Give Unto Us a Possession Among the Brethren of Our Father: Separate is Not Equal

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Gilah Kletenik currently studies in the Graduate Program for women in Advanced Talmudic Study at Yeshiva University. She is also a recent graduate of Stern College for Women where she majored in Political Science and was an active student leader. This article appears in issue 5 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

I have always aspired to be a Jewish leader. The specific shape that this kind of service might take has never been clear. Since I was young, the future of service that I have envisioned is one combining teaching, halakhic decision-making, pastoral counseling, social activism, and spiritual guiding. However, as I grow older it has become increasingly clear that the greatest impediment to the actualization of this dream is neither communal attitudes nor halakhic considerations. Rather, the fiercest obstruction is education.

In Judaism, certainly in Orthodoxy, no single form of religious expression is more emphasized and valued than Torah education. And this makes sense. We are a people shaped by the texts we produce and subsequently study with fervor. It goes without saying, then, that we expect our religious leaders to not only be familiar with our intellectual canon but also to be creative innovators of Torah themselves. Surely religious leadership takes many shapes, but none can themselves be divorced from serious Torah study; “greater is study, for study leads to action.” Although Torah study takes many forms and each style is itself comprised of various methods and manners, few can dispute the centrality that Talmud study has played and continues to play in the shaping of our communal intellectual identity and, by extension, expression of our Judaism. In fact, unfamiliarity with Talmud is a crippling scar on anyone who hopes to serve one’s people from within a normative religious framework and signifies the greatest impediment to women’s ascension to leadership of this kind.

Don’t get me wrong—we have certainly come a long way. Women have been granted unprecedented opportunities and exposure to text study in recent years. It is now taken as a given that young girls, like young boys, will be taught Torah throughout their childhood, well into their adulthood and beyond. *Midrashot* for women abound as do classes, lectures, and *hevruta* opportunities geared specifically toward them.

Nevertheless, the highly knowledgeable and scholarly women educators and leaders that we have are few and far between. Who can name a *sefer* authored by a woman outside of the realm of *Tanakh*,

when even within that niche there are so few? When we have a halakhic query (outside the domain of *taharat haMishpahah*), how many of us will turn to a woman for guidance? And even when we have a question or confront a difficulty while learning, we inevitably run to ask a man. How might this reality be accounted for?

I was twelve years old when my mother first introduced me to the rigor of Talmud study. It was about that time that my twin brother began studying Talmud seriously with our father. However, as we progressed in grade school and then in high school the disparities in our education began to emerge. And, although I excelled in my high-school Talmud and halakha classes and studied scrupulously with my father in the evenings, by the end of my *Shanah Aleph*, the first year of study in Israel, at Migdal Oz of Yeshivat Har Etzion, it was clear that I was too far behind my male peers to ever catch up.

This realization was very difficult to swallow. It just did not seem to make much sense; I was banking in roughly the same amount of time for Talmud that my male friends were and I was a devoted student, at the top of the class. Yet, by the end of *Shanah Aleph*, and certainly *Shanah Bet*, my second year of study, these boys were light-years ahead of me and my female friends. This realization led to a series of frustrated conversations amongst my friends and a handful of meetings with our teachers devoted to figuring out how to raise the bar during our preparation and class time. It seemed as if we were hitting a brick wall, but I was unwilling to let this awareness slow me down. Returning from Israel, I attended Stern College for Women, where I enrolled in its Honors Advanced Talmud course and later began studying in the Graduate Program for women in Advanced Talmudic Study at Yeshiva University. By then, my male friends were so far ahead of me and my female friends in "learning" that the attempt to catch up seemed simply futile.

Although the Talmud itself cautions against teaching women Talmud, calling it "*tiflut*" (and there is no shortage of disparaging remarks in our traditional canon about women's cognitive abilities), arguments of this kind are not palatable to the twenty-first century ear. That is to say, blaming the gender disparity in learning on women's intellectual capacities is simply ludicrous. Clearly there is something more here, but what?

Years ago we could have blamed this on the fact that women were uneducated. But now, when we have so many schools and study opportunities for women there seem to be no excuses for this reality. Certainly not all women are taught Talmud from a young age, but some of us are exposed to these texts at the same time that boys begin to explore them because we study in co-ed classrooms. Often, when we have separate gender classes in grade school the curricula are different, with men's studies emphasizing Talmud text learning while women's classes focused more on *Tanakh*. This differentiation carries over into the yeshiva and *midrashah* world and helps explain the deep disparity between men's scholarship and women's, and thereby accounts for the dearth of competent and proficient female educators and by extension leaders. For, although some of us attend co-educational schools throughout high school, studying Talmud alongside our male peers, once we graduate and go to Israel for our years of study, we are placed in separate environments, which inevitably bear different products and account for my own experiences and that of my friends as well.

Obviously there is no single reason that might account for these disparities, but surely a combination of factors explains them. For one, most women's institutions do not offer Talmud courses and even in those that do, the time allotted and the quality of the study is significantly lower than that found in men's yeshivot. Sometimes this is because the women entering these institutions do not have the requisite background to jump in and learn in the same way that their male counterparts are able to. Additionally, even in schools that do provide women with the choice to spend many hours studying Talmud, it is nevertheless a choice and not a requirement as it is in most men's institutions. The choice to study Talmud for women is taken at the expense of other important areas of study such as *Tanakh*, halakha, and philosophy. That is to say, for a woman to choose to study Talmud is itself a choice of sacrifice. On the other hand, for men, for better or for worse, it is taken as a given that they will consecrate most of their studying time specifically to Talmud. Moreover, even in the institutions that offer women significant courses of study in Talmud, this is seldom the bread and butter of the experience as it is in men's yeshivot.

Teachers also play a major role in this reality. The most competent and knowledgeable teachers of Talmud both for men and women tend to be men. At times, though not across the board, the most competent among these choose to teach in men's institutions and inevitably women students are left with second-rate educators. Additionally, male teachers cultivate relationships with their male students that they are unable to nurture with their female students. This *rebbe-talmid* bond and even pressure, coupled with a certain element of competition amongst the students, often push the student to maximize his learning, which engenders a unique environment not replicated in women's institutions of higher learning.

Another major factor contributing to the disparity between women's and men's learning is that there are few women role models for girls and young women to aspire to be like. When a girl grows up and all of her most knowledgeable Talmud teachers are men, this sends her a message that this domain is not something women can ever have a portion in. And so, as studies have shown in the corporate world, this has a discouraging affect on women, telling them this is not something they might ever accomplish. The obvious solution to this would be to produce more competent women educators. But how might we accomplish this? Clearly, the current formula in having different institutions for men and women has not succeeded in building women scholars comparable to men.

Although the Fourteenth Amendment was ratified in 1868, it was not until 1954 that the Supreme Court overturned precedent establishing the racial doctrine of "separate but equal" as unconstitutional. The Court argued, referring to racial segregation that "Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal" (*Brown v. Board of Education* of Topeka, 347 U.S. 483 (1954)). It is time that the Orthodox community confronts this reality and recognizes not only that separate-gender yeshivot are inherently unequal, but that because of this and until this is rectified we cannot hope to ever have women religious leaders on par with men.

Some might argue that blaming the gender disparity in learning on separate educational facilities is pinpointing the symptom but not the cause. That is to say, it is clear that these institutions are not equal but this reality reflects the values of our community—if we valued women's education more than we do now, surely we would build better curricula for them, give them more skilled teachers, and encourage them from a younger age to pursue Talmud study. Or more, this disparity is a reflection of the fact that men are obligated in the commandment of Torah study while women are not. Although there is no way to escape the reality of the latter argument, with regard to the former, certainly there are factions within our community who do very much value women's Torah study and would like them to have the same educational opportunities awarded men. And even if this is not the case, integrating women into our yeshivot, like forced desegregation, might be ahead of the times, but nevertheless a necessary move.

Integrating women into our yeshivot is the first step to producing competent and knowledgeable women leaders. Moreover, once the community sees that women are as able as men are in terms of scholarship and skills, this will likely affect their views not only on women's education but on the possibilities of women's leadership as well.

Recently, there have certainly been exciting developments for women's education and, by extension, their leadership. However, until women learn alongside men in their yeshivot, women will continue to be the recipients of different materials, methods, and even values than their male counterparts. Consequently, women will forever be less competent and less impressive Jewish leaders.

It is difficult to think about my own future. Although there are a handful of institutions dedicated to advanced Jewish studies for women, and I am grateful to have studied and to continue studying in these places, there is nowhere for women to advance beyond these schools. Moreover, because all Orthodox institutions are gender-separate, they are inherently unequal. This means that practically it will be very difficult for me and my peers to ever achieve the same level of competence in text and knowledge as our male counterparts do. Must my dream of becoming a Jewish leader wait until we have the same educational opportunities as men, until we collectively demand, "Give unto us a possession among the brethren of our father?" (Numbers 27:4).