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### **JUDAISM IS ABOUT TWO KINDS OF LOVE**

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**Review of Shai Held, [Judaism is About Love: Recovering the Heart of Jewish Life](#) (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024). Originally delivered as remarks at an online book launch, hosted by the Oxford Interfaith Forum, Oxford University, April 15, 2024.<sup>1</sup>**

With some books, you don't get to the major idea until the last page. With others, you have to wait until the middle to know what's driving the author. Some books reveal their chief theme in the first chapter, and some in the first sentence. Rabbi Dr. Shai Held, in his wonderful new bestseller, *Judaism is about Love*, outdoes them

all. His keynote idea is found already in the book's opening dedication to his three children. It reads as follows: "To [my children] / *be-ahavah rabbah uve-ahavat 'olam* / With love abundant and abiding" (p. v; cf. 522-523).

What is this distinction between "abundant" and "abiding" love? Held discusses it several times in the book, most significantly in chapters 4 and 15. According to this distinction, there are two kinds of love: *ahavah rabbah* (abundant, abounding, passionate love) and *ahavat olam* (abiding, everlasting, constant, eternal love). The former is a volatile emotion, the latter an enduring disposition (9; cf. 116).

The distinction goes back to a debate in *Berakhot* 11b concerning the "blessing of love" (*birkat ahavah*), one of the blessings that introduce the recitation of the *Shema* (Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21; Numbers 15:37-41). The blessing begins

<sup>1</sup> The author thanks Dr. Thea Gomelaury, Director of the Forum, for her invitation.

with the affirmation that God loves us, which is prefatory to the commandment set down in the *Shema*, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God” (Deuteronomy 6:5). The love is reciprocal. God loves us, and we love Him.

While fixing the text of this blessing, the Rabbis found to their chagrin that there were two different versions. One version said that God loves us with an *abundant* love (*ahavah rabbah*) (cf. Lamentations 3:23). The other said that God loves us with an *abiding* love (*ahavat olam*) (cf. Jeremiah 31:2). What should we do? Should we say “abundant” or “abiding?” Different Jewish communities resolved this problem in different ways. The Ashkenazi practice today is to compromise: “abundant” is said in the morning service, and “abiding” is said in the evening service.

In his explanation of the difference between the two kinds of love, Held elaborates profoundly and creatively on an insight by the celebrated Hasidic master, R. Zadok ha-Kohen of Lublin (1823-1900).<sup>2</sup>

The two terms, Held argues, express two kinds of love and are applicable to all love relationships, including that between husband and wife, parents and children, and God and human beings. All love relationships need *both* sorts of love. “Abundant love” is the love of powerful, fierce passion. It represents the exceptional high moments which endow one’s life with excitement and romance.

“Abiding love” is the continuous, steady, faithful, unchanging love that is present always, unconditionally, no matter what – during the low moments as well as the high. It is this baseline love that sustains the relationship and enables us to live in the real world – with its ups and downs.

Why do Ashkenazi Jews say *ahavah rabbah* in the morning and *ahavat olam* in the evening? Following R. Zadok, Held writes: “Morning is a time of passionate hope and open-ended possibility.” The light of dawn arises with fervor and promise. Our hearts are full of abundant and abounding love. *Ahavah rabbah* breaks forth like the dawn! “Evening is a time of anxiety and apprehension.” It invites uncertainty and fear. We comfort ourselves by speaking of everlasting or abiding love, *ahavat olam*. It is “the kind of love that remains indestructible even during the night and the darkness of troubles” (85).

Held then goes beyond R. Zadok. What is true for the love between God and human beings, he argues, is also true for the love between human lovers. All love, he writes, “must have its share of *mornings*, that is, times of great passion and feeling – but it must also be durable enough to endure *evenings* – that is, times of crisis or weakened ardor – because every life and every relationship faces its share of evenings.” Here Held quotes Shakespeare’s sonnet 116: “Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds” (86). True love, says Shakespeare, is in effect *ahavat olam*!

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<sup>2</sup> See his *Tzidkat Ha-Tzaddik* (“The Righteousness of the Righteous”), no. 200.

But Held corrects Shakespeare: “I am not sure love can be truly *everlasting* if it does not have moments, at least, of being *abounding*” (86). Every true love must comprise both *ahavah rabbah* and *ahavat olam*, both abundant and abiding love, both intense eros and perpetual devotion. Each is a necessary condition of the other. Held might well have cited the popular 1955 [song](#) by Sammy Cahn, sung by Frank Sinatra: “Love and marriage..., you can’t have one without the other.” *Ahavah rabbah* and *ahavat olam*, you can’t have one without the other.

The “love” in Cahn’s song represents fervid, unchained, erotic love. The “marriage” in his song represents steady, everlasting, reined love. Marriage expresses a commitment to abiding love, *ahavat olam*, as formalized in a written contract. Held spells this out: “[A] commitment to remain steadfast in moments when passion is attenuated or diluted is a significant part of what constitutes the covenant of marriage” (86). This “covenantal love,” Held insists, is the same for the covenant (*berit*) of marriage between two human partners and the *berit* between God and the people of Israel, which is called by Scripture *berit olam* (Genesis 9:16; Exodus 31:16), an abiding or eternal covenant (316). “Covenantal love,” Held concludes, “is above all a commitment and an

orientation” (86).

The Exodus from Egypt and the splitting of the Red Sea dramatically revealed God’s abundant, abounding, and passionate love for us. However, the covenant, which represents a commitment throughout all time, binds God and us to an ongoing, everlasting, eternal love. If the Exodus demonstrates abundant love, the Passover seder celebrated each year, year after year, demonstrates abiding love. Nonetheless, according to the Haggadah, “In every generation, one must see oneself as if one personally was liberated from Egypt” (189). In other words, “we remember” (*ahavat olam*) must be mixed with “we are there!” (*ahavah rabbah*).

The late R. Norman Lamm, who was both a superb scholar and homilist, is cited by Held (410, n. 23) as explaining the deep meaning of the word “*olam*” in *ahavat olam*. The word “*olam*,” he urges, may be read “*elem*” (“concealment,” “hiddenness”).<sup>3</sup> *Ahavat elem* thus means concealed love, hidden love – the love that is always there, even if one does not notice it, and even if one can’t see it because of the darkness! But it’s there! In the pitch of night, in tragedy and loss, God loves us with a concealed, yet abiding love.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Tanhuma, Kedoshim* 8; Rashi to Ecclesiastes 3:11, s.v. “*natan be-libbam*.”

<sup>4</sup> Chesky Kopel of the *Lehrhaus* editorial team draws my attention to a distinction made by the Maggid of Mezeritch (1704-1772) between the love of God expressed in the performance of the ritual commandments (*mitzvot*) and that expressed by doing simple everyday chores with the

inner intention (*kavvanah*) of serving God. The former is seen by all (*be-galui*) and the latter concealed (*be-seter*), but the latter is greater. Similarly, explains the Maggid, the erotic love between a man and a woman, which is expressed in secret, is more intense than sibling love, which is expressed openly. See R. Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev, *Or Ha-Emet* (1899), 34b. See also Tsippi Kauffman’s analysis of this text in *Be-Khol Derakhekha Da’eihu* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2009), 343-344.

“God’s love for us,” Held writes, “is expressed in the giving of the commandments in love; our love for God, in turn, is expressed in the keeping of those commandments in love” (348). The commandments (*mitzvot*) express both God’s love for us and our love for Him. They represent a reciprocal abiding love, which is unconditional. But wait! It’s not really unconditional, is it? No! It can’t be, for abiding love, according to Held, can survive only if it is mixed, even if just at rare precious moments, with abounding love. To put it paradoxically, there is no unconditional *ahavat olam* without conditional *ahavah rabbah!*

The most amazing sentence that Held writes appears when he discusses his children: At night, when putting them to bed, he sometimes says to them, “I love you so much. You can’t...imagine how much I love you... [but] God loves you so much more!” He then explains to us why he says this to his children. “I say this because I am aware of my own shortcomings” (90-91). No human being can be sure that his or her unconditional love (*ahavat olam*) is really unconditional. Thus, we need to be reassured of God’s unconditional love. But isn’t the Binding of Isaac (the *akeidah*) proof that we cannot depend even on God’s *ahavat olam* (59-61)? Is not the whole Book of Job proof of this (68-69, 304-305)?

I hope I’ve succeeded in, at least partially, expositing Held’s intricate distinction between abundant and abiding love, that is, between love as an emotion and love as a disposition. Held is a pleasant, engaging, relaxed writer – but he

doesn’t avoid complex subjects.

Let me conclude briefly with a modest attempt to develop Held’s insight in a slightly different but complementary direction. Just as we may distinguish between two types of love, abundant and abiding, so too we can distinguish between two kinds of faith. There is faith based on miracles. It is abundant, abounding, passionate, dramatic, powerful! And there is faith based on knowledge and conviction. It is abiding, quiet, prosaic, cerebral, and everlasting. Faith based on miracles can be weakened or erased. As Maimonides put it, one who believes on the basis of miracles has an imperfect faith (*yeish be-libbo dofi*).<sup>5</sup> The Israelites walking through the split Red Sea knew perfectly well it was a great miracle, and their faith in God and Moses was based on that miracle (Exodus 14:31). Later, given the hardships of desert life (snakes and scorpions, no fish or cucumbers, few creature comforts), they lost their faith in God and Moses and worshiped the Golden Calf. Faith based on amazing historical experiences is true, but not everlasting – for unhappy historical experiences can counterbalance it and snuff it out.

When the State of Israel was proclaimed, virtually every Jew in the world knew it was a miracle no less amazing than the parting of the Red Sea. The Chief Rabbinate of Israel ruled that the Hallel prayer be recited every Independence Day to commemorate the miracle. However, as years went on and Israel made mistakes, allowing the gap between rich and poor to expand, electing

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<sup>5</sup> *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 8:1-2.

corrupt leaders, and becoming entangled in endless wars, many Jews have sadly forgotten that the existence of the State is indeed a miracle.

In sum, Held's thought-provoking and inspiring book explains what Judaism is truly all about – love! It is about both *ahavah rabbah* and *ahavat olam* – and the paradoxical relationship between them.

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### THE CULTURE OF LEARNING IN WOMEN'S TORAH STUDY

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**A**s you walk into the room, you hear voices arguing back and forth. You can't make out the sound of any particular conversation over the murmur of many intense, simultaneous conversations, but the total energy is palpable. The discussion is animated, and amid the wrinkled brows of thought and concentration abound the smiles of joy and fulfillment.

If you once have witnessed this uplifting scene, you know that the above description is of

someone entering a *beit midrash*, a Jewish house of study. In forming one's identity as a Torah learner, participating in this vibrant atmosphere is key. The pervasive intensity and passion is so contagious that a regular participant naturally accepts the charge to learn Torah at the highest level possible. People are pushed to invest further in their own learning by seeing so many in the community learning with a thirst for uncovering the true meaning of the text. It inspires them to invest in their study and probe deeply, leaving no stone unturned as they consider the depths of Torah.

Given its pivotal role in developing commitment to Torah study, it is unfortunate that in the United States this culture of learning<sup>1</sup> is found almost exclusively among male learners. This is true even decades after women in this country began formally studying Talmud, and years after Talmud education became widely accessible to women. In Modern Orthodox (MO) communities, it is observed that over 90% (if not more) of *beit midrash* attendees, Gemara *shiur* attendees, and people with a regular Gemara *havruta* are male, despite the fact that women's *talmud Torah* at the highest level is embraced as a value within this community.<sup>2</sup> As much as we say that women's learning matters, we have not developed a

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this essay, the term "culture of learning" refers to a publicly expressed passion, dedication, and significant time commitment to learning Torah on the highest level. It is what others may call "*shtayging*" or "*ameilus ba-torah*."

<sup>2</sup> I consider "learning Torah on the highest level" to be Torah study that includes independent learning of Talmud by a *havruta* pair. Learning *Tanakh* with a *havruta* pair, or

learning Talmud in a *shiur* without a *havruta* component, does not meet this threshold. A *Tanakh havruta* or *shiur*, though very important to our relationship with God, does not take us far enough into our understanding of His halakhic system. Likewise, learning in a Talmud *shiur* without a *havruta* is not sufficiently rigorous. Because the Talmud is the text that explains the meaning and reasoning of all earlier texts, its analysis is needed for full understanding of *Humash*, *Navi*, and the will of God.

culture of learning amongst women. Our actions belie the belief that high-level learning is of utmost importance to both men *and* women alike.

This issue looms large for me because of my personal experiences. I have devoted virtually my entire life to the study of Gemara. I studied Talmud for hours each week in high school, seminary, college, and postcollege. My professional life is also focused on Gemara: my doctorate is in teaching Talmud, and I teach Gemara to young men and women each day. Most of my learning throughout all of these stages, however, has been in empty women's *batei midrash*, tiny, windowless side rooms, dining rooms, and hallways. Indeed, I have been asked to leave *shiurim* and *batei midrash* almost as many times as I have been invited and welcomed to stay. The process has been very lonely, and I have felt discouraged at many points along the way.

I attribute my perseverance through these challenges to the instances of a positive culture of women's learning around me. I feel lucky that I crossed paths with a few like-minded women who became regular *havruta* partners, allowing us to

support and encourage each other in the otherwise very lonely pursuit. I also encountered some very special institutions and teachers that encouraged me to keep learning because it was right, and not to pursue it less seriously because others were less invested. Not everyone, though, is so lucky to be associated with the amazing mentors I was privy to be guided by. Even with such mentors, the overwhelming loneliness of learning without a community may lead many to give up. I long for my students and the next generation of women to have a more vibrant learning experience than I and my peers did, one which will support them and encourage them in their learning, taking them to great heights.

### **Why Does Culture Matter?**

Learners, especially in their formative years, will only go the extra mile if the culture pushes them to do so. It is for this reason that self-help experts recommend surrounding oneself with others striving for a similar goal when trying to reach that goal.<sup>3</sup> Experimental studies have found that witnessing the success and greater commitment of others leads people to try harder in areas such as their commitment to exercise<sup>4</sup> and their performance at work.<sup>5</sup> People set aside a nominal amount of time for activities they think are

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Therefore, in order to appreciate the full breadth and depth of the Talmud, its students need to spend time learning it independently before discussing it in a *shiur*.

It appears that most agree with this definition of the highest level of Torah learning, as no major institution of higher Torah learning features the full gamut of Jewish law and tradition merely through classes, *Tanakh havrutas*, or *daf yomi shiurim*.

<sup>3</sup> Stacey Colino, "[Finding it Tough to Motivate Yourself? These Strategies Can Help](#)," *The Washington Post*, January 31, 2024; Angela, "[Why Do We Compare Ourselves to](#)

[Others](#)," *Mind, Body and Soul: NYU Blog about Mental Health and Wellbeing*, February 27, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Jingwen Zhang et al., "Efficacy and Causal Mechanism of an Online Social Media Intervention to Increase Physical Activity: Results of a Randomized Controlled Trial," *Preventive Medicine Reports* 2 (January 2015): 651-657.

<sup>5</sup> Ryan W. Quinn et al., "How Did You Do That? Exploring the Motivation to Learn from Others' Exceptional Success," *Academy of Management Discoveries* 7, no. 1 (March 2021).

important, but they only extend themselves when they are trying to meet a particular standard. Without reinforcement around them, people don't experience the nagging feeling that there's more to know and learn, and more to do.

Think about any time you have practiced to get better at an activity or to further your career. Chances are that there were many people in the field that were more successful and accomplished who helped set the standard for you for what success looks like. Similarly, a booming learning culture is necessary to generate more intense and widespread women's learning. We can only expect to see women experiencing a deeper understanding of God's ways and becoming a generation of women leaders as Talmud teachers, community speakers, and religious role models—if a more robust learning culture is present for them.

### **Are We on Track? What the Data Says**

It is understandable that a strong learning culture will only develop in a generation where women have been educated and trained in *beit midrash* study and deep Talmud learning. Past generations may not have developed a women's learning culture because advanced Talmud education was only open to small sections of the community. Z

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<sup>6</sup> I focused on secondary schools over primary schools because "learning culture" tends not to develop before high school. Focusing on coed schools, rather than single-gender schools, ensures that the faculty, ideology, and financial resources are similar for both boys and girls in the study. Even in schools that have different Judaic Studies programs for their male and female students, the ideology of the faculty for both sets of students is likely to be more similar

Today, however, when many Modern Orthodox young women have the option to participate in Talmud study in high school, we would expect to see a vibrant learning culture developing amongst them. A strong learning culture amongst our teenage girls would be predictive of a widespread learning culture amongst women in generations to come, as these teenagers would continue embodying this culture as they transition to adulthood, and the generation after them would do the same.

To ascertain if this stronger learning culture is a reality amongst our youngest generation that is receiving solid Talmud training, I reached out to educators in MO schools to learn about the nature of the learning culture that their students experience. Data collection was limited to educators in secondary coed schools in the United States.<sup>6</sup>

To collect the data on the observed learning culture of young women, teachers in 17 coed MO secondary schools in the United States that have regular required Talmud learning for women were surveyed. Schools were instructed that one Talmud teacher who taught male and female students should complete the questionnaire.<sup>7</sup> The questionnaire was produced as a Google form and

than the ideology and resources provided for male and female students in completely different schools.

<sup>7</sup> It was not required that the instructor teach girls and boys in the same class, or even teach them the same course, but just that they teach Talmud to both boys and girls.

contained seven items: three multiple choice questions about learning culture,<sup>8</sup> two demographic questions, and two free-response questions. Respondents were given the option to provide their names, but they were encouraged to keep their responses anonymous if there was any reason that the data would be sensitive personally or in their school's view.

76% of schools in the survey set returned their surveys. The set of schools that responded included a significant number of schools from both the New York and non-New York areas (57% from the New York area and 43% from elsewhere.) Similarly, it included both schools with single-gender Talmud classes and schools with coed Talmud classes (57% single-gender Talmud classes and 43% coed Talmud classes).

The results of the survey were surprising: our youngest generation of Talmud-educated female students are not developing or experiencing a strong learning culture. Even in many schools that offer the same Talmud-learning opportunities to their female and male students, educators report that there is a stronger learning culture for their male students than their female students. About half (57%) of the coed Modern Orthodox secondary schools in the United States that responded to the survey reported that boys are more likely to choose extra Gemara-learning opportunities within the school day or at co-

curricular programs, including participating in a more challenging Talmud track and attending *mishmar* and *bekiut* programs. (The rest of the respondents saw no difference between boys and girls.) The discrepancy is even wider regarding participation in learning opportunities *outside* of school. Over 75% of schools reported that their male students choose more Gemara-learning opportunities outside of school, whether at night, on Sundays, or during vacations.

This means that even if the classroom experiences of Modern Orthodox boys and girls are the same, women's learning already finds itself woefully behind by the 12th grade. Young men learn more hours and build a culture of motivation while young women do not, on account of the numerous choices made by our young men and women in their teenage years regarding their learning. Equal opportunity and equal access rings hollow when the culture guides students toward unequal time for study, and two 18-year-olds, classmates since pre-K, are in very different places in their learning. It is puzzling why the culture of men and women's learning diverges at such a young age amongst students seemingly receiving the same education and guidance.

It is clear from this survey that we are not currently on track for developing a stronger learning culture for women. We should not patiently wait for our teenagers to reach

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<sup>8</sup> Respondents were asked to indicate if culture was more prevalent among boys, among girls, or among both equally, for each of three measures of learning culture: (1) the amount of extra Talmud-learning opportunities chosen at school, (2) the amount of extra Talmud-learning

opportunities chosen out of school, and (3) the motivation to learn Talmud in one's regular required school Talmud class. The respondent also had the option to report instead that he or she did not have enough information to answer the question.



adulthood to see women’s learning culture flourishing, because they do not have a strong foundation of a learning culture to bring with them. If we want to see this happen, we must work to build a learning culture for our young women during their teenage years. Only then can we expect them to bring and spread the culture among adults when they grow up.

Some readers may be dismissive of this issue, arguing that so long as there is access for women to study Talmud, there is no need to worry what they make of it and if they invest less than young men. The potential impact of an intervention that would nurture a stronger culture, however, is too great to pass up on. When the creation of a more passionate and dedicated generation of religious women is within reach, it is in the community’s interest to foster it. A stronger generation of religious women means a stronger next generation of religious Jews. Children being raised by two parents who understand the deeper meaning of Judaism will create more passionate and dedicated children than those being raised by only one parent with that background. This is an issue that needs the community’s attention, thoughtful reflection, and action, and there is little downside to taking steps to ameliorate this issue.

### **What Are the Causes for the Cultural Differences?**

Changing the culture must begin with an attempt to uncover the causes of a diverging learning

culture for young men and women. I will share various explanations that I have heard educators and laypeople suggest as the reason for this observation. While many of the explanations are based on the narrow personal experiences of those who suggest it, there is broader evidence of the phenomena they describe and, at times, evidence for the causality they claim from educational research in other contexts.

### ***Teacher’s or Club Leader’s Gender***

Some explain that what holds back the women’s learning culture is the lack of congruence between the gender of the teacher or club leader and the gender of the student. Because the vast majority of Talmud *shiurim* and clubs in the MO community are taught by men, girls are led to feel that these programs are more geared for male students than female ones and therefore choose not to participate. It is known that this disconnect is found in other scenarios where there is this lack of congruence between students and teachers. For example, there is evidence that a student matched with a teacher of the same race will be more motivated than when the teacher is of a different race.<sup>9</sup> It is reasonable to think that similar effects occur for other alignments with the teacher’s identity, including gender congruence. If young women, at least to an extent, gravitate toward classes where teachers and club leaders are female, it is understandable that not as many young women choose to participate in Talmud clubs or advanced Talmud classes as their male peers and instead spend more time on other

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<sup>9</sup> Anna J. Egalite, Brian Kisida, and Marcus A. Winters, “[Representation in the Classroom: The Effect of Own-Race](#)

[Teachers on Student Achievement](#),” *Economics of Education Review* 45 (April 2015): 44–52.

activities.

This phenomenon is magnified when the class is run in a way that highlights the teacher's gender. It is not uncommon to see extracurricular Judaic clubs run by male teachers led like a "boys' club." In a "boys' club" environment, interactions designed to connect the students with the teacher are dominated by ways that males relate to one another in all-male environments but not in coed ones. Male Judaic Studies teachers and program coordinators are often seen connecting to their students through fist bumps, friendly insult exchanges, sports talk, playing sports together, and occasionally through spiritual mosh pits. Studies show that male-dominated workplace culture causes female exclusion, even when the males have no intention to exclude the women.<sup>10</sup> The same may be true for how women feel in Talmud extracurricular activities that are dominated by a "boys' club" culture. Even though only some male teachers and club leaders run their programs in this way, it still means that young women will have fewer opportunities that they feel comfortable in to choose from as compared to their male peers.

There are a variety of solutions to address the problem of gender incongruity between students

and teachers. These include opening more programs led by female teachers, training male teachers on how to avoid creating a "bro culture," and being more explicit to students that the gender of the teacher is not intended to signal who should attend, engage, and participate.

### ***The Role of the Haredi Community in Communal Programming***

Others believe that the difference in the culture of learning between young men and women is due to the significant role that the Haredi community plays in determining the structure of religious programming for MO teenagers. In some communities, nightly and weekend learning opportunities for teenagers are run by Haredi-affiliated local kollels, usually because there is no parallel MO kollel to coordinate and offer these programs (likely because Modern Orthodoxy puts greater emphasis on career development rather than kollel learning).

Haredi kollels structure their programs based on their beliefs about women's learning. The Haredi community discourages Talmud learning amongst women because of an application of an opinion in the Mishnah ([m. Sotah 3:4](#)) that it is dangerous to teach women Torah on a high level.<sup>11</sup> This adherence to the simple reading of the Mishnah,

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<sup>10</sup> Weverton Ataide Pinheiro, "[Dismantling the 'All-Boys Club' A Narrative of Contradictions Women Experience in PhD Mathematics Programs: A Freirean Approach](#)," *International Electronic Journal of Mathematics Education* 16, no. 3 (2021); Lindsay Kohler, "[New Research Finds the 'Old Boys Club' at Work Is Real—And Contributing to the Gender Pay Gap](#)," *Forbes*, April 22, 2021; Emily McCrary-Ruiz-Esparza, "[The Boys' Club Culture Is More Common than You May Think](#)" *InHerSight* (blog).

<sup>11</sup> The Modern Orthodox community follows Rabbi Soloveitchik's view that not only are women allowed to study Talmud today but that it is necessary for the religious success of the community that they study Talmud. See Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Talmud Study for Girls in Yeshiva Elementary and High Schools," in [Community, Covenant and Commitment: Selected Letters and Communications](#), ed. Nathaniel Helfgot (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2005), 83. Rabbi Soloveitchik probably understood the [mishnah](#) in [Sotah](#) as prescriptive advice for how to best promote the

combined with a worldview that the roles of men and women in family life and religion are very different from one another, leads Haredi kollels to offer different kinds of programs for male and female teenagers. While serious Talmud-learning opportunities are offered for the young men, other learning opportunities or *hesed* activities are organized for the young women.

The impact of Haredi cultural forces may also explain the divergence between some boys' and girls' programs run by the Modern Orthodox community itself, such as the major summer learning programs sponsored by NCSY. The boys' elite summer learning program, NCSY Kollel, focuses on the learning of Talmud, specifically learning the text inside, while the girls' learning program, Michlelet, focuses more on *hesed* trips, overall spiritual growth, and non-Talmud learning. A viewing of the promotional videos for the two programs highlights these differences in focus;<sup>12</sup> the video for the boys' learning program contains many scenes of the campers studying a page of Talmud, while the girls' video shows students sitting in class and doing activities together, but not pouring over texts and reading them inside. Why would a Modern Orthodox youth group

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religious growth of women in regard to *talmud Torah* given their general approach to learning, logic, and reasoning at the time. Since women's education is different today, the prescriptive advice in the same spirit would be different. Rabbi Willig explains that the *gedolim* who decided to allow Torah instruction for women must have understood the *mishnah* that way. See Mordechai Willig, "[Trampled Laws](#)," *TorahWeb.org*. (Nevertheless, Rabbi Willig himself believes that girls' Talmud study should be on a case-by-case basis rather than being included for all in a school's curriculum.)

<sup>12</sup> See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pwiP1A\\_GcY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pwiP1A_GcY) and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lelvCzCDi5U>.

servicing high school students not offer the same high-level learning for its young women that is seen as crucial for the religious growth of its young men? Perhaps some staff and/or participants identify as Haredi or have been influenced by non-MO viewpoints, and the programs are adapted to be a comfortable option even for those individuals.<sup>13</sup>

I want to clarify that I am very grateful for the incredible spiritual growth and Torah learning that NCSY enables for both their young men and women through these programs, and my observation is not meant to undermine the impact of the programs in any way. I am only highlighting the structure of these programs to point out the way it likely impacts the mindset of its participants about Torah learning. If young men and young women receive direct messaging from NCSY that men study Talmud and women do not, we should not be surprised when they return to school that boys are excited to study more Talmud while girls are content to take notes, pass their exams, and move on to the next course.

Like the first possible cause of why there is a weaker culture of learning among girls, this cause

<sup>13</sup> Some may disagree with the assertion that the influence on programs like this to de-emphasize Talmud learning is external to the MO community, and feel that it is due to a view of women's Torah learning held internally in the MO community. It is possible to claim that a section of the MO community does not adopt the view of Rav Yosef Soloveitchik or Rav Aharon Lichtenstein that Talmud learning is an ideal for women, or just believes that these leaders thought that this ideal was only for a small number of women and not for the full population.

also has an easy solution: adjust the type of programming opportunities made available for young women. Adding more Talmud-learning opportunities for girls and being attentive to what makes those opportunities feel comfortable for them can improve the culture. If parents are cognizant of the need for there to be comparable learning opportunities available to their girls, they can organize parallel programs. Using the offerings for the boys as a guide, they can find and hire a teacher to provide similar programming. It may be that the Haredi kollel is taking more initiative for the boys' learning, but it does not mean that a comparable program, with a little extra forethought, cannot be created for the girls.

The solutions to this cause and the prior one may be workable, but other Jewish educators and laypeople feel that teacher gender and the Haredi influence are not actually the root of the problem. The factors that they suggest are more significant in influencing the culture are more difficult to counteract.

### ***Expectations in Institutions of Higher Learning***

A third explanation attributes some of the discrepancy to decisions made by institutions of higher learning, and the way those decisions trickle down to drive and change the wider culture in the high school years. 90% of men's gap-year yeshiva programs have mandatory daily in-depth Talmud learning, while only three or four

women's seminaries have a parallel model.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the majority of male students in Yeshiva University spend at least three hours daily learning Gemara,<sup>15</sup> but only a handful of women in Stern College study any amount of Talmud each day.<sup>16</sup> Despite offering a nominal option for women's Talmud learning, these institutions are not setting an expectation that girls must enter their seminary and college years with skills to learn Talmud seriously the way comparable male institutions are setting such expectations for their prospective students.

This lack of prerequisites impacts the choices girls make in their high school years. Because learning at a high level is not required or widespread, young women do not set Talmud skill acquisition as a priority in their high school years as they prepare themselves for the next stages of learning. While young men keep pushing themselves to invest extra time in Talmud study—even when not intrinsically motivated—in order to qualify for high-level courses at the next stage, women do not have the same extrinsic motivation of being ready for the next stage, and so they lack that push to keep investing. Because Talmud learning is challenging and can be a struggle for students, at least in the early stages, students without extrinsic motivation to strengthen their Talmud skills often give up quickly and spend more time on lighter pursuits that provide greater instant gratification.

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<sup>14</sup> This claim can be verified by checking the online sample schedules posted on yeshiva and seminary websites.

<sup>15</sup> See Yeshiva University's [website](#).

<sup>16</sup> For the last few years, there have been three Talmud classes offered at Stern College, and some years there are not even eight students registered for each. See Rivka Bennun, "[Three Talmud Courses on Beren Campus Canceled for Next Year](#)," *The Commentator*, April 5, 2023.

This phenomenon has also been studied in general education; students steer clear from hard courses when achievement in that discipline is not required for their major. Instead, students fill their elective slots with easier, discussion-oriented courses so as not to risk the danger of feeling confused or stuck. An example of this phenomenon is the study of math in college. Math is similar to Talmud in that it cannot be understood without both a significant knowledge base of many discrete facts and a readiness to experiment to find the best way to draw on that knowledge and apply it to decipher a type of puzzle. Due to the challenging nature of the subject matter, non-major students are prone to avoiding these classes as much as they are able to. Some colleges are well aware of this avoidance and take steps to address this reality. These schools frame the reason for their math requirements as a way to counteract the natural avoidance. By pushing students to study math until they have enough exposure both to get “good at it” and to appreciate its use and relevant applications, while giving those students the resources they need to succeed in these courses, these students will overcome their math anxiety and be unafraid to use math later on as part of the workforce.<sup>17</sup>

The solution for how to counteract the lack of expectations of Talmud study on our girls is to follow the lead of what colleges have done with math. That is, institutions of higher Torah learning could increase the amount of women who invest in Talmud study long term if they took similar

measures to lower students’ avoidance of Talmud classes—namely, requiring these courses and giving them the resources needed to succeed. In Talmud, unlike in math, the goal is to give students the intrinsic motivation to learn on their own rather than to use these skills in the workforce. But like in math, without a push through the difficult stage of learning, not enough students will ever reach the point at which intrinsic motivation kicks in. Even if girls understand in theory why learning Talmud is valuable, anxiety about its difficulty will keep many girls from wanting to pursue it. Intrinsic motivation will only kick in once the students become more confident in their abilities in the discipline and their anxiety dissipates.

Paradoxically, the way to engender intrinsic motivation among students to learn is to create an extrinsic motivation first. If the MO community wants to broaden women’s Talmud learning, they would need to require all women to study Talmud at the advanced level during seminary and college, to counteract the tendency to avoid the difficult material and to lead them to a level of expertise where they appreciate the discipline and choose to stick with it. If girls are spared from studying Talmud because it is “too hard,” and Talmud is merely optional, they will internalize the message that it is not worthwhile and will not be sparked to study more.

Examining the solutions we have presented for each explanation given by educators and laypeople for the reason for the difference in

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<sup>17</sup> Sian Beilock, “[Americans Need to Get Over Their Fear of Math](#),” *Harvard Business Review*, October 23, 2019.

learning culture between girls and boys highlights a different address for change. The first explanation, teacher gender, places an onus on schools and communities to change the subtle cues they communicate to our children, while the second, Haredi influence, places the responsibility on parents to advocate for the creation of programs for their girls which parallel the ones the Haredi community offers to their boys. This third explanation, expectations for girls' learning post high school, may be the hardest to address, as our community has little leverage to force institutions of higher learning to do their part in building our community's culture. Seminary programs in Israel seek to maximize their enrollment, and few would jump into the fray and require advanced Talmud given the cost to enrollment, even if only temporary, in order to be agents of cultural change. The problem is that if the status quo persists, it is hard to imagine young women ever feeling that they are a part of the culture of learning like young men do.

### **Non-verbal Expressions of Family Values**

I would also suggest a fourth possibility, not found in my survey results, which may be even harder to change than the first three. This possibility is centered on the home. Whatever a family avows in public, on their bumper stickers, or in their schools, young women are greatly impacted by the culture they sense, even nonverbally, within their home and communal lives. They see their fathers and grandfathers regularly learning with a *havruta* or attending *shiurim*, while they don't see their mothers and grandmothers doing the same. Girls are told by every cultural microphone that women's commitment to Torah and Judaism is

measured by dedication to modest dress, *tzniut*, and investment in *hesed* opportunities, while men's commitment to Torah and Judaism is measured through Torah alone.

Every parent who encourages their sons but does not encourage their daughters to pursue learning opportunities, or encourages their daughters to pursue *hesed* opportunities for their bat mitzvah project but encourages their sons to make a *siyyum* for their bar mitzvahs, gives a powerful message to their daughters that their learning is not of utmost importance, even without commenting about the issue head-on. Similarly, synagogue bulletins that announce *shiurim* for men, but social or *hesed* events for women, further this portrait of the ideal woman not being intrinsically tied to her commitment to learn. If a father learns *daf yomi* while a mother volunteers at the food pantry, the daughter learns a gender-role expectation loud and clear.

Girls also pick up on the way people around them determine if others are religiously committed or less serious. Men are perceived as being committed to Judaism only if they have a greater commitment to *talmud Torah*, but women who do not set aside time to learn Torah are still thought to be very pious. It is axiomatic that women who wear *sheitels* and long skirts are very committed to Judaism, even if they have no regular learning routine. Inundated by this subtle messaging every day, is it no surprise that girls think that learning is not for them? Though there are a small number of families where the mother has a regular *havruta* and encourages her daughters to pursue learning opportunities as

much as her sons, this is not the norm. Similarly, some Modern Orthodox synagogues promote and encourage high-level learning for women as much as men, but these synagogues are few and far between. If a synagogue's *daf yomi* class is 100% male and 0% female, any young woman who attends to see what it's like learns that this is something for men and not for her.

It is hard to blame mothers, who themselves have never developed skills in learning Talmud, for not studying Talmud; they are simply continuing in the path that they saw before them. But, even if this subtle messaging is happening unintentionally, culture is unfortunately cyclical, and for every generation of women that doesn't prioritize learning, we plant seeds for a next generation which will not make learning a focus either. It has been decades since high schools have begun teaching Talmud to women, but the culture hasn't changed; perhaps women without skills must push themselves to join the culture of learning, to ensure that the next generation of young women have the vast range of communal role models<sup>18</sup> that will lead them to engage and commit to their own Torah learning.

I was surprised to learn that these cultural forces sometimes even go a step further. Apparently, for some girls, this modeling of religious piety for women goes beyond convincing them that Talmud learning is not *necessary* for their spiritual

growth and instead gives the impression that Talmud study actually *lowers* their piety, or at least the perception of their piety. I was shocked by a comment made during a discussion by a colleague of mine that many teenage girls fear learning Talmud during their year in Israel because they sense it could ruin "their *shidduch*," their prospects of marriage.

My colleagues explained that these girls reason that learning Talmud is never a requirement to cultivate a persona that makes a woman suitable as marriage candidates for any MO young men, but learning Talmud is sometimes a detriment that makes some MO men feel that these women are not as religious. Therefore, girls strategically choose not to take on Talmud learning when it is optional outside of class in their teenage years and instead choose a seminary program after high school that does not focus on Talmud learning. This phenomenon is shocking. It is an upside-down world, an *olam hafukh*, that our community culture conveys a sense that increased study is a sign of decreased piety.

Because it is difficult to change the way people imagine norms and their vision of the ideal, the fixes to address our problem are much harder if this interpretation is the true cause. However, if the community works together toward this goal, it may be possible. If parents in a community agree to reflect on the subtle messages they may

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<sup>18</sup> Many schools may have one or two female Talmud teachers who bucked the trends and made a life of sustained, deep Torah learning. Culture, however, is not

driven by the rare role model. It is driven by wider forces; therefore, true culture changes require the community at large to be driven to make a change.

unintentionally be conveying to their daughters and are explicit in their support and encouragement of their learning, this may move the needle. Similarly, if synagogues and schools are careful to do the same, the pendulum may swing back in the other direction.

But why do these family values persist?

Some in the MO community still today see a woman as the primary caretaker for a variety of reasons: a general worldview that women take the lead role in child-rearing (biological or societal), an expansion of the halakhic principle of women's exemption from time-bound *mitzvot*, and the exemption of women from the formal *mitzvah* of *talmud Torah*.<sup>19</sup> It is hard to assess whether this view is held genuinely or is merely an after-the-fact justification for why women don't study Torah. After all, women's career choices have changed dramatically over the past half century as childcare responsibilities are shared, but women's Torah study has not changed at all.

Even if the argument that women should be less focused on Torah because of their childcare responsibilities is true, it is only relevant for married women of childbearing age and should not impact what happens in yeshiva, in seminary, in high school, or after retirement. Yet, this view of what a woman's role should be at a specific life stage has morphed into a general perception of what women's piety should look like at all times. Thus, even though more than half of women are

outside of the childrearing years and have the time to study Torah on a high level just like men do, the image of a woman's role as the primary childcare provider may make it impossible for people to envision intense Torah learning as part of a woman's role. Culture is cyclical, so if women at some ages don't learn because they are justifiably busy with children, this feeds the perception of what all women should do, even in circumstances when the position to not prioritize learning is not actually justified.

Part of me is convinced by the above line of reasoning that culture is cyclical and therefore changing perceptions is an insurmountable challenge, and part of me says that perception is changeable when people want it to change. Maybe it is possible to change the expectations and goals of women regarding Torah learning, similar to how expectations were changed regarding women being engaged in academic study, careers, and community leadership. Though this explanation for a weak women's learning culture may be the hardest to change, it is reasonable to believe that there is a way forward around this obstacle if the community thinks this is something worth changing.

### **Scope of the Findings**

Although it is clear that women—both school-aged and adult—are not spending as much of their own time learning Talmud as men, one may wonder if it is possible that women are still spending as much time as men learning Torah in a

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<sup>19</sup> MO Jews believe that women are obligated to learn Torah because doing so is imperative to fulfill other *mitzvot* (e.g.,

love of God and fear of God), but all agree they are not obligated directly in the formal *mitzvah* of *talmud Torah*.



more general sense. Maybe they are spending as much of their time studying *Tanakh* as men are spending learning Talmud. A study that investigated the beliefs of Modern Orthodox Jews in Israel suggests that the weaker learning culture holds true across all Torah topics. 77% of male respondents reported studying any type of Torah on a weekly basis, while only 39% of female respondents reported doing the same.<sup>20</sup> Observations of empty women's *batei midrash* in American settings support that a weak learning culture amongst American women is also true across all Torah topics.<sup>21</sup> Sadly, it appears that women's *Tanakh* study is affected by the same cultural influences. Working to improve the culture of learning for women, then, has potential to strengthen all forms of Torah learning for them. The scope of the issue makes the need for an intervention even more urgent and worthwhile.

### Conclusion

As almost any male *rebbe* or *rosh yeshiva* will tell his students, taking a few Torah classes gives us but a small glimpse of the nature of God and Judaism; it is only through hours of intense, deep study that a Jew becomes fully enveloped within the principles of the Jewish faith. For all people, men and women alike, significant investment in

Torah learning is needed to reap the benefits of Torah study, of fully understanding the ideas and concepts behind *mitzvot* and Halakhah and getting a more complete conception of the Almighty and His ways. People change and grow when they don't just learn Torah here and there but make it an integral part of their lives, creating a deeper understanding of the Torah that will strengthen their *ahavah*, love, and *yirah*, fear, of God.

We need more laypeople and leaders to own the problem of nurturing a strong culture in women's learning. The process starts through discussions at the Shabbat table, board meetings, and gatherings of communal leaders. Any Jewish organization or family that doesn't own the responsibility for changing the culture is complicit in perpetuating it for the next generation. A pool of potential interventions will enable people involved in different spheres of the community from schools, to synagogues, to organizations, to initiate needed change. We have made momentous strides in the area of women's learning; we have solved the problem of access and we have solved the problem of buy-in. Now, it is time to move on to solve the problem of culture. Otherwise, we leave another generation

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<sup>20</sup> See Pew Research Center, [Israel's Religiously Divided Society](#), 2016 for a comparison of overall Torah learning by Orthodox men and women in Israel. Pew Center ran calculations on the Modern Orthodox sector, per request in communications with Pew Research Center (December 13, 2023).

<sup>21</sup> The observation that women's *batei midrash* are reported to be more empty than men's *batei midrash*

excludes the possibility that women are coming out to learn like men are but are just studying other topics.

See Eliezer Melamed, ["The Vision of Torah Study for Women,"](#) *Israel National News*, September 7, 2020; Yael Shahar, ["Are Women People? The Implications for Women's Torah Study,"](#) *Memory and Redemption: Reflections on Jewish Life from Within* (March 26, 2018); Ayelet Wenger, ["Hokhmat Nashim,"](#) *The Lehrhaus* (2018).

of young women short in their quest to achieve a deep understanding of God and His Torah.

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