

Studying Nechama Leibowitz

The public and private life of one of the greatest teachers of Bible in recent times is explored in a two-day learning program at the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education in Manhattan

By Judah S. Harris

If you weren't fortunate enough a number of decades ago to sit at the "learning" table in Nechama Leibowitz's modest Jerusalem apartment where, over many years, she taught her regular Torah classes, or grab yourself a place in one of the outer rows where students yet found room to sit, you still could have secured a comfortable empty chair on a Wednesday and Thursday late-December, in one of the larger classrooms on the fifth floor of Manhattan's Drisha Institute for Jewish Education.

Nechama Leibowitz: Her Life & Work, was the theme for this year's *Winter Week of Learning* at Drisha, a center for advanced Jewish Studies (but all levels are welcome) which offers ample learning opportunities throughout the year, but attempts special programs during popular vacation seasons to bring teachers and students together in a common pursuit. December 23rd and 24th was the most recent "community learning event," as Drisha calls it, with presentations by Nati Helfgot, Walter Hertzberg, Moshe Sokolow, and Chayuta Deutsch from Israel, who wrote one of the special biographies of Nechama Leibowitz that has been published in recent years.

The seven different sessions during the two days focused on both Nechama Leibowitz's methodology for studying the written text, and the chapters, not of the book, but of her own life, the intricacies of a public and private person. She taught thousands of students in schools, seminaries, yeshivot, and two Israeli universities, and tens of thousands more through her widely circulated "gilyonot" – stenciled pamphlets of teachings, with insights and questions on the Parsha, that she prepared from 1942 to 1971, and which she distributed broadly. Even after her health dictated that she no longer would labor to produce new material, she continued to receive responses, and offered, for the mere price of postage, and presumably the rewards of extreme satisfaction, to reply, in her own handwriting, to the many who corresponded with her.

Photography and design by Judah S. Harris



"Who are you?" Nechama would occasionally ask the sender on paper, with a heightened wonderment at times as to the basic identity of her correspondents. They were religious and secular, soldiers and shopkeepers, scholars and rabbis, and in one instance, as chronicled by Dr. Avigdor Bonchek, a clinical psychologist and student of Nechama Leibowitz, a waitress in a coffee house, a *beit cafe*. Nechama, noticing good progress in this correspondent's worksheets over the months, was prodded to ask personal questions: what is your profession and how much time do you spend on the worksheets? The waitress answered Nechama that that she was spending two nights each week.

If her students exhibited such a dedication to their learning, for sure it was reflective of or inspired by the dedication of their teacher. For 50 years, Nechama received and marked papers each week, and the tally, which she kept track of at her husband's suggestion, reached 40,000, before the formal counting stopped. Her approach towards studying and analyzing the meforshim, the classical medieval commentators, became legendary, inspired more than one generation of educators, and all those striving to be educated in the words of the Biblical text, and molded the way Tanach was taught and, for sure in Israel, tested in formalized exams, such as the national Bagrut.

Nechama championed active learning, encouraging her students to study the words of Tanach, together with the explanations of the traditional commentaries, to contrast them, and to formulate their own understandings as to the motivations, based on the text, that led a commentator in a certain direction. In Nechama's world, there existed right and wrong answers, better ones and less so, but all in her "classroom" were welcome to attempt, and she was fully encouraging of her students.

Yet some teachers of Tanach, exemplary ones, have been critical of Nechama's approach, as well as the "exaggeration" of her methodology (by others) that developed and became entrenched in the Jewish Studies world, then dictating forcefully how Tanach would or would not be studied.

Rabbi Nati Helfgot, in his late-morning session on the second day of the

program, offered a survey of these voices and provided a “loving critique” of elements - not the entirety of *Shitaf Nechama*, which had, as one example, popularized Rashi, in distinct contrast to the other parshanim, commentators.

“Nechama loved Rashi,” said Rabbi Hefgot, Director of the Tanach and Jewish Thought Departments at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, and a graduate of both RIETS and Azrieli Graduate School (Yeshiva University). “The parshan she quotes the most in her gilyonot is Rashi.”

“What’s bothering Rashi?” has become a catch phrase in the tents of Jewish learning, and even when not verbalized with these choice words, students have been encouraged to read the text almost solely through the eyes of this major exegete, or via the commentaries of a select few. They have, her critics feel, been denied direct access to the text.

“Students get bogged down in Rashi and may think there’s no other way to read the text – except the way these five parshanim read it,” says Helfgot. Nechama’s method was to teach understanding, “havana,” in contrast to accumulation of knowledge, “yeda.” Curriculums and exams in Israel began to reflect this approach and caused a real level of tension in Israeli society, says Helfgot. “Sixty percent of a test was on material never learned.”

Nechama felt that students “don’t remember anything anyway,” and that understanding the happenings, and specific facts related in the text was paramount. Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun, an Israeli educator and Rosh Yeshiva (he studied with Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook), and a paratrooper during the Six Day War, who has championed alternative approaches to Tanach study in Israel, is one of Nechama Leibowitz’s more pronounced critics. He counters that people know thousands of songs – they “remember” them. People do remember what they learn, but how they learn it can make all the difference.

It was in the 70s and 80s that Bible educators such as Bin-Nun started to ask more global or “big” questions that couldn’t be contained in single pasukim, or groups of sentences in the text: Who was King David? What is happening in the perek? What is the overall motif or message of this entire book?

“Looking at ‘central stories’ became more of the focus for many writers and readers of Tanach,” Helfgot explains. Bin-Nun would say “Read an entire perek, learn an entire story, not just pasukim.” But Nechama was against the “Ideas of Tanach” mentality. She had encountered seemingly similar things in Germany in her youth, where non-Jewish biblical scholarship often negated the authenticity of the Torah, at times heavily infused with anti-Semitic beliefs, such as in the theses of Julius Wellhausen.

Another strong critique by the proponents of the new methodologies for learning Tanach was that Nechama Leibowitz’s approach ignores the important disciplines of Archeology, Anthropology, History, Geography - the research in all these areas that could contribute to vital understanding of Tanach. “She was not interested,” says Helfgot, “to take a Tanach and go on a tour.”

Tanach b’Yad, actually going out with text in hand, to survey the Land of Israel, to encounter firsthand the actual places mentioned in the pasukim, has enchanted many a student, no matter what age. Rabbi Helfgot recounts his first “Tanach tiyul” during his Gush (Yeshivat Har Etzion) years, to the top of *Tel Azeqah*, a high place 12 miles from the Mediterranean Sea, overlooking the *Elah Valley*, the site where David battled and then killed the Philistine giant Goliath, who according to some calculations was nine feet tall (not as romantic and exciting an image of a giant as we might wish, but taller than anyone we’ll ever know). The battle is over, and this once strategic point now overlooks a valley of agricultural fields and vineyards, but for Nati Helfgot, here, he says, is where “David and Goliath came to life.”

“Who’s going to be interested in this besides archeologists?” Nechama would ask. “She didn’t care about the Hittite Laws,” says Helfgot, but contemporary teachers wanted to know “what were the customs of the kings in the times of Bnei Yisrael; the tools in use at the time; *Derech Plishtim*,” the shorter biblical route from Egypt to Canaan, but a more treacherous one through enemy territory. What did it look like? What was its path? “We have to understand the geography, realities of the day,” Helfgot says.

(A couple of weeks later, a Jewish educator who studied with Nechama Leibowitz at Beit Midrash L'Torah [BMT] in the 70s, mentioned to me that he took issue with this perception of her. He distinctly remembers her citing archeological findings in respect to Shmuel Aleph 13:21, where the word “Pim” appears in the text, in the context of the monetary cost for the Israelites to have their agricultural tools sharpened by the Philistines. The text states that there were no smiths to be found in Israel, for fear that “the Hebrews will make swords or spears” [to use against the Philistines, but decorative metalwork may still have been allowed]. For





the classical commentators, the word Pim remained an unknown word, a *hapax legomenon*, and they attempted various interesting translations. Only when archeological digs in Israel in the early 1900s yielded stone weights with the word Pim on them, was the mystery solved, and the newly discovered measurement revealed to be exactly equal to 2/3 of a Shekel.)

Because of his critique, Rabbi Helfgot considers himself a *talmid* and not a *chossid* of Nechama Leibowitz. He reads to the class a letter in Hebrew that he received from her in 1988, where she criticizes his attempts to publish a journal of Tanach at Yeshiva University. Helfgot had extended to his teacher, a well-intentioned invitation to submit an essay to the journal, but Nechama explains that she has nothing of real importance relating to textual studies to contribute, and that she has little time.

Then she goes on to the "real" reason. Why are these students publishing a journal on Tanach when they have yet to read some of the seminal "higher level" books in contemporary parshanut, and she lists a few of those she holds in high

regard. "Who from the students of your yeshiva have read even one line of these books?" she scolds, advising Helfgot to turn instead to the Tanach teachers at the institution, who are of the same caliber as the roshei yeshiva who teach *Torah She-be'al Peh*.

Helfgot wrote back to defend and clarify his and his peers' studies of Tanach, even sharing a copy of an exam he had prepared for his own students, and Nechama responds again. She thanks him for his letter, suggests the exam might be too hard for the students, and offers additional books on Tanach and teaching Tanach, written in Hebrew, that should be required reading for all educators, and that even those teaching in the Hebrew language have avoided or missed out on.

Nechama Leibowitz held the highest standards for the study of Tanach, but biblical criticism, and the notion of discordance within the Torah, she didn't accept. "Ein stirot ba'Torah, there are no contradictions in the Torah," she would say.

Rabbi Mordechai Breuer, one of the leading contemporary scholars of Tanach and the Masoretic tradition, who died in 2007, dialogued with her on the subject. They discussed the contradictions between the first and second chapters of Bereishis (Genesis), to which Nechama answered with Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik's analysis of the Torah presenting the first man in two portrayals, Adam I and Adam II. Yes, a contradiction, she admitted.

In one of his books, Rabbi Breuer sums up this exchange as emblematic of Nechama. "A typical Nechama response," he writes. "Her fear (of God) preceded her wisdom." All the world scholars could prove that there are contradictions in the Torah, and she would ignore, says Breuer, because in the end it could lead to kefirah, denial of the authenticity of the Torah. "If it came from the mouth of Rabbi Soloveitchik," he continues, she'd accept, because "for sure, his words won't encourage heretical notions." But for Breuer, Nechama had missed that Rabbi Soloveitchik's explication in this area had in fact opened a "small portal" for examination of the entire text of the Torah, in a similar manner.

"Two very stubborn people," comments Rabbi Helfgot on the exchange, as he begins a final area of critique of Nechama's methodology. "She is extreme - Rashi was not influenced by personal experiences, beliefs..." Only the pure text, the language of the text guided his parshanut, she maintains in her published work, and his bringing of medrashim, she writes, is only when they answer a question, solve a problem at hand, fill in a missing piece. They are not brought as "drashot, moral lessons" or to give mussar.

But there are times, Rabbi Helfgot says, that Rashi does in fact bring midrashim to educate, not just to "solve a problem" in the text. And there are places in Rashi, where the historical situation of the times is very much of concern, and where Rashi, as did other commentators, engages in polemics, selecting explanations to counter Christian theology.

(On right, Nechama Leibowitz speaks at the 1983 award ceremony for the Bialik Prize, an important Israeli award granted by the Tel



Aviv municipality for significant accomplishments in Hebrew literature, both fiction and Jewish thought. Nechama was awarded the prize that year, and spoke on behalf of the winners.)

In an afternoon session, same day, Chayuta Deutsch, author of *Nechama: The Biography of Nechama Leibowitz* (published in Hebrew in September 2008) hands out a photocopied page where Nechama examines one of the culminating episodes in the story of Joseph and his brothers. Judah, a pivotal character throughout the entire narrative, has "drawn near" to Joseph to issue a plea to the ruler to allow Benjamin, the very youngest, and in whose sack the missing goblet has been found, to return home to his father along with the other brothers. Judah offers himself instead, as a slave. Asking for mercy, and predicting their older father's demise if Benjamin is not returned safely, Judah recounts the series of requests and indictments that Joseph leveled against them.

But the Medrash Tanchuma, which Nechama brings, portrays a much harsher exchange between the two men, as this partial excerpt illustrates:

"A false judgment against us," declares Judah.

"There is no more false a judgment, than the sale of your brother," Joseph replies.

"The fire that burned Shechem is rekindled in me, Judah declares.

"That is the fire (of passion) of your daughter-in-law Tamar. I will douse it," says Joseph.

"I will go out now and color the marketplaces of Egypt in blood," Judah threatens.

"You were dyers from an earlier time, coloring the garment of your brother in blood, and saying to your father: He is torn to pieces," Joseph retorts.

Chayuta Deutsch solicits responses from the class, and a number of participants volunteer possible explanations for the medrash's contrived dialogue. This writer suggests that Joseph's words heard in the medrash are the "unsaid" comments of the listener, who in the actual biblical text is verbally silent during Judah's plea, but speaking or responding nonetheless.

"Interesting," she acknowledges, with a tone indicating clearly that she's not too accepting of that explanation. "Let's see what Nechama says."

We read together Nechama's answer to the medrash's embellished transformation of a thoroughly moving speech, Judah's monologue, into a harsh, combative, accusatory dialogue between the two brothers. The words attributed to Joseph - he could not possibly have said them, especially since he has yet to reveal himself. But who then is this accuser that the Medrash presents? Nechama asks.

The sages, she answers, wanted to reveal the inner conscience of Judah, the "voice of remorse which plagued him," now that the brothers' fate was totally in the hands of this Egyptian monarch. The more Judah objects to their treatment, she writes, the more he's reminded of his own persecution of another, "the injustice he inflicted on Joseph."

"It's the voice of remorse and shame," says Deutsch. "But why did Nechama bring this medrash?"

She was drawn to the drama, but most importantly, stresses Deutsch, Nechama wanted to connect the text to real life. The essential peshat, primary explanation of the text must be about the moral obligation that applies to the lives of each one of us. "Her theme was to bring Torah to life," says Deutsch. "She brings Shuk HaCarmel (the large flavorful Tel Aviv market) to class." She wanted everyone "in the marketplace," the entire populace, as diverse as it is, to read Tanach and to think about the psychology (in this case, Judah's relationship with his brother, his family), and the questions that everyone confronts.

Admittedly, the Joseph story ranks high amongst the most dramatic in the Torah, but Nechama found drama throughout the scripture. "Nechama loved drama, understood what drama is," says Deutsch. "She had a good ear for the text and people."

Her capacity with people is well noted, and many former students told Deutsch, while she was researching for her book, that Nechama had a good feeling for people and could sense if something was the matter with someone. Literature, in all its forms, Biblical or otherwise, evoked the human drama. Nechama Leibowitz taught literature, she taught poetry, and she even "liked detective books,"

shares Deutsch.



An appreciation and command of great literature was instilled in Nechama's own home in the early years. Around the family table, her father would quote a sentence and demand the source. "How could you not know it is a Shakespeare *miforash* (an obvious reference)," he questioned?

But even with the family's penchant for knowledge and worldliness, they remained critical of the fact that Nechama, as a young woman, was also a "scholar" in Tanach. The socio-religious outlook of the time considered immersion in Torah study more appropriately the domain of men (even in later years during her career, the site of a woman teaching Torah was surprising, if not shocking to many who sat in on her lectures or classes). Nechama's brother, Yeshayahu Leibowitz, also excelled, and became, in Israel, the more famous of the two - probably, Deutsch assumes, since he was the more outspoken, more provocative one, with philosophical and religious views that seemed radical coming from an Orthodox Jew.

Nechama Leibowitz was two years younger than her brother. Both were born in Riga, Latvia where the family was then living. Nechama was born in 1905 and passed away in 1997 at the age of 92, three years after her brother's death. In her childhood she attended public school; the Jewish education was taught at home.

(On left, Nechama's passport photo)

In 1919, after World War I, the family moved from Russia to Berlin, the German capital. This was a prosperous time for Jews in Berlin, the start of the era of the democratic Weimar Republic, a time of *Jewish Renaissance*, a term introduced years earlier, at the turn of the century, by Martin Buber to encourage a Jewish cultural, as opposed to solely political, revival. Berlin had become a new home for 70,000 East European Jews (according to some figures) that arrived during and after the War, and soon grew as a center for Hebrew culture (by 1930, it is estimated there were more than 103 Jewish periodicals being published in Germany in both German and Hebrew).

Nechama studied at the University of Berlin from 1925-1930, and simultaneously continued her Jewish studies at *Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums*, the Higher Institute for Jewish Studies, a liberal or non-denominational institution. "Why did she go?" Deutsch jokes, but with a serious point intended. "Since she wasn't going to be accepted to Beit Medrash L'Rabbanim (the Rabbinical Seminary)."

In 1930, Nechama completed her doctorate. Her thesis examined Yiddish translations of the Hebrew Bible "in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Century, as Exemplified by Translations of the Book of Psalms." She married and moved to Israel. Her brother stayed in Berlin, and then finished his medical degree in Switzerland.

Nechama's marriage to her uncle, Yedidya Lipman Leibowitz, who was 29 years her senior, caused not only wonderment, but also strife in her family (her parents were not at the chuppah). He was a big man, says Deutsch, and blind. Nechama took care of him, and some supposed she married him specifically to enable her, as a religious woman, to be able to properly care for him. But observers of Nechama Leibowitz point out that indeed it was for love. She felt he was the only one who could really understand her.

Nechama and her brother Yeshayahu



In 1936 Nechama traveled to Strasbourg, where her family was living. She made peace with them, and escorted her family back to Israel, where they resided in her neighborhood. This was the only time in her life that she left Israel after having made aliyah from Germany.

At one point during the afternoon, Deutsch, who has studied with Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun, references Rabbi Nati Helfgot's lesson of the morning. She feels the need to further explain to the class the reason Nechama Leibowitz "couldn't stand" the touring with Tanach phenomenon, an educational activity which would seem enticing to many Jewish Studies teachers, and which Nechama herself might have accepted as an additional means to make "the text come to life." She was convinced, says Deutsch, that this type of discovery activity could "disprove" the veracity of Tanach, when used by scholars with

a non-traditionalist historical agenda or clearly anti-religious approach.

Rabbi David Silber, the Founder and Dean of Drisha, who has been sitting in one of the back rows during the class (the back partition has now been opened up to join the classroom with the larger Beit Medrash), speaks up and offers to frame the difference between Nechama Leibowitz and the educators who subscribe to the new methodologies for teaching Tanach. During visits to Israel, he has met Rabbi Rabbi Yoel Bin Nun, sat next to him in shul. "Rabbi Yoel Bin Nun is about making it real," says Rabbi Silber. "I have many issues with it (his Torah), but it's about constructing *Torat Eretz Yisrael*" - a term referring to knowledge and love of the Land, the integral nature of Eretz Yisrael within Religious-Zionistic thought. "Nechama Leibowitz may have more of a 'Galus mentality,'" he surmises.



As indicated by this special series of classes at Drisha; the popular stories that her students will at times relate casually, but proudly, to their own students, congregants and friends (I have heard many); and the books and articles that have been published since her death, there remains a strong interest in understanding the motivations of Nechama Leibowitz - her world outlook, her philosophy as a pedagogue, and who she was as a private person.

Those who studied with Nechama Leibowitz in her time, for sure caught glimpses of her personal life, if not more. And those who study her now, are invariably often seeking an understanding of the woman as well as the teacher.

For 40 years of her life, Nechama Leibowitz was married, but she had no children. Her housekeeper had to help her with food preparation, because Nechama simply didn't know how to cook. The housekeeper told Chayuta Deutsch that she prepared all the food on the heating platter; Nechama just had to plug it in.

The hundreds of pages in the biographies written about her, based in part on hundreds of interviews and conversations with those who knew her, offer ample details - stories, recollections, and analysis - as the authors also ponder whether Nechama Leibowitz's life as a woman and her life as a teacher only existed side by side, or did also they come together, her private life influencing her public life, the teachings she shared with her students?

Deutsch addresses this question directly, during the last class of the day, by circulating a handout, two-sided, with an English translation of the explanations by two biblical commentators, Ramban, Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, and a later Spanish commentator, Rabbi Isaac Arama, who lived in the 15th century, and authored *Akedat Yitzchak*, a collection of 105 philosophical sermons on the Pentateuch.

In this 1953 lesson on the weekly Torah portion of Vayetze, Nechama's private life plays out on the page, as she presents the two different exegetical approaches by these commentators, which deal with the third matriarch's inability to conceive. The textual sentence is Rachel's saying to her husband Jacob: "Give me children or else I will die" (Beraishis 30:1) Jacob responds with anger: "Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you children?"

The commentators each wonder why Jacob was angered. But while Ramban focuses on Rachel's request for Jacob to pray to God on her behalf, and the efficacy, or not, of that prayer, since she still remains childless, Rabbi Issac Arama chooses instead to stress the dual purpose that each woman has in life: being both an "Isha" and also a "Chava." The latter name references being an "em kol chai, the mother of all living," but isha, says Rabbi Arama, infers "taken from man" (some scholars question the etymological connection between ish and isha), and that just as a man can advance in developing and bettering the world, so too the woman shares this mission. It is not dependent on having children. A woman "deprived" of her "secondary" purpose (in the Biblical text, the name Chava comes after Isha) "will be left with the ability to do evil or good, like the man who is barren," writes Rabbi Arama - the good deeds of the righteous are their children. Jacob, with his harsher response, strongly reminds Rachel that she was not "dead" without children, Rabbi Arama concludes in his commentary. Their joint purpose in life remained very much alive.

She sided with which parshan?" Deutsch asks the class, prodding us to look again at the handout in front of us, and to choose a winner. "Ramban or Rabbi Isaac Arama?" Womanhood defined solely by having children, or by a dual-purpose?

Both, answers Deutsch. "Publicly she kept the harmony of both sides." The dual-purpose of being a woman - and if one purpose is biologically unattainable, the other remains forever present and integral to the success of mankind, Rabbi Arama's approach. "But in private," continues Deutsch, "she kept the sadness of not having kids," the Ramban's approach. Nechama wanted to have children, and Deutsch quotes her as saying, that if she did, "she wouldn't have written one folio," implying that the children would have been her preferred accomplishments.

Nechama Leibowitz's children are her thousands of students, and at her burial on Har HaMenuchot in 1997, a nephew turned to the gathered audience and announced that anyone who felt a connection, should recite the Kaddish too.

In an inscription in her books, she also refers to her published works as her children. Her writings survive her on multiple continents, on tens of thousands of bookshelves, but initially Nechama didn't want to publish any formal books. "Yidabru haTorot sheli," she said. Her Torah, as she taught it, would speak loudly, be passed along, and need not be confined to printed volumes. She didn't want to be considered only a scholar, says Deutsch. "She was a human being, a person."

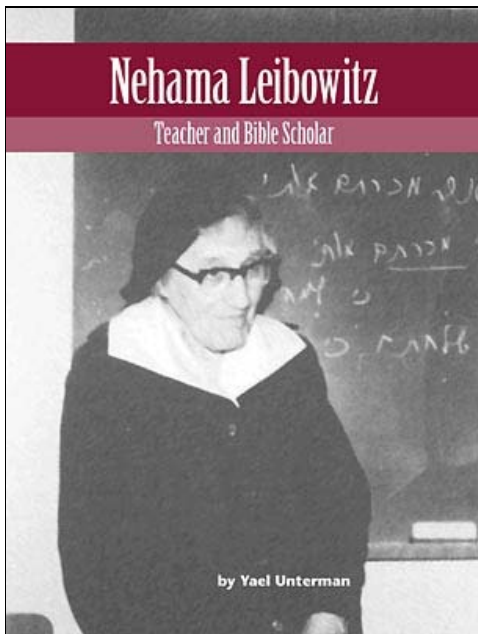
When approached to publish her teachings, she initially refused. She conveyed to the Jewish Agency, which had requested to publish her works, that she felt that would mean that she had to provide the answers to the questions she posed, and people should be thinking on their own. She was also afraid, says Deutsch, who conversed with Dr. Chaim Chamiel of the Jewish Agency's Department of Torah Education in the Diaspora, that if there were books in print, people might not come to her to learn, a financial loss and serious compromise of the personal relationship between teacher and student. She finally did agree, though, and was happy with the results - and even with the answers now provided, she supplemented additional material for students to ponder. The first books were published in Hebrew, later translated into English, French, Spanish, and Dutch.

Though Nechama was never wanting the title scholar (her tombstone has only the one word, "morah, teacher" as a description), she was by all accounts, respected as a scholar at the highest levels in the field of Jewish Studies, well versed in Torah she Baal Peh, a lecturer in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem - of "performer" status, says Deutsch - whose ever-popular public talks were heralded with large signs and public announcements.



Nechama's gravestone, photographed

by Yael Unterman



The curious wondered about her popularity, and some her gender. Yael Unterman, in her book *Nehama Leibowitz: Teacher and Bible Scholar*, published in 2009, tells the story of "a distinguished looking Ultra-Orthodox man" who asked to sit in on her class at the Efrata College, a religious teacher training program in the Baka neighborhood of Jerusalem (formerly the Mizrahi College for Women). Nechama obliged and, as Unterman writes, after the class was over "he introduced himself as a student's father. He had felt the need to substantiate with his own eyes that the teacher behind his daughter's impressive class notes and worksheets was a woman."

Unterman relays another anecdote, this time of a Modern Orthodox Yeshiva student, who arrived in Israel in 1972 as a newlywed, to learn at the Gruss Kollel of Yeshiva University, and was encouraged by his Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Dovid Miller to study with Nechama Leibowitz. He did not take the opportunity seriously. The student was Rabbi Hershel Billet, Rabbi of the Young Israel of Woodmere in New York (and a past President of the Rabbinical Council of America), who tells Unterman that his thinking was "I had already spent five or six years in Rav Soloveitchik's shiur - what could a woman teach me about Torah? So she wrote a few books, quotes a few commentators - simplistic stuff!"

Rabbi Billet finally phoned her, they scheduled for a Friday, and he was soon surprised at just how much he could yet learn from this woman.

"I walked up a couple of flights of stairs, knocked on the door, and a feisty lady opened it, saying, 'Come in, you're two minutes late.' Then she sat me down and gave me a worksheet to fill out. I thought it would be piece of cake. The first question was a breeze, but the second wasn't - it had an X, and the third had two X's, and I couldn't believe this was happening."

He was humbled. Nechama conveyed she was a "busy lady too," but agreed to give him an hour and a half a week. Often Rabbi Billet's wife would join for the sessions, which he found eye opening, and broadening of his perspective.

Not only could longtime students of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik gain immensely from shiurim with Nechama, even the Rav's son himself benefited, as Chayuta Deutsch tells in her own story of Rabbi Dr. Haym Soloveitchik, who studied privately, b'chavrusah, with Nechama for nine months, on a weekly basis. What did they study? Chumash with Rashi. Of course.

If Nechama Leibowitz had serious hesitations, initially, about formally publishing her work, was reluctant to contribute to certain Tanach journals (critical of what she perceived as "amateur" attempts, but also wondering what she might possibly have to add), and continuously exemplified modesty and simplicity in most aspects of her life, what would she say about these books now being published about her, about multi-day learning programs that are examining not just her methodology and "shitah," but her person, her essence, her inner thoughts?

Yael Unterman, who spent 10 years researching and writing her 607-page biography of Nechama, looks back and feels that a lot yet remains elusive. "I think the question of how exactly she came to be who she was, what influences shaped and formed her, and how she became this legend, was not fully covered by either myself or Chayuta, though we both made brave attempts at it from various angles. I also believe neither of us really got into who she was in her most private moments, though again, we make some suggestions."

Unterman is grateful that the publication of her book, together with other recent books, including a number of collections of teachings, has led to a renewed interest in the work of one of the greatest contemporary teachers of Jewish Studies. Unterman measures the overall impact of this one woman who taught Torah, in the broadest possible terms, and believes that the "Jewish intellectual discourse" can benefit immensely by looking to Nechama Leibowitz when discussing "Torah study, feminism, pedagogy and other major issues of concern."

Those who research and write about Nechama and those who studied with her personally, offer us a more complete appreciation of her legacy. Their opinions or conclusions may differ at times, both in style and information conveyed, but with the help of these "commentators," so to speak, a cohesive impression is formulated nonetheless, one that can be transmitted further to all those who choose to study Nechama Leibowitz.



All of Nechama Leibowitz's Gilyonot are now available on the internet at www.nechama.org.il and can be used to study Torah, prepare a shiur, or talk about the weekly parsha. Scans of the original work sheets are also available, as well as short bios of the commentators she includes in her lessons.

Photographs reproduced with this essay are courtesy of the family of Nechama Leibowitz, except the last image (right above) which was taken by Rabbi David S. Levin. The introductory graphic of Tanach text with magnifier was designed and photographed by Judah S. Harris. Chayuta Deutsch's biography on Nechama Leibowitz can be purchased from Yediot Books, www.ybook.co.il, and Yael Unterman's, a finalist in the 2009 Jewish Book Awards, on Amazon or via her website: www.yaelunterman.com

A program on Nechama Leibowitz was presented by Bernard Revel Graduate School of YU in October 2013. Audio of the scholarly lecture and a link to a short film interview that I directed about one of Nechama's earliest students, can be found here: www.yu.edu/revel/nehama-leibowitz-event

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