.htm)

<sup>2</sup> *Orot Hateshuvah*, p. 42.

**Rivka Haut**, *continued from cover*

ness, I realized I had given Chani a false lead. I called to explain and offer another resource. “Oh, no,” she said, “your friend told me that she was sick and could not help me, but she gave me the number of a rabbi in Brooklyn who has been very helpful.” For forty years, Rivka could not turn away a potential *agunah*.

Rivka Haut was Jewish royalty—a human being of integrity, modesty, compassion, and justice, a woman involved in intensive Jewish learning, deeply committed to *halakha* and engaged in prayer as a daily conversation with God. She was also an activist who stood up for the downtrodden, a friend who never could ignore a plea for help, a leader who ran from honor and titles. Rivka never uttered a word she did not feel carried the whole truth. She refrained from *lashon hara* and engaged in criticism only for the sake of a cause.

She was modest to the core and did not speak of her own many accomplishments but rather of the job that needed to be done. She was one of those rare people who made a huge difference in the world in multiple areas, yet never thought of herself as anything but a worker responsible for righting wrongs. In all this and more, she was Jewish royalty.

Born and raised in Brooklyn, Rivka Haut was educated at the Shulamith School in Brooklyn and Yeshivah of Flatbush High School, one of the first schools to teach girls Talmud. She received her B.A. and M.A. in English literature from Brooklyn College and a second master’s in Talmud from the Jewish Theological Seminary, on her way to a doctorate. Her lifelong passion for study, particularly Tanakh and Talmud, prompted her to organize a Shabbat afternoon Talmud *shiur* in her home.

During these past few years, Rivka was a daily presence at the *daf yomi shiur* taught by Rav Dov Linzer of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah in Riverdale. A co-student recently wrote, “I had the unique privilege of [learning with her for two years] ... without really knowing who she was. I encountered her simply as a well-learned woman with insightful experiences and nuanced interpretations that at times challenged and even advanced the learning of the Rav ... I had profound respect for her.” Rabbi Linzer and her *daf yomi* colleagues are as bereft as are her *agunot*.

Rivka believed that learning was not only an intellectual and religious experience, but also a healing one. I remember her gentle call in 2002, shortly after my own loss. She offered to learn Tanach in daily *havruta*, adding that learning had helped her through her grief after the death of her husband, Rabbi Irwin (Yitzchak) Haut.

Rivka Haut co-authored four books: *Daughters of the King: Women and the Synagogue* with Rabbi Susan Grossman; *Women of the Wall*, with Dr. Phyllis Chesler; *Shaarei Simcha: Gates of Joy*, with Dr. Adena Berkowitz; and a book about *agunot* with Dr. Susan Aranoff, which was nearing completion when she died. Whoever worked with her felt it to be a privilege. Her output of articles and letters was formidable, including a steady stream on *getlink*, the listserve of *agunah* activists. On issues that drew passion, her writings were characterized by balance and thoughtfulness, even as she took positions contrary to the majority view. The conversation was always *l’shem shamayim*.

Her early leadership was felt in women’s *tefillah*,

first in Flatbush and then in Riverdale, where she moved following her husband’s death; and in the Women’s Tefillah Network, which she helped found. As partnership *minyanim* began to garner increasing support in the last decade, Rivka remained faithful to women’s *tefillah*. She told her rabbi, Rabbi Avi Weiss, that she loved to hear the sounds of women *davening* together. She felt that women’s *tefillah* was more authentically faithful to *halakha*; more-

over, it was a training ground for adult women in communal *tefillah* and should not be abandoned. Her commitment to women’s *tefillah* exemplified Rivka standing her principled ground.

A distinctive moment in her life took place in Israel in 1988, at the International Conference for the Empowerment of Jewish Women under the auspices of the American Jewish Congress. Spontaneously, with the help of Norma Joseph, Rabbi Helene Ferris, and Rabbi Deborah Brin, Rivka organized a women’s *tefillah* with Torah reading at the *Kotel*—a first in Jewish history. From that moving *tefillah* experience grew Women of the Wall (WOW), a monthly prayer group that continues to this day and of which Rivka remained an active member. Her involvement with WOW enabled her to form cross-denominational friendships that enriched her life.

Among her many causes, Rivka is probably best known for her *agunah* work, a commitment of forty years. She was an early member of the GET organization in Brooklyn, and headed the JOFA Agunah Task Force for several years. In addition to public speaking about the issue, she did much heavy lifting for individual *agunot*, assisting them through the challenges of the religious court system and giving advice freely. She knew most of the judges of the local rabbinic divorce courts and worked well with them, challenging them when she felt they had not done enough. In turn, they

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Rivka Haut (A”H) at last year’s JOFA–Tikvah Agunah Summit

**Rivka Haut**, *continued from page 5*

respected her learning and admired her dedication. She did not hesitate to use the good connections she had cultivated in the rabbinic world, buttonholing pulpit rabbis at every opportunity.

For many years, Rivka helped organize protest rallies against recalcitrant husbands. I recall an early one. It was a freezing day in February 1980. I called her that morning, wanting to be let off the hook, but she quickly countered that many people would not show up because of the cold so it was all the more important to be there. As we circled the small courtyard in front of the recalcitrant's building, chanting, "X., give your wife a *get*," the tenants shouted out their windows, asking if they could withhold rent. A bearded, black-hatted, black-suited protester added "now" to the chant, and the rally began to sound like a NOW rally. Rivka was thrilled with the rally—but not self-congratulatory, because it produced no results; so she organized a second one. Another time, Rivka "invited" me to a pitiful, five-woman rally in Manhattan—my last, but not hers, because for Rivka, it was totally about justice and compassion, not numbers.

To the consternation of many of her friends, Rivka did not support the Rackman *beit din* because she and Irwin felt that some of its processes did not meet standards necessary to gain legitimacy in the Orthodox world. But later she came to accept and appreciate the systemic halakhic solutions applied by the Rackman *beit din* and advocated their use in other *batei din*. At the time of her death, she had begun to work enthusiastically on the new International Beit Din, a court highly committed to finding solutions in every case of *iggun*.

Rivka's contributions to JOFA were enormous and not limited to matters of ideology, program, board membership or professional service. JOFA grew out of the success of the first International Conference on Feminism and Orthodoxy in 1997, of which Rivka was on the original planning committee. Our meetings were held in Riverdale and she lived in Flatbush. After a few meetings she called to say that she, Honey Rackman, and Susan Aranoff could not come to further meetings because they were busy helping Brooklyn *agunot*. However, Rivka continued to follow the planning progress. Several days before the conference, she called to say, "The program looks good, but my Flatbush ladies won't come—it's too expensive." Responding to Rivka's pressure, we offered a bring-your-own-lunch-and-dinner rate of \$40. In three days, registration soared from 482 to 1,400—numbers no one thought possible for a fledgling Orthodox feminist enterprise. Not just her Flatbush ladies, but women from everywhere flocked to an affordable conference, thanks to Rivka's initiative.

I must add that Rivka loved to offer a critique. It was part of her nature. With great critical insight, she could

puncture the balloon of a new idea faster than anyone I knew. Many times I would run an idea past her, knowing that there was an even chance that she would shoot it down. Yet I loved working this way with her and always went back for more, because I understood that her response was an act of pure friendship—to prevent mistakes and wasted energy, to warn of pitfalls. But she did not lock into a position. When one would push back with a defense, Rivka would say, "Well, maybe you're right." She would reevaluate her own views and advice. Criticism was about the purity of an idea, not about ego or power.

### Rivka Haut was Jewish royalty— a human being of integrity, modesty, compassion, and justice.

It would surprise Rivka to know how much attention she has received since her death, how much she was loved, and how important she was to the entire Jewish community. Last November I called her from Israel to report that within the

previous week I had been to three meetings—on WOW, women's *tefillah*, and *agunot*—and at each, her name had been celebrated. She chuckled with surprise at the report and was genuinely pleased—false modesty was, well, false and not suited to Rivka's straight nature. At the end of the conversation, I said, "Now, remember to share this with your grandchildren." But I knew she would not.

With all her accomplishments, her family was and remained the center of her life. She was a grandmother par excellence, giving priority to the lives of her children and grandchildren. She took great pride in the accomplishments of her two daughters, Dr. Sheryl Haut and Tamara Weissman, and sons-in-law, Dr. David Rosenberg and Dr. Seth Weissman. Her six grandchildren were the light of her life, and she felt privileged in her almost daily grandparenting duties. Often, in scheduling a follow-up phone conversation, she would say, "But I can't talk between 2 and 9 PM because I'm babysitting." Did she not know that all working grandmothers slip in a few phone calls or hit the Internet on grandparenting time? Not Rivka. This was serious and joyous business, important relationships to build. When Tamara moved to Maryland, Rivka traveled there often by train, with her small dog Shemesh in tow, to visit her grandchildren there.

Her death at age 71 is a blow to our community. Her work in this world will now have to be taken up by others—many others—to replace the void that one woman has left. I now understand that to be one of the meanings of the classic phrase, *tehi nishmata tzrura bitzror bachaim*—may her life be bound up with the lives of the living, those who will carry on her work.

May the memory of this righteous woman be a blessing for all humanity.

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*Blu Greenberg is the founder and first president of JOFA.*

# La'ad Dance

By Dalia Davis

When asked what Torah commentary looks like, most people would open a book and point to Rashi, Ramban, or other classic works. Similarly, if asked about Talmudic commentary, they would mention Tosafot, Rashba, and Ran. By scrutinizing phrases from a source text and then reading the corresponding glosses, we Jews have built a strong tradition of looking to prose to expand our understanding of sacred texts. However, must our response to text always be manifest through words? What might it be like to engage in *pilpul Torah* (deep analysis of Torah) through the arts? Could a dance performance possibly serve as a Torah commentary?

La'ad Dance is an all-female dance company performing choreographic works that are visual commentaries on Jewish text. The name *La'ad* stems from an acronym commonly used by rabbinic commentators to introduce their opinions: *L'fi aniyut da'ati*—in my humble opinion. Whereas traditional Torah commentaries typically convey the perspectives of men through words, La'ad presents female commentary through movement.

The name *La'ad* also serves as an English acronym representing the company's approach to the choreographic process: *Learn, Ask, Analyze, Dance!* We begin with the idea, the text, the learning. We ask questions about its meaning, analyze its message and broader implications, and finally, we dance. With this approach to text study and the performing arts, La'ad creates a new environment for Torah learning—one that involves stage, music, costumes, and dance.

Like many approaches to Jewish learning, the methodology and vision underlying La'ad Dance developed slowly over time. It began a few years ago when I set out to organize a one-time women's performance in honor of Yom Yerushalayim. During my preparations for the performance, Esther Roth and Shira Sasson answered a call for dancers that was put out throughout Washington Heights. The success of our initial performance heightened our awareness of the strong desire among Orthodox women for performance opportunities. Shortly afterward, Estie, Shira, and I met over coffee to discuss this vast potential—and by the end of the night, a women's performing arts company was born. We named it *Nishmat Hatzafon*—Soul of the North—a nod to our northern Manhattan neighborhood of Washington Heights and our dream of inspiring our community through the arts.

Nishmat Hatzafon's first project was a full-length

performance based on themes of *Havdalah*—separation and new beginnings. Consisting of local artists, including dancers, singers, poets, musicians, and actresses, this performance interwove their respective talents to



The La'ad Dance troupe performs *Im Ein Ani Li Mi Li?* (*If I am not for myself, who will be for me?*). The piece grapples with the expectations of the world as imprinted on women. The lyrics call for the little girl to run away and be herself.

create a cohesive expression. This performance and the response it generated inspired us to push further. We appointed a musical director, held public auditions, built a website, attained 501(c)3 fiscal sponsorship, garnered press coverage, and performed in a variety of venues in the New York/New Jersey area, including synagogues, schools, dance festivals, senior centers, and JCCs.

Nishmat Hatzafon was blessed with many talented and enthusiastic artists, all of whom had other occupations that could easily have consumed their spare time. There were undergraduates and graduate students, theater professionals and therapists, medical residents, educators, and mothers. Despite their busy lives and complex personal schedules, these individuals worked hard to free up the necessary time for rehearsals and performances. This love and commitment created a sense of deep camaraderie in the company, as we shared not only the challenges of creating performances, but intense moments of self-expression and emotional connection.

As artistic director and choreographer, I have strived to incorporate a variety of genres into our performances, drawing on elements of modern dance, lyrical jazz, Israeli folk dance, and ballet to express Jewish themes and teachings. From Ezekiel's messianic vision to the plight of the Spanish *conversos*, from Shabbat *zemirot* to the plight of Israelis awaiting their partners' return from battle, Nishmat Hatzafon's choreography was intended to present something more than merely graceful or rhythmic steps. Rather, our aim was to evoke thoughts and emotions that would leave audiences and dancers changed for having been a part of the experience.

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## La'ad Dance, continued from page 7

After enjoying an exciting period of growth during its initial three years, Nishmat Hatzafon underwent significant changes as company members, including the original trio of founders, moved away from New York City. Rather than letting the group fade, we chose to restructure and re-envision. Although weekly rehearsals were no longer feasible, many performers embraced the opportunity to gather several times throughout the year for marathon rehearsals to prepare for performances. Many miles were traveled, costumes were transported from closet to closet, and new material was taught online and through videos—and the group persisted.

During this time, I launched a separate project, Beit Midrash in Motion: an alternative Jewish learning experience that incorporates movement, meditation, and Jewish text study. Beit Midrash in Motion creates a Jewish study hall experience, absent tables and chairs, in which movement often takes the place of words, thereby engendering a fully embodied and personally transformative learning experience. The more I worked on Beit Midrash in Motion, the more apparent it became that there was a natural partnership between what was then Nishmat Hatzafon and this integrative Jewish learning experience. More late-night meetings with company manager Estie Roth yielded a vision of La'ad Dance as a presentational form of the work that takes place in the Beit Midrash.

Beyond offering audiences new perspectives on Jewish texts through formal performances, La'ad Dance seeks to involve the audience in the learning experience, encouraging participants to view their thoughts and movement as commentary. Toward that end, La'ad Dance often incorporates workshops for audience members, affording them the opportunity to read text, share personal interpretations, and physically explore the themes through movement. La'ad Dance also performs in the more traditional way of allowing performers to remain performers and audience members to remain audience members, but we have found the integration

of the two amplifies the impact of the dance works and leaves the audience more personally connected to the text.

La'ad Dance's newest work, "*Im Ein Ani Li Mi Li*" ("If I am not for myself, who will be for me?"), invites discussion about the ancient adage of Hillel found in *Pirkei Avot*. What does it mean to be "for ourselves"? We approach this text as a question of personal identity, a reminder that we must define ourselves on our own terms despite expectations placed on us by the surrounding world. The choreography is designed to reflect each dancer grappling with "outside" expectations and ultimately returning to a truer, more personal vision of self. More than merely depicting an identity struggle on stage, this piece is grounded in reality, as each participant was asked to reflect on her own experience with outside expectations. It is these expectations that were choreographed into the dance and writ large on parts of the costumes as if imprinted on the dancers' bodies. As the piece reaches a place of resolution, these labels are, thankfully, shed.

Through such performances and attendant workshops, La'ad Dance seeks to reach participants by engaging them with this alternative Jewish learning experience, presenting material that is relevant today while based on ancient texts. Perhaps this process of bringing the ideas on the page to the visual and visceral experience of the stage will allow our Torah learning to gain a new level of growth and deepen our relationship with the text. At least that is what the leaders of La'ad Dance believe, *l'fi aniyut da'ateinu* (according to our humble opinion).

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*Dalia Davis, co-founder of Nishmat Hatzafon and La'ad Dance, directs Beit Midrash in Motion, is a NYC PresentTense Fellow, teaches for the Florence Melton Adult Mini School, and is the dance educator for the Cornerstone Program for the Foundation for Jewish Summer Camps. For more information about La'ad Dance or to arrange bookings, please visit [www.BeitMidrashInMotion.com](http://www.BeitMidrashInMotion.com) or e-mail [Dalia@BeitMidrashInMotion.com](mailto:Dalia@BeitMidrashInMotion.com).*



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# Dancing for Women: JeWTA Promotes Talent Within the Orthodox Community

By Adena Blickstein

I have been dancing since I was a very young child. However, because I attended a Jewish day school, my dancing was an extracurricular pursuit at first. After graduating, I was accepted into the Joffrey Ballet Summer School. Following that summer, I went to a seminary in Israel. After a day of learning, I would travel to a local dance studio to take classes. However, the seminary told me that I wasn't allowed to dance because it disrupted the learning routine. This came as a shock for me, leaving me feeling torn between my love for dancing and my love for Judaism. I opted to leave the seminary and transferred to a kibbutz learning program in the north, where the directors were very open to my pursuing my passion for dance. I was able to dance with a performing arts school near the kibbutz while continuing my learning. After that, I went to Stern College for Women and continued to dance throughout my college years.

When I graduated in 2005, I made *aliyah* and was accepted into two contemporary dance companies in Israel. These companies were not religious; consequently, I had

from me. I know I am a dancer. God, what are You trying to say—that I shouldn't dance? Impossible! Dance gives me life, *hayim*. How could God want to take away my life force? I decided that I would leave the decision up to God. I had planned to rent a studio space for rehearsal; if God granted me this space for a price I could afford, I would leave my company. If not, I would stay.

I got the space.

Around this time, I was inspired by Yocheved Polansky, a dancer who had similar conflicts to my own and who had founded her own studio. She shared with me a letter from the Lubavitcher Rebbe, which said:

*You feel broken; from time to time you fall into a mood of despair; you will find now a place for yourself. ... You must utilize the artistic talent, with which the Almighty has blessed you, to further religious feeling. You cannot delay this task until tomorrow, for tomorrow has its own tasks; today you must do today's tasks. When you apply yourself to this task, though it might well seem to you that you can only make an inroad as tiny as the point of a needle, the Almighty will respond by granting you success.*

Soon afterward, I began hosting open-mic nights once a month at the Pargod Theater in the Nachlaot section of Jerusalem. These shows snowballed into a national competition similar to *American Idol*, called *Rotzah Lehiyot Kochav* ("Wanna Be a Star") for women only. In 2007, I founded an umbrella organization called Professional Women's Theater, Inc., as a nonprofit for the promotion of the performing arts for women-only audiences. While pursuing a medical degree, I moved to Haifa and then moved back to the United States in 2012.

In January 2013 I was named a fellow of the Jewish social incubator Presentense. My goal as a fellow was to found the Jewish Women's Tal-

ent Agency (JeWTA) as a project of the Professional Women's Theater. The mission of JeWTA is to empower talented female performance artists through professional development and performance opportunities that are exclusively by women and for women; to promote true artistic expression, free of exploitation and defined by the highest standards of professionalism; and to develop a community of artists who will transform entertainment, inspire audiences, and change the world.

Each year, JeWTA handpicks artists to be part of a performance tour consisting of all-women audiences. Those chosen are invited to go on a national tour. Each JeWTA cohort dedicates its performance tour to a pressing and underreported issue affecting Jewish women and the Jewish community. This year's theme will be raising awareness of "court abuse," a form of domestic and

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Performers and their mentors, supported by JeWTA (left to right): Ariel Grossman, Faige Glaser, Doren Glaser, Eden Glaser, Chaya Glaser, Reina Potaznik, Adena Blickstein, Giselle D'Souza, Jessica Schechter, Shani Aduculesi, Anna Schon, Talia Lakritz.

to miss rehearsals on Shabbat. Part of me was thrilled that I was finally dancing professionally, fulfilling a dream of mine. I loved the stage, the lights, the production, and the choreography. However, every time I came to class or rehearsal, I felt that I had to leave something of myself outside. I worried that the director might put me in a piece with a male partner, and I was uncomfortable about what our costumes (or lack thereof) would look like. The outfits weren't modest, to put it mildly. As the year progressed, the company was invited to go on tour and perform in Europe. How could I, an Orthodox Jew, go along and still keep Shabbat, let alone *kasbrut*, and deal with the mixed sleeping arrangements? I reached the point where I had to choose between my Jewish values and my love for dance.

To my mind, there wasn't a choice—this was torture. I found myself pleading with God, asking what He wanted

# Kol Isha: Don't Drown Out a Woman's Voice

## A D'var Torah on Vayishlach

By Rabbi Shmuel Herzfeld

As Yaakov is preparing to meet his brother Esav and is afraid of what his wicked brother might do, the Torah tells us that Yaakov brings his eleven children across the river to meet Esav (Genesis 32:23). Rashi, citing the Midrash, immediately notices that at that time Yaakov had not eleven children, but twelve. Rashi asks: “*VeDinah beichan haytah?*” “Where was Dinah?” Rashi answers: “He put her into a box and locked her in, so that Esav would not set eyes on her. Therefore, Jacob was punished for withholding her from his brother—because perhaps she would cause him to improve his ways—and she fell into the hands of Shechem” (Rashi 32:23, from Gen. Rabbah 75:9).

According to Rashi, Yaakov was punished for locking Dinah in a box. On the one hand, our sympathies are with Yaakov. After all, he was worried that she would fall into the hands and under the influence of the wicked Esav. On the other hand, though, we learn from this incident that by locking Dinah in a box, Yaakov protected her from Esav, but exposed her to the wicked Shechem. The lesson of Rashi is clear: One cannot protect someone by locking that person in a box. Having been locked in a box, Dinah was totally unprepared to deal with the wicked people of the world. After the box incident, we next hear about Dinah when the Torah tells us:

“*Vatetzei Dinah bat Leah asher yaldah l’Yaakov lir’ot biv’not ha-aretz. Vayar ota Shechem ... vayikah ota, vayishkav ota, vaye’anebah.*” “Dinah, the daughter of Leah, whom she had borne to Jacob, went out to look about among the daughters of the land. And Shechem the son of Hamor, the Hivvite, the prince of the land, saw her, and he took her, lay with her, and violated her” (34:1–2).

Although Shechem is the villain of the story, Rashi tells us that Dinah, too, acted inappropriately.

He comments: “*The daughter of Leah:* And not the daughter of Jacob? However, because of her going out she was called the daughter of Leah, as she [Leah] also was in the habit of going out” (34:1).

Having been locked in a box, Dinah became a *yatzanit*, a girl who goes out inappropriately. She went out to see the daughters of the land, and in the end, Shechem assaulted her sexually.

Thus, Rashi draws for us a direct line between the act of Dinah being placed in a box and her going out. In the end, her time being locked up in the box did not protect her, but actually increased her vulnerability.

This midrashic interpretation of the Dinah story came to mind in the context of a recent incident in our community regarding *kol isha* (the voice of a woman) and the differences of opinion on the issue.

### Dancing for Women, continued from page 9

child abuse whereby abusive husbands use manipulative means to attain custody of the children during divorce proceedings and use this power as a way of victimizing the mother.

This year’s tour will take place from June 15 through June 21 and will include the following performances:

- A musical performance by Glaser Drive, a folk–soul band (see article on p. 22)
- A stand-up comedy performance by Jessica Schechter, addressing being a single Jewish woman
- A multimedia performance incorporating dance, acting, and video art by Jessica Schechter and Reina Potaznik

These performances may feature an “open mic” at the end of the show, allowing audiences to join in and add their voices.

JeWTA interacts with the community by offering a menu of programs designed for different audiences and interests. These include:

- An evening of inspiration (ages 18 and up) to entertain, uplift, and revitalize women through beautiful voices

and soul-lifting harmonies.

- JeWTA for Social Justice (ages 15 and up) to bring greater awareness of social justice themes through the medium of performance.
- JeWTA Teen Esteem (ages 9–17) to promote healthy self-esteem and interactive discussion while incorporating pop tunes and star artists.
- JeWTA Children’s Jam (ages 2–5) to provide an entertaining and fun performance geared to young children and their mothers, through interactive jamming and dancing.

JeWTA is the first talent agency for women only, consistent with the values of the Orthodox community. It is our answer to

revitalizing the community. Just as artists are thirsty to give, our community is thirsty to receive. JeWTA’s success depends on the Orthodox community. We invite you to open your doors to our performing artists. It is time for the Orthodox community to engage women performing artists. I encourage you to become part of the JeWTA community, go to our website ([www.jewta.com](http://www.jewta.com)), and become a member, a mentor, or a performer.



Adena Blickstein discusses the concept of JeWTA.

*Adena Blickstein, M.D., is a maternal–child health advocate and founder of the Jewish Women’s Talent Agency.*

### What Is the Prohibition of *Kol Isha*?

What is the prohibition of *kol isha*? How has it been interpreted by our rabbis? The Talmud (*Berakhot 24a*) records the following statement:

Amar Shemuel: Kol be-isha ervah, she-ne'emar ki kolech arev umar'ekh naveh. *Samuel taught: The voice of a woman is a sexual stimulant, as it states, "For your voice is sweet and your face is comely" (Song of Songs 2:14).*

This statement is left without further explanation in that talmudic passage, but another talmudic text (*Kiddushin 70a*) implies that the concern is not for the singing voice of a woman, but for a speaking voice, in an inappropriate context of conversing with a married woman.

In an important article on this topic, Rabbi Saul Berman argues that most *Rishonim* (medieval authorities) did not interpret the statement of Samuel as a blanket prohibition on women singing in the presence of men, but as a prohibition on the recitation of *Shema* while hearing a woman sing, or to exchanging warm greetings with married women, or both of those concerns. (See Saul Berman, "Kol Isha," in *Rabbi Joseph H. Lookstein Memorial Volume*, Leo Landman, ed., KTAV, 1980, p. 54.)

Nevertheless, many later authorities did view it as a blanket prohibition against a man hearing a woman sing. These later authorities form the basis for a *p'sak* that today limits men from hearing a woman sing, no matter the context.

However, recently two rabbis in Israel whom I greatly admire—Rav David Bigman, *rosh yeshiva* of Ma'aleh Gilboa (where I studied), and Rav Moshe Lichtenstein, *rosh yeshiva* of Yeshivat Har Etzion—have both independently written that the prohibition of *kol isha* should be understood in a much more limited fashion. Their opinions are based on the writings of great medieval authorities such as Raviah, the Mordechai, and Tosafot Ri, and of some modern-day Chareidi rabbis such as the Seridei Eish and the Chazon Ish. (Rav Bigman's responsum can be seen at <http://www.jewishideas.org/rabbi-david-bigman/new-analysis-kol-bisha-erva>; Rav Lichtenstein's was published in *Techumin* 32, 5772.)

Rav Bigman writes:

*There is no prohibition whatsoever of innocent singing; rather, only singing intended for sexual stimulation, or flirtatious singing, is forbidden. Although this distinction is not explicit in the early rabbinic sources, it closely fits the character of the prohibition as described in different contexts in the Talmud and the Rishonim, and it is supported by the language of the Rambam, the Tur, and the Shulchan Arukh.*

*Q: We have a practice in our school, in ceremonies organized for various events, that a female student sings as part of the ceremony. Is this practice halakhically acceptable?*

*A: The issue of "kol b'isha erva" (the voice of a woman is nakedness) is discussed extensively in many*

*contexts, mainly in the responsa of the great rabbinic figures of the past generation. Even so, this issue has not been discussed in relation to communities that already have an established practice of leniency and allowance of women to sing publicly.*

After carefully reading the opinions of Rav Bigman and Rav Lichtenstein, I feel strongly that their opinion on this matter is one that our *shul* should embrace as an ideal approach for our spiritual community.

### Three Risks from a Prohibitive Approach

There are three concerns that I fear for our spiritual community if we don't follow the path advocated by Rabbis Bigman and Lichtenstein:

First, we run the very real risk of drowning out a girl's spiritual voice, and thereby turning her away from traditional Judaism. We alluded to the fact that Dinah's actions after being locked in a box were seen as rebellious. *Vatetzei Dinah* means that Dinah went out inappropriately. Ironically, in a commentary to this passage, the *Torah Temimah* draws our attention to another instance in the Torah where the verb *vatetzei* is used: "*Vatikach Miriam haneviah...vatetzenah kol hanashim aharebah*"—"Miriam, the prophetess, Aaron's sister, [took a timbrel in her hand], and all the women came out after her [with timbrels and with dances]" (Ex. 15:20).

These women whom Miriam led were on such a great spiritual level that they took their own musical instruments from Egypt in anticipation of being able to praise Hashem properly.

Miriam and her followers were on the highest possible spiritual level, and they reached that level through music. We need to allow our daughters the space and place to attain that level, if they so desire.

For many girls, music and singing are a spiritual outlet. By denying girls the opportunity to perform in school plays and sing in spiritual settings within their spiritual community, we are limiting their ability to succeed spiritually and potentially turning them away from our Torah.

This was indeed part of the reasoning of Rav Yehiel Weinberg (1884–1966, *Seridei Aish*, vol. 2, no. 8), who issued a radical ruling allowing boys and girls to sing Shabbat *zemirot* together: "In countries like Germany and France, women would feel disgraced and see it as a deprivation of their rights if we prohibited them from joining in the rejoicing over the Sabbath by singing *zemirot*. This is obvious to anyone familiar with the character of the women in these countries. The prohibition could drive women away from religion, God forbid" (cited by Berman, 64).

Several people have told me that they have great spiritual difficulties with not being able to sing. So, too, multiple people have shared with me that a prohibitive approach to *kol isha* is a major factor in whether they would send their own children to an Orthodox day school. If we deny the girls of our community the ability to express themselves through song, we run the very real risk of allowing

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### **Kol Isha**, continued from page 11

them to be serenaded by an alternative influence that is truly dangerous.

Another midrash cited by *Torah Temimah* says: “*Shechem me’asef menagnim bachutz kedei she-al yedei zeh tetzei Dinah*”—“Shechem gathered musicians outside Dinah’s home and, as a consequence, Dinah went out of her home.” Amazingly, the midrash is teaching us that Dinah left her home because she was enticed by the music of Shechem. We should encourage our girls to sing in the context of Torah, lest they run to hear the music of Shechem!

A second concern that we should have is not only what drowning out the voices of girls will do to the spiritual advancement of the girls, but also what message it teaches the boys. This point was forcefully made by Rav Lichtenstein. He argues that if we are stringent in the area of *kol isha*, then we are accepting upon ourselves a “stringency that will lead to a leniency.” He argues (based on the Talmud) that a human being is in part a physical animal and in part a spiritual entity. By teaching boys and men that women are such erotic creatures that it is impossible to have an encounter with them that is not erotic (which is actually the simple reading of the one talmudic text that refers to *kol isha* in *Kiddushin*, which is conveniently ignored by most who are stringent about a woman’s singing voice), we are, in fact, reinforcing the notion that our spiritual personality cannot rise above our physical nature.

The hyper-erotic educational message we are sending is a depressing one, and seems to go against what our tradition teaches us in other places—namely, that the spiritual can overcome the physical. A lenient ruling in the area of *kol isha* is thus an important educational tool for all of our children. It is lenient in the area of *kol isha* but actually stringent in the area of our spiritual expectations from the people of our community. We are saying that we are ultimately spiritual beings and not purely physical animals.

A third concern is that by focusing on the formal prohibition of *kol isha*, we are ignoring the more salient factor of not who is singing, but the context in which the singing is taking place. Although this opinion is generally ignored in practice, *Sefer Hasidim* (early thirteenth-century Germany) writes that just as a man cannot hear a woman’s voice, so too a woman should not hear the voice of a man (*ve-hu hadin l’ishah she-lo tishmah kol ish*, Bologna, 614). The community message should be consistent and emphasize what the Gemara is really concerned about.

Our ever-constant focus on the woman singing causes us to ignore the real issue. The underlying issue is not a woman singing or a man singing, but licentiousness and flirtatiousness. These are the activities that our tradition is strongly discouraging.

Licentiousness can be found in women singing and men singing alike. Instead of teaching the boys and girls that the voice of a girl or woman singing innocuous words is sexually seductive, we should teach them to make the right choices in life about what are inappropriate contexts and behaviors. This type of cultural inappropriateness is far too present in all of our lives, and we should focus on eliminating it. But by focusing on merely whether a woman is singing, all we are doing is distracting ourselves from the real issue.

An in-depth study of the parameters of *kol isha* can teach us many things that will help all of us to grow spiritually. A careful study of the issue will show us that the ideal approach for our community is not to drown out the voices of women, but to allow them to be heard within the context of halakhic parameters. Such an approach is not merely a *bediavad* (ex post facto) allowance, but a *lehatkhilah* (ab initio) approach that is entirely consistent with *halakha* and our worldview.

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*Rabbi Shmuel Herzfeld is the rabbi of Ohev Sholom, the National Synagogue, the oldest Orthodox synagogue in Washington, D.C.*

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# On Becoming 'The Voice' for Young Orthodox Women

By Ofir ben Shitrit

The story of my career as a singer began when I was three years old. During a family vacation in Eilat, I got up on stage and—spontaneously, to my parents' shock—sang Ofra Haza's song, "T'filah." That was the first sign to my parents that I carry the "music gene." When I was five, I started playing the violin and continued to study violin for seven years in the music academy.

When I was twelve years old, during my bat mitzvah trip to Europe, I decided to replace my classical violin with a cool black guitar. I took my guitar with me almost everywhere, even to the *ulpana*, where I have studied for the past six years. It was a wonderful way for me to bring joy and happiness to boring school breaks. I wrote songs and won the *ulpana* singing contest, the "*ulpanigun*," each year.

I have always felt a strong passion to sing, but was hesitant about taking the first steps forward. One day, though, my aunt heard about auditions for the TV show "The Voice" and convinced me to try out. Within a few weeks, I found myself standing on stage singing Ofra Haza's famous song, "*Od mehaka la-ehad*" in front of four popular Israeli singers. It was a great surprise for me when I passed the first audition. I chose Aviv Gefen to be my mentor; choosing this secular rock star was a clear professional decision. At that stage, I did not realize the impact this choice would have on the audience. Only at a later stage did I understand that many people were highly interested and followed our relationship closely, questioning whether people from two different worlds—the religious and the secular—could speak with each other and build a bridge of music as a shared interest.

Today, I can say clearly that Aviv was the best mentor I could ever have had. We were able to learn about each other with great respect and curiosity, and we won each week until the final four, when I finished in second place.

The experience was empowering and enriching, and I was highly motivated to learn and win. The reactions from the general Israeli public were mostly supportive and very positive. In the media, I was presented as role model and heroine. However, there were also other voices—those of religious extremists, who called me a "fake religious Jew" and a "shame to the Orthodox community." Orthodox newspapers and magazines featured

heated discussions on the halakhic prohibition against women singing in public: "*kol b'isha erva*" (T.B. *Berakhot* 24a). I remember the intensive period during which I was running from one interview to another, trying to explain halakhic issues to the world, when I simply wanted to sing.

Unfortunately, my participation in "The Voice" was considered by my school, the *ulpana*, to be an action contrary to the halakhic spirit. Consequently, I was suspended for two weeks from school; however, with the help of the Ministry of Education, I was able to return and graduate.

Obviously, singing on "The Voice" went far beyond my simple dream. I didn't change my religious views and faith in God. On the contrary—I am now stronger in my faith and believe that I have the great privilege to do a *kiddush Hashem* and present the beauty of

the Jewish religion and tradition on different stages and platforms. I am grateful for the wonderful voice Hashem gave me to make people happy.

Currently I am serving my country in *Sherut Leumi* (National Service) through the Jewish television channel, Orot, whose purpose is to facilitate and foster dialogue and understanding between religious and secular people. My work with Orot provides me a great opportunity to learn more about the media from the other side of the camera. I am interviewing and writing, and am responsible for the content presented. Therefore, I use this platform to convey my message that the Jewish religion is a way of life and is there to promote, light, and guide every aspect of our life—including singing, dancing, and anything we have a passion to accomplish. I have found the media to be a very interesting and challenging field; however, I have no intention of leaving my first love: music.

I was fortunate and honored to be invited to the last JOFA Conference in December. I met wonderful people and a warm community who opened their hearts and homes during the Chanukah vacation. I was surprised to find out that, despite the distance, many of them knew my story and had followed me during the season of "The Voice." I still keep in close contact with many teenagers from New York and am grateful to have friends overseas. To be honest, before the conference, I never thought

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Ofir ben Shitrit, star of "The Voice" in Israel.

# The Song Is the Pen of the Soul

By Rebecca Teplow

Even though my parents think I'm in class at the Yeshivah of Flatbush, I'm taking the subway for my first day at the High School of Performing Arts, the school featured in the movie *Fame*. As the train pulls out of Brooklyn, a sudden wave of nausea overtakes me. As my eyes dart up and down the car, I recognize a woman who lives in my building. A social worker, she talks and calms me down. With a little emotional fortitude, I make it to the West 47th Street exit in Manhattan without vomiting. I find my way to the school and stare, mesmerized by 750 ethnically diverse students, dancing in the streets to boomboxes.

That night, I tell my parents where I've been. On the surface they fume, but deep inside they must have been conflicted. Why else would my father have come with me to the audition last January? Was it only so that he could brag to all his friends about my acceptance to "Fame High"? I found the yellow, ripped acceptance letter saying that "out of thousands of applicants, only 200 students are accepted." My father doesn't save many things, but that letter was protected in plastic.

The next day I'm shipped back to Yeshivah of Flatbush, where I'm unhappy and lonely, despite the presence of my childhood friends. I don't fit in. My passion for *Humash* and *Navi* has yet to be ignited. My soul craves music and the tools to develop my God-given talent.

**"It cannot be wrong for me to use my God-given talent to encourage hearing the inner voice of the soul's yearning for spiritual greatness."**

The following week I return to the High School of Performing Arts for freshman year, but the conflict resurfaces in my sophomore year, when I'm pushed back to Yeshivah of Flatbush. After the first week, my parents meet with Rabbi David Eliach, the principal, who says, "Let her go back to Performing Arts"—although I will never know if he was looking out for my best interests or just couldn't deal with my feisty personality.

I stay at Performing Arts for the rest of high school. Although it's far from easy, it's the right decision for me. If I had stayed in yeshiva, with its rigorous dual curriculum, I wouldn't have had the time and training to become a disciplined musician. Religiously, I stay connected through after-school Judaic studies, Jewish summer camps, and Shabbatons, but it is difficult to miss the Friday night and

Saturday orchestra performances, as well as the recording session of *Fame* on Shabbat. It's particularly difficult holding on to my Jewish identity and ideals while exposed to such diversity at the age of thirteen.

## An Outsider in Two Worlds

I'm an outsider in two worlds—the yeshiva and the secular world—but music keeps me connected to both. When I play a Bach Solo Partita for Violin, I feel as though I enter the sanctuary. When I sit around the fire at Camp Moshava and sing *zemirot*, I fill the space of the Holy of Holies. In my musical compositions, I continue to fuse these two worlds, combining the complex harmonic and rhythmic techniques from classical training with the beautiful simplicity of Jewish melodies. My musical influences include J. S. Bach, Samuel Barber, Leonard Bernstein, Joni Mitchell, and Kate Bush. My biggest life influences are my husband, Josh, and my three children, Joe, Avery, and Tamara, who focus my creative juices. Not everyone is a musician or artist, but everyone has a rich and beautiful God-



Rebecca Teplow

given life.

I'm not sure whether I have performance anxiety or whether the principle of *kol b'isha erva* presents a strong obstacle to my expressing my love of God freely through public song. Am I afraid that I am not being a "good girl" when I sing in public? After many years of hiding from public performance, I have now taken the leap. Although I still define Jewish women's territory in a certain restricted way—for example, singing Shabbat *zemirot* only in an undertone—it is time for me to tap my inner strength, to model for my children, students, and future generations what I truly believe in my heart: It cannot be wrong for me to use my God-given talent to encourage hearing the inner voice of the soul's yearning for spiritual greatness.

Sometimes I have a hard time connecting to God in synagogue. Spirituality is such a personal thing, and I feel there are too many people around me in synagogue. I am a private person, and people hear this introspective quality in my music. They tell me it evokes the core of their *neshama* (soul) in a private, intense connection to God.

When I'm singing, though, I'm completely focused on recognizing God's presence in my life. Listeners feel this and absorb the emotion, and the music echoes in their soul. The occasional sadness someone hears is a reflection of my soul's yearning for spirituality. My music directs people not to escape from the sadness of their soul—not to try to fill the void with money, fancy cars, jewelry, or painkillers. There is joy in this yearning, which should be embraced.

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## One Thousand 'Voices of Change' Heard at JOFA Conference



MK Ruth Calderon addresses the opening plenary session at the JOFA Conference

Nearly 1,000 women and men from 125 cities and towns in seven countries came together for one of the largest JOFA conferences ever, while many others watched online from remote locations. With more than fifty sessions on topics as diverse as *agunah* advocacy, *mikvah*, women and money, preventing sexual abuse, Jewish education, innovations in prayer and ritual, LGBT inclusion, marriage and divorce, and Women of the Wall, the conference was deemed a huge success on all accounts.

This event—the eighth conference on feminism and Orthodoxy since 1997—generated animated conversations about the status of women in religious life, and gave participants new skills, resources, and inspiration for promoting change in their communities. The conference reinvigorated attendees to push for innovation in their communities, reunited old friends and allies, and welcomed newly minted Orthodox feminists and supporters into the JOFA family. As part of a new targeted effort to recruit the next generation of leaders, a record 30 percent of conference attendees were in their thirties or younger.

Some notable highlights included opening remarks from MK Ruth Calderon, the announcement of a soon-to-be-formed *beit din* to focus exclusively on freeing *agunot*, two knockout performances by the talented teenage Israeli singer Ofir ben Shitrit, and a discussion by Rabbi Professor Daniel Sperber about how to respond to critics.

The JOFA Conference featured a great variety of speakers representing a broad cross section of the Orthodox and feminist communities. Speakers included female and male clergy, community leaders, Jewish professionals, scholars, and experts in the fields of *halakha*, religion, feminism, psychology, and education. In addition, the conference introduced many up-and-coming leaders, women and men who spoke from their personal experiences about the relevance of Orthodox feminism to their lives.

This conference shone a light on the next wave of Orthodox feminism, its direct impact on people's lives, and the ways in which communities can organize themselves for change. The conference also featured two separate tracks for day school educators and high school students. The Educators Track allowed day school educators to net-

work with each other and to share experiences, advice, and best practices on a wide range of feminist concerns, including classroom management, teaching problematic texts, facilitating *tefillah*, working in a diverse community, and extracurricular activities. The High School Track was created by the teens themselves and examined *tefillah* options, relationships and sexuality, and advocating for change in a high school setting.

The JOFA Conference, the highlight of 2013, was made possible by a broad band of sponsors, supporters, and volunteers. We are so grateful that so many of you joined us in person and online and we thank all who made it a success. If you missed the conference, you can browse photos and videos, read recaps and press coverage, and listen to audio recordings of many sessions at [jofa.org/2013conference](http://jofa.org/2013conference).



Ruth Lockshin leads a women's *tefillah* service at the JOFA Conference.

## JOFA Celebrates Purim 2014

Thank you to the dozens of communities around the world that celebrated Purim with JOFA. We are so thrilled to see many *kehillot* embracing and incorporating women's voices into the Purim festivities in a variety of ways:

- More than seventy-five communities, in nineteen states and six countries, contributed to JOFA's International Megillah Reading Directory. A special *yasher koach* to the eight communities where this year women read Megillah for the first time, and to the fifteen communities with veteran readings that have been going strong for more than fifteen years.



- Rabbi Shlomo Riskin gave his halakhic support to the practice of reciting three additional verses about Esther aloud during communal Megillah readings. Rabbi Riskin explained, "There is absolutely no halakhic problem for the congregation to pre-read a verse about Esther, which will then be repeated by the Megillah reader." Suggested verses are Esther 2:7, 4:16, and 9:32.

- A record number of you downloaded JOFA's Megillat Esther App and used it to learn to *leyn* Megillat Esther.

- JOFA's Megillat Esther App and women's Megillah readings were featured prominently on PBS's *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*.

To learn more about JOFA's Project Esther and Purim resources, visit [www.jofa.org/Community/Project\\_Esther](http://www.jofa.org/Community/Project_Esther).

## Teasers From



*The Torch*, JOFA's new blog, generously supported by Targum Shlishi, a Raquel and Aryeh Rubin foundation, explores gender and religion in the Jewish community. Named after Deborah the Prophetess, "the woman of torches," the blog highlights the passion and fiery leadership of Jewish feminists, while evoking the powerful image of feminists "passing the torch" to a new generation. Visit the blog at [www.jofa.org/blog](http://www.jofa.org/blog). Check back regularly, as the blog is updated with new articles at least twice each week.

### An Old Shul Still Paving the Way (3/21/14)

Reflecting on Bais Abe Synagogue's 120-year history, Phyllis Shapiro recounts the many ways in which the St. Louis *shul* is at the forefront of Orthodox feminism. Bais Abe hosted one of the first women's *tefillah* groups in 1973 and hired one of the first maharats in 2013. *Yasher koach!* To another 120 years!

### From Isolation to Community: Opening the Conversation on Mikvah (3/18/14)

With ground-breaking honesty, Sasha Kesler describes her experience learning about and practicing *niddah* in the first six months of her marriage. Inspired by the *mikvah* session at the JOFA Conference in December, this powerful blog post sparked many conversations on- and off-line, including Sasha's facilitation of ImmerseNYC *Mikvah* Salons in her neighborhood.

### A New Purim Hero? (3/12/14)

JOFA's acting executive director, Audrey Axelrod Trachtman, promotes the practice of including lines about Esther in the congregational recitation of verses from the Megillah. She explains the reasons for this emerging practice and highlights its successful implementation in various communities.

### Megillah on the Run (3/4/14)

Attempting to meet both religious and professional obligations, Viva Hammer listens to her brother read *Megillat Esther* as they race to work on Purim morning. The streets of New York City set the scene for her riveting retelling of her (and our) Purim story.



**Confessions of the Tehillim Lady: Further Reflections on Learning How to Pray (2/17/14)**

Ilana Kurshan’s daily morning prayers blend seamlessly with the hum of the stroller as she walks her twins to *gan*. This post reveals the efforts she and her husband make to balance religious obligation with the unyielding demands of child care.

**Women, Tefillin, and Double Standards (1/22/14)**

In one of The Torch’s most widely read posts to date, Avigayil Halpern addresses the common concern of “seriousness” in regard to women taking on the mitzvah of *tefillin*. While not denying her political motivations, she firmly asserts that her goal is closeness to God.

In the past six months, The Torch has also featured three blog posts about halakhic prenuptial agreements, explaining how they work and emphasizing the value of married couples signing postnuptial agreements. One synagogue, the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, has set a goal of 100 percent participation among married couples to sign either pre- or post-nuptial agreements. See “Throwing a Party for Prenups” (11/25/13), “Signing in Solidarity” (2/3/14), and “Prime-Time Drama” (3/26/14).

*Add your voice to the conversation and write for The Torch!  
Visit [www.jofa.org/thetorchblog](http://www.jofa.org/thetorchblog) for submission guidelines.*

**JOFA Webinars Are a Virtual JOFA Conference Year-Round**

In November 2013, JOFA interviewed Rabbi Shmuel Herzfeld, discussing the changes his shul in Washington, D.C., had undergone in the past few years. Participants were intrigued by what had been accomplished there and asked Rabbi Herzfeld’s advice about how to bring similar changes to their congregations.

This engagement with the audience, all of whom were sitting comfortably in front of their computers, has been the hallmark of JOFA’s webinar series. Whether learning how to start a partnership minyan, or understanding the *halakhot* and practical steps required for women to chant or write their own Megillah, webinar participants—as well as those enjoying the recordings later—have had the opportunity to learn from experts and people with firsthand experience.

A JOFA Conference happens on a specific weekend in a specific place, and generates an energy that cannot be matched—but the learning and shared experiences of last winter’s conference will continue throughout the year through this webinar series.

The webinars have been so successful that plans to extend the series are under way. There will be two tracks of five webinars each over the course of 2014. One track will feature experts on topics that are enlightening and educational. A second track, on grassroots organizing, will focus on skill building and advocacy for people interested in becoming active in their local communities.



*Please visit [www.jofa.org/webinars](http://www.jofa.org/webinars) for information about the series, and to enjoy recordings of previous webinars.*

Thank you for making the JOFA  
Conference such a success!



**But why wait for the next one?**

JOFA offers year-round webinars, audio recordings, publications, articles, blog posts, social media content, advocacy statements, members-only content, and more!

[jofa.org/2013conference](http://jofa.org/2013conference)

[jofa.org/membership](http://jofa.org/membership)

[jofa.org/webinars](http://jofa.org/webinars)

[jofa.org/blog](http://jofa.org/blog)



## **Pen of the Soul** *continued from page 14*

The maxim, “Every Jew is responsible for all other Jews” guides us in our search for God. It teaches us to release ourselves to faith and to try connecting with God through the *mitzvot* (good deeds). In this spirit, and wanting to donate my concert proceeds to a Jewish cause, I came upon JOFA. On JOFA’s website I read articles about *kol isha* that opened my eyes to new understandings. I’m so grateful that I can contribute to an organization that is making such a difference in my Jewish life. The road to redemption is happily a two-way street.

### **Jewish Women as Definers of Spirituality**

“If words are the pen of the heart,” taught Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, “then song is the pen of the soul.” While God’s words of Torah flow down to our minds and actions, joyous song carries our souls upward to connect with the Almighty. Women are creators of life, physical developers of the next generation. Jewish women are also the definers of Jewish spirituality in the home. Jewish women are connecting their children with words of Torah, but many aren’t tapping into the spiritual core of ecstatic singing of which Rabbi Zalman spoke.

Rabbi Shmuel Herzfeld’s article on *kol isha* (see page 10) cites many rabbis, including Rabbi Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg, Rabbi Moshe Lichtenstein, and Rabbi David Bigman, who have written that women may sing publicly. Others in our community have rejected this view—but in doing so, they risk destroying our spiritual community, if women remain “locked in a box” like Dinah. Rabbi Herzfeld says, “If we deny the girls of our community the ability to express themselves through song, we run the very real risk of allowing them to be serenaded by an alternative influence.” After reading Rabbi Herzfeld’s

article, my interest was sparked to do some research of my own. I learned that the word *erva* (nakedness) comes from the root *ayin-reish-hey*, which means to uncover, to bare oneself. The notion of revelation inherent in this root seems to be more innocent than the Gemara’s later definition of *erva* as unchasteness or lewdness. I choose to understand the idea of a woman’s voice as revelatory, and my songs as pronouncing the Jewish truth of holiness that is a part of our lives.

### **The Voice as a Loan from God**

Our voice is a loan from God. We must surrender our egos and trust in God, because we are all merely God’s instruments. God is playing a melody through us. Sometimes we compromise the good we may do by assuming that humility requires stepping out of the spotlight. However, there is nothing wrong with confidently recognizing our talents and strengths. On the contrary, there is something wrong when we don’t: “You shall serve God with all your heart and all your soul and all your resources” (Deut. 6:4–5).

Two years ago I was wheeled into emergency surgery on Yom Kippur. I was still awake when the nurse asked if she could play my CD, which I had given to the surgeon. I nodded yes, and then felt a surreal gust of air push me back as I listened to “*Birkat Kohanim*” while the anesthesiologist told me to count backward from 20. There really was no better way for me to *daven* that Yom Kippur. There really is no better way for me to serve God today.

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*Rebecca Teplow is a singer, composer, and arranger, and a classically trained violinist who studied under Itzhak Perlman. For bookings and music, go to [rebeccateplow.com](http://rebeccateplow.com).*

***“Rebecca Teplow is a must for anyone with interest in new music to the Holy Scriptures. Haunting as well as soothing, her songs resonate on a deep emotional level—fresh and new, evoking the ancient and deeply spiritual.”***

— Zalmen Mlotek, artistic director of the National Yiddish Theatre Folksbiene

## **‘The Voice’** *continued from page 13*

about the term “feminism” or regarded myself as a feminist, although on many occasions I was presented as such. Today, I can clearly say that I belong to the Jewish feminist approach that is being conducted in light of the Torah. This approach combines women’s involvement and development equally to those of men without violating the way of the Torah.

I am now intensively working on my first single and plan to release my original songs during the coming months. I am very meticulous in my work and would like to bring something creative, new, and unique of my own that people will remember for years. I am fortunate to be surrounded by a supportive family and close childhood friends in my day-to-day life who provide me a safe environment and enable me to keep my feet on the ground. Singing and creating music are the most important things in my life; I have been able to enjoy the fame in the right proportion, without giving up my routine responsibilities and activities.

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*Ofir ben Shitrit was a finalist on the Israeli talent show “The Voice” and is currently doing Sherut Le’umi in the field of media.*

# Orthodox Feminist Activism Through Film: An Interview with Nurit Jacobs-Yinon

By Karen Miller Jackson

Nurit Jacobs-Yinon is an independent filmmaker and owner of Aluma Films, in which she focuses on documentary projects, new media, and video-arts. Nurit's artistic work has a unique point of view on the Orthodox-feminist-art nexus. In addition to filmmaking, Nurit is an artistic director, judge, and lecturer at various film festivals throughout Israel. She also lectures about art, Judaism, and gender in different settings and is socially active in these areas.

The video-art work "A Tale of a Woman and a Robe" deals with the act of immersion in a ritual bath (*mikvah*) by women converts. This immersion, signifying the final stage of the conversion process, obligates the woman to immerse in the presence of a *beit din* (three rabbinic judges) while wearing only a robe. The video-art examines the immersion experience from the woman's viewpoint, an experience that may simultaneously evoke feelings of both elation and humiliation. The work exposes the woman's role as being both present at, and absent from, the ceremony and gives expression to an artistic, personal, and public statement.

**Q:** What led you to decide to make the movie "A Tale of a Woman and a Robe" about women converts and their *mikvah* experience?

**A:** Five years ago I received a phone call from a friend who worked at the Prime Minister's Office, which then included the Ministry of Religious Services (*Misrad Ha-datot*). He told me that he had just seen an announcement (a "tender") seeking men to take part in a *beit din* that would bear witness to converts immersing in the *mikvah*. The men did not have to be rabbis, just Orthodox males. They received compensation for this role. This was how I learned about the phenomenon of women converts having to immerse in the *mikvah*, while wearing a robe, in front of three men. Until this point, I didn't really know what a woman convert had to experience in order to become Jewish. This was my entry point into the world of *giyur* (conversion). I was in shock.

Until five years ago, there was little or no discussion about this element of *giyur*. That was when I decided to make a documentary on this topic. I met with Hila Karabelnikov, a painter with a unique artistic language, and we decided to put together a joint exhibit that was eventually shown in April 2013 at the Tel Aviv Public Gallery House. Over the following few weeks, more than 2,000 visitors came to the exhibit to see our artistic work. All the Israeli radio and TV channels and newspapers covered the exhibit. It received a lot of attention because it was the first time this topic was being discussed publicly. Suddenly, the idea that a female convert had to immerse in front of a *beit din* of men entered the consciousness of politicians in the Knesset, rabbis from Beit Hillel, and the general public.

Since the exhibition, I have been lecturing and showing my video-art at various places, including the Knesset, academic venues, cinemas, and *batei midrash*. I was also honored to share my work at the 2013 JOFA conference. One of the most moving moments for me, was when my video-art was awarded the "free-style" best documentary film award in Israel for 2013. Receiving this prize demonstrated that my work was appreciated for its artistic value, beyond the religious, social, and gender messages it contains.

**Q:** Tell us about yourself. How do you affiliate Jewishly? When did you decide to make films?

**A:** I identify as a Modern Orthodox feminist. I grew up in a typical Zionist Orthodox family, and my loving husband and I have four children. My entry into the world of filmmaking was incidental. When I was twenty years old, I heard about Ma'aleh, a religious film school in Jerusalem. At that point, it was still very new. I went to visit and was drawn to it, and I graduated in the sixth graduating class.

**Q:** Tell us about the Ma'aleh film school.

**A:** Ma'aleh is now about twenty years old. It is a religious film school, although the faculty and student body are not exclusively religious. It was a very radical thing when it started, as film was an unusual field to study in the religious world. Many graduates started out teaching *kolnoa* (film) in high schools, and in 1996, I started teaching film in the High School (*Ulpana*) for the Arts in Jerusalem. I went on to become responsible for film study for the national-religious schools network (Hemed) for a couple of years, where I oversaw 80 *ulpanot*, *yeshivot*, and religious high schools. The fact that the religious school system included the study of film in its curriculum turned it into a more widely accepted option in the religious Zionist world, and I think a similar phenomenon is happening now in the world of dance. For example, my students in the Pelech Ekron School just made a movie about a woman named Daniella—a religious woman in Israel who dances for men and women. There are many talented religious Jewish artists. Once it was not accepted to pursue performing arts, but now it is becoming more mainstream.

**Q:** When did you become a religious feminist? Is this your first Jewish feminist film? What were the others?

**A:** In retrospect, I have always been a religious feminist. For my final project in Ma'aleh, I made movie about Zelda, the Israeli poet. I knew I wanted to make a movie about a woman. It might not have always been expressed as feminist activism, but I knew I wanted to highlight the work and life of Zelda, even when movies about Jewish and Israeli women were less common.

In 2005, I made a movie called “*Brit: Women, God and All That’s Between*” about religious women and the *brit milah* experience. I have, of course, made movies on other subjects, but movies about women and feminism are my passion.

This year I started a partnership *minyán* in Shoham with friends. My films are an expression of my feminist activism, but I still view myself as an artist first.

**Q:** Tell us about the film’s success. What has been the reaction within Israel? Has it impacted the United States yet?

**A:** I presented the movie at the 2013 JOFA Conference on a panel with Dr. Jennie Rosenfeld, Dr. Susan Weiss, and Rabbi Shmuel Klitsner, and many people came to see the movie. This was the first time I had shown the movie outside Israel, but I look forward to continuing to the next phase, when I will develop a full-length documentary film on this subject.

I like to joke that the *chaluk* (robe) is a sixty-year-old “Israeli startup.” Before the *chaluk* was used, women immersed in the nude in front of the *beit din*. Sometimes a sheet was put on top of the water. Through my panels, I occasionally hear from individuals that it wasn’t always this way. Also, at the recent JOFA Conference, a woman from Toronto approached me to say that she had converted within the past ten years and immersed without a *chaluk*. There are still places where women immerse without the robe, and the *beit din* glances for a second so as not to behave in an immodest manner. In Israel today, women always immerse with the *chaluk*.

**Q:** Do you think the situation will change soon and women will be able to immerse in front of women?

**A:** We published a catalog to accompany the movie that brings together voices of women from different fields, including MK Dr. Aliza Lavie, Emily Bilsky, and Rivka Lubich. One article, by Rabbanit Michal Tikochinsky, argued based on halakhic sources that a woman can be appointed as an emissary of the *beit din* and watch the convert immerse. Midreshet Lindenbaum now has a program training female *dayanot* (rabbinic judges), but it will take a few years for these women to complete their training and graduate.

Rabbanit Michal Tikochinsky had written her article before my film came out. However the film brought together voices that discussed the problematic nature of a woman convert immersing in front of a male *beit din*. Rivka Lubich, a *to’enet beit din* (rabbinic court pleader) and author, wrote a modern *midrash* conveying the discomfort a female convert must feel.

I do believe the situation will change, but it will take a while.

**Q:** What will your next film be about?

**A:** It will be a documentary about a strong-minded woman from the highest class of Israeli Arabs in the north, a woman of means, fighting for her independence to realize her dream: the first Arab cinemateque in Israel.

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*Karen Miller Jackson is a Jewish educator and a member of the JOFA Journal editorial board.*



Scenes from “A Tale of a Woman and a Robe”

# Meet the Glaser Sisters

By Chaya Morgan Glaser

It's a rainy night, and the Glasers are gathered in the kitchen with some close family friends, following *Havdalah* during the eldest daughter's birthday weekend. All of the immediate family is home together, having just shared ritual Shabbat meals filled with Torah discussion and *zemirot*. The father heads to the living room and sits down to play the piano—his mother's baby grand, on which he learned to play. He fiddles with some jazz chords until he decides on Gershwin's "A Foggy Day." The mother moves toward the living room and chimes in, "I was a stranger in the city." While one sister pulls out a guitar, another sister takes out the bongos, and another sister grabs some maracas from the array of small percussion instruments beneath the piano. Everyone is gradually drawn into the room one by one, and they take spots on the couches. All sing together, "A foggy day in London town..." And that begins a typical *motzei Shabbat* in the Glaser home, as the family weaves happy harmonies together throughout the night.



The Glaser sisters (left to right): Doren, Chaya, Faige, and Eden.

## Family Roots

The Glaser sisters grew up as daughters of musical parents who woke them up with live jazz jams in the morning and serenaded them with the lullabies of Birdland and Broadway as the girls fell asleep around the family piano. Car rides were flooded with classical music and oldies, and their car seats rocked as they swayed side by side, singing and tapping along. Their family fireplace has always been more than just an alternative to central heating during icy New York winters. It was a warm gathering place for family sing-alongs in which the Glasers harmonized and blended their voices together, accompanied by piano, guitars, bongos, and pots and pans.

The sisters have been singing together for as long as they can remember. Vocal harmonies have always grabbed the girls and brought them together. Throughout summers at camp, high school, college, and post-college, they participated in and worked on vocal arrangements for various a cappella choirs. At home, *zemirot* always filled their Shabbat table, connecting them to their religious roots.

The girls fondly recall memories of their grandparents singing together and playing piano and violin as the girls twirled and danced in the living room. Their great-aunts and uncles, one of whom was a cantor and another an opera singer, created a four-person vocal group, performing at various events. The group arranged and performed traditional Yiddish songs, Jewish melodies, and spirituals, from "Bei Mir Bistu Shein" to "Everybody Talkin'

'Bout Heaven." They spontaneously broke out into song together around the girls and constantly inspired them with soulful spirit and enjoyment of their music.

Out of this love of music came Glaser Drive, a New York-based band composed of the Glaser sisters—Faige on guitar, tambourine, and vocals; Chaya on piano, guitar, and vocals; Eden on vocals and small percussion; and Doren on vocals and small percussion—together with Elly Geldwerth on cajon, Erik Naslund on bass, and David Keeseey on lead guitar.

Some of the sisters have chosen to incorporate music education into their career paths. Faige, who has a master's degree in music education, and Chaya, who is Orff-certified, are both music teachers at Jewish day schools in Manhattan. Doren, an early childhood educator, is currently studying music so she can introduce it to her preschool classroom at another Jewish day school in Manhattan.

Chaya, a singer/songwriter, and Faige, a veteran a cappella singer, gravitated toward singing and arranging original music together with Eden and Doren to continue the musical life that they experienced in their childhood home. Their songs and compositions are inspired by people, life events, stories, and everyday and not-so-everyday encounters. Inspiration for their original vocal arrangements is drawn from the folk harmonies of Peter, Paul, and Mary, the family feel of the Mamas and the Papas, classical piano, *zemirot*, and spirituals. This translates into the sound and message the Glasers were drawn to create.

## Female Voices in Jewish Community

The Glaser sisters grew up in San Diego, California, while the family was moving closer to Orthodoxy, and they eventually moved to the East Coast. Their parents were committed to community and Orthodox education for their children and found New Jersey to be an enriching option. This move also brought them closer to some family members already living in New York.

The sisters attended all-girls schools from high school through college (Yeshiva University), where the only forum for Jewish performance was within the confines of their schools. They wrote, directed, and performed in musical plays, and performed and arranged songs in various all-female a cappella groups, as co-ed singing groups were not offered as an option. They quickly—and unhappily—discovered that women in the Orthodox community do not have the same opportunities to perform publicly as men do.

Growing up in a musical household filled with women brought the female voice to the forefront of their mu-



Glaser Drive making music in the park.

sical path. Although the Glaser sisters do perform for both male and female audiences, they often find that in an Orthodox Jewish forum, there is a lack of opportunity for women.

#### Religion Is What Inspires Us

Today we, the Glaser sisters, explain our position this way: Religion is something that inspires us and our music, and not having a forum to share that or hear that from others—just because we are female—feels contrary to what Judaism is all about. It doesn't jive. Over the past few years, we have seen some new opportunities with a surge in women's arts events, classes, schools, and summer camps in the Orthodox community. Instead of being forced to dismiss the Jewish parts of our performance, we can now proudly embrace that element. There is a general increase in opportunities for women to perform both professionally and publicly in the Orthodox community.

One of us plays guitar and sings for hospitalized patients through a Jewish organization. The patients are often ultra-Orthodox, and before Purim, she recalls visiting a patient who was being visited by her sister who started playing guitar and handed out some shaker eggs. "The women wanted to connect, but were hesitant at first," she noted. But after playing a few Purim songs, the two women were singing and shaking along, letting their spirits find comfort through the music. "Why should music be a barrier just because we are female? Music is what beautifully breaks down those barriers and unites us."

We see that so often in our community: Women are told that they can't perform—or that they can, but are then given limited resources and options, and they are not taken seriously. They begin to let their art implode. Being fellows of JeWTA (see article, p. 9), we have felt a spark of hope as we have begun to see women performers taken seriously in the Orthodox commu-

nity. We feel energized and lucky to be a part of such an exciting time, when the arts are beginning to be encouraged in the Orthodox community. We find joy in watching that trend unfold and being able to have a role in it.

#### Sister Dynamics

As one can imagine, having four passionate, opinionated female artists who happen to be sisters in one band does bring its own struggles. We are a family band as well as a band that is family, and we try to find ways to separate as well as integrate these two elements to "get things done."

The sisters get together first to rehearse as a foursome and then with the full band. Considering our busy schedules, we don't have many opportunities to spend time together, so a two-hour rehearsal can easily begin with the first hour engaged in sharing the latest news in one another's lives. Then, we realize it's time to arrange some harmonies. We also face the blessing, yet challenge, that results from the passion to enable our ideas to emerge through the music. There is sometimes an underlying tension as we go head-to-head on one matter or another, until finally we are able to put egos aside and find a common perspective.

Nonetheless, our strong bond is in our love for each other and our music, which draws us tightly together. There is nothing like getting together as four Jewish sisters, and singing your heart out. I look across the stage during one of our songs and find comfort in the smile of another one of my sisters. We love each other, and we love creating music together. And that's the most meaningful part of all. As our parents always say, "The family that sings together, stays together."

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*Chaya Morgan Glaser is a member of the folk-rock-soul band Glaser Drive and a music teacher at Ramaz Middle School.*

# Bulletproof Stockings Rocks the *Frum* World

By Miriam Brosseau

It's not *shtick*. It's an honest-to-Hashem all-girl Hasidic alt-rock band. And it works, because it's real.

The first time I saw Bulletproof Stockings in performance, they were playing in a crowded, small converted flower shop in Crown Heights, surrounded by a motley assortment of Lubavitch women and a few stragglers like myself. It was an unlikely gig: a rock concert for *frum* (religious) women not half a mile from 770 Eastern Parkway, the world headquarters of Chabad. Drinks were being passed around, as cliques of women formed and migrated around the tight quarters. The tin ceiling tiles reverberated with the pre-show laughter of single women and young mothers who had managed to find sitters for the evening. I shuffled around, eager for somewhere to direct my attention.

Then the band took the stage. I was prepared to be underwhelmed; I'd heard other for-women-only music groups and found them sweet, but hackneyed. Sincere, but saccharine. Always too *freiliche* (lively). This, though, was something different.

Perl Wolfe sat behind her keyboard the way I picture Danica Patrick sitting behind the wheel of her racecar. She shook her fist in the air and stomped her stylish feet, all the while willing her take-no-prisoners voice through the confines of the microphone. Behind her, Dalia Shusterman worked the drums with energy and intensity, treating her set as an instrument intended for melody as much as for rhythm. On top of that, the songs were really expressive, as I confirmed later by looking at the lyrics; although their melodies resounded, I couldn't make out more than a word or two during the concert itself. The show had all the elements of house concerts and VA rock shows I attended in high school: too loud, too crowded, too hot.

It was awesome.

I have heard Bulletproof Stockings a couple of times since and have even played guitar with them on occasion. They approach every show fresh-faced and excited, and walk away intensely critical of themselves and their performance: It could have been better; it could have rocked harder; this is what we need to change next time.

Every time I have met these two women, I come away with a sense of how deep and important the bond between them is. Perl and Dalia represent a particular breed of musical co-conspirators. Ask them, and they'll tell you that every step of their journey together is evidence of a still, small voice urging them to do this work—here, now,

together. Their music is their *shlichut* (mission). They do it because they love it, but equally because they genuinely can't see themselves doing anything else.

Bulletproof Stockings has received a great deal of attention in the past year or so—video interviews, articles in Jewish and non-Jewish publications, even two documentaries, and their own Wikipedia page. They've got great momentum—which naturally leads to the question asked within so many of the aforementioned stories: How far can you go if you perform only for women?

For Dalia and Perl, it's not even a question under consideration. Even though they cannot control who hears

their recorded music (especially online), they play for all-female audiences, period. Their commitment to being a band by women and for women comes from the same place as their decision to keep Shabbat or eat kosher. They are Hasidic women, and this is how they roll. Even the name "Bulletproof Stockings" is a rebranding of a somewhat derogatory term for an item of *frum* women's fashion, the thick tights worn by some women in

the ultra-Orthodox community. Perl and Dalia see the stockings as a badge of honor. They are, and aspire to be, both explicitly feminine and tough as iron. They embody their Hasidic roots and their musical wings equally.

## Fame, *Frumkeit*, and the Future

At the recent JOFA conference, I hosted a discussion with Perl and Dalia, and we spoke briefly about the trump card of all successful Jewish musicians—Matisyahu. The comparison is stifling—but inevitable for a group growing out of the Chabad community. Matisyahu's beard practically needed its own PR firm as the world watched and analyzed his religious transformation. Bulletproof Stockings has the potential for a similar crossover appeal. Will their convictions hold in the face of fame?

The answer, I think, is a resounding yes. On the other hand, I believe that is the wrong question. Integrity does not preclude evolution. Bulletproof Stockings will change, perhaps dramatically. Their music, their look, their relationships with one another and with their fans and critics all are destined to develop in ways no one can anticipate. The duo has faced dramatic and difficult changes before: Perl is twice divorced, and Dalia is a widow with four young boys. What makes Bulletproof Stockings as compelling as it is has everything to do with how they embrace those challenges, focus on God, and



The Bulletproof Stockings:  
Perl Wolfe (left) and Dalia Shusterman (right)



turn sadness into rock-and-roll.

The future, though uncertain, is hopeful. Perl has left her job as a manager at a makeup and beauty store to pursue her work with the band full-time. She and Dalia share an apartment and are continuing to book gigs and write songs; they dream of playing Berlin and winning a Grammy. They are at the forefront of a burgeoning renaissance of Jewish arts in Crown Heights. In pockets all around the community, visual artists, songwriters, and comedians are testing their skills in a more public way. It's happening both in Crown Heights and throughout the Lubavitch world. It is especially prominent and ex-

citing among women, who up until now have only been strumming out tentative tunes to the four walls around them. Now women flock in groups to open mic nights and fundraisers featuring female voices.

Wherever they may go from here, Bulletproof Stockings will continue to make their music and inspire other women to share their own music—and, all the while, keep it real.

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*Miriam Brosseau is director of engagement at See3 Communications and half of the “Biblegum pop” duo Stereo Sinai.*

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# Aliza Hiller: On Being an Orthodox 'Jock' and a Coach in a Yeshiva Setting

By Pam Scheininger

**A**liza Hiller is a physical education teacher and coach of the girls floor hockey team at Yavneh Academy in Paramus, New Jersey, and plays ice hockey on a women's team called the Quarry Cats. She describes how she has combined religious observance with participation in competitive sports.

**Q:** How did you first become interested in sports?

**A:** The first organized sports I played was with the Yavneh Academy Little League when I was in second grade. Before that, I would shoot baskets, play catch, and ride my bike, but I really got into sports when I started playing softball with Yavneh Academy. I had the same coaches for five years in a row in that league; they always had the same "have-fun" attitude toward sports, and this made an impression that I will never forget.

**Q:** What types of sports did you/do you play, and at which points in your life did you play them?

**A:** For many years of my childhood and youth, I went to Ma Tov and Regesh day camps, where I loved playing all types of sports. With respect to organized sports, from the time I was eight until I was twenty-one years old, I primarily played softball—first with Yavneh Academy Little League until the end of eighth grade, then on the Ma'ayanot Yeshiva High School for Girls softball team, followed by a women's softball league in Fair Lawn, New Jersey. I also played on the Kaplen JCC on the Palisades' softball team at the JCC Maccabi Games in Boston when I was sixteen. Getting to play in a "Jewish Olympics" was the experience of a lifetime.

I also grew up shooting hoops in my driveway and going to basketball clinics with my aunt and cousins. By the time I reached seventh grade, I had made the basketball team at Yavneh Academy and played on that team in seventh and eighth grade. I then continued to play basketball at Ma'ayanot for four years and have continued to play pick-up games with local Jewish women.

Hockey is currently my favorite sport, although I first encountered it at the age of eleven, when my cousins got their first hockey stick. I played hockey with my cousins at their house and loved it so much that I knew I had to get a hockey stick of my own! I continued to play street hockey with my younger sister, wearing inline skates. While in high school, I played hockey in the Ma'ayanot hockey club, but was not planning to try out for the hockey team until the hockey club coach (who also coached the school hockey team) asked if I was going to try out. At that time, I was a freshman who was just getting used to high school, and it did not even cross my mind to play two sports in the same season. However, when the coach asked if I was going to try out, I could not resist. I used the same hockey stick that I had received when I was eleven years old; the blade was as thin as a butter knife,

but it got me on the team! I continued to play Ma'ayanot hockey throughout my four years of high school and we won the championship in my junior and senior years. In my last year of high school, I was captain of the basketball, softball, and hockey teams, and, following my graduation, my number 62 was retired at Ma'ayanot.

When I started college, I thought I would go crazy without any teams to play on, so I decided to get ice hockey skates and see how I was as a hockey skater. I then got full ice hockey equipment for Chanukah and started to attend ice hockey clinics as often as possible. I loved ice hockey so much that when I saw an "adult instructional league" advertised at the hockey rink, I decided to sign up. I have been playing in that adult instructional league for more than five years now with the same people who started with me, and we have grown together in our ability to play well. Also, two years ago, I was privileged to join a women's ice hockey team called the Quarry Cats. We travel to Delaware, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, and elsewhere to play games against other women who love the sport.

**Q:** Did you have a different experience with sports as a result of being Orthodox?

**A:** Being an Orthodox Jewish woman on the Quarry Cats has definitely been both a fun and a challenging experience. Because games are played on weekends, and no one really knew about my religious needs when I first started playing, there were a lot of games that I was forced to miss because I could not play on Shabbat. Some games would start after Shabbat, but were too far away for me to make it there in time unless I stayed at my sister's home in South Jersey or at a nearby hotel. I would sometimes play in weekend tournaments with the Quarry Cats in which I have to sit out the game played on Shabbat, but I would arrange with the tournament coordinators to have the games played early enough on Friday to play before Shabbat, late enough on Saturday to play after Shabbat, or played on Sunday. At these tournaments, I would room with teammates who quickly learned about the laws of *kasbrut* and Shabbat. My teammates were amazing about this and would even sit down for Shabbat meals with me. One teammate even bought me a portable grill because she wanted to me to eat more satisfying food during tournaments! By my second year on the team, the team captains who scheduled games worked hard to ensure that the games were played on Saturday nights or Sundays. I am so appreciative of how much people have worked to try to accommodate my religious needs. Unfortunately, the league playoffs still take place on Shabbat. To work so hard during the regular season and not get a chance to take part in the playoff game is hard to handle, but my religion takes precedence over everything. It is one thing that I will always stay true to.

**Q: What is your current job?**

**A:** I am currently a physical education teacher at Yavneh Academy, as well as the girls' floor hockey coach at Yavneh Academy.

**Q: What professional path led you to this position?**

**A:** I have known that I wanted to be a physical education teacher since high school. When I was in high school, Coach Eileen Schwartz was the physical education teacher at Ma'ayanot, and I saw how much she was able to change people's lives through sports. I knew right then and there that I wanted to be able to do that as well. During high school, I coached in the Ma'ayanot Junior Hockey League, where I began to put my coaching skills to the test. I really enjoyed coaching and was further encouraged to follow this path. After I graduated from Ma'ayanot, I attended Midreshet HaRova for a year, then entered Queens College, where I majored in physical education. I was also fortunate enough to find an amazing mentor at Queens College, Dr. Ariela Herman, who was the head of the physical education department and, coincidentally, an Orthodox woman from Bergenfield, New Jersey. I could not believe it! Dr. Herman was the head of sports at Ma Tov Day Camp, where she took me on as a member of the sports staff. It was there that I was able to practice and develop the teaching skills I had been taught at Queens College. In addition, while I was still a student at Queens College, Dr. Herman helped me get a job teaching kindergarten physical education at Yeshivat Noam in Paramus, New Jersey. Dr. Herman was truly instrumental in helping me on my career path.

Eventually, Yavneh Academy contacted me about a girls middle school hockey league that they wanted to start and asked if I would coach Yavneh's team. I was already the assistant coach of Ma'ayanot's hockey team at the time, but this was my chance to be a head coach. I continue to be head coach of the girls' hockey team at Yavneh. After I graduated from Queens College, Rabbi Jonathan Knapp, the head of school at Yavneh Academy, asked me to become a part of the Yavneh team and teach physical education there. I feel so privileged to have gotten this job and to continue on the career path that I had hoped for since high school. I love sports. I grew up playing sports, and I continue to play for the social, emotional, and physical benefits. I am so happy that I can share with my students that same love of sports and the skills, knowledge, and motivation to participate in physical activity.

**Q: What does your job involve?**

**A:** I teach students in pre-K through eighth grade. From fourth grade and up, I teach all the girls in the school. Physical education classes include units such as basketball, hockey, and fitness units like step aerobics, dance,

and circuit training. I try to present as many different opportunities for physical activity to my students, so they can find something that works for them. The key to staying active is finding something that they enjoy and want to continue to do.

**Q: Please describe your experiences in teaching Orthodox girls.**

**A:** Most Orthodox girls are not aiming to become Olympians or professional athletes. They are in school from 8:00 a.m. until 4:45 p.m., and they do not have much of a chance for physical activity, given all of their homework and long school hours. Teaching Orthodox girls means giving them the chance to find something they love and also giving them a break from the crazy school and work schedule. It is about making them realize that life will always be busy, but they need to carve out time for physical activity.

**Q: What do you bring to your position as an Orthodox woman teaching Orthodox girls?**

**A:** One reason why I love teaching in an Orthodox school so much is because I can relate so well to my students. I see myself as a role model, as someone my students can emulate in their participation in physical activity in and outside of school and as a Jewish woman. Sports can bring out so much in a person—for example, in the way someone presents herself at an athletic event, at camp, or in the way someone interacts with a coach, fellow teammates, and opposing teams. Everywhere we go, we represent something bigger than ourselves—we represent the Jewish people. I like to make sure students are aware of that both by what I say and what I do. I know for me it was not necessarily the rabbis or Judaic studies teachers who helped me become more religious. Sometimes I was in such awe of those rabbis and teachers that it was hard for me to think I could ever be as religious as they were. Rather, it was the teacher who was most similar to me, my high school physical education teacher, who taught so much about the value of Judaism and how to carry myself as a Jew. As an Orthodox woman in an Orthodox school, teaching Orthodox girls, I never know who will decide to turn to me as a mentor. And because, in many areas of my life, I can relate to my Yavneh Academy students, and because of the role my mentors played in my life, I know how important it is for me to be there for them.

*Pam Scheininger works as a court attorney referee in New York County Family Court. She currently serves as a vice president of Yavneh Academy in Paramus, NJ, is vice president of programming and education for JOFA, and is a member of the editorial board of the JOFA Journal.*

**Everywhere we go, we represent something bigger than ourselves—we represent the Jewish people. I like to make sure students are aware of that both by what I say and what I do.**

# Can a Religious Woman Play Premier League Basketball? The Naama Shafir Story

By Karen Miller Jackson

Naama Shafir is easy to spot when she is playing point guard for the Elitzur Ramla women's basketball team: She is the only player wearing a short-sleeved T-shirt under her basketball jersey. Shafir made headlines in Israel in 2011 when, as a member of the Israel's national women's basketball team playing in Europe, she insisted on wearing short sleeves under her basketball jersey against tournament rules, so that she kept within the bounds of *hilkhot tzniut* (laws of modesty). The issue was resolved by her wearing skin-tone elastic sleeves.

Shafir is the fourth of nine children and grew up in Hoshaya, in the Galilee. Shafir returned to Israel this past year after spending five years in Ohio, playing for the University of Toledo while studying business management. The U.S. team tried its best to accommodate her Shabbat observance by not scheduling practices on Shabbat. Shafir did receive a personal *heter* (rabbinic permission) from the rabbi of her hometown, Hoshaya, to play in basketball games on Shabbat outside Israel. His rationale was that a practice session would not be allowed, but a competitive game would be. "Practice is in the category of 'exercise' and therefore forbidden, but the game itself is fun for the player. Who wants to sit on the bench?" he said. Shafir has been known to walk long distances to and from games so as not to desecrate the Sabbath.

In Toledo, Shafir enjoyed great success, both on and off the court. She was twice a co-captain, and is believed to be the first Orthodox female athlete to earn an NCAA Division I scholarship. She also excelled in her studies, making the dean's list five times.

Back in Israel, Naama was asked by the Israeli online magazine *Mishelakh* whether she considers herself a feminist. She declined that label, but added, "If somehow this gives other women strength, why not?"

These days, Naama stays in touch with the friends she made in Toledo while playing for Elitzur Ramla. She tweets, "Toledo friends... If you are tired of the snow, you are more than welcome to come visit me in Israel!" Religious Zionist leaders praise her as a role model.



Naama Shafir in action with the University of Toledo Rockets.

Read more at <http://forward.com/articles/136770/an-orthodox-jew-leads-toledo-to-a-womens-national/#ixzz2yM3BDsZ.i>

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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WHERE YOU BELONG

## EMERGING VOICES:

# Pursuing the Performing Arts as a Modern Orthodox Teen

By Shoshana Edelman



Shoshana Edelman (center) performs in the Ramaz production of *The Pirates of Penzance*

As a child, like many aspiring performers, I was talkative, expressive, and admittedly a little manipulative. My stage life did not, however, really begin to emerge until I entered high school. My suburban Jewish day school did not offer a formal drama program, nor were the performing arts a popular extracurricular activity among my peers. Throughout elementary school and middle school, I spent summers at drama camps and studied ballet and jazz at a local dance studio. Although I enjoyed wearing voluminous tulle skirts at my ballet recitals and grew flexible and graceful from my dance lessons, my classmates were not impressed. They preferred to play on sports teams. The coordination I gained in my dance classes did not transfer to the Little League field, and aside from a few stints on soccer teams, I gave up on athletics.

Nevertheless, it was not easy for me to go against the grain when it came to choosing a high school. The majority of my elementary school class was headed for one of three local Jewish high schools. I craved a more cosmopolitan and diverse environment and needed a change of energy. But at age fourteen, the prospect of attending Ramaz Upper School in New York was both exciting and daunting. In the end, I did choose to attend Ramaz, largely because of its emphasis on the performing arts. Unlike my options in northern New Jersey, Ramaz is unique in that it does not interpret the halakhic parameter of *kol ishab* as restricting girls from singing solos or starring in musicals—and this made all the difference in terms of my participation. As a freshman, I initially hesitated to audition for the fall musical, but when immensely talented upperclassmen not only welcomed me but also encouraged me to audition, I eagerly signed up. I rediscovered the magic of theater and became addicted to the thrill of a live audience. I auditioned for every play, musical, and arts night, and found a new home on the stage.

### Stepping Out of My Comfort Zone

In the comfortable environment of Ramaz, among students with similar backgrounds to my own, there was no conflict between my love of performing and my religious observance. However, for all three of the summers of my high school years that I spent performing with NYU's "Looking for Shakespeare" youth ensemble, I was the only observant Jew in the program. I was not daunted by this challenge, and made fast friends with my fellow thespians. The only time my singularity presented a conflict was on Shabbat, when the group would have tech rehearsals. I knew going into the program that my Sabbath observance would be an obstacle, but I was willing to step outside my comfort zone and observe Shabbat while still attending rehearsals. On Friday night, I would sleep

over at the apartment of a family friend in the neighborhood, and then on Shabbat morning I would walk to my nine-to-five tech rehearsals. It felt a little strange to bring an overnight bag to rehearsals and to have my cell phone off while everyone else was texting away during breaks, but this was a small price to pay for the experience.

Looking for Shakespeare (LFS) stimulated my growth as an actress and also provided me with a network of high school students and theater teachers from a myriad of backgrounds. LFS participants ranged across the full spectrum of geographic and socioeconomic backgrounds. It didn't matter whether you came from a posh neighborhood in Perth, Australia, or a humble one in Carmel, Indiana; members of the troupe were able to embrace our differences and share our mutual love for Shakespeare. Generational divides were also put aside, and the graduate students who taught and mentored us were able to connect to us on a highly personal and intellectual level. The shows we produced were so spectacular because they were the product of a collaborative effort by a community of artists and teachers who shared an intense mutual passion for their craft. I returned to LFS summer after summer because I craved the inspiration I received from such a diverse group of people. My experience at LFS proved to me that for a theatre piece to succeed, it has to be a collaborative, not a competitive, effort.

Our productions were excellent demonstrations of Shakespearean acting, but each had a unique flavor. My favorite was our post-World War II-themed production of *Much Ado about Nothing*, complete with fully choreographed swing dance numbers. Not only was this the most fun production, but it was also the most challenging for me. When I had played in *Much Ado about Nothing* two months earlier at Ramaz, I was cast as the ingénue, Hero. At NYU, I was cast in the role of Antonia, a feminized version of the role of Antonio. This was a challenge because I had to both create a female role out of one written for a man and also because I had to play Hero's mother. It was certainly a thrilling experience, and although it wasn't one of my larger roles, it was one that allowed my acting skills to rise to new heights.

I am grateful for the opportunities that Ramaz and LFS have afforded me. My endeavors on the Ramaz stage as well as at NYU have helped me grow artistically and intellectually and have helped me mature into the person I am today. I hope to pursue the arts—acting, producing, or dramatic writing—while still maintaining my Jewish identity. The arts are a vital part of my life, and I can't imagine myself following any other path.

*Shoshana Edelman is a senior at Ramaz Upper School in New York City and will be attending NYU in the fall.*

***A Bride for One Night: Talmudic Tales***

By Ruth Calderon, translated by Ilana Kurshan  
 Jewish Publication Society, 2014, \$17.65  
 (published in Hebrew in 2001)

By Roselyn Bell

Many writers have brought biblical stories to life in works of historical fiction, but few have turned an imaginative eye upon the tales of the sages of the Talmud. (Milton Steinberg's classic *As a Driven Leaf*, portraying the life of Elisha ben Abuya, comes to mind as an exception.) Now, Ruth Calderon, who famously taught Talmud at the Knesset (of which she is a member), has taken nuggets of *aggadata* scattered throughout the Gemara and rabbinic literature and breathed fresh life into them, using the tools of literature and scholarship.

She has chosen seventeen terse but dramatic Talmudic tales and expanded and reimaged them, often from the perspectives of the women who are described therein but remain voiceless. She delves into the thoughts of the *sota*—or, actually, the sister of a *sota* who goes in her stead—as she enacts the biblical ritual of drinking the bitter waters (according to *Midrash Tanhuma, Naso* 6). She evokes the feelings of the anonymous wife of Rav Rehumi, left alone while her husband studies in Mahoza, as she awaits his return, which fails to materialize; her single tear causes him to fall through a roof and die. Calderon notes that Rehumi means “love” in Aramaic and “can be interpreted as either ‘loving’ or ‘beloved,’” and it is his nameless wife who makes him “beloved”—yet he fails to recognize what love is. She describes the inner dialogue of the “bride for one night” mentioned in B. Yoma 18b—not quite a prostitute, but a substitute wife who allows a traveling rabbi to function as a tourist with all the comforts of home.

In retelling the story of Homa, the wife of Abaye, who appears before Rava asking for her *ketuba* money, Calderon explores the tensions and inevitable rivalry between the closeness of two study partners and the intimacy of a marital couple. She sees the subtext of the story in B. *Ketubot* 65a, observed from the point of view of the woman, as being, “It should be clear which of the two of us was closer to Abaye.” Suddenly, a story that seemed to be about *ketuba* money ignites with the sparks of relational jealousy. A different kind of triangle of two scholars and a woman is spelled out in *Bava Metzia* 84a in the story of Rabbi Yohanan and Reish Lakish, whose wife is Rabbi Yohanan’s sister. When the two men, teacher and student, have a falling out that turns deadly, the wife rushes to the study house to plead for their reconciliation, lest she become a widow. Again, the woman’s perspective receives fuller and more empathetic treatment than in the original.

In story after story, Calderon sensitively fleshes out the emotions that lie below the sparse text of the Talmud. She not only portrays feelings, but also captures and



elaborates on the details of daily life. In her literary retelling, we smell the aromas of the marketplace, envision the majesty of the study house, and feel the warmth of a family hearth. In fact, the book’s title in the Hebrew was *Hashuk, Habayit, Halev* (the marketplace, the home, the heart), and each of these environs is fully explored.

Calderon, who has a doctorate in Talmud from the Hebrew University, brings both critical, historical perspectives and artistic creativity to her retellings. Sometimes the two methodologies are slightly at odds, as the emotional insights draw upon modern sensibilities, whereas the historical background illuminates our distance from the sources. Overall, however, the two approaches are complementary and make for a satisfying sense of finally “getting it” for texts such as the Beruria temptation episode, with which many of us are already familiar.

This is a book that will delight both the talmudists and the feminists among us.

***Gender and Timebound Commandments in Judaism***

By Elizabeth Shanks Alexander  
 Cambridge University Press, 2013, \$99.

By Eli Leiter

Elizabeth Shanks Alexander, an associate professor of religious studies at the University of Virginia, has written a breakthrough study on the issue of women and timebound commandments. An academic study, the book focuses in depth on the Tannaitic and Amoraic sources related to this topic. As such, it is a multilayered, complex work that demands much effort on the part of the reader. Shanks discusses these texts in great detail—and, for those willing to make the effort, a wonderful intellectual treat awaits.

Shanks argues against the common understanding of the rule that women are exempt from timebound *mitzvot*. Most scholars assume that the rule is prescriptive and meant to determine women’s involvement with ritual. The prescriptive formula, however, is actually the way the rule is understood by later sources. Once this assumption is made, the sources search for rationales for the rule. For example, some traditionalists see the exemption of women from timebound commandments as due to their greater spirituality. To feminists, this smacks of apologetics.

Shanks makes the case that the rule is neither prescriptive nor motivated by a particular social vision of what women’s role should be. Rather, she claims that the rabbis were interested primarily in performing scholastic exercises that affirmed their status as masters of Torah. Technically, the rule was formulated as the exegetical conclusion of three rules about *tefillin*. This exegesis led to the rule about women being exempt from *tefillin*. Once this conclusion was reached, followed by similar conclusions regarding *sukkah*, *lulav*, and *shofar*, the rule became a marker. In each of these cases, women are



exempted for reasons other than their being timebound.

Shanks further posits that women were exempt from *Shema* and *tefillin* because they were exempt from Torah study. For the rabbis, wearing *tefillin* and reciting *Shema* were both forms of Torah study. The key point is that Torah study for the rabbis was not just mastery of text. When the rabbis understood Torah study as the mastery of intellectual skills, they did not exempt women. However, they saw the essence of Torah study as the ritual means for a father to replicate his social and cultural identity through his son. Fathers do not teach their daughters because the daughters' identity was socially determined by the men they married. Daughters would never be the paterfamilias of the next generation.

In a fascinating final chapter, Shanks discusses the implications of her conclusions for modern feminist thought. She states openly that "this book is not the bearer of 'good news' for feminists looking to find resources in classical texts for contemporary Jewish women." The reason is that "undergirding the rule is an assumption that women are not central actors in the creation and perpetuation of the covenantal community." This presents a problem: what to do when an earlier source does not provide support for Jewish feminist values.

Shanks suggests two solutions: One is based on the work of Tamar Ross, who claims that all Divine revelation is mediated through human lenses. She then argues that just as the initial message was authentically Divine, so can the modern feminist approach be seen as authentic. The interested reader would need to consult Ross's *Expanding the Palace of Torah*.

Shanks herself makes another very interesting argument. In a sort of postmodern and ironic vein, Shanks posits that even though the rabbis excluded women from the *beit midrash*, their intellectual product is available to all in the form of rabbinic literature. When feminists engage with the texts, they are participating in the *beit midrash* from which they were excluded. They are in essence reproducing the covenantal community. Shanks reaches a wonderful paradoxical conclusion. She states, "When feminists re-animate the exercises that constituted ritual Torah study in the ancient *beit midrash*, they constitute themselves de facto as the next generation in the covenantal community forged by Torah study." With this conclusion, Shanks transforms her own academic work from a scholarly treatise into a part of the modern feminist project.

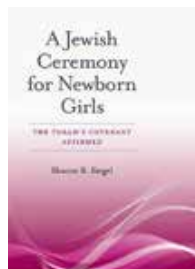
### ***A Jewish Ceremony for Newborn Girls: The Torah's Covenant Affirmed***

**By Sharon R. Siegel**

Brandeis University Press, 2013,  
\$29.95 (paperback)

**By Nomi Presby Schneck**

When my second daughter was born,  
a group of Jewish husbands in the



hospital wanted to name their daughters immediately. So they left their wives and newborn daughters and trekked to a small local synagogue. It was a synagogue they had never set foot in before and would never set foot in again, a synagogue empty of relatives, friends, or familiar faces. Yet it was a synagogue that offered an *aliyah* and *mi shebeirakh* to name their daughters as members of Israel.

Sharon R. Siegel's newly published book, *A Jewish Ceremony for Newborn Girls*, observes that "[w]hen a girl is born ... [t]he public expression of happiness is subdued." In fact, newborn girls often lack any independent celebration directly linked to their naming.

After a thorough analysis of past customs for birthing mothers and newborn babies, Siegel shows that the only surviving Ashkenazi customs for birthing mothers are the husband's *aliyah* and *mi shebeirakh*, wherein a Jewish name is assigned to the baby girl. This custom conflates the focus on the birthing mother with that on the new baby, who are both frequently not present for the ritual.

Siegel evaluates the current *simhat bat* ceremonies as inadequate, mainly due to the lack of covenantal ritual and theme. Through a close reading of a wide range of Jewish texts, Siegel argues that women, like men, are members of the covenant, "the central pillar of Jewish faith," which embodies "the Jewish people's fidelity to God as the one and only God, and their agreement to keep God's commandments, and God's promise to keep the Jewish people as His people, make them multitudinous, and give them the land of Israel as an inheritance."

Drawing on customs from the past while seeking a solution to the dilemma she has noted, Siegel develops the Brit Bat ceremony. The key components of the Brit Bat are a covenantal theme, a first-and-only naming (eliminating the naming through *mi shebeirakh* in *shul*), an eighth-day timing, and a uniform liturgy. Siegel hopes that this ceremony will become "such a natural part of the Jewish life-cycle that no one could precisely pinpoint when this practice began to feel irrevocable, entrenched, and maybe even timeless."

Will Siegel's vision materialize? A uniform welcoming celebration would indeed provide the community with the resources to publicly celebrate the births of their daughters in a validating way. However, Siegel's conclusion highlights the tension between the creativity and meaningfulness of looser ritual and the value of codifying tradition. The lack of established custom for celebrating the birth of a baby girl provides a rare opportunity for parents to creatively organize a ceremony reflective of their own values. Is the community interested in giving up the self-created style that the lack of set structure allows?

Regardless of one's opinion, the many sources and texts in Siegel's book provide the basis for a much needed conversation about the treatment our daughters receive as members of the Jewish community from their first moments. As she notes, "Engaging in a community-wide conversation about the future of Jewish practices for newborn girls presents a distinct opportunity for the entire Jewish community to work together toward a shared goal."



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