Four Spaces: Women's Torah Study in American Modern Orthodoxy

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Women's Torah Study in American Modern Orthodoxy

By Dean Rachel Friedman*

Nearly thirty years ago, I left my career as a lawyer to become a teacher of Torah. As a teacher, I focus on text and substantive study. But, inevitably, I am also an observer of Torah learning in the United States and of the place of women in that study. I have witnessed many discussions, often heated, about women's roles in studying and teaching Torah. Rather than give a definitive perspective on those issues, I offer here something else: a taxonomy of the discussion itself. In any discussion, nothing can get done without knowing, first and foremost, what the discussion is actually about.

In that vein, I have observed that discussions about women and Torah learning are not about any one thing. This is natural, because Torah study

itself is not a single thing. Torah study is an aspect of formal Jewish education, but it is also preparation for professional careers. And, perhaps more importantly than either of those, it is one of Judaism's most significant religious and social acts. Any discussion about women's Torah learning, then, relates to one of four "spaces": the education, the professional, the religious, and the social. These spaces are all interconnected. Teasing these out as separate spheres will do much to make our discussion of their significance more coherent.

The Education Space

The first context for discussing women's Torah study, then, is education. This context deals with what women learn as students in formal classrooms in elementary school, high school, seminaries, and college *batei midrash*. Yeshiva day schools – including those I attended as a child -- have long emphasized women's textual and primary-source learning in the form of *Tanakh*. Indeed, because of this, girls' schools were often thought to provide better Bible and Hebrew-language skills than their all-male counterparts.

Traditionally, however, these day schools did not impart primary knowledge of *torah she-ba'al peh* or *halakhah*, focusing instead on bottom-line practice. This has changed dramatically over the past two decades. In both co-educational and girls-only schools, young women study the full panoply of *torah she-ba'al peh*, from Talmud to *rishonim* to modern *piskei halakhah*. The basic Torah educations received by young Modern Orthodox women and men, therefore, resemble each other as never before.

Still, there is a caveat. This is true of the *basic* education expected of our students. At higher levels – those that follow high school – the quality and quantity of women's and men's offerings differ markedly. A male high school graduate spending a gap year in Israel will, by default, end up in a program that emphasizes *torah she-ba'al peh*, unless he seeks out something different. By contrast, a female student with the same background will, by default, end up in an institution that emphasizes areas of study other than *gemara* and text-based *halakhah*, unless she actively seeks admission to one of a small number of seminaries whose curricula resemble those of men's *yeshivot*.

And the difference becomes more acute in college. Men seeking intensive *beit medrash* study focusing on *torah she-ba'al peh* have a number of options, including at Modern Orthodoxy's flagship institution, Yeshiva University. The closest that women come to such an opportunity at YU is the Stern College Beit Midrash for Women. Students have expressed, however, that the range of torah she-ba'al peh offerings at Stern, and the number of religious authorities who serve as teachers and mentors, does not approach that of the men's campus. See

https://yucommentator.org/2020/05/making-strides-towards-a-stronger-beit-midrash-on-beren/.

These differences in advanced learning may, of course, simply reflect that women's learning of *gemara* and *halakhah* is, in historical perspective, a recent phenomenon. And I would agree that the trajectory is towards greater opportunities for women and greater parity with men's education options. But it seems likely that women's opportunities differ for structural reasons, also, which means that differences will not evaporate with time alone. For men, advanced *gemara* and *halakhah* learning can lead to a title such as *rabbi*, and to the respect and jobs that come with the title. Women's opportunities for certification, such as a certificate from GPATS or the Drisha Scholars Circle or the title of *maharat*, lead to fewer professional opportunities and less communal recognition. This means not only that women have less incentive to populate advanced *Talmud* classes, but that they may receive a subliminal message – intended or not – that men are the keepers of the *torah she-ba'al peh* and that women do not need to study its intricacies at an advanced level. All of this lays the groundwork for our discussion of the second space for women's learning: the professional.

The Professional Space

Here, women face a fundamental limitation in most Modern Orthodox communities because they cannot partake of a title such as *rabbi*. This lack of a title makes it more difficult for a woman to signal that "I am a trained Jewish professional with significant learning under my belt."

Women have worked creatively around this limitation. They have long taught *Tanakh* in yeshiva day schools and, in recent decades, have played more public roles as scholars-in-residence in synagogues. For those trained in *torah she-ba'al peh*, many have found roles teaching (without a title) in high schools, in advanced programs like Lamdeinu, Drisha, Midreshet Nili, and in public speaking. Following the Israeli precedent, a number of learned women have begun calling themselves *rabbanit*, a moniker which proves less controversial because it preserves the ambiguity of whether it signifies marriage to a rabbi, independent accomplishment in high level Torah study, or both. Women have also found roles as *yoatzot halakhah*, *toanot*, and *rebbetzins* that allow them to partially take on some tasks traditionally performed by men. Finally, women trained in *torah she-ba'al peh* have found communal roles – such as at federations, the UJA, and in *kashrut* organizations -- that take some advantage of their Torah training.

Finding ways for women to use their learning is important not only for the professionals themselves, but for the community, which risks losing out on their individual and collective contributions. Still, this is a delicate balancing act. Fear of a feminism that runs counter to the Jewish value of

women as the center of the Jewish home and family runs deep. And Orthodox Judaism must be, by its nature, conservative in the Burkean sense. It can absorb slow, incremental change, rather than measures that do too much too quickly. I am likely not alone in wanting measured, gradual change that sticks, rather than a hasty and dramatic overhaul that does not, when it comes to creating professional roles for women.

The two spaces we have discussed so far – the educational and professional – are important, but immediately relevant only for the subset of women still in school or entering Jewish communal work. Torah learning, though, is much more than an educational or professional endeavor. It is also a religious act and a facilitator of social connection. I will focus next, therefore, on women's Torah learning in religious and social space.

The Religious Space

As a religious matter, it is generally understood that men have a formal obligation to study Torah, while women do not. Kiddushin 29b. Nevertheless, even in the absence of obligation, our community looks at women's Torah study as valuable because it is a *kiyyum mitzvah* (fulfillment of a voluntary mitzvah) and, perhaps more importantly, an essential way of connecting to God. See e.g. https://www.jpost.com/magazine/judaism/may-women-study-the-talmud. Rabbinic leaders have recognized that, as a practical matter, women with sophisticated secular education and advanced professional roles may find it challenging to connect meaningfully to their religion without a similar opportunity for sophisticated engagement. Id.

We must think carefully, therefore, about the messages we send to women with respect to their roles as Torah learners. For example, what does it say to a spiritual woman, married or single, if her community encourages men to be *kovei ittim* and study *be-havruta* for hours each week, but offers no similar encouragement or form of engagement for her? I do not claim to know the exact answer to this question. But I do know two things. First, it will be hard for some women to find fulfillment as observant Jews if we do not value their engagement with Torah study as a spiritual and religious act. Second, in my experience, women's thirst for this spiritual act is profound, judging by the fact that the *beit midrash* which houses Lamdeinu, the institution I founded and lead, is filled on weekdays with women learning Torah.

The Social Space

I move now to the fourth and final area of women's Torah study: learning as a social act. For many, studying Torah is about more than the study itself. It is a way to connect with friends who attend the same shiur or to bond with a study partner. Torah study provides a framework for Jewish social life.

With a few exceptions, Torah study for women comes much more frequently in the form of classes than *havruta* study. By contrast, it is not uncommon for adult men – often retired or otherwise not working full-time -- to sit in a shul *beit midrash* studying in pairs. In this way, Torah study offers more social interaction for men than for women. This difference may reflect differing preferences, particularly among the older adults most likely to have time for Torah study and whose expectations were formed in an era when women's discretionary learning was less common. But, if these preferences are generational, we must be aware that future generations of women who are accustomed to participating in Torah study as an act of social connection, may expect more *beit midrash* style options.

As a case in point, one of the most popular classes at Lamdeinu is a Parshanut haMikra shiur on Sefer Bereishit which includes guided *havruta* preparation followed by an interactive shiur. Strong personal friendships have formed between students, who often live considerable distances from each other, owing to their study of Torah and rabbinic sources in a *havruta* setting. These learning/social relationships have proven enduring; they have continued full force through zoom and telephone in the covid era.

Concluding Thoughts

Having provided a taxonomy of women's "Torah learning spaces" in 21st century America, and of some attendant challenges, I offer a few remarks in conclusion.

First, I do not imply that women's Torah learning must be made to look exactly like its male counterpart. Women, as a group, have needs, interests and desires that may differ from those of men, and we do ourselves no service by imitation for its own sake.

Second, just as we ask about changing what Torah study for women looks like, we may ask the same about men. For example might men benefit from incorporating a greater emphasis on *tanakh* into the traditional yeshivah curriculum and in their own discretionary learning?

Finally, on a personal note, I feel blessed to have spent my adult life *mi-yoshvei beit ha-midrash* -- as a teacher of Torah and an administrator of high-level Jewish educational institutions. Even as I contemplate the evolving role of women's Torah study in Jewish communal life, I never forget that what brought me to this work – and what keeps me there – is not the new, but the ancient and eternal. I am here because I love Torah and I love teaching it. I cannot imagine a meaningful connection to *ha-Kadosh Barukh Hu* without it. If I ask questions, it is only in the hope that others may be so blessed to connect with Judaism and God through Torah learning as I have.

*I am grateful to my son Rabbi Elie Friedman for his significant contributions to this article, and for deepening my understanding of Torah and humanity always.