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SHEMOT

THIS WEEK'S LEHRHAUS OVER SHABBOS IS SPONSORED BY
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MOSES IN THE TEIVA: AN ACT OF HOPE OR
DESPAIR?

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The Talmud ([Sotah](#) 12a) presents a very different picture of Moses' family than what seems to emerge from a simple reading of the book of Exodus:

Amram...when he saw that the wicked Pharaoh decreed, "Every son that is born you shall cast into the Nile," he said, "We are struggling in vain." He arose and divorced his wife...His daughter said to him, "Abba, your decrees are worse than Pharaoh's. Pharaoh decreed only on the males, but you decreed on the males and the females. Pharaoh decreed only in this world, but you [decreed] in this world and the world to come. Pharaoh, who is wicked, there is a doubt whether his decrees will be fulfilled or not. You, who are righteous, your decrees will certainly be fulfilled..." He arose and brought back his wife.¹

The image is of parents who had lost hope, who had despaired of any purpose of having children in face of Pharaoh's cruel decree. But this presentation seems to contradict the description in the Torah itself of parents who made every effort to hold onto their baby for as long as possible:

The woman conceived and bore a son; she saw that he was good, and she hid him for three months.² When she could hide him no longer, she got a wicker basket (*teiva*) for him and caulked it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child into it and placed it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile³ (Exodus 2:2-3).

Far from despairing, the special basket they make to save the life of the baby seems to display a degree of hope far in excess of what the average Israelite in Egypt had at the time.

It is true that the verses in the Torah mention only the mother building and placing Moses in the *teiva*. One might plausibly suggest that the Talmud is picking up specifically on Amram's absence from the story to highlight his lack of hope in comparison with the rest of the family—his daughter who convinced him to remarry and have more children and his wife who attempted to save their son's life through the *teiva*. However, since the Talmudic passage makes no explicit contrast between husband and wife—only between father and daughter—I think it is fair to assume that the two parents were on the same page.⁴ Under this assumption, though, the contradiction remains when reading the Torah verses in tandem with the Talmudic passage: the two parents who had despaired of all hope for future children also hopefully built a *teiva* to save their son.

It may be that the Talmud understands that Amram and Yokheved's hope, which resulted in constructing the *teiva* for Moses, only emerged after the conversation with their daughter Miriam. As the Talmud portrays, these parents had given up all hope of having future children to the extent that they separated. But once their daughter Miriam inspired them to reunite and not despair of future children their hope was rekindled, to the extent that they built a *teiva* on the small chance that it could save their son's life, as the verses in the Torah convey. However, no textual source is brought to support the notion that Miriam was the source of their hope. More importantly, a subsequent passage in the Talmud indicates that if Miriam had indeed inspired them to hope once again, this hope was rather short-lived:

[Miriam] said, "In the future, my mother shall give birth to a son who shall save Israel." When Moses was born, the entire house filled with light. Her father arose and kissed her on the head. He said, "My daughter, your prophecy has been fulfilled!" When he was cast into the Nile, he arose and smacked her on the head and said to her, "My daughter, where is your prophecy [now]?" This is the meaning of the verse, "His sister stood at a distance to know what would be done to him (Exodus 2:4)." [She

⁴ I believe the Torah mentions only the mother because she did the physical actions of acquiring the *teiva*, putting the baby in it, and carrying it to the river, while the Talmud mentions only the father because they saw him as the patriarch and default decision-maker for the family. Therefore, neither should be taken to imply that the other parent was not in agreement with the decisions being made.

¹ All Talmudic translations are my own.

² [New JPS](#) translation with modifications.

³ [New JPS](#) translation.

wanted] to know what would be in the end with her prophecy.⁵

This passage provides the first hint of a textual source for the understanding that Miriam had more hope in her brother's ability to survive than her parents did. "His sister stood at a distance to know what would be done to him." It was only his sister, only Miriam, who stood there to see what would happen, who had hope that he might encounter a fate other than death. Where were his parents? They had seemingly lost hope. But how could that be? How could the parents who made him the special basket to protect their son in the river suddenly lose hope that it might be effective?

We tend to take for granted that the purpose of the basket was to protect the life of baby Moses. After all, what else would be the purpose of such a thing? The Torah even hints at this by calling it a *teiva*, the same word used for Noah's ark (Genesis 6:14), which protected him from the waters of the flood. But maybe this wasn't the function of the basket. Archaeologist Richard Freund writes:

Walking through the Cairo Museum on my last trip to Egypt, I noticed on display small baskets for infants that were generally thought of as "burial baskets."...The mother of Moses placed him in a burial basket and then placed the basket in the Nile as a cheap and meaningful burial for a child that Pharaoh had ordered to be "cast into the Nile."⁶

Yokheved and Amram were not trying to save Moses with the basket. If we follow Freund's theory, they were actually trying to give their son a decent burial. They sought to preserve his humanity by giving him the burial that was denied to the other Jewish baby boys who were just tossed in the river. But actually saving his life was beyond what they could imagine. The Torah may be hinting to the reader that the basket would ultimately save his life by using the word *teiva*, but at the time that it was made the only one who realized its life-saving potential was Miriam. Moses' parents put the basket in the river. They said what they presumed to be their final goodbyes and went home, having despaired of the life of their child. Only the young Miriam stayed behind. Only she believed there might yet be hope for her baby brother.

It is likely that the authors of these passages in the Talmud were more familiar with ancient Egyptian burial practices than a more modern reader would be. Once we understand that the basket was never intended to save Moses' life, the contradictions between the Talmud and the simple reading of the text disappear. His parents were not hopeful and optimistic as we initially thought. While Miriam was able to convince them to remarry and try to have more children, they never believed that a wicker basket could save their son from his fate. They had indeed despaired of protecting their son from Pharaoh's cruel decree, and so they "buried" him in the basket and left him in the river. Armed with this knowledge, along with the textual anomaly of only the young Miriam waiting to see what would happen, the rabbis of the Talmud were able to creatively imagine what the rest of the story might have looked like in a way that gives us deep insight into the different responses of Moses' family members to this seeming tragedy. The rabbis show us the striking contrast between Miriam's extreme hopefulness and trust in God and her parents' more pragmatic and accepting approach to life's

unfortunate circumstances. With this new understanding of the *teiva*, the Talmud's story fits beautifully with the text of the Torah and brings the internal dynamics of Moses' family to life.

FROM MADISON SQUARE GARDEN TO METLIFE STADIUM: TRANSFORMATIONS IN DAF YOMI SIYUMIM

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Over the past week, the whole world has been treated to celebration after celebration of the enduring love between the Jewish people and the book that shaped it more than any other, the Talmud Bavli. It has been a tremendous source of pride and inspiration for me, and I, an avowed *Daf Yomi* outsider, am finding it harder and harder to resist its temptations.

However, until I finally cave, this resistance has allowed me to observe the *Daf Yomi* phenomenon and its *Siyumim* every 7.4 years with a certain critical distance, and to notice certain important changes in the production of the main *Siyum* in the U.S. and in the culture of *Daf Yomi* over the past 30 years.

The most obvious change is the scale. As late as 1968, the "main event" in the U.S. was held at the Bais Yaakov of Boro Park, with an estimated attendance [as low as](#) 300. Half a century and seven *Daf Yomi* cycles later, this population squared itself, as some 90,000 people filled MetLife Stadium on January 1, 2020.⁷ I attended my first *Siyum* at Madison Square Garden in 1990. There was astonishment that a *Siyum* could fill a 20,000-seat arena to capacity, especially since in 1982 the audience of 5,000 did not sell out the Felt Forum.

Yet many of the transformations have been subtle, flying beneath the radar. This account is impressionistic, guided mainly by memory.

My father started learning *Daf Yomi* in the late 1980s, toward the end of the ninth cycle, figuring – in true Fischer fashion – that the last tractates are some of the most arcane and challenging, so it would be best to get them out of the way first. There were not many Modern Orthodox laypeople studying *Daf Yomi* at the time – he attended a class in Yiddish at a Hasidic *shtibl*. Not long after he started – and not long after I became bar mitzvah – we went to the *Siyum* at Madison Square Garden.

On balance, it was a miserable experience. The awkward self-consciousness of the early teens was exacerbated by the fact that I was wearing one of very few knit *yarmulkes* in a sea of black. The vast majority of the speeches were in Yiddish, which was incomprehensible to me, and there was a simultaneous translation into Yeshivish English, which was not much better. The concession stands were closed, and I was hungry. The women were confined to a

⁷ This relates to the largest of the American *Siyumim*. The main *Siyum* of the second *Daf Yomi* cycle was held on June 27, 1938, in Lublin, Poland, with an attendance of [10,000](#) according to a local Yiddish newspaper, a mere few months before Kristallnacht and the beginning of the Holocaust. No American *Siyum* (and perhaps no single *Siyum* anywhere) would eclipse the scope of the Lublin *Siyum* until 1990. For more on the history of *Daf Yomi*, see Zev Eleff's *Lehrhaus* article.

⁵ *Sotah* 13a.

⁶ Richard Freund, [Digging Through the Bible](#) (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 58.

small part of the upper concourse, behind thick white curtains. My father was very amused when we walked up a ramp with the throngs, and there was some sort of construction or leak on the right side, so an Agudath Israel usher had the task of standing there with a megaphone and instructing everyone to “move to the left.”

My most vivid memory of the day is of the traffic to get onto the Holland Tunnel to head back to Baltimore. In all, we probably spent ten hours in the car that day, which could have been nice, except that at the last minute, a member of his *Daf Yomi* group needed a ride both ways. This leads to my second most vivid memory of the day: this extra passenger’s postnasal drip, head cold, or something. So instead of riding shotgun and bonding with my father, I was in the uncomfortable back seat of my father’s old Buick, listening to some guy try to dislodge a stubborn bit of mucus from a sinus.

At the time, I probably convinced myself that I had a blast. There are some positive memories – the recitation of *Shema* in unison, the silence as the crowd of 20,000 began the *Amidah* prayer – but they are all very serious. Making the event enjoyable, it seems, was simply not a priority of the producers.

The *Siyum* at the end of the next cycle had a lot more music and even some dancing. There were two large New York venues: Madison Square Garden again, and Nassau Coliseum. It was clear that MSG was primary: it was a more storied location, its speeches were mainly in Yiddish, and its list of VIPs was more prestigious.

Yeshiva University President and Rosh HaYeshiva Norman Lamm was seated at a secondary dais at the secondary venue. He had recently likened *yeshivot* that teach no secular subjects to a Talmudic sage who studied Torah for thirteen years in a cave, concluding that YU’s mission was for its students to eventually leave the cave. This speech became known as the “cave man” speech⁸ and was aken as a grave insult by leading *roshei yeshiva*, most notably Rabbi Elya Svei of the Yeshiva of Philadelphia, one of the most powerful figures in the American *yeshiva* community. I and many other YU students at the time attended the event at the Coliseum. We acutely felt the slap that Rabbi Svei had administered, and I recall trying to defend Rabbi Lamm from charges of heresy at and around the time of the *Siyum*. It certainly cast a pall over the celebration for us.

Along with YU, the women were also relegated mainly to the Coliseum, though a sizable chunk of the Coliseum was converted into a women’s section, and it was not only the uppermost concourse that was reserved for them. One of the Nassau speakers, Rabbi Yissocher Frand of Ner Israel Rabbinical College in Baltimore, praised the women who enable and encourage their husbands to attend *Daf Yomi* classes, even at the most inconvenient times. Every time he mentioned the word “women,” he received a loud ovation from the back third of the Coliseum. After four or five such ovations, the avuncular smile that was pasted to Rabbi Frand’s face as he watched *yeshiva* students dance on the Coliseum floor had been replaced by an unambiguously peeved expression. To the best of my knowledge, he was the first speaker at the main *Daf Yomi Siyum* to acknowledge

⁸ An earlier version of this essay claimed that Rabbi Lamm used the term “cave men”. In the [published version of this speech](#), and in an [earlier exposition](#) of this theme, the term “cave man” or similar does not appear. Whether or not he used it in the speech as an impromptu witticism will only be clarified when a recording becomes available. I thank Menachem Butler for pointing out that the term “cave man” does not appear in any published account of the speech.

the presence and role of women in the endeavor, certainly to devote an entire speech to it.

It was at this event that I realized that in addition to being a unifying force – having the entire Jewish people on the same page, connected by the same words, etc. – *Daf Yomi* and its *Siyum* were projects of Agudath Israel and reflected its values. It came to me as Rabbi Abish Brodt was singing, “*Ve-ye’asu kulam agudah ehat la’asot retzonekha be-levav shalem*,” a line from the High Holiday liturgy that means, “They will all be made into one band to do Your will wholeheartedly.” This rendition of an ancient prayer for unity repeatedly emphasized the word “*agudah*” over and over again. The dissonance between partisanship and unity was palpable.

Nevertheless, the uneasy accommodation of two groups – YU and women – signaled that Agudath Israel was straining to maintain its imprimatur on a flagship project and cultural phenomenon that was spreading beyond the community it represented. And this was just the beginning. [ArtScroll](#) was making Talmud accessible to new audiences, the [Internet](#) was making it possible to download lectures onto portable devices, and a generation of [Modern Orthodox laypeople](#) – mostly men, [some women](#) – who had spent formative years rigorously studying Talmud was coming of age.

I have not attended the main *Daf Yomi Siyum* since the late 1990s, but I have watched the phenomenon spread. By the time the next *Daf Yomi* cycle completed in 2005 (with simultaneous *Siyumim* at three New York-area arenas), I had become friendly with Conservative Jews who were studying *Daf Yomi*, and a group from Alon Shevut had a *Daf Yomi* class by and for women. When the new cycle started, I was an OU-JLIC educator at the University of Maryland, and we started a *Daf Yomi* class for college students. Upon completion of the first tractate, *Berakhot*, a group of about a dozen students – men and women, Orthodox and Conservative, straight and queer – got up in front of their peers and made a *Siyum*. The class foundered during the extended summer break and eventually died when the Fall 2005 midterms coincided with some of the thorniest passages of *Eruvin*. In hindsight, the steadiness of *Daf Yomi* and the peaks and valleys of university schedules are not well-suited to one another. And yet, a dozen students completed *Berakhot*, and a *Daf Yomi* class survived a semester and a half.

The 2012 *Siyum* marked its graduation from indoor arenas to an open-air stadium with seating for 100,000, but as it grew, it diversified. During the most recent cycle, Tablet Magazine literary critic Adam Kirsch began studying “the *daf*” and writing a [weekly column](#) on it. Ilana Kurshan published an award-winning memoir, [If All the Seas were Ink](#), which weaves insights from *Daf Yomi* into the [events of her life](#). Erica Brown has been tweeting [Daf Yomi insights](#). In London, artist Jacqueline Nicholls studied and then [drew each daily daf](#). *Daf Yomi* has become, as Kurshan’s promotional material describes it, “the world’s largest book club,” a broad cultural phenomenon, and a vehicle for creative expression, an abstract communal center for a world in which people are increasingly “bowling alone.” It even borrowed from the culture of marathon runners, as decals with the number “2,711” (the number of pages in the Talmud) adorn the cars of some *Daf Yomi* learners.

On New Year’s Day, 2020, I tuned into the livestream of the latest *Daf Yomi Siyum* at MetLife Stadium. The production values were first rate, with lots of music and dancing (Rabbi Abish Brodt remains the featured vocalist) and lots of high-energy “sideline reporters” to highlight personal interest stories, like the man who studies *Daf Yomi* despite having ALS. The tome used for the *Siyum* was a “Survivors’

Talmud,” printed by the U.S. Army and the JDC in the American Zone of postwar Germany, symbolizing how, despite everything, Jews have not forsaken the Torah. On social media, people were posting pictures of tailgating parties and [a wise guy who dressed as Waldo](#). In all, it seemed like a truly meaningful experience and an absolute blast.

Most of the speakers acknowledged wives’ roles in enabling their husbands to study *Daf Yomi*. YU *rebbeim* were featured prominently – as were Sephardic rabbis and rabbis from Hasidic groups unaffiliated with Agudath Israel. Promotional material listed OU and YU websites as repositories of other *Siyumim* around the world – including one from an IDF base. One recitation of *Kaddish* was dedicated to fallen Israeli soldiers. Another was recited by Jay Schottenstein, wearing the same sort of knit *kippah* that I felt so out of place wearing 30 years ago.

Such gestures may seem inconsequential, and, to be sure, it was still an Agudath Israel production. It reflects the successes and sensibilities of the American “black hat” laity. Women were acknowledged as enablers, but no women were pictured, nor was there any acknowledgment of women who themselves completed *Daf Yomi*. YU and the OU were featured, but other Orthodox institutions, and certainly non-Orthodox institutions, were not acknowledged.

Yet considering the trajectory of the *Siyum* over the past 30 years, Agudath Israel is clearly trying to make the event more inclusive and more enjoyable, and with a great deal of success. Whether this is a concession to demographic and economic realities or a true inclusion of those who were outside the Agudah tent a generation ago is a fair question, but largely beside the point. The Agudah’s production, the MetLife *Siyum*, remains the main event.

However, this cycle, a large number of smaller *Siyumim* have cropped up all over the world, with no affiliation with Agudah. In Israel, the night after the MetLife *Siyum*, there was a *Siyum* produced by religious Zionist organizations. Its attendance was in the thousands, and it featured several women. In the U.S., at least three *Siyumim* highlighted the accomplishments of women. Institutions that do not affiliate with Orthodoxy made their own *Siyumim* as well.

On Sunday, January 5, a *Siyum* at the Jerusalem International Convention Center by and for women took place before a sell-out crowd of 3,300 – not much smaller than the attendance at the Felt Forum in 1982. My wife, who sat in the small, obscured women’s section of the MSG *Siyum* in 1997, stood on the stage and recited the “*hadran*,” the valedictory text of the *Siyum*, representing the [women’s seminary](#) where she teaches and trains teachers. She has started learning *Daf Yomi*. My daughters were there, too; the younger one is motivated to study *Daf Yomi* someday but is currently more invested in completing all of Mishnah before she becomes a bat mitzvah. And when they think back to this *Siyum* in 20 or 30 years, perhaps they will remember how historic it was, or how small it seems compared to the women’s *Siyumim* of the sixteenth and seventeenth cycles. Or perhaps they will remember the words of the emcee, Racheli Sprecher Frankel, thanking the husbands who encouraged and enabled their wives’ commitment to studying *Daf Yomi*.

IMAGINING OURSELVES INTO THE BEIT MIDRASH

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It was the middle of July in 2014, and I was teaching *Masekhet Avodah Zarah* to girls in Drisha’s Summer High School program. As I often do, I invited the students to dramatize the case presented in the text: “Let’s act this out. The woman in the story has a jug of wine, and she leaves it with her non-Jewish neighbor for safekeeping.” But my students unexpectedly pushed back: “How do you know it was a she?” I shot back: “How do you know it wasn’t?” Confused, they retreated, but not without a fight: “Well, I learned [Berakhot](#) this year, and my teacher said it was about the boys,” muttered one girl.

Fast forward to the [Women’s Siyum HaShas in Jerusalem](#) this week, where Rabbanit Chana Godinger Dreyfus spoke about [Seder Nezikin](#), and mentioned that these laws [apply equally to men and women](#). This principle is one of the reasons that I chose *Masekhet Avodah Zarah* that summer. Nonetheless, as my students noticed, these *sugyot* are no more likely to explicitly include women. The stories are framed by male rabbis in the masculine. Women may be present implicitly, but they are not specifically mentioned. In that moment, my students, accustomed to seeing men everywhere they looked on the shelves of the *beit midrash*, saw only male protagonists. The possibility of inclusion exists, as Rabbanit Dreyfus explained, but isn’t always readily apparent to the uninitiated.

Rabbanit Michal Tikochinsky, one of my Gemara teachers and mentors, also spoke at the Women’s *Siyum* about our connection as women to the Torah and its scholars. She described her relationship to learning Torah by sharing a passage from Rav Soloveitchik’s [u-Vikashtem mi-Sham](#). The Rav describes his experience of learning as one of intergenerational community. Everyone is present: “The Rambam is on my right, Rabeinu Tam on my left... everyone is sitting around my table... encouraging and strengthening me” ([And From Their You Shall Seek](#), 145). Rav Soloveitchik feels a “personal connection” with each of these great Torah personalities. Rabbanit Tikochinsky described a similar experience of connection. When visiting cemeteries in Eastern Europe, she met “the whole *hevra*.” Rema, Maharshal, Tosafot Yom Tov - here were so many of the rabbinic personalities with whom she spends quality time, day after day. Her love of Torah runs so deep that it connects her across time to those whose conversations we echo and continue in our *batei midrash*.

Rabbanit Tikochinsky’s words resonate deeply with me. I love that passage from Rav Soloveitchik, and, for as long as I can remember, have felt that way about the rabbis of the Talmud. They have been my constant companions since I was a little girl, and they have been with me through thick and thin. They are opinionated, argumentative, and sometimes funny. We have spent a lot of time together. Yet, in a space dominated and convened by women, I found it striking that she could speak so unselfconsciously about her imagined world of companionship. The personalities she encountered through their headstones in European graveyards are all men. The dynamic tableau envisioned by Rav Soloveitchik is entirely male. No female scholar sat in the ageless, timeless *beit midrash* that the Rav conjures, and the rabbis to whom Rabbanit Tikochinsky feels so connected did not spend time with women like her. No matter how

many of the halakhic issues debated by these scholars apply equally to women, halakhic history presents a vision of a male-dominated conversation.

Yet the process of studying Talmud - itself a story of the study and interpretation of earlier texts - calls upon us to read with imagination. Every Mishnah I teach my students contains a *mikreh* - a case, a story. It is up to us to think about what that story might be. Perhaps it is precisely this re-envisioning of all-male spaces that has enabled the flourishing landscape of women's Torah study that exists today. Again and again, women who loved learning Torah envisioned themselves in the *shakla ve-tarya*, *batei midrash*, and all the stories. We looked at rooms that had no women, and imagined ourselves there. We looked at a world of serious Talmud study and fell in love, and that love helped us see ourselves in those spaces and in those conversations.

Rabbanit Esti Rosenberg spoke at the *Siyum* about this kind of love in paying tribute to her father and grandfather, [Rav Lichtenstein zt"l](#) and [Rav Soloveitchik zt"l](#). They were [instrumental in enabling women to learn Gemara](#), and they took these steps, in the words of Rabbanit Rosenberg, less because of what they thought about women, and more because of how they felt about learning Torah: "They could not imagine *ovdei Hashem* who didn't learn Torah." Indeed, a love of learning that animates *avodat Hashem* is precisely the basis of the connection that Rav Soloveitchik describes in [u-Vikashtem mi-Sham](#).

Rabbanit Tikochinsky then shared an additional necessary element. Her internal world, in which she is in conversation with the great Torah personalities of the past, is only possible within the confines and context of the *beit midrash*. This space, writes Rav Soloveitchik, is not fantasy but a psychological reality. It is also, Rabbanit Tikochinsky added, a function of the love which fills in that which is missing in life, bringing joy. When those of us who love learning look at the world of Hazal and immerse ourselves in the words of the *rishonim* and *aharonim*, we see Torah scholars, lovers of Torah, first and foremost, and we see our own souls reflected in theirs. This ability to imagine ourselves sharing a *beit midrash* with others who have loved Torah just as we do is what enabled women to take their place in the contemporary *beit midrash*. Living in different centuries than Rabbanu Tam, Rambam, and Rav Hayyim (and indeed they lived in different centuries from each other) did not stop Rav Soloveitchik from inhabiting the same *beit midrash* with all of them simultaneously. So too Rabbanit Tikochinsky can relate to Rav Soloveitchik's words and can be inspired by visiting the graves of great Torah scholars and not be inhibited by the fact that they were all men.

Again and again, the friends, students, colleagues, teachers, and mentors I saw at the *Siyum* said wonderingly: "Who would have thought? How could we have imagined?" But we did imagine. We imagined ourselves right into the world of learning. Every time we learned a text, every time we translated a story to include women, every time we envisioned ourselves in the company of the great rabbis of the halakhic discourse, we became a little more a part of that world. Slowly but surely, visions of a Torah conversation in which women were full participants gave way to a reality that looked more and more the way we always believed it could.

If we can look into the past with imagination, we can look forward as well. The challenges that lie ahead, like the challenges of the past, will surely be significant. May our love of Torah be the lens that continues to shape our vision of what is possible.

THE BALABATISH DAF YOMI REVOLUTION

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In December 1972, Rabbi Samuel Fox of Anshe S'fard in Boston reported in the local Jewish press that a congregant had asked him "What is a *Daf Yomi*?" Rabbi Fox dutifully explained that it was a curriculum championed by Rabbi Meir Shapiro of Sanok, later the founder of the Chachmei Lublin Yeshiva. In 1923, Rabbi Shapiro had petitioned the Agudath Israel at a conference in Vienna to support a program of a folio-per-day Talmud study. The intent was to cover the 2,711 pages, front-and-back, of the Babylonian Talmud, the major text rehearsed in the traditional *yeshivot*. The purpose was to foster cooperative Jewish learning. "Since the cycle began on a certain day," explained Rabbi Fox. "the effect was that Jews throughout the world could be studying the same leaf on the same day. This also led to a certain sense of unity to Jews all over the world who became united in the study of the Holy Talmud."

That many American Orthodox Jews in the 1970s were unaware of *Daf Yomi* is understandable. The previous seven-and-a-half-year cycle of Talmud learning concluded in January 1968 without much fanfare in the United States. Below the radar, a thousand yeshiva students assembled for a *Siyum ha-Shas*—a rite marking the completion of study of the whole Babylonian Talmud—in the Bais Yaakov of Boro Park. Elsewhere, the Agudath Israel sponsored some smaller events in Boston and Chicago, but these programs did not reach that far beyond the mostly immigrant groups of yeshiva-trained *Daf Yomi* participants.

Back in Europe, Jewish newspapers like Warsaw's *Yiddishe Togeblatt* had reported on the *Siyum ha-Shas* after the completion of the first cycle in 1931 and after the second in 1938. In both instances, the major celebrations had occurred in yeshiva settings—in Lublin, Yiddish reports varied from 2,000 to 20,000 attendees—and recognized the achievement in the context of yeshiva study and yeshiva students. Reading the Talmud is a challenging exercise, mastered after years of persistent preparation. Laypeople had been required for the 1938 convocation to fundraise for an additional sixth floor for the Lublin yeshiva. *Daf Yomi* had struggled during the Holocaust and its immediate aftermath, though rabbinic emigrés in Israel had arranged for convivial events in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem in the immediate postwar years.

Daf Yomi was in its earliest stages a yeshiva-based custom. Its practitioners were faculty members, students, and cadres of alumni who utilized the curriculum to remain a part of their rabbinical brotherhoods. This depiction contrasts with the current image of *Daf Yomi* as a learning program for *balabatim*, laymen. The series of speeches and video presentations at the 2020 *Siyum ha-Shas* in New Jersey's MetLife Stadium celebrated the unfettered commitment of laymen—a growing number of women learn the *Daf* but were not acknowledged at the event—who wake up early to study a complex page of Talmud and then proceed to work. These are the "learner-earners" who, it is claimed, represent an "ideal" of Orthodox Jewish life. How did the public discourse around *Daf Yomi* change?

The *balabatish* transformation took place, without detection, during the *Daf* cycle that stretched from the 1970s to 1980s. The Agudath Israel was eager to increase the visibility of the *Siyum* for the conclusion of the seventh *Daf Yomi* cycle in June 1975. To generate interest, the Agudah rented the Manhattan Center in Midtown

Manhattan and filled the building with 5,000 women and men. The Agudath Israel arranged for a “rich and inspiring program,” led by members of its Moetzes Gedolei HaTorah, Council of Torah Sages. The Bluzhover Rebbe, Rabbi Yisrael Spira, had attended the 1923 Vienna conference and recollected the excitement over Rabbi Shapiro’s *Daf Yomi* proposal. He shared how the initiative animated European *yeshivot*.

The overall messaging of the affair was one of restoration. For the rabbinic luminaries seated atop the dais, the 1975 *Siyum ha-Shas* symbolized something very important for the “Yeshiva World,” specifically the increasing numbers of young men engaged in full-time Torah study. Rabbi Shmuel Ehrenfeld, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, and Rabbi Mordechai Gifter all relayed sentiments to the *Siyum*-goers that simultaneously celebrated Talmud study and “mourned for those absent from the gathering.”

Rabbi Gifter of Cleveland’s Telshe Yeshiva, for example, reportedly charged the young people in attendance with the “responsibility of preserving the glorious accomplishments of pre-World War II Europe.” Rabbi Gifter’s and others’ expectation was that the men who completed the Talmud cycle in the audience were associated with the growing American *yeshivot*, not laypeople working outside of these Talmud academies.

The Agudah planned the 1982 *Siyum* with the same demographic in mind. To celebrate the eighth completion of the *Daf Yomi* cycle, the Agudath Israel rented Madison Square Garden’s Felt Forum. Located beneath the main arena in the Garden, the Felt Forum—now the Hulu Theater—was typically used for boxing matches and concerts.

The Felt Forum could accommodate 5,000 participants. But the Agudah was confident that interest in the *Siyum* would exceed the previous 1975 event. After all, Rabbi Chaskel Besser and his *Daf Yomi* Commission estimated—probably somewhat optimistically—that the total *Daf Yomi* learners worldwide numbered 40,000 Orthodox Jews. The organizers decided to limit attendance to men, figuring that male yeshiva students and alumni would be the most interested in the *Siyum Ha-Shas* (most *Siyum* attendees arrive as spectators, not *Daf Yomi* practitioners). The Agudath Israel also reckoned that the program’s pageantry—sociologist Samuel Heilman called it a “cultural performance”—suited a particularly yeshiva-oriented audience. Once seated, the attendees watched, many awestruck, as a curtain that surrounded the stage parted to reveal a long series of tables in front of the Moetzes and other leading rabbis. These luminaries were well-known to the throngs in attendance. “What a sight,” explained one young man to a reporter. “What a panorama of greatness!”

Much of the messaging at the 1982 *Siyum* resembled the earlier iterations. The *roshei yeshiva* and hasidic rebbes trumpeted the need to increase Torah study, to rebuild the destroyed *yeshivot* of Eastern Europe. They admonished the thousands of yeshiva boys and alumni to redouble their commitment to diligent Talmud learning. One very prominent sage, Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky, offered that *Daf Yomi* ought to become a more integrated part of the everyday yeshiva curriculum. Floored by his experience at the previous *Siyum* in the Manhattan Center, Rabbi Kamenetsky told the crowd that he had decided to pursue the *Daf* cycle in addition to his other learning obligations. “Many yeshiva students feel that *Daf Yomi* does not apply to them,” said Reb Yaakov. “I would like to inform them that it is possible to learn through the entire Talmud, but one must work hard at it, and the earlier one begins, the better are his chances for success.”

Yet, the Agudah leaders may not have fully comprehended a social sea change, the democratization of Talmud learning in the United States. Rabbi Yitzchok Bider of Chicago claimed that the number of *Daf Yomi* classes in his neighborhood increased from one to five to accommodate the interest in the new cycle. None of the major reports on the 1982 *Siyum* mentioned the Torah Communication Network in Brooklyn’s “Dial-a-Daf” service. For a \$12 monthly subscription, aspiring *Daf Yomi* students lacking the skills to read Judeo-Aramaic on their own could gain access to a 40-minute lecture on the scheduled page of Talmud. Moreover, by the 1980s, there existed a generation of American-educated yeshiva alumni equipped with those skills and eager to tackle the *Daf*. Most of these Orthodox Jews were not serving in the rabbinate or working in schools. They were laymen but nevertheless engaged in Rabbi Meir Shapiro’s daily Talmud curriculum.

What is more, their wives also felt invested in *Daf Yomi*. At least one of these women, Libby Schwartz of Brooklyn, took exception to the narrowness of the *Siyum*’s scope. Schwartz wrote a stern letter to the editor of the Agudah monthly magazine to express her “disappointment to discover that this mass celebration was being limited to men only.” Further, she contended:

If there are men who spend time away from their homes and families learning Torah, then there are women who sit [at] home and take care of that home and of the children to ensure that the men can learn. Whether the *limud* of the *daf* takes place early in the morning (when it is then the sole job of the woman to dress, feed, and send all the children off to school) or whether the learning is in the evening (when it is then the sole job of the woman to do homework and send all the children off to bed) a tremendous share of that learning goes to the woman.

Schwartz argued that to “exclude women from such an event is a tremendous affront” and hoped that the “Agudah will realize their mistake.” In response, the editor, Rabbi Nisson Wolpin, reassured Schwartz that the Agudath Israel had already reserved Madison Square Garden’s capacious main arena for the next *Siyum* scheduled for April 1990 and confirmed that a “special section is being set aside for women.” The Agudah’s recalculation signaled a widening of the *Daf Yomi* movement to laypeople—men and women.

The festivities following the finishing of the next cycle betokened this awareness. The 1990 *Siyum ha-Shas* boasted 20,000 participants assembled in Madison Square Garden’s much larger arena, a reflection of the widened reach and involvement of *Daf Yomi*. Accordingly, the coverage of the event in the *New York Times* focused on the labors of laymen and, per Libby Schwartz’s recommendation, mentioned that women were invited because of the “sacrifices they had made to enable their husbands to study.” The Agudah’s reporting also highlighted the efforts of laypeople. It highlighted businessmen and professionals who credited Dial-a-Daf and [Soncino Press’s English translation of the Talmud](#) with the needed educational support to complete *Daf Yomi*.

The success of the 1990 *Siyum* inspired more creative methods for laypeople to gain access to Talmud learning. For example, a group formed a class in the rear car of the 7:51 a.m. Long Island Rail Road

route from Far Rockaway to Penn Station. Throughout the United States, Orthodox congregations added *Daf Yomi* classes.

Most crucially, ArtScroll, the flagship imprint of Mesorah Publications, launched its [Schottenstein Edition of the Talmud](#) in 1990. The Schottenstein Talmud featured a translation that was much more user-friendly than the Soncino alternative. Its English was more readable and its interlinear format more accessible. The pricey fifteen-year translation project required \$21 million in fundraising (about \$250,000 per volume) and was meant for interested laypeople, not yeshiva students since, commenting on the latter group, “they’ll never study on their own if they use a crutch,” explained ArtScroll editor Rabbi Nosson Scherman. ArtScroll completed the Schottenstein Talmud in 2004. Koren Publishers started printing its [English-edition of the Steinsaltz Edition of the Babylonian Talmud](#) in 2012.

The 1997 *Siyum ha-Shas* doubled down on the laity. Once again, the Agudath Israel secured the use of Madison Square Garden. The *Siyum* tallied an attendance of 26,000, evidence of *Daf Yomi*’s “explosion in the last 10 to 20 years.” Agudah President Rabbi Moshe Sherer credited the spike to the proliferation of learning resources on the Internet and the wider distribution of audio recordings on cassettes and compact disks.

The Novominsker Rebbe, Rabbi Yaakov Perlow, suggested that another factor in the rising numbers at the *Siyum* was the so-called *Ba’al Teshuvah* movement, the “thousands,” announced Rabbi Perlow at the *Siyum*, “who have returned to their roots and the truth of Torah Judaism.” These people were aided by ArtScroll and other new resources. One self-described *Ba’al Teshuvah* at the 2005 *Siyum ha-Shas* at Madison Square Garden was consistent with Rabbi Perlow’s hypothesis. This individual was grateful for the *Daf Yomi* movement and that the complement of learning aids could support “people like me.”

In 2012, the Agudath Israel moved the *Siyum ha-Shas* to MetLife Stadium and hosted about 90,000 women and men. The 2020 MetLife incarnation and other local programs featured multilayered messaging, the production of various iterations of *Daf Yomi* discourse. Speeches and video presentations echoed the rebuilding of Orthodox Judaism since World War II and publicly recognized the fleeting number of Holocaust survivors. The events feted yeshiva heads and touted their students. But most messages heralded the labors of laymen and laywomen to fit *Daf Yomi* into their family’s daily routines and the new resources to support this *balabatish* Talmud revolution.

THE NEXT WOMEN'S SIYUM HA-SHAS

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Like most people at the Hadran *Siyum ha-Shas* for women on January 6 in Jerusalem, I hadn’t actually finished *Shas* myself. But it didn’t matter. Aside from celebrating the accomplishments of those who had learned all 2,711 pages of Talmud, one page each day, over a seven-and-a-half year course of study, I had come to celebrate a different process, one that had lasted much longer than seven-and-a-half years. In fact, we were all celebrating the process that began around the year I was born, at a dining room table in Jerusalem, in an upstairs room of a *shul* in Manhattan, or maybe even a hundred years ago in an apartment building in Krakow. For me personally, it was a process that began in my own backyard in Toronto, when I began learning Mishnah with my parents at age nine.

A *Siyum*, of course, is a celebration of the completion of learning. The Hadran *Siyum*, by contrast, was not just a celebration of women’s learning, but itself a stage in the advancement of women’s learning. Women’s Torah study, first a radical anomaly, then rare and controversial, has now become a fact in our communities. When three thousand unite to celebrate women’s Talmud study, we know that we are no longer alone; women’s learning has become the norm and is here to stay. As a friend said of her middle school students who attended the *Siyum*: “They will never, ever say that Gemara is for boys again!”

Accordingly, while some of the speakers at the *Siyum* reflected beautifully on their personal experiences of learning and teaching *Daf Yomi*, many others who spoke had not completed the Talmud; they had come, like me, to celebrate women’s learning. The dialogue between Torah scholars Michal Tikochinsky and Esti Rosenberg about women’s Torah study was placed at the heart of the lineup of speakers, and the frame of the evening was provided by the inimitable educator Racheli Sprecher Fraenkel’s words about women playfully, joyfully, and bravely teaching, learning, and sharing Torah. When it came time to recite the *hadran*, the formula recited by those who had finished the text, the women who were called to the stage to recite the first paragraph were not only those who had completed *Shas*. They were young women and adults who learn and study Talmud; even the *hadran* itself marked not only the completion of *Shas*, but the arrival of women’s Torah study. There was a feeling that although once we were disconnected from Torah, now we are connected. Once we were isolated and lacking confidence in our right to learn Torah, and now we are part of a giant, vibrant community. In the words of the *Siyum* ceremony, *lo nitnashei minakh Talmud Bavli ve-lo titneshei minan* – we will not forget the Talmud, and the Talmud will not forget us.

For me as an individual, I saw my own personal life story as a Talmud learner and teacher flashing before my eyes, as so many people who are and have been part of my learning and teaching converged in one place. I saw teachers and mentors from my days as a student at Midreshet Lindenbaum and Drisha, the principal who hired me for my first job as a Gemara teacher, *havrutot* from my student days and adult life, and colleagues and students from all the schools where I have taught Gemara. At the ceremony I sat between a young woman who is currently a student in my Gemara shiur at Midreshet Amudim, and my father, who was my first *Torah she-Ba’al Peh* teacher. I was a link in a chain.

As most of the speakers noted, a *Siyum* is both an ending and a beginning, which raises the question: When we celebrate the completion of *Masekhet Niddah* and the *Talmud Bavli*, it is obvious that the next step is to begin again with the first words of the Talmud, “*From when do we recite Shema in the evenings?*” But if we are celebrating the arrival of women’s Torah study, what is our next step?

I’d like to suggest three possible achievements we might hope to celebrate at the next *Siyum ha-Shas* in seven-and-a-half years.

1. More Women’s Learning

While the Hadran *Siyum ha-Shas* gave us a powerful feeling of strength in numbers, three thousand people is still tiny compared to the Jewish population in Israel. For the next *Siyum*, let’s aim to fill an auditorium twice as large! Let us hope to see the *midrashot* grow in size and number, and hope to see twice as many women’s *Daf Yomi* groups represented. Qualitatively, perhaps next cycle’s women scholars will already be widely recognized halakhic authorities, authors of works of Torah scholarship that appear in every *beit midrash*.

2. Decentralizing Women’s Learning

In general, *Daf Yomi* is not associated with great Torah scholarship—studying such a large quantity of material requires a fairly superficial approach. Serious Torah scholars delve into their study in depth; lay people who are familiar with Talmud study but who are not Jewish professionals often use *Daf Yomi* to stay connected to that study each day before or after work. At the women’s *Siyum ha-Shas*, ironically, the *Daf Yomi* symbolized Torah scholarship even though it has typically been the opposite. But this is no coincidence. While the women’s learning revolution has produced top-notch women scholars, *Yoatzot Halakhah*, and Gemara teachers in schools and *midrashot*, it has not yet produced a critical mass of educated lay people. Most women who learn Gemara for significant amounts of time are preparing for careers as scholars and educators.

The gap between elite women scholars and the Talmud education of the average woman is especially wide in Israel, where it’s not unusual for a girl to graduate from a mainstream *Ulpana* (religious Zionist girls high school) having never laid eyes on a page of Talmud. Religious Zionist young Israeli women who attend a *midrasha* for a year after high school are still a small elite. So most religious Zionist adult women in Israel have no direct connection to Talmud study.

The organizers of the Hadran *Siyum* were interested in spreading Talmud study to a broader audience. They assigned a page of Talmud to every person who signed up for the *Siyum*. Together with groups who joined from abroad and also took on Talmud pages, the *Siyum* attendees collectively finished 3,600 pages of Talmud, the whole Talmud one and a half times over. Many of the women who took this on had never learned a page of Talmud before, and some were inspired to make Talmud study a bigger part of their lives.

Perhaps the *midrashot* that attend the next Hadran *Siyum ha-Shas* will be joined by *Ulpanot* (girls’ high schools) that have included Talmud study in their curriculum. Perhaps reflections on finishing the *daf* will be shared not only by scholars and Jewish professionals but also by dentists and programmers who have completed the *Daf Yomi* as well.

3. Less “Women’s Learning”

We’ll know that women’s learning has truly succeeded when it is normalized, replaced with something we just call “learning.”

While this is partly just a mental shift, we could also expect the Dati Leumi community, which is the main community the *Siyum* participants come from, to give more recognition to the learning and scholarship of women. And on that note, I believe our community should be asking some hard questions of our Torah institutions.

Historically, women who wished to learn Torah have asked nothing from mainstream Torah institutions. With the possible exception of Migdal Oz’s connection to Yeshivat Har Etzion, women have generally opened our own schools, *midrashot*, and institutes, hoping only that the existing *yeshivot* for men would refrain from criticizing us too much. But it’s time we start asking for more. How can men’s *yeshivot* justify not having even one female educator on staff? And while there are reasons why *yeshivot* are single sex, are they strong enough to justify denying young women educational opportunities?

Our expectations are shaped by our reality, but we should not let lack of imagination stop us from questioning whether our current reality in fact makes sense. It’s actually not so hard to imagine a day when our grandchildren hear that Yeshivat Har Etzion did not always admit women, and they are just as baffled as we were when we learned that Yale University did not always admit women as students or hire them as professors.

Perhaps in seven-and-a-half years the Hadran event will no longer be a women’s *Siyum ha-Shas*, any more than any other event this year was called a “men’s *Siyum ha-Shas*.” It will simply be a celebration of learning Torah, in which most of the scholars who take center stage happen to be women.

The Hadran *Siyum ha-Shas* both marked the growth and change of women’s learning over the past decades and also was itself a part of the change. Women’s learning is different now than it was before the *Siyum*, and the next Hadran *Siyum ha-Shas*, in seven-and-a-half years, will definitely be different from the one we just experienced. I look forward to another beautiful celebration, and I am curious to see where we will be and what we will be celebrating.

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