EVE-OLUTION: An Overview of the Dramatic Progress in Educational Opportunities for Girls and Women in Israel

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The empowerment of women today in Modern Orthodox society in Israel is a direct result of the number and range of education opportunities now available—and a very welcome and necessary development considering the multiple halakhic issues affecting them. The emergence of Batei Midrash for women and the courses provided at all levels—from the high school to midrasha to adult education—have bred a new generation of learned women who have become active members in the community and participants in the halakhic decision-making framework in issues pertaining to them.

When I was growing up in London in the 1960s, the Jewish education available for girls was limited. Girls could either a Jewish school that provided a mediocre secular education, or a quality public school supplemented by attendance at after-school Hebrew School classes. This spurred the trend to obtain additional Jewish education with a year at “seminary”—in Gateshead or Israel—but those girls who chose the latter option soon discovered the vast gulf between the level of their Jewish knowledge and that of their American-educated peers.

Thus education became a major motive for our *aliya* in 1976, and it was our intention to secure a good Jewish education for our children. Since we were ultimately blessed with four daughters, this proved to be a wise decision. Yet no one at that time could have envisaged the power of the dynamic forces that have driven the growth and evolution of educational opportunities for girls and women over the last three decades.

People today have forgotten—and many may not be aware at all—of how narrow the range of options was when looking for a high-quality religious girls school in Jerusalem in the early 1980s. Without

quite realizing it, but feeding off the obvious and painful inadequacy of the *mamlakhti-dati* (state religious) school system (as Esther Lapian described in her article in *Conversations* issue 7, p. 133) to provide both a good secular education together with a broad Jewish education, we were sucked into the elitist trend that came to dominate the education scene. “Private schools” (not in the American sense, but with a large financial input from parents to boost the quantity and quality of education) such as Horev and Noam at the primary level, and Horev, Peleh and Tsvia at the secondary level, attracted the “good kids” from the “good homes,” creating a vicious circle of decline in the mainstream state schools.

After considering the options, we chose to send our children to Horev; but over the years, we became increasingly disturbed and irritated by the emerging trend—away from the school’s original *Torah im Derech Erets* philosophy toward narrow, quasi-Hareidi attitudes—that came to dominate the school. This was, of course, an expression of the wider trend toward Hareidism sweeping throughout the Orthodox world. One of its primary manifestations was the sense of constraint felt by students and their reluctance to pose the most basic questions regarding personal and philosophical issues, for fear of being penalized—so detrimental in the critical teenage years. This inevitably led to frustration and conflict. In addition, the school’s attitude toward Zionist values and particularly the stance toward army service became exceedingly discouraging.

Fortunately, in tandem with (or as a counterbalance to) the trend toward greater Hareidism, other processes were at work. The massive increase in the overall student body, together with the growing diversity of views among their parents—and the greater financial resources available—led to a steady increase in both the number of educational institutions at all levels and also, and more importantly, a greater diversification of the kinds of education, the values, emphases, and so forth.

A major contribution to this educational scene, especially in the Greater Jerusalem area, was the Ohr Torah Stone network of high schools founded in 1983 by Rabbi Riskin—who personally placed great emphasis on girls’ education (and on women’s issues in general)—and which succeeded in attracting and training top-quality young educators with strong ideals and commitments. The schools’ mandate was to provide education for the Modern Orthodox woman, and the curricula provided intensive Jewish studies emphasizing the relevance of Torah to modern life together with a high level of secular studies.

At the post-high school level there has also been significant and dramatic progress. Catering to the prevailing global trend of interest in higher education, midrashot have sprung up throughout the country. Girls voluntarily choose to attend midrashot where they can now develop their Torah learning and are provided with the tools to delve into independent study. Teaching standards are high, thanks to the emergence of a cadre of charismatic and gifted educators with broad vision.

A landmark event within this field was the creation of a *hesder* program for girls within the midrasha. This answered the desire of religious girls who wished to serve in the army in a Torah-based framework rather than the National Service—hitherto the only option acceptable for religious girls. A leading example of these was Midreshet Ein haNatsiv, established in 1986 by Kibbutz Hadati to parallel the existing yeshiva in Kibbutz Ein Tsurim. Girls today are able to devote two years, before, during, and following full army service, to intensive and deep study of Jewish sources, and during their period of army service they receive spiritual support and regular shiurim from the staff of the midrasha who visit their girls on the respective army bases.

Midreshet Ein haNatsiv has grown in popularity and acceptance, also providing pre- and post-army courses and also attracting overseas students to its unique style of open-minded learning. Headed by top quality educators such as Rabbi Eli Kahan *z"l* and Mrs. Rachel Keren, Midreshet Ein haNatsiv has cultivated a cadre of learned women with a deep commitment to Judaism who take active roles contributing to the advancement of Jewish society and the State of Israel. Other *hesder* progams,

similar to that at Ein haNatsiv, also exist at Midreshet Bruria/Lindenbaum and Be'er in Yeruham, proving the need for such a framework.

Thus, in our case, two of our four daughters chose to do *sherut le'umi* while the other two were able to opt for the progam at Ein haNatsiv and served in the IDF education corps—one subsequently becoming an officer.

We have therefore had the privilege to be part of this evolution, which, while developing steadily over years and decades, represents a far-reaching revolution within the Jewish world.

Meanwhile, in the more academically focused, quasi-yeshiva style framework and beyond into adult education, things were moving at even greater speed.

Thus there are now a multitude of institutions providing higher education for women. Rav Yehuda Amital and Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, founders of Yeshivat Har Etzion, saw the need to provide yeshiva style Torah education for women at a high academic level, and in 1997 they established the Women's Bet Midrash in Migdal Oz, headed by Mrs. Estie Rosenberg (Rav Lichtenstein's daughter.) Migdal Oz provides a full-time learning curriculum together with the option of obtaining an academic qualification.

Beyond the tertiary education level, there has been a dramatic awakening in the field of adult education for women with a proliferation of Batei Midrash. Matan, founded by Rabbanit Malka Bina in 1988, is a prime example of a dynamic institution that today provides a myriad of diverse courses in Torah study. From havruta learning in Daf Yomi, through Bat Mitzvah courses for mothers and daughters, to a packed weekly schedule of classes, Matan attracts students aged 12 to 80. Its success has led to the establishment of eight branches throughout the country from Bet Shemesh to Zichron Yaakov—and has also expanded into internet courses and seminars. Thirst for learning among women seems boundless. Matan's vibrant Bet Midrash has paved the way for women to learn Torah at the highest levels, and its courses prepare them to assume leadership and educational positions. It thus provides the link between study per se, *lilmod u'lelamed*, and translating that knowledge into action—*lishmor vela'asot*.

This link is essential because the new generation of educated Jewish women see far beyond the "mere" study of texts and teaching. They are intent on becoming active participants in key areas of Jewish life—first and foremost, those issues affecting women.

A trailblazing institution in this area is Nishmat, founded in 1997 by Rabbanit Chana Henkin. Not just another midrasha providing advanced Torah study for all ages, Nishmat pioneered a course for *Yo'atsot Halakha* (halakhic advisors), wherein women devote two years to intensive study with rabbinic authorities of the laws of family purity as well as training in allied issues of modern medicine, such as gynecology, infertility, psychology, and sexuality.

This development is unprecedented, marking the first time in Jewish history that women have been trained to address women's halakhic issues—and have succeeded in obtaining widespread rabbinic support. Nishmat's Women's Halakhic Hotline, staffed by the *Yo'atsot Halakha*, receive thousands of calls from women in Israel and abroad, on issues in family purity, intimate personal and family matters, as well as fertility and women's health. This is a far cry from the traditional procedure in which women, or their husbands, were obliged to consult a male rabbi about the most intimate female and marital issues, and it must surely serve to encourage greater adherence to the mitzvoth of family purity.

Another area in which women have turned their halakhic studies to effective practical use is that of *To'enot Rabbaniot* (rabbinical adjudicates). This course was initiated and run by Mrs. Nurit Fried at Midreshet Lindenbaum, and provided its students with intensive training to qualify them as rabbinical advocates—whose aim is to help women required to appear before rabbinical courts. It marks another major step in the empowerment of women and testifies to the tremendous determination on the part of

Orthodox women to become active partners in religious life.

A study of this eve-olution of education and allied subjects would not be complete without mention of Koleh, the first Orthodox Jewish feminist organization in Israel. Founded in 1998 and initially led by Chana Kehat, it has grown into a flourishing religious women's forum that is active in a multitude of spheres, addressing such issues as *agunot*; prenuptial agreements; mobilization of religious leadership in fighting sexual harassment, domestic violence, and sexual abuse; and creating appropriate curricula for schools. Its national two-day conferences attract thousands of participants from throughout the Jewish world and across the full religious spectrum to learn about and discuss contemporary halakhic and social issues.

One final observation must be made—albeit not a positive one. It would seem that the advance in the education and empowerment of this generation of young women has had a detrimental effect on their ability to find marriage partners. Singlehood is indeed a global epidemic but in Orthodox religious circles this is an issue of enormous concern and a subject that demands great attention.

In summary, if we look back over the last three decades we have witnessed phenomenal growth in the provision and scope of religious education available in Israel to the Modern Orthodox woman. It can also be noted that the majority of the personalities in the forefront of this revolution have been American *olim*: Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, Rabbanit Malka Bina, Rabbanit Chana Henkin, Rabbi David Bigman, Chana Kahat, and so forth. Such individuals have served to encourage their Israeli counterparts to eagerly jump on board to create a new cadre of Israeli educators.

But this is not at all the end of the story, but it is very much the story so far. There can be no doubt that the process I have described—and that we have experienced and benefited from—is still in its early stages, from an historic point of view.

Rabbanit Chana Henkin, who has been in the forefront of so many of the developments noted here, envisions the process moving forward in the direction of women kollel students and ultimately, women rabbis (although they will not be called by that title—the subject of a discussion at a recent Koleh forum). But the reality will exist before the name. I expect—and hope and pray—that my granddaughters will become part of this ongoing process. They will take for granted all the achievements noted above, having been born and educated in a world where they were all well established. The front line of the campaign for women's education will be further advanced. Each of us can enunciate their own vision of how this might be achieved, but the bottom line is that women will be full, largely equal, and highly active partners in all spheres of Jewish studies and the Orthodox community.