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Peer Press-ure: Cultural and Market Forces and the Orthodox Press

Yoel Finkelman

History has a way of laughing at us. When Belzer Hasidim began publishing *Mahzikei Hada*s in Galicia in 1879, they were met with significant opposition. German Orthodox Jews had their newspaper, and the *maskilim* in Eastern Europe had cornered the market for Jewish papers there, pushing for increased general education and communal reform. *Mahzikei Hadas*'s decision to publish a newspaper of its own was laced with irony, particularly regarding the use of modern technological tools to combat modernity.

Voices in less compromising Eastern European Orthodoxy thought that the Belzers had gone too far, and that the format of a newspaper inevitably diminished Torah discourse, which should follow traditional formats and be printed in age-old media. By now, however, every Orthodox Jewish community creates and reads its own print newspaper.

We can add newspapers to the list of matters—such as sermons in the vernacular, school-based Torah education for girls, or the value of exercise—that were once subjects of divisive debate and are today part of the consensus among essentially all Orthodox communities. When market and cultural forces appear that push for an Orthodox media, it comes into being and takes on the forms that those forces dictate. Examples of Orthodox newspapers from the 19th and 20th centuries—in Europe, Israel, and the United States—show a print culture adapting to cultural conditions.

Mass produced print media play a homogenizing function. In his important work, *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson famously argued that newspapers were critical in the formation of national identities, since they enabled people across a wide geographical and cultural expanse to participate in the same discourse and to imagine themselves as part of one collective. The wealthy urban elite of Paris shared news, opinions, and ideas with the farmer of the South, and thereby came to share also a sense of self and attachment to the developing French nation.

Whether or not he overstates the claim that nationalism is a modern phenomenon, Anderson is certainly right that newspapers and magazines can play an important role in homogenizing disparate individuals into long-distance collectives. Hence, it is not surprising that newspapers and mass-produced print media have found a comfortable home in Orthodox Judaism. After all, Orthodoxy, perhaps Judaism as a whole, depends on a trans-geographic sense of group identity that binds people together, despite physical separation. Rabbi Yaakov Ettlinger's *Der treue Zionswächter* and Rabbi Marcus Lehmann's *Der Israelit* played a role in Germany of forging a

Neo-Orthodox identity and, if not in actually combatting Reform, at least in creating a group of Jews who shared a rejection of Reform as a key part of their commitments.

In a similar vein, in the United States, the unapologetic and unabashedly isolationist version of Orthodoxy that consolidated in the decades after World War II found its mouthpiece in *The Jewish Observer*, founded in 1963. This magazine became one of the leading voices of right-wing American Orthodoxy toward the end of the twentieth century.

But another, indeed opposite, dynamic is also at work. Mass produced periodical literature enables a shrinking of collective identity, since it allows smaller and smaller sub-groups to be linked by a narrow shared discourse. This can fragment Jewish communities. Orthodox Jews who prefer to avoid the real or imagined anti-Orthodox biases of the *New York Jewish Week* can read the *Queens Jewish Link* or *Five Towns Jewish Times*. They gain access to material of local interest, but the split loosens solidarity across the full range of the Jewish community.

This centrifugal impulse applies not only to communities bound by geography, but also to those bound by ideology. Proliferation of media fragments the existing Orthodox minority into smaller and smaller subgroups. For instance, the *Hamodia* newspaper represented and reflected all of Agudath Israel in Israel, until Rabbi Elazar Menahem Man Shach's insistence on separating the Lithuanian elements of Agudah from its Hasidic components. Solidifying that separation required a new newspaper, and so *Yated Ne'eman* was founded in 1985.

Then, as Israeli Lithuanian *Haredim* split again between the more moderate Bnei Brak branch and the more militant Jerusalem branch, *Hapeles* emerged in 2012 to reflect the Jerusalem branch's values and to attack in the sharpest terms the moderates. Advocates of the *Yated* initiated a boycott of advertisers in *Hapeles*, while advocates of *Hapeles* began badgering supporters of the *Yated*, eventually leading to arrests in 2015 of *Hapeles* activists.

This splintering becomes a matter of great significance, since newspapers are perceived as a critical mouthpiece for articulating the Torah-true ideology and beliefs of a given sub-group, and to garner political and social support of leaders and parties.

Both of these trends—creating and then splintering of identity-groups that transcend geographical location—are magnified by the virtual discourse of the Internet. Blogs, social media, and online editions of print newspapers make it even easier for individuals across geographic boundaries to share and participate in the same culture and discussion. But they also make it even easier to find just the niche and sub-niche in which a person feels comfortable, sharing an online community even if there is not a critical mass of like-minded people in walking distance.

In this context, newspapers struggle mightily to survive in the context of digital media and reader-created web 2.0. But Orthodox print media are alive and in some cases thriving. While

general print newspapers are leaking readers to online venues and non-traditional media sources, Orthodox print media have weathered the storm well, largely for two reasons.

First, the Haredi community in both North America and Israel has fought an ongoing and at least partially successful battle against internet use. In these communities, print media has less competition, thus allowing America's Satmar Hasidim to support several papers, for example.

More broadly and certainly more importantly, Shabbat restrictions have made Orthodox print media particularly resilient to the destructive impact that internet journalism and social media have had on traditional print journalism. For a time, weekly *parashat ha-shavu'a* sheets—distributed freely in synagogues on a weekly basis, and in most cases much more like weekly news and entertainment magazines than works of Torah—were Israel's only growing branch of print media.

Similarly, Israel's religious-Zionist weekly, *Makor Rishon,* has extremely wide distribution among Israeli religious Zionists. Like so much of the historical Jewish press, it is delivered on Friday morning, and its editorials, discussions of religious ideology in its *Shabbat* supplement, and at times sharp editorial cartoons, have become a go-to staple for readers to fall asleep on after Friday-night dinner.

Much of this is, of course, driven by the market as much if not more than ideology. *Haedah*, the Jerusalem-based Yiddish and Hebrew mouthpiece of the more radically anti-Zionist branch of the Edah Haredit, does not sell enough copies to make ends meet, and it is supported philanthropically out of ideological conviction.

But that cannot be said of all Orthodox print media, where stiff competition between similar magazines and papers have editors jockeying for readership which can be translated into subscriptions and advertising inches. *Binah* magazine competes mightily with *Family First*, *Mishpacha*'s women's supplement, for the allegiance of English-speaking, moderate Haredi housewives. The two magazines are virtually indistinguishable from one another, including the bizarrely ironic policy of not publishing pictures of women in a women's magazine.

A similar competition for market share can also have authors playing to their intended audience, leading at times to a kind of editorial posturing. Authors write to the editorial and marketing agenda of editors and subscribers; their personal convictions play a lesser role. Esther Reider-Indorsky had no personal problem writing in her own name, but her column on Israeli politics still appeared under the male pseudonym Ari Solomon for years, in order to meet the standards of not publishing women's names that some Haredi readers desire.

Many authors with whom I have spoken would be more than happy, or at least would not oppose, the inclusion of photographs of women in right wing Orthodox periodicals, but they are

not willing to fight the inevitable battle that would ensue should the policy change. Chatting about something else with a fellow who wrote often for Israel's *Bakehilah* weekly magazine, I commented that I thought the magazine's competition, *Mishpacha*, was more interesting, innovative, edgy, and daring. He agreed and commented wryly that if he were paid to write for *Mishpacha* he could also write more freely. But *Bakehilah* plays to the market of people who won't read *Mishpacha* precisely because of its edge.

The historical debates over the very legitimacy of mass-produced Orthodox print media have faded into the background. Such newspapers and magazines are a fact. Measuring their impact, however, is more complicated. Do these publications merely reflect the existing beliefs and values of Orthodox readers? Or are they agents of change, modifying and forming the beliefs and values of the community? Methodologically, this is difficult if not impossible to gauge. But an understanding of contemporary Orthodoxy requires a thorough analysis of print periodicals and their readers.

Dr. Yoel Finkelman is curator of the Haim and Hanna Solomon Judaica Collection at the National Library of Israel and the author of Strictly Kosher Reading: Popular Literature and the Condition of Contemporary Orthodoxy.

Why I believe in Women and Their Batei Midrash

Shayna Goldberg

The challenge is real. The frustrations often run deep. Every woman who has followed her heart to the *beit midrash*, into the arena of higher Torah learning has a story—or several—that she can share. Maybe her intentions were questioned or her *yirat Shamayim* doubted. Perhaps she felt underwhelmed by the learning opportunities that were offered to her or that no one really believed in her abilities. She may have worried at times that the risks were too great, the endpoint too uncertain, and any possible career path too unclear.

Nonetheless, I remain dedicated to encouraging young women to enter the *beit midrash*. Why do I believe so strongly in women experiencing firsthand what it means to engage seriously with *Torah She-be'al Peh*? Are we not just leading them to the edge of a cliff and inviting a lifelong struggle with tensions that may remain forever irreconcilable?

As a lifelong participant in women's *batei midrash*—first as a student and now as an educator—I read with great interest and concern Ayelet Wenger's recent self-reflective Lehrhaus essay. It provoked my own reflection about the place in which my students, colleagues, and I find ourselves.

I don't know where the path of women's learning will lead, and I can understand that, for some women, the questions of where they can go on it and how fast they can get there are so unsettling that these feelings overtake the joy that brought them to the gates of Torah to begin with.

Moreover, these questions are most haunting for the most talented and ambitious and thirsty among us; those who yearn to grow into genuine scholars in a way that I never could; those who, with a different set of chromosomes, might have become *roshei yeshiva*. The glass ceiling hangs low and is not likely to be shattered.

Yet, I still believe that the immersive experience of *talmud Torah* in a traditional setting is too important to dismiss, even if it means hitting up against the ceiling. Just because we are not sure what the endgame will look like for the select few who could be reaching for the stars does not mean, I believe, that we should discourage our young women from entering the field. I do not think that the success of a women's *beit midrash* should be measured only by the number of true *talmidot hakhamim* it produces. Even under a low-hanging ceiling, the walls of the *beit midrash* have much to offer.

A woman who has seriously engaged in traditional analysis of our primary texts can converse in them as an "insider." Like a doctor reading the medical literature and a lawyer researching judicial rulings, a "professional Jew" must be able to read and interpret Hebrew and Aramaic legal texts. A woman trained to do this can ask questions and research them and enjoy the benefits of

literacy and fluency. This experience alone is a game-changer in the life of a Jewish woman. She is not just a blind follower but an active participant. She is privy to a more sophisticated understanding and appreciation of how *halakhah* operates, and as such often develops a deeper respect for the halakhic system. She can understand the key principles in play. She can differentiate between *de-Oraita*, *de-rabbanan* and *minhag*. And she can understand when and why exceptions can be made.

A woman who has experienced the breadth and depth of Torah learns to approach it—I hope—with deeper humility. A woman who has studied an issue in depth has a greater ability to value different approaches, to understand different opinions, and to appreciate decisions that different communities make. Real exposure to the complexities of the system makes it harder to write off or criticize a halakhic position out of armchair intuition or common sense.

A woman who has intensively studied *halakhah* can make better educated and more informed decisions in her halachic practice. She is empowered to know what to do in her day-to-day life and is not paralyzed or dependent every time a halakhic question arises. When she does need to consult with rabbinic authority, she possesses the ability to ask better and more relevant questions. She knows when there is room for flexibility. Overall, she can engage with *halakhah* with more understanding and less resentment.

A woman who has sat within the walls of a *beit midrash* can contribute differently to her various circles of community, starting with her own family. Torah will play a different role in her relationship with her spouse; it will appear with greater sophistication in her mealtime conversations. A mother who is familiar and comfortable with our core texts can be more deeply involved in her children's Torah study and in their schoolwork. She feels comfortable navigating material with them and answering their questions. Her knowledge and engagement can leave a deep, if quiet, impact on her children, especially on her daughters' connection with their Judaism, with Torah, and with God.

A woman who has learned is a woman who can teach. She can deliver *shiurim* in her community. She can weigh in more thoughtfully on community decisions. Her learned voice can (though may not always) be heard, and her opinion can be valued in a halakhic conversation.

A woman who has turned the pages of a *Gemara* can have an impact on learning that reaches beyond the *batei midrash* of women. She can raise different questions that may not have been asked before or at least not considered from a feminine perspective. She can also encourage and demand a deeper sensitivity when thinking about and addressing complicated issues of marriage, divorce, rape and other topics within Judaism that relate directly to women.

A woman who loves and learns Torah can be a role model for young women and for young men. She can stretch imaginations, expand horizons, and challenge assumptions. She has a relationship with Torah that is real and alive. She can speak openly about her successes and her challenges as she continually forges a tighter relationship with her Creator.

A woman who has learned extensively can advocate for other women in front of a *beit din*. She can help couples navigate personal questions in *taharat ha-mishpaha* and can advise on all kinds of

situations that arise. She can serve a community, provide guidance, offer counseling, and provide pastoral support. She can inspire in formal and informal ways.

Finally, a woman who has spent time in a *beit midrash* understands that the *halakhah* is not just a rulebook, but a life force. She understands that it is not just an instruction manual with laws to follow but also a wondrous world to enter, breathe and experience. Through her study, she has learned to experience and appreciate the enormous spiritual significance of a humble encounter with the Divine.

As someone who has been privileged to learn a little, I have developed high aspirations for my children and for my students. I want them to be not only *shomrei mitzvot* but full *bnei* and *bnot Torah* who are active participants in this transcendent drama of engagement with *devar Hashem*. I want to see them foster a spiritual identity that does not just practice *halakhah* but is immersed in it, and I believe that a key way of fostering that identity is by toiling in Torah.

Is there more that can be done for women? Of course.

Are there heavy questions that we are not sure how to resolve? Definitely.

Could the educational system for young girls, starting from an early age, use an overhaul and benefit from fresh perspectives and new creative methods? Without a doubt. Do we need more institutions that offer multi-year tracks for women who want to pursue *limmud Torah* on the highest of levels? Most certainly. Is it time to open programs, for the select aspiring *talmidot hakhamim*, that demand the same commitment and time investment, if not more, that other elite professional tracks do? I think so. Should these programs be opened even if only a handful of women are initially interested? There is no other way to start.

Are there women who feel that the system has failed them and are left searching for more, or women who have fled to environments that they felt would believe in them more? I know them.

I would love to see more opportunities, more intensive programs, longer hours, more years of Torah study and broader career options available for women whose souls thirst for it, even if there are only a few. Even if the programs must be built first so that they will come. I believe there are many other women and men who would like to see this as well.

I know men who believe in this vision *le-khathila* and are devoting their professional lives to teaching high-level *Gemara* to women. They do so because they believe in these young, talented women and believe that the future of Judaism depends upon them, not because these men couldn't land jobs in *yeshivot* for men. There are institutions actively thinking about all these questions and planning their next steps—though perhaps not as quickly and aggressively as their constituencies might like.

We could tell our daughters and our students that there is nothing there for them. We could tell them that change is too slow and that it is taking too long, that the experiment has not worked.

We could tell our daughters and students that perhaps it is not worth the wait or the struggle. We could lament that everyone has failed them.

But I cannot fail them.

I feel compelled, instead, to tell them that life is complicated; that it is not all or nothing; that you cannot choose the reality into which you were born but you do get to choose how to respond; that, as my mother likes to emphasize, everyone ultimately "does what they want to do;" and that people have to make their own calculations and decide what works for them, but that they also have to own those decisions.

I can empathize with those—men and women—who have chosen out of frustration to not pursue the field of Torah in its traditional context. I don't judge, and I certainly don't want to blame.

Personally, though, I choose to not simmer in frustration or let cynicism bring me down. I have found that anger and resentment, while real and valid and not always controllable on the personal level, are not usually productive in advancing our cause in the public square. And this cause matters to me, and to many others. We feel that it is worth the fight, despite all the frustration involved.

When we first ventured into the *beit midrash*, no one told us that our path would be easy. No one made us promises they couldn't keep. No one told us that developments would happen at the pace we wanted or in the ways we expected. No one said that we wouldn't be lonely or have to swallow a lot along the way.

But I have chosen to not turn back. I learn and teach Torah because it is invigorating, thought-provoking and stimulating. I learn and teach Torah because it builds my religious world and shapes its contours. I learn and teach Torah because it enriches my life and fills it with meaning. I learn and teach Torah because it brings me closer to my Creator.

I learn Torah because I cannot imagine my life any other way. And I teach Torah because there is no career I can fathom as more fulfilling, rewarding, and satisfying than traveling with others on the well-trodden paths of our traditions and journeying with them into realms still unexplored.

There are plenty of things that could frustrate me if I chose to dwell upon them. But I don't have that luxury. So many of our students and daughters would like to throw their lot in with Torah in its most traditional form, and they are looking to us. My job, I think, is to share with them the connection, excitement, and passion I feel when I engage directly with *devar Hashem* and to continually try to uplift and inspire them, even when I am feeling tired and especially when they start to grow frustrated.

For I cannot fail them.

Shayna Goldberg teaches in the Stella K. Abraham Beit Midrash for Women at Migdal Oz. She previously taught halakha at the Ma'ayanot Yeshiva High School in Teaneck, NJ and served as a yoetzet halacha for

Congregations Rinat Yisrael and Ahavat Torah, as well as for Kehilat Kesher, all in New Jersey. She lives in Alon Shevut, Israel, with her husband and five children.