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# Then, Now, and Lots of Room for Tomorrow: A Comparative Analysis of Female Intellectual Ambition in Jewish Society

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## **Preface**

Growing up in a Bais Yaakov (right-wing Orthodox) Jewish day school system from grades K-12, my peers and I were consistently inculcated with the notion that Talmudic study was a prized intellectual commodity reserved for men. At seven years old my brother began studying the age-old text that had sustained my people's religious tradition for the past 1800 years, while my female classmates and I were focusing on only the books of the Bible and the Prophets.

Talmud, as is implied by the ultra-Orthodox branch of Jewish society, is for the boys. Why? Simply because girls just do not possess the intellectual capacity to study and fully grasp something so technical and logical, an argument commonly supported with a simple yet exceedingly nuanced passage from the Talmud which will be referenced shortly. Besides, as teachers explained to us, female study of Talmud could never be anything close to sincere. I never really bothered to challenge these claims at the time. Ironically enough, when teachers wanted to reference an idea or lesson based in Talmudic text, they would either allude to it orally or bring a brief source clipping that was always prefaced with "my husband showed this to me."

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A handful of years later, I found myself at none other than a women's Biblical and Talmudical academy of study in Israel following my senior year of high school. At Michlelet Mevaseret Yerushalayim (MMY), a modern orthodox seminary for women located in the heart of Jerusalem, educators and Rabbis held an entirely different approach to female study of Talmud: they embraced it. MMY has several in-depth Talmud classes offered at intermediate and advanced levels, and Talmud played a critical role in almost all of the courses there. No lesson or lecture was ever accepted by students or fellow faculty at face value; everything was accompanied with a rich array of sourced arguments and textual references, many of which were from the Talmud. Teachers and students alike exuded passion for Torah and Talmudic study that I had never quite seen before. A handful of my friends even finished entire tractates, and joining in such an immense and meaningful celebration of their accomplishments was a sight to behold. Interestingly enough, I was surrounded by a plethora of friends at my gap-year program who too came from a more religiously right wing educational background. We often bonded over our shared pedagogical experiences, and absolutely loved to joke about our Bais Yaakov pasts.

This past summer, thanks to the generosity of the Brenner Fellowship Award from the Jewish Studies Department at the University of Pennsylvania, I had the privilege of working at iAngels, a female-led hybrid venture capital and crowdfunding platform based in the heart of bustling Tel Aviv. Two extraordinary Jewish women, Mor Assia and Shelly Hod-Moyal, recognized a need to democratize the startup investment process and an opportunity to channel hundreds of millions of global dollars to foster Israeli innovation, so they set out to change the venture capital scene. Assia is a graduate of the IDF's elite intelligence unit 8200 and attended Technion and Columbia Business School. Hod-Mayal brings years of experience in the financial industry, including at Goldman Sachs. Five years after its inception, the firm has gained world-wide acclaim and has surpassed \$200 million (Assets Under

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Management). The firm consists of approximately 30 employees, 25 of whom are women.

During my time working at iAngels, I saw first hand what it means to be a bright, powerful, Jewish female changemaker. I saw what it means to sit at the epicenter of emerging technology and invest in the future, while being a mother to many children, amongst many other obligations. I was deeply struck by the profound contrast between the age-old cultural norms for Jewish women and the immense potential that lay ahead. I sat each day alongside incredible Jewish women who had been commanders in the Israeli Air Force, worked around the world, had many academic achievements, and most of whom were either returning from or embarking on maternity leave. Their capabilities genuinely knew no bounds.

As a Jewish woman in the twenty-first century who possesses a variety of Jewish educational experiences across the cultural and religious spectrum, I often ponder my authentic role within my Jewish community and society at large. Though my professional experience this past summer was not in any way a religious one, it did leave me with tremendous food for thought as to the place and potential that Jewish women have in the time in which we are living. I was thirsty to understand why Jewish women can lead major firms and organizations and reach the pinnacles of academic and professional success, but in some circles are still prohibited from Talmudic study.

### **A Community of Interpreters**

Can and should women study Talmud, and if so, how? Let us take a step back and explore the basis from which this fascinating argument stems. The Gemara in Kiddushin (29b) states that women are exempt from Torah study, on the basis of a verse from Devarim:

The baraita teaches that a father is obligated to teach his son Torah. The Gemara asks: From where do we derive this requirement? As it is written: 'And you shall teach them [velimadtem] to your sons' (Deuteronomy

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11:19) ... From where do we derive that a woman is not obligated to teach her son Torah? As it is written: 'And you shall teach [velimadtem],' which can be read as: And you shall study [ulmadtem].<sup>1</sup>

This indicates that whomever is commanded to study Torah is commanded to teach, and whomever is not commanded to study is not commanded to teach. Since a woman is not obligated to learn Torah, she is likewise not obligated to teach it.

The Gemara presents the exemption in the context of a broader tradition of Torah transmission, which is passed down from father to son. Women are clearly not seen as a component of this aspect of the tradition, as they are under no obligation to learn Torah.

In the Mishnah of Sota, Ben Azzai and Rabbi Eliezer hold deeply conflicting views on whether daughters are included in this commandment.<sup>2</sup> While Ben Azzai maintains that a man possesses an obligation to teach Torah to his daughter, Rabbi Eliezer argues that a man is actually prohibited from doing so: "Whoever teaches his daughter Torah, it is as if he taught her *Tiflut*."<sup>3</sup>

According to the Rambam, *Tiflut* refers to vain and worthless words. As he explains, "The Sages directed that a man shall not teach his daughter Torah, as the majority of women have not a mind adequate for its study, but, because of their limitations, will turn the words of the Torah into trivialities."<sup>4</sup> In other words, the Rambam fears that women will not approach Torah study with the respect, dignity, and state of mind that it deserves. Rashi and Tosfot, on the other hand, maintain that *Tiflut* implies sexual misconduct. As Rashi writes, "Because from it [Torah study] she will gain cunning, and pursue [immoral] matters covertly."<sup>5</sup> That is, through the study of Torah, a woman may ultimately come to exploit her new intellectual sophistication and body of knowledge to channel it towards immoral behavior.

At first glance it may seem that Rashi and Tosfot are suggesting that Torah study makes women manipulative. The context for these statements,

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however, are the laws of *isha sota*, a woman who was convicted of having cheated on her husband. A woman who is suspected of adultery is taken to the High Priest, who gives her special water to drink. If she is found guilty, she dies a public and gruesome death. However, the Gemara writes that even if she is an adulterer, if she has other merits from her Torah study she can avoid punishment. Rashi and Tosfot say that learning Torah leads women to be cunning because they are worried that women will learn Torah to increase their merit and thereby avoid punishment for adultery.

### **Historical Context**

At the time the Talmud was written, a woman's role was seen purely as being a homemaker, wife, and mother. As the Gemara in Berachot 17a so starkly illustrates:

Rav said to Rabbi Hiyya: By what virtue do women merit to receive this reward? Rabbi Hiyya answered: They merit this reward for bringing their children to read the Torah in the synagogue, and for sending their husbands to study Mishna in the study hall, and for waiting for their husbands until they return from the study hall.<sup>6</sup>

As Professor Judith Baskin explains, women were viewed as the enablers of male Torah study, and were expected to live up to their assigned roles and satisfy the social norms of the time.<sup>7</sup>

Dr. Judith Romney Wegner brings to the fore an incredibly vital perspective about the Talmudic time period.<sup>8</sup> As she describes, the Talmud is a work of literature that was created by men, and therefore presents only a mere glimpse into the real life experiences of Jewish women at the time. Since the Talmud discusses women in a rather generic fashion, the Talmud only illustrates the Rabbis' perspective of the woman's role in society, along with the legal implications of a patriarchal society. Practically speaking, most Jewish women probably lived lives not all that different from their non-Jewish counterparts at the time, given an overarching theme of patriarchy

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that permeated society's views and legal systems. Avraham Grossman, a professor of Jewish Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, lends some historical context to the issue at hand. In his book *Pious and Rebellious: Jewish Women in Medieval Europe*, Grossman highlights the role of women's culture and education as a backdrop to the prohibition of female study of Talmud.<sup>9</sup> He explains that Jewish women during the Middle Ages faced a great deal of discrimination in the realms of culture and education. A large portion of women were illiterate, and were prohibited from studying a handful of sacred studies. Given Torah's central role within Jewish culture and tradition, the inability to study the religion's most seminal text alienated women from participating in one of the most pivotal Jewish occupations. In fact, Grossman argues, the inability to perform this Mitzvah, and possibly even the very prohibition against it, took an unfortunate toll on Jewish women's public perception and self-image. Grossman relates that there are three central factors that fostered the discrimination against Jewish women in the realm of education: Talmudic tradition, an exaggerated emphasis on the virtue of female modesty, and the daily reality of non-Jewish life during that time.

In terms of the Talmudic tradition, Rabbi Eliezer's ruling against the female study of Talmud framed women in a rather negative light. To make matters worse, Rabbi Abbahu's interpretation of Rabbi Eliezer's argument further degraded the image of women. According to Rabbi Abbahu, if a woman studies Talmud she will gain wisdom and might potentially exploit her newfound knowledge for the wrong reasons, such as deceiving her husband or hiding her immoral actions. A similar argument stood within surrounding non-Jewish cultures. For instance, Roman thinker Seneca argued in favor of withholding education from women in order to maintain their innocence. Medieval historian Philip of Novara was of that belief that educating women and teaching them to be literate, even within the aristocratic class, would enable them to write letters to lovers, thereby bringing shame upon their families. In essence, women at the time were

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perceived as nonsensical and faithless. I can only imagine the pain and shame that came with that public portrayal.

Despite the prohibitions against female study, according to historical testimony there were some learned women at the time. These women learned from their fathers or private teachers. Bruriah is an example of an educated woman who challenged the status quo. Other females include the daughter of Rabbi Samuel ben Ali and Rabbanit Asenath Barzani, who even led a Yeshiva in Kurdistan. These women refused to take no for an answer, and would later serve as sources of empowerment and inspiration for a modern-day wave of Jewish feminism.

Dr. Judith Hauptman argues that contrary to popular historical belief, women in the Talmudic period possessed a fairly thorough knowledge of ritual law.<sup>10</sup> In order to perform the various rituals of the home, such as baking matzah for Passover and erecting the courtyard Eruv to permit carrying objects, a woman had to be informed of the legalities of these commandments. Established rules were generally transmitted from mother to daughter, and new rules were taught by the men of the household. Sometimes women tailored the rules to make them applicable to real-life circumstances.

### **Evolution of the Age-Old Argument**

The debate about women and Torah study lives on in the writings and discussions of early-modern scholars and contemporary Rabbinic authorities. While the conversation most certainly paints a picture of the Talmud's view of women in Jewish society, it also has pragmatic implications in terms of modern-day Jewish law in the field of education and Torah study. At its core, the issue boils down to the following: Can and should women be studying Talmud? If so, in what context, and to what extent? This has been a source of great contention for various branches within Orthodox Judaism, mainly between the Modern Orthodox and right-wing camps. Of course, there are many nuanced approaches to this issue across the board. For instance, some

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religious scholars view the female study of Talmud as a purely intellectual pursuit which would be unfitting to the sacred text. Others view the prohibition against the female study of Talmud as entirely irrelevant and outdated, and highlight the misogynistic trends throughout the relevant traditional Jewish sources. There is no shortage of literature surrounding this issue, but I will spare you from the legal intricacies of the debate and instead focus on its contemporary significance and implications.

### **Contemporary Implications**

Though Judaism is a religion centered on tradition and law, the impact of this age-old debate extends well beyond the mere legal justification for the female study of Talmud. Indeed, researching this topic brings the critical question of a woman's role in Jewish society to the fore. While the legality behind it may be ambiguous, one thing is for certain: the landscape of female Jewish education is unlike the world has ever seen. Talmudic study for women has become the status quo for most Modern Orthodox Jewish day schools, and there are an increasing number of female Talmudic graduate programs. An unprecedented number of women have dedicated their lives to pursuing the study of Talmud, both professionally and privately.

As a Jewish woman in the twenty-first century with friends on both sides of the debate on female Talmudic study, I often question my role within the greater scheme of Jewish life. I see plenty of women who enjoy Talmud study mainly from an intellectual vantage point, but so do plenty of men. I have a handful of friends who find extraordinary meaning through Talmud study, and have found an incredible channel for their thirst for Jewish learning and continue to gain an immense amount of inspiration and religious passion through their daily study.

Let me be frank: if women in today's day and age can pursue Ph.D.s, M.B.A.s, J.D.s, M.D.s, and so much more, what is to stop them from channeling their extraordinary intellectual capabilities, passion, and zeal



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towards the study of Judaism's second most seminal text (the first being the written Torah)? The Talmud is a critical foundation for any Jewish education, and there is no reason that women must experience a superficial and two-dimensional understanding of it. Besides, the Talmud is the most practical means for understanding Jewish law, an integral part of every Jew's religious practice and experience.

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### Endnotes

1. Kiddushin 29b.
2. "Shiur #03: Women and Torah Study," *Vbm Hartzion*, <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/shiur-03-women-and-torah-study>.
3. Sota 3:4.
4. Hilchot Talmud Torah 1:13.
5. Rashi, Sota 21b.
6. Berachot 17a.
7. Judith Baskin, "Women in Rabbinic Literature," *My Jewish Learning*, September 2, 2003.
8. Judith Romney Wegner, "The Image and Status of Women in Classical Rabbinic Judaism," in *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective*, ed. Judith R. Baskin (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 73-100.
9. Avraham Grossman, *Pious and Rebellious: Jewish Women in Medieval Europe* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 2004).
10. Judith Hauptman, "The Talmud's Women in Law and Narrative," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues*, no. 28 (2015): 30-50.