

A Woman's Voice

More Female Torah Readers Among the Orthodox

By Talia Bloch

Change is afoot in the Orthodox Jewish community. In recent years a quiet and very slowly growing group of *minyanim* (prayer groups) has allowed women to read from the Torah in a mixed setting. While women have been accepted as Torah readers in non-Orthodox congregations for several decades now and the Orthodox have long had women-only prayer groups in which women read Torah, female Torah readers in *minyanim* with both men and women is a relatively new and controversial phenomenon.

According to Rabbi David Silber, founder and dean of the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education, the movement actually began in Israel, where a prayer group called the Leader Minyan introduced female Torah readers in a mixed group about a decade ago. The Modern Orthodox Leader Minyan, which, according to Silber, has an innovative service in several other respects as well, inspired him to bring the idea to the United States. "I'm the one who brought it here," he said. In explaining why, Silber said, "I think giving women more of a part in the synagogue is positive. It enhances the service." And, he added, that he "would like to see movement in the direction of full participation."

Drisha, center for women's Jewish education, which traditionally only holds services on the High Holidays, introduced the practice two years ago. Silber said he set up a second High Holiday service at which both men and women can read from the Torah and may be called up for an *aliyah*—the honor of making the blessings before and after a section of the Torah portion is read. "Within Drisha," Silber commented, there "was a lot of support and little criticism."

Several other Orthodox prayer groups have followed Silber's lead. According to JTA, three *minyanim* in New York have women read Torah, as well as several groups in Israel, including Shira Chadasha, an Israeli synagogue. Kehilat Orach Eliezer (KOE), a Modern Orthodox synagogue in Manhattan, is also considering accepting women as Torah readers. If it were to do so, it would be the first Orthodox synagogue in the United States with female Torah readers in a mixed setting. When called for comment, members of KOE declined however, saying the matter was so delicate that they did not want any more publicity at this point.

Blu Greenberg, president of the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA) explained, "The opposition is rising; the discomfort level is rising," because, as she said, "many women as well as men in the community feel threatened by the changes." The reason for the discomfort, said Greenberg, was twofold. First, there was the strong emotional component. "These things have a lot to do with emotions," she said. Prayer is a very emotional thing and involves connecting to the past, so people are

very reluctant to have what they know altered in any way. The second reason Greenberg pointed to was "that people aren't aware of the halachic sources and the research."

A year ago, Mendel Shapiro, a rabbi in Jerusalem who had done extensive research into the subject, published a controversial article on the web site of the modern Orthodox group, Edah. In his piece, Shapiro documented that the halachic opposition to having female Torah readers in a mixed setting derived from the notion that it would dishonor the community, because it is improper for women to assume public roles. Yet, Shapiro argued, women's role today is completely different from what it once was. Even within Orthodoxy women have an ever-growing public role. Thus, having them assume the public role of reading Torah could not be considered a dishonor to the community.

Another traditional halachic opposition to having women read Torah, is the notion of "kol isha"—that a woman's voice presents a distraction from proper prayer, because of its seductive nature.

Greenberg, who said she believed "in a place for distinctive roles for men and women," commented that she didn't "know how far it should go." Yet, she did feel that the movement would continue: "It will grow, but it will grow slowly." She said that by starting slowly at the fringes, the idea would have time to catch on in the mainstream, hopefully without creating a rift.

When asked why it was happening now, Greenberg said that she believed the first reason was the larger context of the feminist movement within secular society. Internal to Judaism, Greenberg cited three other factors. The first was Shapiro's article, which, she said, provided a model for female Torah reading which others could follow. The second was that restricting female Torah reading to all-female prayer groups had "a certain cost" for families who would like to be together at Shabbat or holiday services. The third reason, Greenberg said, was that today, more than ever, before Jewish women within a large segment of Orthodoxy are getting an extensive religious education.

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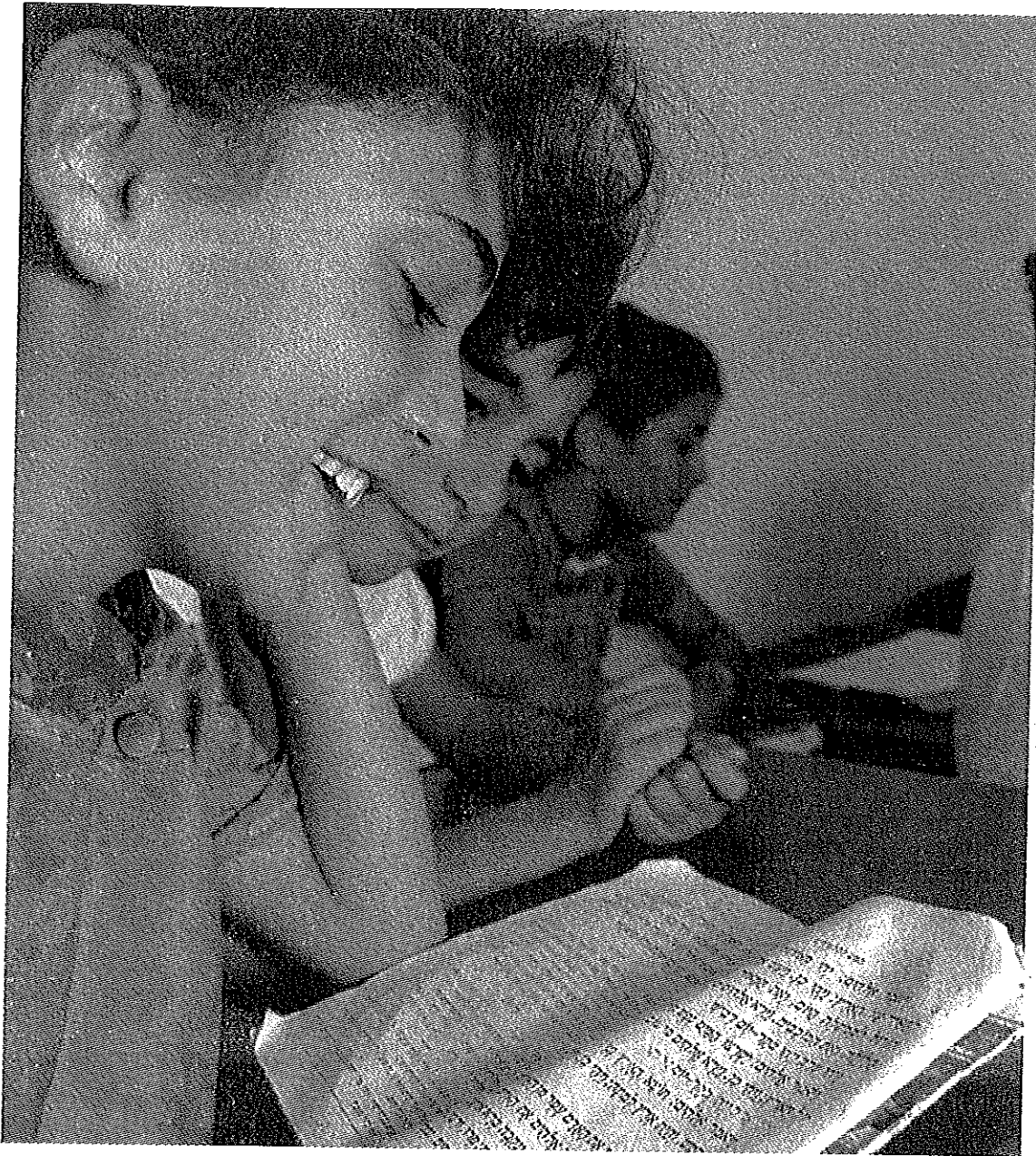


Photo: Roy Mitzelman

Young women in a Hebrew study group.