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Malke Bina

The Future of Jewish Leadership

I would like to open with the words of the Midrash found in גמרא שבת פח/ב :

אמר רב חננאל בר פפא מאי דכתיב "שמעו כי נגידים אדבר" (משלי ח/י) למה נמשלו דברי תורה כנגיד לומר לך מה נגיד זה יש בו להמית ולהחיות, אף דברי תורה יש בהם להמית ולהחיות.

What is the meaning of that which is written in Proverbs (8:6)

“Listen, for I (the Torah) will speak words of excellence, leadership, importance.”

Why are the words of Torah compared to a distinguished individual, to a leader? This serves to tell us that just as this leader has the power to kill and give life, so too the words of Torah have the power to kill and give life.

The Gemara explains: היינו דאמר רבא, למיימנין בה סמא דחיי, למשמאילים בה סמא דמותא.

– This is reflected by that which Rava said “To those who grasp it with their right hand, the torah is a drug of life – to those who grasp it with their left hand, it is a drug of Death”.

Rashi explains the term מיימנין :

עסוקים בכל כחם וטרודים לדעת סודה כאדם המשתמש ביד ימינו שהיא עיקר

Those who endeavor with all their might to uncover the Torah’s secrets are compared to someone who uses his right hand, the stronger hand.

This Midrash teaches us about the comparative strength and power of the leader and the words of Torah – both are life-granting forces. Rava and then Rashi further clarify and tell us that Torah is the source of life to those who learn It for Its own sake "תורה לשמה" and work very hard at understanding It fully.

"שמעו כי נגידים אדבר" The words of Torah are compared to the leader. I would like to expound further and make a "דרוש" on the Midrash and add – not only is Torah compared to the leader, in its life-giving capacity, but, in essence it is the Torah, the pure and in depth study of Torah, which produces the leader and cultivates Jewish leadership.

The overarching and guiding theory behind my vision of Jewish Leadership, be it for women or men, is that it stems from the Beit Midrash. Jewish leaders are nurtured and developed by the authentic learning experience of the Beit Midrash. This learning fosters personal growth and eventually empowers the dedicated and worthy students to have an impact on the family, the community and the face of Judaism today and in the future.

I've been asked to speak about the next generation of Jewish leaders and how women will successfully rise to places of leadership in the Jewish community. Before speaking about the future, I think it is imperative to take a more careful look at what is happening in the present and then analyze these recent developments and their implications for the future.

When I came to Israel in 1967 to study Torah in the leading post-high school program at that time, there did not exist in all of Israel and I think also in the US, a Women's Beit Midrash. In fact where I was then studying if we tried to discuss a matter of learning in the library we were told to be quiet or to leave. In my three years of advanced Torah learning, out of approximately 25 teachers only one was a woman. Also noteworthy, very little Oral Law was included in this high-level curriculum, some Mishna and commentaries, but no Gemara. Although on the one hand I was very grateful for the solid foundation in Torah scholarship which I received, on the other hand, I began realizing that it wasn't as inclusive, rigorous and leadership oriented as it could have been. I couldn't articulate it at the time but inside I felt that there was something missing. Where was the Beit Midrash that I and other women could walk into - learn Torah together in chevruta, discuss issues, ask questions and answer questions?

It is interesting to note that just about the same time that Drisha opened the first women's Beit Midrash in America in the late 70's, we opened the first women's Beit Midrash in Israel in Shappels which later became Bruria, and now Midreshet

Lindenbaum. The Jewish world at large was in need of this new force of the stronger and more active Torah learning of women. It is clear that a great deal of the energy in religious Jewish life today revolves around women's study of Jewish sources.

In 1988 MaTaN was established in Yerushalim, the first Women's Institute for Torah Studies, or in other words women's Yeshiva and women's Kollel, whose founders and head were all women. Since its opening hundreds of women have learned in MaTaN's Beit Midrash, in the Advanced Scholars Programs and thousands have attended our high level classes and diverse learning activities such as our very popular mother-daughter Bat Mitzvah Program. Many of our graduates have entered the world of women's religious leadership, especially in areas of educational, moral and spiritual leadership. *Oshra Koren*, dynamic builder of the MaTaN Raanana branch and other branches including Tel-Aviv, Netanya and Petach Tikva, *Esti Lichtenstein Rosenberg* head of Midreshet Migdal Oz and *Shani Taragin*, outstanding scholar and post-high school teacher of Tanach, are a sampling of the products of MaTaN's Beit Midrash. In the fifteen years since MaTaN opened another twelve Midrashot were established for post-high school Israeli women each one with an educational philosophy and style of its own. Every year hundreds of post high school women from the US and other countries come to Israel for intensive Torah learning. In her comprehensive and thought-provoking article "And All the Women Followed Her..." On women's religious leadership in Israeli modern orthodoxy, which is in a book on Jewish Leadership soon to be published by JTS and also will appear in Hebrew in the Journal # 10 דמוקרטיה תרבות to be published at the end of 2004, Prof. Tova Cohen states, and I quote, "Of all the factors that have permitted the emergence of women religious leaders in contemporary Orthodox Society, undoubtedly the most obtrusive is their attainment of access to the world of Torah study, generically is known as 'learning'". Another quote "...the admission of women to the world of advanced Torah study (above all, the study of Talmud and of halakhic literature) during the 1990's deserves to be considered a genuine watershed. Generated by the development of midrashot this revolution now enables women to attain a level of erudition equal to that of men".

Never before in the history of the Jewish nation have so many women, independent women been so actively involved in the learning of Torah. Never before have masses

of women had so much Torah knowledge. I posit that we have sociologically and therefore also Halakhically entered into the phase of being a “New Reality”. This new reality has already been the catalyst for the emergence of women religious leaders as heads of Midrashot, pleaders in the Beit Din, heads of Batei Midrash and teachers of Tanach and Talmud on the high school and post-high School level, Advisors in Halakhic matters and builders of new Torah learning programs for their communities. We women are going to have to decide what we want for our future, for the future of the Jewish nation. I personally don't know what will happen or what should happen regarding women's Halakhic leadership and psikah. What I do know is that if, or should I say, when women become Halakhic leaders it will be a direct result of their many years of intensive Beit Midrash learning and serious Halakhic training and internship and also the participation of masses of additional women in the Torah learning process.

As a good Jew, I would like to end with a question and would like you to think about this challenge. What is the most effective way of bringing in this new form of halakhic leadership for women – hardcore revolutionary methods or grassroots incremental progress?

I believe in the possibility of women's religious leadership, but I also think that the best, long lasting results, accepted by the most people will come through an evolutionary process and grassroots involvement. Revolution is identified with the breakdown of tradition, but from close association with the women of the Beit Midrash, the leaders and potential leaders, I know that revolution is not their style, rather these women cherish and desire to promote the tradition.

What I envision is that more and more women will be learning and teaching Torah at advanced levels and will become more knowledgeable in broad and specific halakhic fields. Slowly they will join a more inclusive leadership. If people see a woman with inner strength, knowledge and understanding they will make her into a leader. The new reality of masses of women learning Torah in the Beit Midrash has the potential to usher in a new era where many women will become religious leaders

להגדיל תורה ולהאדירה.

