

FROM OUR PRESIDENT

THE BIGGEST QUESTION: WHOM TO ASK?

By Judy Hecklen

This year, for the first time in my life, I spent Passover in Israel. My eldest is there for her year between high school and college, and we thought it would be a meaningful experience for all of us to be in Jerusalem when we conclude our Seder with “*l’shana haba’ah bi-Yerushalayim*.”

And so began the great *kitniyot* debate.

Kitniyot, the legumes, beans, and seeds forbidden on Passover according to Ashkenazi tradition, presented a few questions to wrestle with. The first has to do with the uniqueness of the calendar this year. The seventh day of Passover fell on Friday, which meant that the Shabbat immediately following it was no longer Passover in Israel. Thus, even though we couldn’t eat *hametz* on that Shabbat (because we couldn’t acquire or make any *hametz*), we should have theoretically been able to eat *kitniyot*, as we are allowed to own them during Passover. The second issue has to do with the fact that my daughter is a vegan, whose only source of protein is legumes.

I emailed my rabbi, the *mara d’atra* of my *shul*, to ask him how to manage the *kitniyot* situation. He did allow my daughter, as a strict vegan, to eat *kitniyot* during all of Passover. He also responded that I shouldn’t cook *kitniyot*



in my pots, because they would then have the *ta’am* (taste) of *kitniyot* and couldn’t be used for the rest of the week, but I could keep *kitniyot* salads in the refrigerator and have any *kitniyot* eaters use disposable utensils.

When I told my Israeli sister-in-law that I could not cook *kitniyot*, she replied that I should have asked an Israeli rabbi, because the American rabbis are behind the times on the *kitniyot* issue. When I told a fellow JOFA board member about the *p’sak*, she pointed me toward a video put out by Machon Shilo discouraging the *minhag* of avoiding *kitniyot*. Others pointed me to the *p’sak* of Rav Yoel bin Nun allowing *kitniyot* derivatives because they don’t have the appearance of *hametz*.

So should I not have bothered asking in the first place, but just done my own research? Should I have chosen my *posek* based on knowing what he or she would answer? When does each of us choose to ask a *she’eilah*, a question, and to whom? What qualifies someone to be a *posek*? What does it mean to have *semikhah*? This issue of the JOFA Journal explores these questions and related issues.

Women are now forming a cohort of religious leaders in the Orthodox community. Institutions such as Yeshivat Maharat, Nishmat, Midreshet Lindenbaum, the Drisha Institute, the Graduate Program for Women in Advanced

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Belda Lindenbaum, z”l OUR FOUNDER AND SUPERHERO

By Laura Shaw Frank

The Jewish world has lost a great luminary with the passing of Belda Kaufman Lindenbaum, visionary Orthodox feminist activist and indefatigable supporter of Orthodox women’s education. A founding board member of JOFA, past president of the board of Drisha, founding board member of Yeshivat Maharat, and founder of Midreshet Lindenbaum, Belda was larger than life.



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P’sak Halakhah and Women’s Voices

By Dov Linzer

This article is dedicated to the memory of Belda Kaufman Lindenbaum, z”l.

What does it mean to have an inclusive approach toward women and women’s voices in *p’sak halakhah*? The answer is not as simple as some might imagine. At Yeshivat Chovevei Torah (YCT) Rabbinical School, of which I am *rosh hayeshiva*, one of the yeshiva’s core values is “recognizing the need to enhance and expand the role of women in *talmud Torah*, the halakhic process,

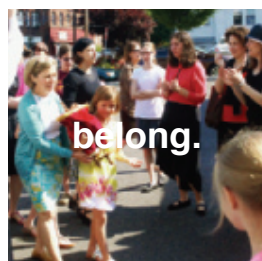
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From Our President, *continued from cover*

Talmudic Study (GPATS) at Yeshiva University, Matan (Women's Institute for Torah Studies), and others are training women to be halakhic and spiritual guides. The next step is to create a professional career path for these women. JOFA is supporting this in two ways: We hope to foster a sense of professional collegiality among the women in the various programs and to partner with communities to find employment for them in synagogues, schools, and institutions. That work has recently begun with the first-ever gathering of Orthodox women clergy from these different programs. Over the coming years, JOFA will continue to provide a platform for these women to collaborate and learn together, while making inroads into the community for career advancement.

Many of these programs (as well as JOFA itself) would not be here today without the vision, support, passion,

and energy of Belda Lindenbaum, *z"l*. Our community is diminished by her loss. On a more personal note, I will miss her sharp sense of humor, her willingness to speak truth to power, and her friendship.

So what did I do about *kitniyot*? Well, I had already asked the question, and therefore I was sticking with the answer. So there I was, in the aisles of the Israeli supermarkets, carefully reading the labels of the products to make sure they had the right *hashgabat*. It certainly led to some head scratching. What, after all, could possibly be *kitniyot* about cumin? And when the label says "kosher for Passover but contains rapeseed oil," what does that mean? Do I use rapeseed oil or not? It turns out it was much harder to keep kosher for Passover in Jerusalem than in Teaneck!

L'shanah haba'ah bi-Yerushalayim hab'nuyah.

P'sak Halakhah, *continued from cover*

religious life, and communal leadership within the bounds of *halakhah*." The key phrase here is "the halakhic process"—for with all of our commitment to inclusiveness, YCT rabbis, myself included, often find ourselves ruling *for* women, identifying opportunities in *halakhah* for their greater ritual participation, but not *with* women, not listening to their voices and directly engaging them in the process of *p'sak*.

To illustrate this point, let me share a story. About seven years ago, the yeshiva moved into a building near Columbia University. As we started the year, we had not yet figured out how to put up a *mehitzah* for *davening* in our *beit midrash* in a way that would both work technically and also run down the center—something that we insist on. A woman from Columbia University started attending our morning *minyan*, standing off to the side. This approach is allowed by Rav Moshe Feinstein in the absence of a *mehitzah* when it occurs only periodically. By the third day, however, it was clear that she was coming on a regular basis and that a *mehitzah* would be necessary. Because we still did not have one for that purpose, I looked around the room and concluded that the best solution would be for her to *daven* in my office, which opened into the *beit midrash*, leaving the door open, so she would not be shut off from the *davening*. I phoned her to explain the problem and my solution, and was duly apologetic for the inconvenience or distress that this might cause her (at the same time probably imagining myself to have been magnanimous in offering her my personal office space). The next day, she came and *davened* in my office, and when the students saw this, they leapt into action and, by the next day, had figured out how to solve the *mehitzah* situation. This was pretty good in the sensitivity and inclusiveness department—so I thought—for me and especially for my students.



Panel of women at YCT discussing children with disabilities; from left to right: Harriet Cabelly, Michal Silton-Kahan, Chana Sommer, and Devorah Zlochower.

However, a few weeks later, I got a call from this woman, asking to come in to speak to me about what had happened. I readily agreed, not knowing what to expect. When we met, she told me that she was deeply disturbed by what had happened. Why? Not because my solution was not the best one possible. Perhaps it was, she said. No, the problem was that I had never once involved *her* in the process. I never called her and said, "Look, here's the problem we have. Here are the parameters we have to work with. Can we think *together* to figure out the best possible solution?"

This moment opened my eyes. It made me realize that however much we rabbis are sensitive and inclusive, it is terribly easy to slide into the role of benevolent despots, ruling unilaterally—with sensitivity and compassion, to be sure—for those who ask us *she'eilot*, but still ruling *for* them, and not *with* them.

Of course, this problem exists when men are the ones asking the questions as well. However, it is exacerbated

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in the case of women, whose voices have never been a part of the conversation, neither as *sho'alot* or as *poskot*.

It doesn't help just to commit to being more conscious and conscientious about this problem. I find that, in a yeshiva of all male students with all male rabbis, I am constantly having to relearn the same lesson. Just this past semester, I gave a course on the history of halakhic debates around women's ritual roles in the synagogue, covering areas such as bat mitzvah, *Kaddish*, and women's prayer groups (with part 2, on partnership *minyanim*, given in the spring). I titled the course "Only Her Voice Was Not Heard: Women in Participatory Roles in the Synagogue." When I shared the syllabus with my wife, Devorah Zlochower, she said to me: "You realize that you have no women's voices in this class. The students are never getting a chance to hear firsthand from women about their experiences." The irony would be humorous, if it were not so sad.

I corrected the situation, and opened the course with a panel of women—Devorah Zlochower, Miriam Schacter, and Rachel Lopatin—sharing their personal experiences and perspectives. But I have needed to relearn this almost tautological lesson again and again: Without the ongoing presence of women's voices, I would not be able to be sufficiently attentive to women's voices. And this ongoing presence could only occur when women become part of the conversation; when they become not only *sho'alot*, but also *poskot*.

Widening the Tapestry of Halakhah

Of course, the need for women as *poskot* goes well beyond this. We need to ensure that those voices and perspectives are part of the process of interpreting, weighing, and applying *halakhah* as well. If we excluded any 50 percent of our population from this role, we would suffer as a result. So many voices, opinions, insights, and considered judgments would never be heard or considered, never be able to be a part of the tapestry of *halakhah*, to enrich it with additional nuance, depth, and subtlety. When that 50 percent is the entire population of women, though, we are depriving ourselves of the particular experiences and perspectives that are uniquely theirs. What does it mean to interpret and rule on halakhic issues around pregnancy and childbirth, taking birth control pills, female infertility, and nursing, if none of those interpreters have ever had these experiences firsthand? These are just some of the more obvious examples.

The reality is that, in a world that is anything but gender blind, even with its egalitarian aspirations, women's experiences in a vast array of situations will differ from those of men. (This is even bracketing the work of Carol Gilligan and others who argue that men and women approach law and ethics in fundamentally different ways.) It is those experiences, and those perspectives, that need to be brought into the process of *p'sak halakhah*.

Certainly, rabbis will be called on to rule on situations that they have never experienced, but it is quite different when an entire class of people does not participate in

a conversation. Consider, for a moment, whether men would be comfortable with the idea of a halakhic system interpreted and shaped by women. Or consider if only celibate single men could *pasken*. Would married men (and women) be comfortable with such a situation? However much we may strive to approach *halakhah* while bracketing our own personal perspectives (and whether this is the ideal is a discussion for another time), the reality is that those perspectives, even unconsciously, shape our reading and interpreting of sources.

Consider the following quote from Rambam, based on the Talmud Sanhedrin:

אין מעמידין בכל הסנהדרין לא זקן מופלג בשנים ולא סריס מפני שיש בהן אכזריות ולא מי שאין לו בנים כדי שיהא רחמן.

One does not appoint to the Sanhedrin either a very elderly person or a eunuch, because they have a certain degree of cruelty. Neither may we appoint someone who has no children, to ensure that he [the judge] will be compassionate.

Laws of Sanhedrin, 2:3

As Rashi explains, the very elderly person "has forgotten the pain of child-rearing, so he will not be compassionate" (Sanhedrin 36b, *s.v. zaken*). *Halakhah* recognizes that different people with different life circumstances will interpret and rule differently. Rulings that affect people's

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lives need voices of compassion, voices that emerge from a wealth of life experiences. When it comes to women, then, we have to ask ourselves: What have we done by excluding their voices from the discourse? Have we protected the system from their perspective, or have we robbed it of such?

In the past, it was not feasible for women to be a part of the halakhic system. They did not have the necessary level of education, and their role in society was such that neither they nor the rabbis could have imagined them playing such a role. However, now that this role is feasible, it becomes a necessity.

My argument is that without women in the role of *poskot*, *halakhah* suffers.

Others will argue the fundamental issues of rights and opportunities, and what it means from a moral perspective to exclude women from a particular professional or religious role. Those arguments are well taken. My argument, however, is that without women in the role of *poskot*, *halakhah* suffers. To correct this, we need more than a few token opportunities; we need to have women's voices as a regular and ongoing part of the discourse and process of *p'sak*.

One might argue that at this moment in history, this article is not necessary. We now have, thank God, not only the programs for *yoatzot halakhah* and *toanot rabbaniyot* in Israel, but also Rabbi Shlomo Riskin's new program for female *dayanot*, and in the United States, Yeshivat Maharat. Women are taking serious positions of communal religious authority—both the maharats and other women in analogous positions in the States, and, in recent and exciting news, Dr. Jennie Rosenfeld as a religious leader in Efrat. However, the halakhic discourse—the writing of responsa and halakhic opinions, whether in written form or on listserves and on the web—is still taking place almost exclusively among men.

Thus, my charge to my fellow male rabbis is that we do everything we can not only to welcome, but also to proactively seek out, support, and encourage, women to be part of the conversation, to get the necessary training, and, if they already have the necessary training, to speak up and write, so that their voices can be heard. My charge to these women is that they invest the time and energy to do so, that they write not only articles and books, but also *teshuvot*, and that they fully embrace the role of *poskot*. And my charge to us as a community is that we find ways—through philanthropy, advocacy, and education—to begin to make this a reality. We owe it not just to our women, but also to *halakhah*.

Rabbi Dov Linzer is rosh hayeshiva of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School in Riverdale, New York.

The Changing Nature of *P'sak* in the Twenty-First Century

By Rachel Kohl Finegold

Imagine you are twenty-one years old and have a halakhic question you'd like to ask your rabbi. But who is *your* rabbi? Is it the rabbi of the *shul* where you grew up, who knew you as a child? He has known your family for decades, but doesn't know you personally very well. Maybe it's the rabbi at your high school with whom you had a close relationship. But it has been many years since you've seen him. There is the rabbi who was your daily "morning *rebbe*" at yeshiva in Israel, who helped you solidify your current religious outlook. But you are no longer in Israel, have not been in touch with him since you left, and are not sure that he understands the nature of your life as a Jewish student on an American secular college campus. Perhaps the person who would most understand the situation is the rabbi of your campus Hillel, who seems great. But you've only heard him speak at the "Pizza and Parsha" program and have never had a substantive conversation with him. You are not sure he even knows your name. In the end, you decide it is easier to try to find an answer online.

The task of "*Aseh lekha rav*" ("Make for yourself a rabbi," *Avot* 1:6) is not simple in the twenty-first century. And lest one think it is difficult only for college students, whose lives are especially transient, imagine what happens after this student graduates. Perhaps she moves into her own apartment with roommates; maybe she lives on the Upper West Side of New York City for a few years (or in a similar community in Chicago, Los Angeles, or Boston). She eventually gets married and moves again while completing her medical residency. Soon after, she will move once or twice more, perhaps for her or her husband's work or for other reasons, until finding the community where she will raise her kids and send them to school. It may be fifteen years after college before she finds a long-term *shul* community and rabbi.

Even in their later years, many Orthodox Jews continue to wonder, "Who is my rabbi?" One woman often calls me with *niddah* questions. She has a rabbi whom she respects and feels comfortable asking her halakhic questions—that is, most of her questions. She calls me only when she has a *niddah* question. I met her once, a couple of years ago, and I have no other relationship with her other than to consult on these questions, although we have developed a relationship in this way. Even someone who has settled into a relationship with a particular rabbi might still have other rabbis (or maharats or halakhic advisors) to whom they turn at particular moments.

What is to become of the rabbinic relationship in the twenty-first century? What can "*Aseh lekha rav*" mean for our changing world? How does this affect what we mean by *p'sak*?

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Factors Contributing to Change in Rabbinic Relationships

There are many factors contributing to the changing nature of rabbinic relationships. Three are discussed here.

Mobility

Asking “Who is my rabbi?” is another way of asking “Who is my community?” This question is far more complex than it was in the *shtetl*, and has changed even more in the past thirty years. Young families often do not settle near their parents or other relatives. Even those who do may find several Jewish communities, and even several Orthodox communities, within a single geographical location.

In this setting, community is a choice—and the choice can be complicated. If you are in the New York metropolitan area, you might rotate *shuls* as often as some people rotate coats of nail polish. People often do not settle on a single community or follow a single rabbinic leadership. However, if you live outside New York or another major metropolitan area, then the chances are that your choices are more limited. You might attend a *shul* that is not the ideal fit but is the closest to what you would really want. You may or may not feel ideologically in step with the rabbinic leadership, just as you may send your child to the only Jewish day school in town because there is no other choice. Even in an age when one’s community and rabbi are choices that people make, some are given more options to choose from than others.

Hence, when asking themselves the question “Who is my rabbi?”, some people will have more than one answer, whereas others may feel that they have no answer at all.

Education

At one time, most lay people did not have the text skills, the time, or the opportunity to acquire their own advanced Jewish knowledge. One would learn how to live a halakhic life mimetically—through watching one’s parents and community members—but not from text. In this world, the rabbi was the key to the world of halakhic text and halakhic decision making.

In a world, however, where lay people are Jewishly educated—and might learn *daf yomi* or even teach a *shiur* themselves—many look up the answers to their own questions. In this setting, what is the role of the rabbi or maharat? First, the answer should not be simply “*muttar*” or “*assur*,” but the rabbi rather should assume a basis of knowledge and discuss the rationale for halakhic decisions. An educated lay person might also be looking for the rabbi to pass along the *mesorah* of his teachers—to convey a worldview and a particular approach to halakhic decision making. When I am approached with a question, I hear my teachers’ and *rebbe*s’ voices in my head, which helps me to think about how to approach the halakhic dilemma. This is what rabbinic training is all about. Lay persons who have book knowledge might be seeking not simply information, which they might find on their own, but rather guidance toward an ideological approach.

Rabbinic guidance also contains a heavy pastoral element, wherein understanding the *sho’el* (questioner) is just as important as understanding the question. The rabbi might need to help someone navigate a complex relationship or a difficult time in her life. This, too, is the role of the rabbi outside the realm of simply looking up the answer in a book.

Autonomy and Individual Empowerment

Ours is a culture that values the autonomy of the individual. I have often heard the remark, “I could predict the answer I was going to get, so I decided not to ask because it wasn’t the answer I wanted.” This, of course, relates to the preceding discussion of the reality that lay people are educated enough to glean information and make their own decisions. But there is also something else at play here. Some who reach their own conclusions might suspect that their rabbi’s answer will be different from their own.

This means that people might *pasken* for themselves, even when they assume that their rabbi would disagree. What lies beneath this decision not to ask? It is possible that this individual values her own autonomy over rabbinic authority. Perhaps she would not directly disobey a rabbinic *p’sak*, so the choice not to ask allows the individual to sustain her autonomy without directly shirking rabbinic authority: Better not to ask rather than to disobey directly.

The decision not to ask is tragic, for a number of reasons. First, people who *pasken* for themselves often come up with a more stringent answer than their rabbi might give them. They might be unnecessarily restricting themselves, and asking would give them a more lenient answer. This is very often in the case in questions of *niddah* that I have dealt with.

Furthermore, if someone suspects that she knows the rabbi’s answer without even asking, this means that she assumes she will be getting a pat answer, not one that speaks to her personally. Someone who feels that the answer will not suit her needs probably feels that her rabbi doesn’t know her well and will not take the time to understand where she is coming from.

Refraining from asking is most unfortunate because it prevents a relationship from developing—it prevents the process of “*aseh lekha rav*” for someone who has not yet secured that relationship.

Developing a Connection between the Sho’el and Meshiv

P’sak in the twenty-first century must focus first and foremost on the development of a connection between the *sho’el* and the *meshiv*, the questioner and the responder. Especially in an exceptionally mobile society, and in a setting where people prize their ability to find their own answers, religious leaders must prioritize the rabbinic relationship. For even the most knowledgeable Jew, there are times in life when she seeks religious guidance. It is then that she must have the confidence that a question will not simply be answered in a yes/no manner, but that

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RUPTURE AND REPAIR: Responding to Breaches of Trust in Rabbinic Authority

By Michelle Friedman

I was honored to be invited to spend a Shabbat as resident scholar at Keshet Israel in Washington, D.C., shortly after that community was catapulted into the Jewish media spotlight. Keshet's rabbi, Barry Freundel, had been charged with serious allegations that besmirched his role as a spiritual leader and violated the trust of his congregants. The goal of my visit, as a psychiatrist and pastoral counseling teacher, was to help the community process its recent trauma and move forward.

In preparing to meet the community, I focused on pathways from trauma to recovery. My talks and spontaneous one-on-one conversations were informed by my professional background in psychodynamic understanding of human experience, my knowledge of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and my faith in the deep understanding that our Jewish tradition has regarding human conflict and the capacity for resolution. I felt fortunate that Dr. Rachel Yehuda, my good friend and co-author of our forthcoming book on pastoral counseling, is one of the world's foremost experts on the subject. Most PTSD research has been gleaned from the aftermath of severe catastrophe. People who experience natural disasters such as floods and fires can experience serious anxiety, nightmares, and physical symptoms. Those who survive human-caused devastation, such as 9/11 or war horrors, suffer even more. Researchers and clinicians know that in addition to providing basic needs for those who live

through trauma, it is crucial that victims resume their normal routines and identities. One of the most important roles of aid workers is to validate survivors' experiences and support their natural resilience.

Diverse Responses

I knew that the Keshet community was dealing with a different kind of trauma. Everyone had shelter and food. Their tsunami was emotional—the trauma that follows the loss of an ideal, the betrayal of trust. My role was to hear congregants' diverse responses, whether anger, grief or mistrust. Each member had his or her own story and his or her own coping style. Walking into *shul* on Friday evening, I heard the melodious sound of spirited *davening*. This vibrancy continued throughout Shabbat. Members of the *kehillah*, functioning with dignity and competence, led prayer services and facilitated basic functions such as setting up meals and running programs. Clearly, even though Keshet had suffered a major rupture, it was a vibrant, functional community.



Keshet Israel, Washington, D.C.

My training as a psychoanalyst helped me to frame Keshet's trauma of rabbinic leadership by using the emotional language of persons who were abused as children. Individuals were struggling with mixed feelings toward Rabbi Freundel. Some had been his congregants for decades, others for a much shorter time. These included mature *ba'alei batim* who had grown up *frum*, people who were not particular acolytes of his, as well as younger members and certainly those who came into Judaism as converts or *ba'alei teshuva* under his influence. For some, the rupture created a sense of shakiness with their spiritual foundations and doubt as to the authenticity of their religious practice. I suggested an analogy to the experience of growing up with an abusive parent. Even when there is great pain, that parent is still the only mother or father the abused person has known. The child associates security, love, and comfort with that parent, as well as cruelty or other misuse. The takeaway for Keshet was to extend compassion to one another for all kinds of feelings that might arise. People might feel furious with Rabbi Freundel but also inspired by the Torah they had learned with him. They might feel betrayed but also grateful for kindnesses he had extended in the past.

An especially poignant question was: "What should we call him now?" That meant how to refer to him in e-mails and conversations with one another. Some people felt uncomfortable using the honored title "rabbi," whereas others felt that using only his given name was

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the leader will take the time to understand where the questioner is coming from, what the surrounding situation is, and to give a sensitive answer that will enhance the individual's Judaism. That means not that the answer will always be "*muttar*," but that it will be a sensitive and nuanced response that upholds the questioner's dignity, knowledge, and empowerment.

An empowering and sensitive *p'sak* is the only *p'sak* that can remain relevant as we move into the future. And it is the only *p'sak* that will encourage people, whether aged twenty-one or ninety-one, to keep asking their questions.

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Rupture and Repair, continued from page 7

not something they had done in the past and did not feel right now. I suggested that Keshet congregants continue to say or write "Rabbi Freundel." I analogized that when physicians lose their license or lawyers are disbarred, they lose the right to practice, but not the acknowledgment of their education or professional experience. I felt that this was a way to honor congregants' past and current relationships to their religious lives, of which Rabbi Freundel was one guide, albeit a deeply disappointing one. The flow of Jewish life goes beyond the power of one individual. Furthermore, avoidance of the title "rabbi," in situations where it would have been used in the past, feeds into the myth that "real" rabbis are immune to heinous behavior. The point that I was making was that Rabbi Freundel was and is a "real" rabbi, and that a certain percentage of all people, even clergy, have a preexisting problem, get into bad places, fall into temptation, and abuse their power. I anticipated that Keshet congregants might feel besieged by questions doubting their own judgment, such as, "Didn't you see anything wrong?" or "How could this happen?" We talked about various responses to these feelings.

Looking toward the Future

At the same time, in keeping with trauma recovery, I urged the congregants to recognize the importance of continuing their normal routines and reclaiming activities and spaces that might feel tainted. This especially applied to conversion processes and to the *mikveh*, about which so much has been written.

Looking toward the future, I encouraged the community to use their painful experiences to inform the process of selecting a new spiritual leader. They would need to query applicants closely and to feel that candidates have psychological sensitivity, in addition to rigorous learning, and are well trained in pastoral counseling.

I was fortunate to visit Keshet Israel on the Shabbat of *Parashat Vayishlah*. The *parasha* is replete with stories of conflict and resolution. On Shabbat morning I focused on the narratives of Yaakov and Eisav and of Dina and Shechem. Here, among many other messages, the Torah teaches us how the inherent turbulence of human conflict wells up into every facet of life, until some kind of resolution is achieved. I closed my *d'var Torah* by looking forward to the story of Yehuda and Tamar, when Yehuda puts an end to the earlier cycle of violence by taking responsibility for his own actions and hasty misjudgments.

Keshet Israel will heal and go forward. May other ruptures of rabbinic authority be met similarly with community humility, compassion, and competence. May we choose our spiritual leaders wisely and support their service to *klal Yisrael*.

Michelle Friedman, M.D., is director of pastoral counseling at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School.

GRASSROOTS CHANGE BEGINS IN THE MIKVEH: The Story of the Eden Center

By Naomi Marmon Grumet

Change happens in many ways. Sometimes it is through the bravery of leaders who fight for rights and bring about change by inspiring a movement. Sometimes there is a violent revolution that brings about rapid, drastic change. Sometimes there is a grassroots movement, where the masses demand that change take place. Eden is part of a quiet grassroots revolution that is happening with regard to *mikveh*. It is part of the movement for women's empowerment in the Orthodox world, of taking back our sacred institutions, and making them places where we feel safe and that answer our needs and mores as modern women.

In 2009, as part of my doctoral research in sociology, I interviewed married men and women from *mikveh*-observant couples to understand how Modern Orthodox couples practice the laws of *niddah*, how they think it affects them and their relationships, and ways in which it intersects with their identities. Through this research I began to understand the ways in which observance of *mikveh* can inform women's connection to their bodies, to fertility, to sexuality, to ritual, and even to God. I came to understand the centrality of *mikveh* from a feminist point of view, as a tradition mediated, arbitrated, and maintained by women. I saw how observance of *niddah* may highlight difficulties, tensions, or crises in the most intimate, often unspoken, areas of life, such as miscarriage, marital strife, or negative body image. And I came to see the physical space of the *mikveh* as a tangible reflection of women's status in the Jewish world, expressing much about women's value and worth in the eyes of the community.

A Place by Women and for Women

As I began to share my research findings, I found others who joined in my passion for reinvigorating the *mikveh* as a greater resource, a place whose physical space reflects our beauty and worth as women and whose services provide a holistic Jewish response for body, mind, and soul. Out of these connections, Eden was founded in 2010 by women for women, with the goal of augmenting Jewish women's health and well-being through the *mikveh*.

Eden imagines the *mikveh* as a focal point for addressing a variety of dynamics related to the Jewish woman and family, including intimacy and healthy relationships; infertility and miscarriage; healthy body image; sexual, physical, and mental abuse; and women's health. As a Jerusalem-based initiative, we ultimately hope to create a *mikveh*-spa-women's center that will become a new model for a *mikveh*, combining educational, health, and support services, to turn this uniquely Jewish, female space into a women's resource center.

Eden's primary focus today is on educational programming and advocacy, aiming to make the experience

around *mikveh* more positive in several ways. We are now embarking on an intensive training program to create a cadre of *hatan* (prospective bridegroom) teachers who share our vision of shared responsibility in the realm of marital intimacy. In parallel, we offer supplementary training to experienced *kallah* (prospective bride) teachers to give them broad knowledge and confidence to address issues of intimacy and healthy relationships. This comprehensive program includes a range of topics related to sexuality, pleasure, and desire, as well as body image, abuse, common fears, and red flags. It also addresses birth control, miscarriage, infertility treatments, and their effects on couples. We are very proud that several *yoatzot halakhah* (halakhic advisors) are among our graduates. They are now able to connect their halakhic knowledge with general knowledge about sexuality to assist women in a much broader way.



Tsofit Golan speaks to a group of *mikveh* attendants about the challenges of *mikveh* for disabled women.

Since 2010, Eden has reached more than 2,000 people directly and another 48,000 people indirectly, through professional training courses, support groups, lectures for the general public on issues of women's health and sexuality, and a community advocacy campaign. We have broached sensitive topics including menopause, birth control, speaking with children about intimacy, fetal loss, and spiritual aspects of *mikveh*. Based on academic research that has shown the *mikveh* to be a powerful medium for allowing a space to connect in a meaningful and uniquely female way to spiritual aspects of our lives, we see the *mikveh* as a key resource for reaching out to Jewish women.

Program for Mikveh Attendants

In 2012 Eden developed a comprehensive program for Israeli *mikveh* attendants, who are an untapped resource as first responders for women's health and crisis intervention. The course, which we are currently working to adapt to bring to communities in the United States, educates *mikveh* attendants to know how to identify

continued on page 10

crisis issues and connect women to professionals who can help them appropriately. Our program has rabbinic support across a wide range of communities, from hasidic rabbis to Rav Avraham Yosef, Rav Zalman Nechemia Goldberg, Rav Yaakov Meidan, and Rav Yitzhak Breitowitz (among others). It covers topics from abuse and domestic violence, post-partum depression, breast health, and infertility, to communication and sensitivity and issues of physical, emotional, and sexual health. It instills awareness and teaches tools to identify issues. It encourages *mikveh* attendants to reach out to women in need, to advocate for intervention, and to know where to refer women. We have run the course in conjunction with local religious councils from the Golan to Holon. The course methodology, built on the model of facilitated group learning, empowers attendants to shift their vision of themselves into much broader communal resources.

A well-informed, well-trained attendant can be an agent of change and awareness within segments of the population that are generally inaccessible, such as ultra-Orthodox and hasidic communities, particularly regarding abuse and breast examinations. This is exactly what happened in one of our first courses: One *mikveh* lady, “Malkie,” was working in the *mikveh* when a woman came in who didn’t make eye contact even when addressed directly. As a result of attending our course, Malkie recognized this as a potential warning sign. Before the woman left, Malkie took her aside and said, “I feel that something is bothering you. Is everything okay?” When the woman brushed it off, Malkie said, “I’m here to listen if you want to share. You shouldn’t go home from the *mikveh* feeling upset.” By sensitively raising a question and leaving the space to talk, Malkie discovered that the woman’s husband, a well-known ultra-Orthodox rabbi, beat her and their nine children. The woman confided that she had never shared this before, both because she felt she would not be believed because of her husband’s stature, and for fear that it might harm her children’s *shiddukh* chances. Malkie was the first person ever to reach out to her. Malkie reassured the woman that she didn’t have to go through this by herself and gave her the number of the Crisis Center for Religious Women, where she could speak anonymously to someone. The woman, who said she never knew of the existence of the center, was very thankful and took the number.

Graduates of Eden’s *mikveh* attendant training report feeling empowered in new ways, as expressed by one participant, Gila: “I’ve been a *mikveh* lady for twenty-five years. ... This course helped me to look at my job in a new light, and realize that I can make a significant difference. ... In the past, if a woman came to us suffering from postpartum depression, we’d give her a cup of water, and make sure she didn’t have any *hatzitzot* [physical obstacles to be removed before immersion], but we never knew that we could send her to Nitza (the Israel Center for Maternal Health). If we came across an abused woman, we recoiled. And if a mother of a bride told us that the bride had previously been raped, we didn’t know

that there is an organization that can help and support such women, so that that young bride can really build her new house without that hanging over her. Today, we know better how to handle these situations, how we can really help women in the community in a pleasant, quiet way, sometimes with just a phone number.”

Creating Sensitivity

The success of the program is as much about creating sensitivity as it is about referral. For example, one attendant told us that the course had changed her overall approach to being a *mikveh* attendant: “I used to see it as my responsibility to make sure everything was okay. To check that everything was up to standard. The course switched my thinking; this is actually the woman’s *mitzvah*, and I am here to help her, not to impose my standards. I learned to relax, to go by her cue, and recognize that it’s ultimately her responsibility to fulfill the *mitzvah*, and I’m here to facilitate it.”

Likewise, course participants become more sensitive to issues of privacy and boundaries. One issue that has arisen several times has to do with asking for a ride home. Often, attendants ask a *tovelet* (an immersing woman) for a ride at the end of the evening. Many ask when she is still in the *mikveh* or as she is just coming out. After a discussion about vulnerability, power relations, and boundaries, attendants in several courses decided to try making their requests after the woman had dressed and was passing the reception desk on her way out. Attendants have been pleasantly surprised at the positive reactions of women who say that they would be happy to give a ride, but feel more respected and gracious at being asked in way that gives them space, allows for the sanctity of the moment, and leaves open the possibility of saying no.

Seven successful programs have graduated 140 attendants throughout Israel—who ultimately will serve tens of thousands of women.

As we work to bring the attendant program to more communities around the world, we encourage each community to think about how to enable women (and men) to feel safe and reach out to its members in times of need. Whether people have questions about abuse, cycles, relationships, or other sensitive subject matters, they deserve a *mikveh* that can provide for them and be a safe place to bear their burdens.

We are doing our best to create change around *mikveh* because it is a beautiful ritual, something to be proud of, and something that Jewish women have always treasured. *Mikveh* will continue to preserve and nurture our heritage for generations to come, but it will impact us all the more profoundly if we update it by being sensitive to the needs of women and communities today.

Dr. Naomi Marmon Grumet is the founder of the Eden Center and director of the Training Program for Mikveh Attendants. She received her Ph.D. in sociology from Bar-Ilan University and lives in Jerusalem with her husband and three children.

DEMOCRATIZATION OF HALAKHIC AUTHORITY: Opportunities and Challenges

By Shmuel Klitsner

We Jews—and, in particular, we Orthodox Jews—tend to think that it's all about us. We labor under the illusion that we are an autonomous society, immune from external cultural trends and changes. However, when examining the changing nature of rabbinic authority in the twenty-first century, we must take into account a few significant worldwide trends that contribute to a democratization of *halakhah*. This shift, I argue, is a welcome, though challenging, development.

Halakhic Information at One's Fingertips

First, the Internet, humanity's number one source of information, has had a profound impact on the way we access halakhic information. Vast amounts of halakhic knowledge are now stored electronically and are easily retrievable by powerful, user-friendly software. Perhaps the most consulted *posek* today is "Rabbeinu Google."

Now that information is so readily attainable from intelligent software, many well-educated Modern Orthodox types—those who tend to ask halakhic questions—look differently at their *poskim*. Rather than seeking authorities who have committed vast libraries of halakhic precedents to memory, this public looks for thinkers who bring profundity and creativity to their analysis of halakhic material.

Group P'sak

The halakhic world has been affected by general democratizing trends in another significant way: Increasingly, wisdom is sought from a cooperative, Wikipedia-type model. In Israel, this new model of halakhic discourse is best represented by the three-year-old Beit Hillel forum, in which religious Zionist scholars (both men and women) conduct ongoing discussions of the most pressing issues in Israeli life, along with their halakhic ramifications. In addition to the vibrant discussions in the closed-membership web forum, there are periodic *beit midrash* sessions for joint learning. These sessions have an ultimate goal of producing position papers and *piskei halakhah*. This is a fascinating new phenomenon—with its own considerable procedural and substantive challenges—of group *p'sak*.

I would distinguish here between two uses of the term *p'sak*: The more colloquial use of the term refers to a simple matter whereby a rabbi refers a constituent to a previously decided *halakhah*; this process involves very little need to compare the nuances of one situation to another (*le-damot milta l'milta*). There is another kind of *p'sak*, however, that requires that rare rabbi of rabbis who has the knowledge, the learned followers, and the broad vision to issue new rulings. It is to this latter type of *p'sak*, and this higher level of authority, that the learned and inclusive scholars of Beit Hillel turn their collective attention. Because of their high regard for their female colleagues' views, they actively include these women's voices in the process.

Inclusion of Women's Voices

The ramifications of the inclusion of women's voices in the great, ongoing two-thousand-year-old halakhic conversation are astonishing and promising. Two factors have contributed to making this welcome development possible.

First, usually in the past, a lone *posek*—always male and almost always above the age of sixty—sat in his study and penned responsa. His writings were given credence and authority because of his proven prowess and perseverance in mastering the vast literature. It might have taken another twenty-five to a hundred years under the old model for one or two exceptional women to reach the status of halakhic master. Consider that from tens of thousands of men who dedicate their days and nights to Talmud study for many decades, only a handful of *poskim* emerge. Given that statistical model, is it likely that the fairly new phenomenon of women dedicating multiple years to Talmud study will soon produce a *poseket* of stature? However, this model now exists in tandem with another model, in which a group of talented, albeit lesser scholars—both male and female—express an opinion in a collective effort.

Second, we have recently begun to see a number of programs offering advanced halakhic training for women. These programs, on both sides of the Atlantic, accept women with previous years of learning in Talmud and train them in the intricacies and unique language of halakhic discourse. I am proud to be the director of one of the most intense of such programs: the Susi Bradfield Women's Institute for Halakhic Leadership at Ohr Torah Stone's Midreshet Lindenbaum in Jerusalem. Women

Most recently, Dr. Jennie Rosenfeld has been appointed a spiritual leader in Efrat by Rabbi Shlomo Riskin.

enter the program after having completed multi-year, full-time Talmudic study; they then embark upon and complete a five-year learning program. Their curriculum is almost exclusively focused on in-depth learning of the codes, commentaries, responsa literature, and court decisions, and ultimately leads to *semikhah*. This *semikhah*, like male *semikhah*, certifies the basic knowledge required to answer halakhic queries of the first type mentioned, as well as indicating that the bearer has entered the portal toward having the capability to compare a new case to its precedents and suggesting new halakhic ground. Indeed, two of our outstanding *musmakhot* (graduates) have recently published a small volume of their own halakhic responsa. They and several other learned women are those who participate in the Beit Hillel halakhic forums.

Most recently, another of our students, Dr. Jennie

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Opportunities, continued from page 11

Rosenfeld, has been appointed a spiritual leader in Efrat by the city's chief rabbi, Rabbi Shlomo Riskin. She is already providing guidance to individuals who apparently have been waiting for such an address; her guidance involves both halakhic and pastoral sensitivity.

The Global versus the Individual

Although many other factors have a democratizing effect on halakhic authority, I'd like to point to one other trend that also has its roots in the universal and affects our inner world: We live in an age in which the corporate—that is, the communal or denominational—sense of belonging is no longer the dominant feature of our identity. Identities now tend to be global or individual, as communal loyalties give way to a demand for personal meaning and relevance. This universalizing trend provides a great challenge for Jewish educational strategists in general; it is even more challenging to organizations like JOFA that are committed to Jewish continuity while at the same time welcoming outside influences that are seen as positive into our lives.

With all its complexities, the trend toward the global and the personal nonetheless contributes significantly to an incremental democratization of rabbinic authority. The new generation of Modern Orthodox Jews often judges halakhic possibilities presented by scholars in a new way: not on the basis of the author's credentials or denominational standing, but on the basis of the coherence and relevance of the analysis of halakhic precedents and how these precedents interact with an ever-changing reality.

A few communities are willing to accept innovations based on this type of grassroots scholarship. Many

Modern Orthodox communities resist this at present, but they too insist on having mainstream rabbinic authorities at least respond to suggestions and engage in conversation with them.

One of the key challenges is what Alexis de Tocqueville would have us consider with regard to *all* processes of democratization: How are we to maintain an excellence, and a complex thinking worthy of meeting the complexity of life in all its fullness, without risking the pitfalls of mediocrity and reductionism to the lowest common denominator that often attend the shift from elite hierarchies to inclusive democratization?

From what I have witnessed so far with regard to both Wikipedia and Beit Hillel, I am optimistic. As long as the standards of scholarship remain high and our communal institutions foster integrity and humility, we need not fear the opening of the doors—or virtual windows—of the *beit midrash*. Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria understood the need for democratization in the time of Rabban Gamliel and saw it as an opportunity for more Torah and more rank-and-file attachment to learning and observance. Today this trend is happening on its own. We can embrace it and navigate its flow, or we can engage in a futile effort to stem the tide of historical processes.

Rabbi Shmuel Klitsner, author of Wrestling Jacob: Deception, Identity, and Freudian Slips in Genesis, has taught Bible and Talmud for the past twenty-seven years at Jerusalem's Midreshet Lindenbaum and has been involved in innovative educational projects including the award-winning Hanukkah animation Lights. He is presently the director of Midreshet Lindenbaum's Women's Institute for Halakhic Leadership.



JOFA Online

The conversation continues around the clock and throughout the year on social media and the JOFA homepage.

The Torch blog has new content added every week: jofa.org/blog



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Belda Lindenbaum, z"l, continued from cover



Belda Lindenbaum approaching the Torah at the dedication of JOFA's Torah Lending Project.

Nothing was impossible if Belda was involved. She was undaunted. Whether it was organizing a conference or a dinner, obtaining a large financial gift from a reluctant donor, or going to speak with an important rabbi about a controversial subject, Belda was the one you wanted on your side. Scholar, teacher, philanthropist, fundraiser, mentor, and leader, she lived her life with dignity, integrity, and vigor, always striving to chart a new and brighter future for Orthodox girls and women.

Belda's work on the JOFA board was legendary. Level-headed and plain-spoken, Belda always said it straight. She always pushed us forward, giving us the courage to continue our fight to expand roles for women in Orthodox Judaism and to create a richer and more vibrant Orthodoxy for the future. She never let us devolve into fear of opposition or retribution. She would calmly articulate the justice of our cause; her steely resolve and wise counsel would give all of us strength. She lived her values and served as an example to all of us, fighting for her name to be included in her children's *ketubot* and serving as *sandeket* at the *brit milah* of her grandson. She spoke truth to power, all five elegant feet of her. Oh, she was fierce!

Belda devoted her life to building a brighter and more inclusive future for the Orthodox Judaism she loved so dearly.

And she loved as fiercely as she fought. Belda was my mentor and friend for more than twenty-five years. I first met her when I was a college student in the late 1980s. In those days, it was still unusual for an Orthodox woman to know how to read Torah. Belda and her sister, Carol, recruited me, an unknown Columbia student, to *layn* for their Upper East Side women's *tefillah* group. I don't really remember the *layning*, but what I do remember is the Shabbat lunches at Belda's home afterward. I remember feeling enveloped with warmth and inspired by the heady conversation taking place around me. The spark of Orthodox feminism was kindled in my heart during those Shabbat lunches at Belda's gracious dining room table. Since that time, Belda never stopped cheering me on. She encouraged me and celebrated my achievements

at every opportunity. In the hours after her death, as dozens of women posted, emailed, and spoke about her, it was awe-inspiring to see how many other women she had supported and championed. Over and over, women said, "She believed in me; she pushed me to become all that I could be." No small part of the legacy she leaves on this earth is her nurturing and mentorship of generations of Orthodox women leaders.

Belda was our superhero. She gave of herself in every way she could. She devoted her life to building a brighter and more inclusive future for the Orthodox Judaism she loved so dearly. Through her philanthropy and the tireless work of her hands, she built institutions and organizations that permanently transformed the landscape of Orthodox women's education and leadership. She nurtured the leaders of the present and the future with her wisdom and love. The Jewish world is immeasurably enriched due to her time on this earth. We will never stop missing her; our only comfort is knowing that her legacy will truly last forever.

May Belda's beloved husband, children, grandchildren, sister, and brother be comforted among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem. *Yehi zikhra barukh*—may her memory be a blessing.

Laura Shaw Frank, a member of the JOFA Executive Board, teaches history at SAR High School in Riverdale, NY.

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Campus Leaders Shabbaton

On Shabbat *Parashat Beshalah*, thirty-seven college students from seventeen campuses joined JOFA in Riverdale for a leadership *shabbaton*. The event was open to undergraduate women and men who are passionate about advocating for Orthodox feminism on campus. It provided a unique and powerful opportunity for Orthodox feminists from different campuses to come together, network, learn more about JOFA and Orthodox feminism, and discuss ways to create change in their campus communities. All students who attended the JOFA *shabbaton* were eligible for micro-grants to support programming on their campuses for the spring semester of 2015. To date, micro-grants have supported programming at Barnard College, Brandeis University, Princeton University, Stern College, and the University of Pennsylvania.

Students came from Barnard College, Brandeis University, Columbia University, Harvard University, Johns Hopkins University, McGill University, MIT, Northwestern University, NYU, Princeton University, Sheirut Leumi in Israel, Stern College, Stony Brook University, Temple University, University of Bristol (UK), University of Pennsylvania, and Yeshiva University.



JOFA Dinner: CELEBRATING EIGHTEEN YEARS OF CHANGING LIVES

It is hard to believe that it has been eighteen years since a group of women gathered in Blu Greenberg's living room and first dreamed of JOFA. On Sunday, November 15, a gala dinner will pay tribute to the extraordinary individuals and communities that have been transformed since JOFA's inception. From women reciting Kiddush at their Shabbat tables to reciting Kaddish for loved ones in synagogue, changing norms in the Orthodox community testify to the impact of JOFA. After eighteen years of progress, we can reflect on the new reality of empowered women who serve as leaders and agents of Jewish ritual in the Orthodox community.

From learning institutions now certifying and confirming women as halakhic leaders, to *batei din* freeing *agunot*, to communities honoring women with *kibbudim* at their bat mitzvahs, weddings, and Shabbat services, a new world has been created for our children—an Orthodox community in which women and men work together as valued partners. Our lives and the lives of our children and grandchildren will be qualitatively different because of the efforts of the women and men who are a part of this movement.

We are pleased to honor the following individuals on this special occasion:

Monique (Nicky) Katz, M.D., and **Gail A. Katz** are a mother-daughter pair whose contributions to JOFA can hardly be measured. Both have served for years on the JOFA

Board of Directors, and in tandem have been responsible for the creation and ongoing success of the *Ta Sh'ma* Halakhic Monograph series. These publications provide an in-depth scholarly look at halakhic topics that affect women's obligations and involvement in Jewish ritual life. This program is one of many in which the Katz family has been committed to connecting Jews with educational resources. Monique is also very involved at the Frisch School, Yeshiva University, and Bar-Ilan University. Gail has been a chair of JOFA conferences in New York and California, and they have both dedicated countless hours to the Orthodox feminist movement.

Audrey Axelrod Trachtman and **Dr. Chaim Trachtman** are a model JOFA couple. Over the past dozen years, they have served in numerous roles throughout the organization, but most significantly, they have built a home and raised a family rooted in the values of Judaism, feminism, and equality. Most recently, Audrey served as JOFA's interim executive director for six months, drawing on her past experience as board treasurer, vice president, and conference chair on more than one occasion. Chaim is a regular contributor to JOFA's blog, *The Torch*, and served as editor for the expansive work exploring the halakhic considerations of partnership minyanim, *Women and Men in Communal Prayer*. Their shared commitment to this cause and a values-infused life serves as a model to us all.

Rabbi Dr. Daniel Sperber is a pioneering voice for gender equity within Orthodoxy. A professor of Talmud at Bar-Ilan University, he has developed an independent halakhic style defined by authenticity to the sources and indifference to political forces. His teachings have served as a foundation for building an Orthodox Jewish community that is inclusive of women in leadership roles and ritual observance. He has taught at numerous

JOFA conferences and contributed significantly to *Women and Men in Communal Prayer*. Among his many accomplishments, Rabbi Sperber was awarded the Israel Prize for Jewish Studies in 1992.

We hope you can join us at this eighteenth anniversary celebration. For more information, please visit www.JOFA.org/dinner.

Recent Highlights from



The Torch Blog explores gender and religion in the Jewish community. Visit the blog at www.jofa.org/blog for fresh Orthodox feminist content. New blogs are posted every week. Submissions are welcome!

My Daughter's in the 4th Grade... And I'm Planning Her Bat Mitzvah

Pam Greenwood

A mother realizes that the small steps building up to her daughter's bat mitzvah begin well before her eleventh birthday.

Forget the Man, Fix the System

Chava Evans

A Maharat student refocuses the discussion following the Freundel revelations away from the crimes of one man, and toward the systemic problems in how mikvaot are operated, conversions are handled, and more.

The Year I Missed Simchat Torah

Nini Slochowsky

Celebrating the same holiday over the years, and in various communities, can yield vastly different experiences.

Lonely in a Crowd of Strollers

Rachel and William Adler

One couple's struggle with infertility is exacerbated by a feeling that they weren't fully integrated into the community because they didn't have children.

Challenging our Assumptions about Women's Inclusion

Daniel Atwood

After leading a mincha service at a conference, the author decides that he will "not assume that women are excluded from anything and everything unless told otherwise."

My #OrthodoxFeministMoment

Laura Shaw Frank

After teaching her son how to chant Megillah, a mother realizes that we all have an Orthodox feminist moment worth sharing.

The Joy of Text

Dr. Bat Sheva Marcus, founding JOFA board member, and Rabbi Dov Linzer, *rosh yeshiva* of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School, have teamed up to create a podcast exploring the intersection of sexuality and *halakhah*. This podcast, produced by Jewish Public Media, is a monthly show in which the hosts explore topics, interview guests, and answer questions from the audience. In conversations hosted by Ramie Smith (Yeshivat Maharat '16), they have explored subjects such as demystifying virginity, fantasy in the bedroom, and talking to children about the *mikveh*.

Dr. Marcus explained, "The goal is to bring these topics out of the dark so [we can] talk and laugh about them. Sex doesn't have to be such a hush-hush, heavy topic—it can be fun."

We hope that these episodes will not only be enjoyed privately by observant Jews, but that they will also spark conversations among communities and rabbis around the world.

You can subscribe to The Joy of Text, and listen to all past episodes, by visiting www.TJOT.org.



AN APPRECIATION: Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, zt"l

By Karen Miller Jackson



Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, zt"l

Shortly before this journal went to print, the Modern Orthodox world heard that Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, zt"l, had passed away. Given that this *JOFA Journal* is about the nature of halakhic authority, it seemed appropriate to write about the Modern Orthodox world's leading Torah scholar and educator and the influence Rav Lichtenstein had on Orthodox feminism. As the only member of the *JOFA Journal* editorial board living in Israel, I was given this challenge.

Rav Lichtenstein was a unique combination: a great talmudic scholar who also held a Ph.D. in English literature from Harvard. He was the recipient of the prestigious Israel Prize just one year ago. He moved to Israel in 1971 to join Rav Yehuda Amital in heading Yeshivat Har Etzion, which has graduated many Modern Orthodox leaders in Israel and beyond.

There will be many *hespedim* (eulogies) and memoirs published by students and family members who knew Rav Lichtenstein well. I met Rav Aharon (as his students fondly refer to him) only once, but his influence on the world of women's *batei midrash* where I have studied was tremendous. Whether I was learning in Matan, Midreshet Lindenbaum, or Drisha on the other side of the ocean, almost all my teachers were students of Rav Aharon Lichtenstein. When I studied at Lindenbaum, both of his daughters were part of my *beit midrash* experience. Rav Lichtenstein's older daughter, Esti Rosenberg, directed the Israeli program; she has since gone on to establish Migdal Oz, a *beit midrash* for women known for its intense learning of Talmud and *halakhah*. His younger daughter, Toni Mittelman, studied in Lindenbaum at the same time as I did. She too has gone on to teach Talmud in Midreshet Amit Be'er, located in Yeruham.

At Rav Lichtenstein's funeral, all six of his children delivered *hespedim*. Six sons and daughters alike stood at the podium in the men's *beit midrash* and spoke about their father's Torah, his *middot* (fine qualities), and his devotion to family. This seamless consistency was a testament to the message Rav Aharon and his wife, Tova Lichtenstein, instilled in their family regarding Torah study: For men and women alike, Torah study is the ultimate value. As Esti Rosenberg said so beautifully:

"מודה לך בשם בנות ישראל על סיועך בפתיחת שער ללימוד תורה לבנות ישראל."

"I thank you in the name of the daughters of Israel for your assistance in opening the gates of Torah learning to the daughters of Israel."

Some feminist voices may have asked to see and hear more from Rav Aharon, but it seems appropriate now to appreciate what we received—namely, the message that girls and women should aim high in their learning and know that, if they study Torah, they too can be great Torah scholars. This is certainly not a given for many girls at this time. No doubt these values were due in part to the influence of Rav Lichtenstein's wife, Dr. Tova Lichtenstein, the daughter of Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik.

On a personal note, my husband and I met with Rav Lichtenstein just before we got married seventeen years ago. We had some significant halakhic questions, which we wanted to discuss with a *posek* who understood the modern world we lived in. I was, of course, quite intimidated as we entered the study of this intellectual Torah giant. However, Rav Aharon was patient and understanding. He did not just give straight answers. Instead, he discussed (in fact, recounted with ease) the relevant sources with both of us. It was clearly important that, beyond a *p'sak*, Rav Lichtenstein wanted us to know and understand the sources.

The influence of Rav Lichtenstein, zt"l, influence on Torah study for women may not have been overt and was conducted in a quiet way. Yet, the message that high-level women's Torah education is essential was conveyed to his rabbinical students and was demonstrated most clearly by the way he educated his daughters—two female Torah leaders who followed their father's example.

May the memory of Rav Lichtenstein zt"l be for a blessing through his many *talmidim*, as well as the *talmidot*, who were influenced by his teachings.

Karen Miller Jackson is a Jewish educator and writer living in Ra'anana, Israel. She teaches at Matan HaSharon and is founder of Sherutech, a guidance program for girls before national/army service. Karen is on the board of Kolech and the editorial board of the JOFA Journal.

“No Voice, No Vote”

A CAMPAIGN TO ALLOW HAREIDI WOMEN'S VOICES TO BE HEARD

By Tali Farkash

If you followed the recent elections in Israel, you could not have missed the “No Voice, No Vote” campaign. The campaign started as part of the efforts of a group of *hareidi* feminists to put the lack of representation of *hareidi* women in the Israeli Knesset on the national agenda.

In fact, the “No Voice, No Vote” campaign began during the previous Knesset elections, which took place two years ago, through a Facebook initiative undertaken by my friend and colleague Esti Shoshan. Esti and I, together with several other *hareidi* women, came together to try to raise public awareness of the lack of representation of *hareidi* women in the Knesset. Regretfully, the topic did not receive the public attention that we sought.

In the run-up to the recent elections, when the decision was announced to dissolve the Knesset and to call for new elections, Esti asked me whether I thought it would be worthwhile to try to bring the subject up for discussion again. My response was, of course, positive, so what began as a Facebook initiative, with a message directed at *hareidi* women, turned into an agenda for the entire nation.

Very quickly we found ourselves called into every television studio and interviewed on radio programs. Even the *hareidi* media did not remain indifferent. Our articles were published and republished with great frequency on *hareidi* websites and elsewhere. Even the partisan, conservative newspapers, such as *Yated Ne'eman*, could not ignore the outcry, though of course their columnists had rather less complimentary things to say about us.

Who Are We?

The core group of leaders of the campaign comprises five women—four women in addition to myself.

- **Esti Shoshan**, married with four children, is a director and filmmaker. She is the creator of the film *Akarah* (Barren), the story of a newly married *hareidi* woman who has no interest in children. Esti is a publicist and a social activist.
- **Michal Chernovitsky**, married with three children, is Lithuanian *hareidi* (i.e., not hasidic). She is a social activist, an active member of the professional organization *Koah La'Ovdim* (the Democratic Workers' Organization), a volunteer in a shelter for abused Orthodox and *hareidi* women, and a promoter of social activism in *hareidi* towns. Michal stood for election in the recent elections for the city council in Elad. Even though she won hundreds of votes, she did not win a seat on the council.
- **Racheli Ibenboim**, from the Gerer hasidic group, is married with two children and lives in Meah Shearim. She has served as the executive director of the charitable organization Meir Panim, and currently runs the *Movilot* (Leaders) program, a social project

for the advancement of high-quality employment for *hareidi* women.

- **Esty Reider-Indorsky**, a former journalist, is an academic researcher and is currently completing her thesis on the subject of *hareidi* women.

These are my partners on this journey; we are all the products of *hareidi* society. We have all studied, grown up, and been educated in its institutions. In my role as a journalist, I have written for the last decade about *hareidi* matters and social phenomena taking place in our society. Finally, after no small number of articles and columns, I have come to the conclusion that I also have to do something.

I am not alone. Each of my friends has come to the same conclusion as a result of her own life experience, and the problems and difficulties that each has experienced or witnessed in her job. If we talk about a “glass ceiling” that prevents women from realizing their full potential, in *hareidi* society this should be called a “concrete ceiling.” The discrimination and exclusion are not hidden, but rather are present in every aspect of a *hareidi* woman's life: her work, her promotions, and her acceptance into decision-making forums and positions of influence.

What Are We Talking About?

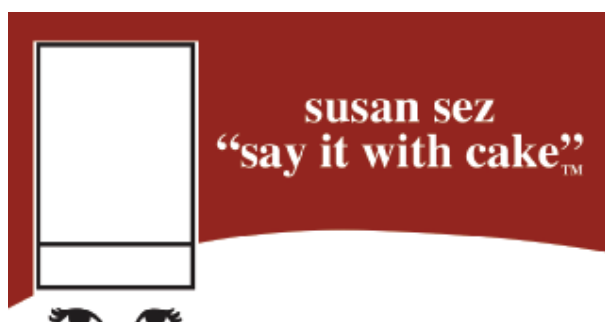
Some statistics: The chief *hareidi* parties in Israel, Shas and United Torah Judaism, currently hold thirteen seats in the Knesset. Women vote for these parties in equal measure to men. Therefore, we are talking about six and a half Knesset seats that *hareidi* women vote for, while not actually being represented within the Knesset itself. Of the citizens of the democratic State of Israel, 5.5 percent are unrepresented in the Knesset.

Obviously, the Knesset is not supposed to be a perfect reflection of Israeli society, but the fact is that *hareidi* women have no presence at all in the Israeli parliament, and therefore no real ability to promote legislation and budgets for matters that are important to them, whereas every other sector is able to fight for the issues that they care about. The voices and desires of *hareidi* women remain out of the equation.

This statistic is particularly worrying when we look at the heavy price paid in the area of employment. According to statistics from the Ministry of the Economy, a *hareidi* woman earns 35 percent less than the average Israeli woman. She has difficulty exercising her basic employment rights and is susceptible to exploitation by her employers. Instead of outsourcing to India, Israeli companies can simply give the low-paid work to *hareidi* women, as happened in Modi'in Illit. Similarly, a *hareidi* kindergarten teacher may be asked to pay part of her salary back to her employer as a “tithe.”

Things are no better in the women's health arena. There

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No Voice, No Vote, *continued from page 17*

are numerous health-related issues for which *hareidi* women do not receive the medical treatment to which they are entitled. The Health Ministry does not gather statistics specifically related to *hareidi* women, even though these statistics do actually exist. These statistics would help the ministry set out a policy for dealing with the issue and monitor the effectiveness of the programs already in operation by private organizations in the field. There are some disturbing statistics of morbidity and mortality rates. For instance, according to the Israel Cancer Association, the cancer mortality rate for *hareidi* women is three times the rate for the average Israeli woman.

Rabbinic Guidance Sought

It is important to mention that before we embarked on our political activities, each of us met individually with a learned rabbi to hear his opinion on the campaign and its goals. The rabbi with whom I consulted told me that there is not enough halakhic discussion on the subject for him to be able to provide a clear, definitive ruling, but that he believes that there is a strong, firm basis on which to permit it.

He came to the conclusion on the basis that there was no issue of *serarah*, rulership (which is apparently the source of the halakhic prohibition, according to Rambam), as these are democratic elections that do not call for special honors, nor are these positions conferred by inheritance, such as a monarchy. He also highlighted the difference between the active election by people who are choosing for themselves to vote for a woman and appointment from above. This is something that we learn from the example of the prophet and judge Deborah.

Another point that one of the rabbis from a more conservative faction made was if women are voting for their female Knesset members and the male *hareidi* public vote for their representatives, as far as he is concerned there is no problem because men are not voting to be represented by women.

Another rabbi sent us a quotation from Rav Haim Kanievsky, in response to a question about public activity for women (not related to the Knesset), that it was right and appropriate that women should act for and assist women, rather than having *hareidi* men do so.

The rabbi with whom I consulted told me that he was pleased to hear the opinion of such an eminent rabbi as Rav Aharon Yehuda Leib Shteinman. However, our attempts, both public and discreet, to obtain answers and guidance on the matter were all blatantly ignored by the *hareidi* members of the Knesset and the rabbis' inner circles. To put it simply, they have refused to give a final decision on the matter, perhaps out of concern that they might arrive at an answer that does not "suit" them.

We decided not to try to force any responses from people because it would always be possible for those rabbis to deny the answers, as has happened many times in the past, or to say that their comments had been misunderstood. Also, in our view, this is not actually a halakhic issue, but a cultural one. As long as there is no

clear statement from a respected rabbi, from one of the leaders of the *hareidi* public, against our request, we have no reason to think that there is anything “wrong” with it.

The only one to give his halakhic opinion on the matter, in direct reference to the campaign, was Rabbi Meir Mazoz, the *rosh yeshiva* of Kisei Rechamim and the spiritual leader of Eli Yishai’s Yachad party. He is of the opinion that there is definitely room to permit it, and he sees no problem with it. However, he noted that he would not be prepared to be the first one to do so, and that he would wait for the opinions of other rabbis on the matter—opinions that have not been received as of the time of this writing.

To tell the truth, there has not been enough concrete debate on the subject. This is a new issue, and it seems that most Orthodox rabbis, and especially *hareidi* rabbis, have decided not to deal with it, for reasons known only to them. Nonetheless, after in-depth research, we managed to find these and other discussions, which we collected and published in a booklet. The most interesting among them, in my opinion, is that of the *Seridei Aish* (Rabbi Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg), who, while stating that there are “strong reasons” to forbid it, noted explicitly and frankly that “from a purely legal perspective, there is absolutely no basis on which to forbid the decision” (Part A, *Siman* 139).

Publication of a Pamphlet

To raise awareness of the halakhic aspect of the issue, we published a short halakhic pamphlet written by two learned rabbis, presenting the approaches of various *poskim* over several generations. The pamphlet is currently being actively distributed in synagogues and kollels to encourage halakhic debate on the topic.

Ultimately, the awareness campaign has not only forced the heads of the *hareidi* parties to deal with the issue and the chairman of Shas to set up an advisory “Women’s Council,” in an attempt to mitigate public criticism against him on this issue, but it has also initiated a wave of awareness of the question regarding the woman’s place in modern *hareidi* society.

In the end, the question of a female *hareidi* member of the Knesset has transformed into a frank discussion of the “F-word”: feminism. It has provoked a discussion of the place of *hareidi* career-minded, educated, social activist women in the decision-making process and their influence over areas that need improvement. *Hareidi* society, like all conservative societies, is progressing toward modernity, albeit slowly, and with diligent efforts to determine the appropriate checks and balances needed to conserve its social-religious identity. Only time will tell whether they succeed. What is for sure is that a female *hareidi* member of the Knesset is, ultimately, just a matter of time.

Tali Farkash is a journalist at Ynet (Judaism Channel). Raised and educated in an ultra-Orthodox community in B’nai Brak, Israel, she currently lives in Elad and is married and a mother of two. She is studying for her master’s degree in gender studies.

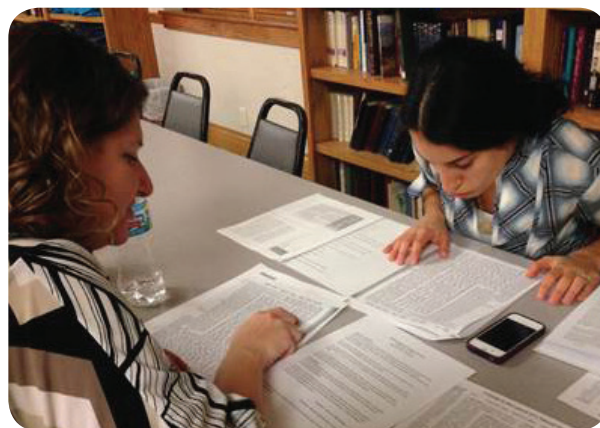
Shalhevet Women’s Kollel of St. Louis—Diving In

By Phyllis Shapiro

A stranger walking into the auditorium of Bais Abraham Congregation on a Tuesday evening might be surprised to see some two dozen women of all ages sitting together deeply engaged with a text of *Gemara*. Most of these women have encountered the actual *daf* (page) of the Talmud for the first time in this program.

Despite the fact that Talmud is among the foundational texts of Judaism, women to this day encounter controversy when seeking to learn *Gemara*. However, the Shalhevet Women’s Kollel of St. Louis, hosted at Bais Abraham Congregation, aims to make the Talmud accessible to all women, no matter what their background.

The focus of Shalhevet is on intensive, text-centered learning. One need not come with years of Talmud study, competency in Aramaic, or even exposure to Hebrew to be able to engage fully with these texts. With all the resources available today—including dictionaries, resource guides, and the new *Koren Talmud Bavli*—the gatekeepers have been removed and the doors of the *beit midrash* have been thrown open, allowing all students permission to enter.



Women learning in *hevruta* in the Shalhevet Women’s Kollel.

Pedagogic Approach

Rather than beginning with basic skills or hand-picked *sugiyot* (segments), Shalhevet takes a pedagogical approach of beginning at the start of a *masekhet* (tractate) and struggling with the text as it unfolds. This means studying the simpler pieces together with the more complex, the popular sections together with the lesser known. Throughout it all, students find themselves learning more about the evolution of *halakhah*, the intricacies of rabbinic thinking, and the underlying basis of modern-day Judaism.

Shalhevet, funded in part by Targum Shlishi (the Aryeh and Raquel Rubin Foundation), meets every other week for an hour and a half. Each session is divided into *havruta*

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Meaning of the Name and the Logo

Shalhevet means “flame,” representing the light of the Torah, which illuminates all that surrounds it. Like a flame, Torah learning is never diminished when shared with others; new flames are created which then cast yet more light into the world. Women’s learning can never decrease or denigrate Torah; it can only enhance the wisdom of Torah already in the world.



The logo, designed by Dr. Tessa Gardner, features, in addition to a flame, the rare four-pronged *shin*, the twenty-third letter of the Hebrew alphabet. This four-pronged *shin* is found only on the left side of the *tefillin shel rosh* (phylacteries worn on the head). The simplest explanation for the two different *shins* is that the traditional three-pronged *shin* represents the three patriarchs and the four-pronged *shin* represents the four matriarchs, making it an apt symbol for a women’s learning space. Additionally, there are deeper associations. The four-pronged *shin* is created by the white space around a three-pronged *shin*. The three-pronged *shin* represents the written, revealed Torah, but the four-pronged *shin* symbolizes the as yet unrevealed Torah, to be developed through the ages.

As Rav Kook wrote, “The white parchment around the letters is an integral part of the Torah; without it, the Torah scroll is disqualified.” Thus, the four-pronged *shin* beautifully symbolizes the learning process at Shalhevet. Women study the black space—the sacred words printed in the Torah—and at the same time explore the white space that exists between the words—the stories, discussions, debates, and rulings that comprise the Oral Tradition, as recorded in the Mishna and Talmud.

For more information, and for permission to use the Shalhevet logo, contact Maharat Rori Picker Neiss at maharat@baisabe.com.

Women's Kollel, continued from page 19

(partnership) study followed by a *shiur* (formal class) led by Bais Abraham’s maharat, Rori Picker Neiss. The initial 45 minutes of study in small groups allows each woman to grapple with the text and develop a personal relationship with the rabbis, the discourse, and the tradition. The class that follows allows everyone the opportunity to share their insights, questions, and thoughts to enable all to learn from one another and to add their voices to the discussion. The results have been astounding. Even those who had little experience with Jewish learning in any context find themselves fully absorbed in the rabbinic discourse, joining the conversation with those who lived centuries before.

Talmud learning by women is the new reality within Judaism—not only for our daughters, but for our mothers, our sisters, and ourselves. Even though the logic and rigor of Talmud learning may not appeal to all sensibilities—some might prefer the poetry of *Kohelet* or the history of *Tanakh*—it is imperative that all observant Jews today have the freedom of choice to become acquainted with the seminal texts of rabbinic Judaism. Being an Orthodox Jew demands a level of Jewish literacy, of which familiarity with Talmud is an important element.

Shalhevet invites all women to join us in our learning, to join us in the rabbinic discourse and in removing the gatekeepers who previously stood guard at the doors of the yeshiva—join us in forming the Shalhevet Women’s Kollel Network.

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

Letter to the Editor

Dear Editor,

I read the article by Barbara Trainin Blank on “Women as Circumcisers” in the *JOFA Journal* Vol. XII, no. 2.

I should like to point out that I discussed this issue in my *Minhagei Yisrael*, Vol. 4, Jerusalem, 1995, pp. 3–9, with additional evidence in *ibid.*, Vol. 7, Jerusalem, 2003, p. 401, and, in English, in my book *The Jewish Life Cycle*, Bar-Ilan University Press/Oxford, 2008, pp. 84–88, to which I can now add the following sources:

E. Baumgarten, *Mothers and Children: Jewish Family Life in Medieval Europe*, Oxford, 2004, p. 65.

A. Grossman, *Ve-Hu Yimshol Bo: Ha-Ishah be-Mishnatam shel Hochmei Yisrael bi-Yemei ha-Benayim*, Jerusalem 2011, pp. 171, 350–51.

In the Ethiopian Jewish communities of “Beta Yisrael,” circumcision was almost exclusively done by women.

Incidentally, I also discussed the issue of women *shochtot*, *ibid.*

Rabbi Daniel Sperber

The Question Behind the Question

THE PROCESS OF P'SAK

By Rori Picker Neiss

I remember vividly a Shabbat in 2005 when some friends and I decided to visit a Modern Orthodox *shul* we had never before attended. The four of us—three females and one male—entered our respective sections and were immediately impressed by the warm welcome we received. The *davening* was pleasant and full of singing. The structural layout clearly divided the room between men and women, but still allowed a clear sightline for women, making the space feel inclusive and participatory. One friend turned to me and remarked that if our male friend were offered an *aliyah*, we should immediately take out membership in this *shul*.

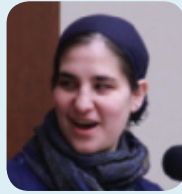
I was ready to do just that—until the rabbi gave his *drasha* (sermon). We were in the midst of the controversial Terri Schiavo case, involving a debate over prolonged life support and whether the husband, who was her legal guardian, could remove her feeding tube. The rabbi stood before the congregation and stated unequivocally: “There is one Torah. There is one *halakhah*. There is one answer. And I will tell you what that is.” I was shocked. Any plans for my becoming a member immediately disappeared. Anyone who publicly stated that there was one Torah, one *halakhah*, clearly had never studied it.

This is not to say that the scrolls carried from the ark in that *shul* held different words from the ones I kiss each Shabbat morning. They do not. Yet to say that those words allow for only one answer to any particular question is at best superficial and at worst misleading.

This rabbi had never met Terri Schiavo. He had never spoken with her husband or her parents. His knowledge of the complexities of the case was learned through newspaper articles and television reports. He was not informed about the details of her condition, her prognosis, or her treatment.

That is why I was so horrified to see him stand before his congregation and proclaim that he had the one answer to an argument that had divided the medical and legal communities. I had no reason to challenge his level of learning and his knowledge of *halakhah*. Indeed, he had far more experience and education than I. I could not even say that I would disagree with his halakhic conclusion, but I could not abide anyone who would stand before an audience and declare, without hesitation or doubt, that he had the answer to a question about which he did not have all the information.

It is true that there is one Torah. But that one Torah has seventy faces. That one Torah encompasses millennia of deep debate, rich interpretation, and a multitude of voices that carried it through an ever-changing world. To say that any one question has one unambiguous answer is to ignore the tradition that brought us to this point.



Rori Picker Neiss

A Process both Formal and Personal

The process of rabbinic *p'sak* is not a simple one. It is at the same time both extremely formal and extremely personal for the individual(s) involved.

I never cease to be amazed—and horrified—when I receive a call preceded by a now all-too-familiar introduction, “I asked my rabbi about this and he told me x, but he said to call back if anything changes/it becomes too hard/I am not able to do it.” Often the questioner has no idea what is meant. If *what* changes? How hard is too hard? Hard in what way? How many times can I call back? Why can't you just tell me the answer?

A halakhic authority does not have the power to change the law, but a change in circumstances can change how a law applies to a particular person or a particular situation. Unfortunately, rather than attempting to understand the person or the situation, and talking the person through the possible solutions to the variety of scenarios, some authorities prefer to give a partial answer. Instead of educating people about the law and introducing them to its beauty and profundity, they offer a simple answer and instructions to call back if necessary. In doing so, they keep the knowledge and the power in the hands of a few authorities. Individuals seeking guidance are disempowered, not knowing which details of their situation are halakhically relevant and not knowing the full range of options that might be available to them. Instead of enriching the questioners' experience of Jewish law and practice, this process turns people off, making them less inclined to ask further questions or to study a tradition that makes them feel misunderstood or dumb.

In one particularly poignant example, I received a message from a woman who was newly married. She was contacting me to learn more about what sexual positions and sexual activities were permitted and prohibited. Specifically, she wanted to know what options were available for her husband to pleasure her beyond vaginal intercourse. While taking classes before their marriage, both she and her husband were told that any other forms of stimulation, such as oral or manual stimulation, were prohibited—but “if you have any trouble, you can call the rabbi to ask.”

She was mortified at the thought of calling the rabbi on the phone and asking him such a personal question. She was painfully shy, and just writing the question to me was difficult for her.

I thanked her for reaching out. I congratulated her on her wedding, asked her about herself, about her husband, about married life. We started to talk. In the course of our conversation, I learned that she came from a very religious household, whereas her husband had first become connected to the Orthodox Jewish community in his twenties. They had met through a matchmaker, dated

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On Being a JLIC Educator on Campus

By Naomi Kohl

Working on campus under the auspices of the Orthodox Union's Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus was an awesome and empowering opportunity for me. I always felt very blessed that my husband, Eli, and I ended up at the University of Maryland, College Park, because it was exactly the kind of community in which I felt comfortable. Our community attracted many students who respected tradition but were looking for new ways to find their connection. That dichotomy was critical and played itself out every year in new situations that tested the community's desire to stay rooted in tradition while engaging in the contemporary conversation about issues of the day.

My History

I went to Yeshiva University from 2001 to 2006, including a year in Israel and two years in graduate school. I graduated with a B.A. in psychology and Judaic studies and then received my master's degree in Jewish education and social work. I always felt that I was working toward my own kind of *semikhah*. I was having trouble figuring out what I wanted to do with my life when the opportunity to be JLIC educators

at the University of Maryland arose for my husband and me. It was the perfect opportunity to build on my interests in teaching and helping others. From the time we first arrived, when students started their first women's *tefillah*, to our departure seven years later, with a partnership minyan beginning, I often found myself in



Naomi Kohl and her husband, center, flanked by students Naomi Bilmes and her brother Eli Bilmes.

Question, continued from page 21

for only a few months, and had not touched at all before their wedding. They were committed to living a fervently halakhic lifestyle, and they were struggling with physical intimacy in their marriage.

Once I uncovered that last detail, our conversation changed. While we talked through some *halakhot* of permissible sexual activities (complete with sources, so that she could show her husband the texts as well), I was able to direct her to other resources that could be helpful to her. One year later, she excitedly sent me an announcement of the birth of their first child.

Not a Single Question with a Single Answer

The process of rabbinic *p'sak* is not a simple matter of a single question that yields a single answer. It is a series of questions, an exchange in which the answers are often new questions. It is an investigative exercise that seeks to uncover the questions that exist within the questions. It cannot be a monologue; it must be a dialogue.

Although I consider myself to be counted among the halakhic authorities, my job is not to make broad pronouncements of what is prohibited and what is permitted. My job is to guide people as they navigate through defining a halakhic lifestyle. In asking questions and opening up a dialogue, I not only ensure that I have the full picture to best address the questions posed to me, but that I am also able to educate each person and to empower them to be an active participant in their Jewish life.

To be a thriving Jewish community, we need active participants who are passionate and engaged in their Judaism. To stand up before a group of people and make sweeping generalizations about Jewish law, or to answer a question with a simple yes or a no, without giving context or discussing the halakhic issues at play, is to create a passive Jewish community. It is to tell people that they are irrelevant in the halakhic process.

A halakhic system devoid of people is just empty words on paper.

The job of the rabbi or maharat is never to close the door, but always to open it as far as possible and welcome everyone through. When people come seeking *p'sak*, they are cracking open the door and peeking through. We can give them the answer that they seek and close the door behind them, or we can swing the door wide open and use it as an opportunity for education and engagement.

There are those who fear educating people because they worry that explaining the halakhic process to those not trained in its intricacies will lead people to make their own decisions without consulting a halakhic authority. Admittedly, some people may do just that. Therefore, some halakhic authorities routinely say, "Yes, but call me back if you need to." In fact, we should not fear that they never call back; rather we should fear that they will never call in the first place.

Maharat Rori Picker Neiss is the director of programming, education, and community engagement at Bais Abraham Congregation in St. Louis.

the crosshairs of a dilemma. Even though I might not personally choose to *daven* in a women's *tefillah* or to hold the Torah on Simchat Torah, I did my utmost to understand, support, and connect to those who did. I think some students who had feelings similar to mine appreciated the lack of pressure to participate in a way that was not comfortable for them.

Whenever my husband and I would discuss the latest issue in the community, I found myself advocating for and being the voice for other women. I also credit my husband for always trying to understand the issues on a very deep level rather than just looking at *halakhah* as black and white. He understood how any response he gave affected real people, on both a communal level and a personal level. We tried to be sensitive at all times to make sure everyone found way to connect.

It was interesting to observe how students would view my husband's and my roles, depending upon the circumstances. I recall many times—continuing even up until today—getting Facebook messages saying, “I have a question for Rabbi Kohl, but maybe you could help.” Depending upon the type of question, many times I could answer. Given the questions I received, I often wondered whether, if they did not have a Modern Orthodox female leader on campus, these girls would have asked one of the rabbis instead. Even though I had no *semikhah* or formal credentials, there were certain questions of kashrut in the kitchen or *hilkhot niddah* that, if I knew the answer, I would reply. However, most of the time I felt more comfortable if I checked with my husband, as I did not have the years of learning and training that he did. Conversely, there were many times when my husband knew the *halakhah* but would consult with me as to how an answer would play out, because it was something I

had dealt with more often than he had.

For years, unbeknownst to most of our community, we would frequently debate and talk about the multitude of ways in which we could answer a question. We really struggled with how to find and present the best possible answer for a specific scenario.



JLIC's home at the University of Maryland.

How I Grew

I grew so much and was definitely changed by the JLIC experience. To be in an environment with so many different people and to try to find space for everyone was eye-opening for me. Being in a leadership position meant that I was forced to struggle with scenarios. Had I lived in my own bubble and not been thrust into the public sphere, I would not have engaged these issues if I felt uncomfortable.

I feel so lucky that we had incredible students who respected our personal choices and communal decisions. I was personally inspired by the girls who told me that had they gone to a college with a more liberal Jewish community, they might have been able to participate more in the community, but because Maryland was more traditional at the time than other campuses, they were forced to see the bigger communal picture and respect ideas that they may not otherwise have needed to confront.

Their maturity and respect for others was something I will always admire. I feel so lucky to have been in a community with women like that and will take their examples as lessons for me.

Naomi Kohl is the Alumni Relations Coordinator for SAR Academy and SAR High School. She was the JLIC Educator at the University of Maryland from 2006 through 2013.

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Mehalekhet Bedarkhah

By Malka Puterkovsky

Yedioth Ahronoth/Chemed, 2014, 88 shekels.

By Johnny Solomon

The men and women honored to light the torches as part of this year's official Independence Day ceremony in Israel were chosen for their trailblazing contributions to Israeli society; among this elite group was Malka Puterkovsky.

Puterkovsky holds a B.A. in Jewish Studies from Bar-Ilan University and an M.A. in Talmud from Tel Aviv University. She is a founding member of *Takana*, an organization that deals with issues of sexual harassment in the national religious community. She is a member of *Mavoi Satum*, which helps women whose husbands have refused to grant them a *get* (religious divorce), and she is also involved in the *Ma'aglei Zedek* social action organization. However, even though all these roles are a clear expression of Puterkovsky's commitment to women's rights and social justice, she is best known for her work as a scholar and teacher.

Puterkovsky—whose mentors are a veritable “who’s who” of leading female Torah scholars, including Alice Shalvi, Chana Safrai, z”l, and Nechama Leibowitz, z”l—spent many years teaching Talmud and *halakhah* at the Pelech High School for Girls and was the head of the *halakhah* program at Midreshet Lindenbaum. In both these institutions, she raised the bar regarding what is taught and what can be expected of students. Since then, she has been lecturing throughout Israel, while offering halakhic guidance to men and women who either call or visit her at her home in Tekoa. Through her classes and her writings, Puterkovsky's message is heard loud and clear: Women can and should study *halakhah* to the highest levels; halakhic discourse can and should include

women; and halakhic rulings can and should be produced by women.

In August 2014, Puterkovsky published her first book, *Mehalekhet Bedarkhah* (literally, *Following Her Halakhic Way*), which addresses “life challenges from a halakhic and moral perspective.” While this subtitle certainly describes what can be found in *Mehalekhet Bedarkhah*, it does not fully convey the unique qualities of this extraordinary work.

Mehalekhet Bedarkhah is a collection of Puterkovsky's *she'elot u-teshuvot* (responsa). Thus it sits on a unique but growing bookshelf of responsa literature written by women, alongside *Mah She'elatekh Esther Vate'as*, also published in 2014 (reviewed in the fall 2014 *JOFA Journal*). However, there are differences between these two works.

Whereas the authors of *Mah She'elatekh Esther Vate'as* were ordained by Rabbi Shlomo Riskin and Rabbi Yehoshua (Shuki) Reich, Puterkovsky makes it clear to the reader that she is not ordained. In contrast to *Mah She'elatekh*, which was published by

an institution, Ohr Torah Stone, and could be purchased or downloaded only from that institution, *Mehalekhet Bedarkhah* is published by Yedioth Ahronoth/Chemed and can be purchased in bookstores throughout Israel. *Mah She'elatekh* begins with an introduction and endorsement by Rabbi Reich, whereas both the introduction and the body of *Mehalekhet Bedarkhah* are written by Puterkovsky herself. All these factors, as well as the size of *Mehalekhet Bedarkhah*—a hefty 567 pages—convey the message that Puterkovsky is bold, independent, incredibly knowledgeable, and certainly worthy to be counted among those who have made trailblazing contributions to Israeli society.

Puterkovsky's innovation continues throughout her book. In contrast to the classic method of presenting each *she'elah* with the barest of details beyond the halakhic question itself, Puterkovsky begins each chapter by recounting the background to each *she'elah* and the human story behind each. For example, Chapter 2, examining the halakhic permissibility of female *poskot* (halakhic decisors), begins by describing the meeting between Puterkovsky and a young married woman called Sagit who was struggling with her commitment to the laws of *niddah*. One of the issues that troubled Sagit was her inability to discuss *halakhah* with someone who could fully empathize with her situation, and it was her heart-wrenching conversation with Puterkovsky that led to the question of whether it is possible for a woman to become a *poseket*. Similarly, Chapter 3, which addresses the question of whether it is permitted for women to wear *tefillin*, begins by describing a conversation between Puterkovsky and her eleventh-grade student Mevasseret concerning which *mitzvot* women are and are not obligated to perform. Chapter 4 starts by recounting a discussion between Puterkovsky and her old friend Michaela, who works as a psychologist. In that role,



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Michaela encounters numerous situations in which the strained relationships between parents and children make it impossible for a child to fully observe the laws of honoring parents as presented in the classic halakhic sources. What should be done in such a situation?

After introducing each *she'elah*, Puterkovsky then proceeds to present all the relevant source material for each question in meticulous detail, explaining to the reader the background of every source and where different authorities appear to adopt conflicting positions. When terms are not clear, she explains them. When biographical information may be appreciated, it can be found in the comprehensive list of works cited, which is found at the back of the book. And when additional details are important but not essential to the key discussion, these have been added as endnotes. This means that every *teshuvah* is not merely a halakhic response, but also a master class in how to read, interpret, and apply halakhic texts.

Puterkovsky is also clear that many halakhic questions have implications far beyond the specific issue being discussed. Thus, every chapter in *Mehalekhet Bedarkhah* concludes by discussing the future directions of each given question. For example, having recounted her conversation with Sagit and presented a plethora of sources regarding the halakhic permissibility of female *poskot*, Puterkovsky concludes by explaining why it is so necessary for women to become more halakhically literate, and why it is so valuable for women's voices to be expressed and heard, both in offering halakhic guidance

and in shaping halakhic discourse in the modern period.

Although some have challenged some of the rulings found in *Mehalekhet Bedarkhah*—and in at least in one instance, Puterkovsky has written a firm rebuttal—it is clear that the publication of this volume is incredibly important in terms of its depth, breadth, content, and style. By weaving narrative and law together, Puterkovsky reminds the reader that behind every *she'elah* is a questioner, but also through sharing the conversations between herself and those who have sought her guidance, Puterkovsky gives a human face to her *teshuvot* and reveals her own qualities as a *poseket*.

Although Malka Puterkovsky's role as a torchbearer for the State of Israel concluded at the end of the Independence Day ceremony, she continues to carry the torch for serious female Torah scholarship throughout the world. *Mehalekhet Bedarkhah* is a serious, yet moving, work of great scholarship, and one that I believe will lead the way for many more budding scholars to participate in halakhic discourse and engage in halakhic rulings.

Rabbi Johnny Solomon is a graduate of Yeshivat Kerem B'Yavneh and has a B.Sc. (Hons) in mathematics and religious studies. Rabbi Solomon was a major scholar at the Montefiore Kollel in London, from which he received semikhah. Before making aliyah in 2012, he was the head of Judaic Studies at Hasmonean Girls' School. Rabbi Solomon now teaches post-high-school girls in Machon Ma'ayan and Midrash Torat Chesed and works as a Jewish education consultant.

The Lieberman Open Orthodox Haggadah

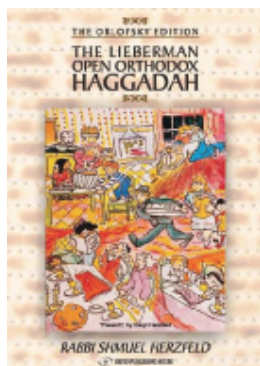
By Rabbi Shmuel Herzfeld

Gefen Publishing House, 2015, \$19.95

By Israel Drazin

This haggadah is a thought-provoking and inspiring work that can be read during the Passover holiday or at any time during the year when one wants to learn about Judaism. It reflects the views of Open Orthodoxy, which its founder, Rabbi Avi Weiss, defined as the movement within Orthodox Judaism “completely committed to *Torah min hashamayim* [Torah from heaven], to the belief that God wrote the Torah, and to the meticulous observance of *halakhah* (Jewish Law). At the same time, it is open—inclusive, pluralistic, and nonjudgmental.”¹

With regard to gender-defined roles within Judaism,



Rabbi Weiss feels that men and women share “roles in more than 90 percent of areas, but there are still clear distinctions.” Open Orthodoxy encourages women's involvement in learning Torah at the same level as men—no lower. Thus, “women can be ordained and receive *semikhah*.” Open Orthodoxy welcomes and fully integrates all people into community and synagogue activities, regardless of sexual orientation, and encourages interaction with all kinds of people, including non-Jews.

This haggadah (called the Orlofsky Edition and the Lieberman Haggadah because of the generous assistance of these two families in its publication) was written and edited by Rabbi Shmuel Herzfeld, associate rabbi at Rabbi Weiss's synagogue from 1999 to 2004 and now the rabbi of The National Synagogue in Washington, D.C.

Rabbi Herzfeld wants this haggadah “to help your Seder be alive, exciting, and relevant.” Therefore it includes “provocative voices that will encourage you to discuss cutting-edge ideas at the Seder ... and help sensitize us to the needs of our entire community.” The text of the Haggadah and the many Seder meal practices are explained in an easy-to-read and informative manner, so that the ancient content does not stymie action but rather encourages readers to make the ritual

continued on page 26

¹ In *Judaism*, September 1997, and in *The Lieberman Open Orthodox Haggadah*, by Rabbi Shmuel Herzfeld, Gefen Publishing House, 2015.

acts relevant. For example, he clarifies that *maror*, the bitter herb, is a reminder not only of the past bitterness of our Israelite ancestors, but of the bitterness in modern society throughout the world.

The haggadah features twenty-four short, enlightening essays, including five special essays by three women and two men, and four “Open Orthodox Discussions.” The three women are Michel Martin, a non-Jewish veteran host of National Public Radio; Maharat Ruth Balinsky Friedman, the first full-time female associate rabbi of an Orthodox synagogue; and Rachel Lieberman, the program director of JOFA. Martin writes about the “blessed” impact on her and her family of serving as the buyer of the *hametz* (the unleavened products) from Jews who attend the local synagogue, the neighborliness this created, and the subsequent result that “half a dozen men from the congregation came running to my aid” when she and her family needed help. Balinsky Friedman writes about the need for congregations to become sensitive to the pain of women who suffer because of infertility, and describes a healing ritual that some groups of women have used to help such women. Lieberman describes four new practices that highlight the constructive and caring contributions of women to ancient and modern society: welcoming Miriam the prophetess along with Elijah the prophet with songs and dances; placing a Miriam’s cup on the Seder table; decorating the table with mirrors; and adding an orange to the Seder plate. She explains these four practices rivetingly and, about the orange, describes how some men tried to distort the new custom.

Rabbi Weiss, one of the two rabbis in “Guest Voices,” urges readers to be sensitive to all people. He notes that respected rabbinical authorities sometimes made decisions based on incorrect ideas. The author of *Mishnah Berurah*, for example, thought that women do not understand the words of blessings and so “cannot be trusted to complete the full forty-nine-day count” of the Omer. Rabbi Asher Lopatin, the president of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, enlarges upon the idea of respecting everyone.

The “Open Orthodox Discussions” address “*Kol Ishah*,” the prohibition against listening to women sing lest it provoke sexual desires; “Why More Synagogues Need a Maharat,” showing what female spiritual leaders can do that their male counterparts cannot; “How to Form an Inclusive Spiritual Community,” describing the benefits of interaction with people whom others ignore; and “No More *Agumot*,” depicting the plight of wives whose husbands refuse to grant them a Jewish divorce, leaving them unable to remarry.

In the *Kol Ishah* essay, the haggadah describes the somewhat recent development of the rule and the view of some modern rabbis, including Rabbi Moshe Lichtenstein, that the prohibition does not exist. The essay argues that if we continue to insist on the *kol islah* prohibition, “we run the very real risk of drowning out a girl’s spiritual voice and thereby turning her away from traditional Judaism.” Second, we are sending a bad

message to boys—that men cannot learn how to control their sexual urges and can do so only by segregating women. Third, the prohibition is hypocritical: Why is there no rule prohibiting women from hearing male voices?

These are some of the many topics discussed and explained in this haggadah. Readers will delight in the ubiquitous explanations of the text, the provocative questions, and the discussions of topics such as how to prepare spiritually for Passover, the transformative nature of the four cups, and the meaning of the *afikoman*.

Rabbi Dr. Israel Drazin is the author of twenty-nine books, including most recently, Unusual Bible Interpretations: Joshua.

Seder Talk: The Conversational Haggada

By Erica Brown

Maggid Books/OU Press, 2015, \$24.95

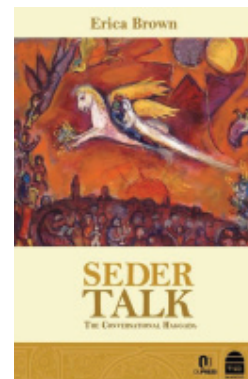
By Roselyn Bell

Every new haggadah struggles with the balance between telling too much and telling too little, between pursuing the endless paths down which our intellects can lead us and enjoying the emotional flow of the evening with its four cups of wine and its many melodic songs. *Seder Talk: The Conversational Haggada* by Erica Brown, who currently serves as the community scholar of the Jewish Center

in Manhattan, deals with this tension creatively by arranging a book that can be read in two directions. From right to left, we have the traditional text of the haggadah, in Hebrew and English translation, with a running commentary and suggested questions to prompt conversation. From left to right, there are eight longer essays—one for each day of the holiday—on broad themes that flow from the Passover experience.

In both halves of the book, Brown has gathered an eclectic mix of sources, both textual and visual, to deepen our understanding. For example, in the first essay, dealing with how to be a good host and a good guest, she quotes Rav J.B. Soloveitchik, Emma Lazarus, Blu Greenberg, and Miss Manners. In the second essay, on the Four Sons, she brings my favorite visual image of the four children as four playing cards (“we have no control over the children dealt us”) from the David Moss haggadah. Each essay concludes with a section of “Life Homework” to encourage further discussion.

The haggadah text side of the book—with Hebrew and English in large type on facing pages, commentary



below the line in smaller type, and icons to separate the instructive and the conversational parts—presents a somewhat cluttered page visually. The content is well chosen, though, pitched to the lives and concerns of modern rather than medieval Jews. And Brown never stops, even offering insights on parts of *birkat hamazon* and *Hallel*.

This haggadah weaves together material from a wealth of previous haggadot—both classical and modern—while adding both explanatory and homiletic material of her own. It is a worthwhile addition to one's own haggadah collection—and likely to stimulate many a lively conversation.

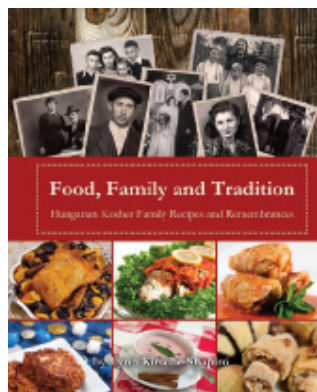
Food, Family and Tradition: Hungarian Kosher Family Recipes and Remembrances

By Lynn Kirsche Shapiro
Cherry Press, 2014, \$35.

By Roselyn Bell

Just as the title suggests, this book is far more than a cookbook—it is a personal memory book, trying to capture through recipes the flavor of traditional Jewish life in prewar Hungary. The book began as an attempt to complete two unfinished projects of the author's parents—her mother's recipe collection and her father's autobiography. Kirsche Shapiro has truly fulfilled *kibud av v'em* with both—and in the process filled in her family tree, explored her family's history, and learned a lot about kosher food and wine production and modernizing recipes.

The cookbook project began as a collection of recipes



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for the author's *bubbie's* eightieth birthday, and expanded to a paean to her family's tradition of providing food and groceries to Jewish communities in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Chicago. Her mother's uncles and father's maternal grandparents had owned small grocery stores in prewar Czechoslovakia, where they baked matzah and supplied the Jewish community. Her parents, both Holocaust survivors who came to America, opened the first kosher-only supermarket in Chicago, Hungarian Kosher Foods, where her father worked until shortly before his death in his eighties.

The recipes themselves have been on a long journey, conveying memories of food traditions such as stuffed chicken prepared in the manner of gefilte fish, but modernized with precise measurements and using foods available today. The directions are clear, the photographs mouthwatering, and the recipes, as far as I tried them, work. One may be surprised to find among the Hungarian classics—such as goulash, chicken *paprikas* with dumplings, and *lekvar* (prune butter)—some newcomers such as chop suey and Israeli salad (the author now lives in Israel). These new faces reflect the never-ending journey of Jewish food, always picking up new ideas from its changing surroundings. *B'tayavon*.

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