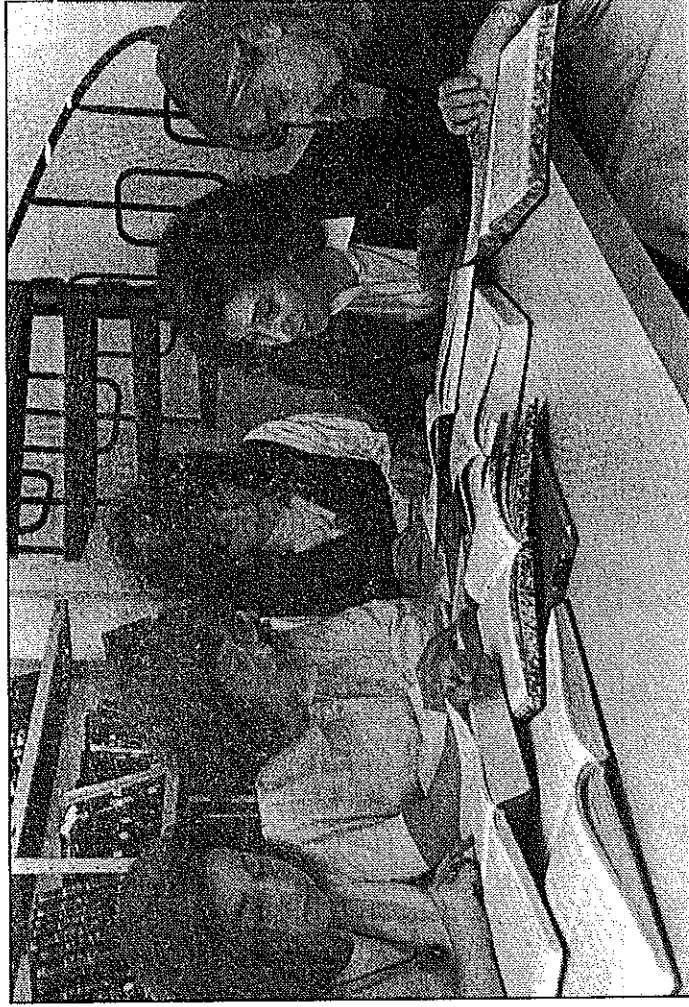


Matrix

A monthly forum for Jewish women in the 1990s



Intensive learning: women grapple with the sources at Nishmat, a yeshivah in Jerusalem for women

Lot

The women's review, prayer groups, the agunah and kaddish controversies — the climate seems right for Jewish women at last to stand up and be counted. But, asks Valerie Monchi, is the establishment really prepared to let women into the educational inner sanctum?

of learning is a dangerous thing

If you were asked to name 10 outstanding male Jewish scholars, it probably wouldn't take too long to come up with a list. It might take a bit of thought, or even research, but it wouldn't be too difficult.

Now try to name 10 outstanding women Jewish scholars. OK, try five. Two? Well, there are Nechama Leibowitz, and Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg — both in Israel. But what about in Britain?

Give up? Are women not able to learn? Are they not interested? Or is it that they simply don't enjoy the same opportunities as men?

It is often said that "knowledge is power." The phrase has certainly become common currency over the past two years among Jewish women seeking to advance their position in the community.

Men say it, too. Or variations of it. Only this week, Rabbi Mickey Rosen of Yakar, the independent Orthodox congregation in North-West London, told a group of women gathered to pray with a Sefer Torah, that "real power is knowledge."

Rabbi Rosen clearly meant what he said. When, at the end of his shiur, I approached him to ask a question, he said: "Just a second, I'll go and get you the text." A few minutes later, he returned with photocopied pages of the Gemarah, with the relevant passages underlined. "Here, you can read it yourself." Such an encouraging, unpatronising attitude from a rabbi was refreshing.

The need for more and better standards of Jewish education for women was exposed by the Chief Rabbi's report on "Women in the Community." A poor Jewish education was, the report said, "the most serious barrier to women's religious fulfilment."

Immediately after the report's publication, Chief Rabbi Dr Jonathan Sacks confirmed: "The doors of knowledge must open to women."

Evidence shows that the UK is far behind the United States, Israel and even Australia, when it comes to standards of Jewish education.

"Young girls — and boys — who come out of secondary Jewish schools in the UK are not on a par with the rest of the world," says Gila Rosen, who worked as a Jewish educator in the UK before she moved to

Next month:

Violence in the Jewish family

Evelyn Stern, 39, lectures in Jewish philosophy at Jews' College, and teaches women's issues in Jewish law at Yakar, both in London.

6 I don't like the title "learned woman." You can sit and learn for your entire life, and at the end, you may say you know something. But I feel I have much, much more to learn myself.

"I am a political scientist by training. When I was in my early 20s, I wanted to prove myself intellectually. I deliberately avoided Jewish studies.

My Jewish education stopped at 18, when I left high school. In my late 20s and early 30s, I was less interested in making an intellectual point, and wanted to do something for myself. I went to Jews' College, where I did an MA in Jewish studies.

"Jewish learning is not just an academic pursuit. It is spiritual, something I do for myself, not anybody else. It's not political.

"I am not a feminist, nor am I anti-feminist. Feminism is about autonomy, rights, equality. Those are all things I fundamentally believe in within the secular world, but they are foreign to the Orthodox world.

"If women keep on talking to the rabbinate in a language that is alien to Judaism, they will get nowhere. The way forward lies in retrieving the fundamental values that exist within Judaism, but that somehow have been lost."



for having given her the opportunity to pursue her Jewish education. "To my knowledge, it is the only Orthodox institution in this country which teaches women Gemarah." The college has also just appointed its first woman lecturer in Jewish law, Tzifra Crown.

Gila Rosen also used to teach Gemarah classes for women at Yakar. "There were a dozen women here and there, who were comfortable doing that," she recalls.

In the US and Israel, however, there exists a number of institutions specifically designed to promote Jewish scholarship among women.

As long ago as 1979, Rabbi David Silber founded the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education in New York. It offers a variety of programmes, including a "scholars' circle," where women are provided with a stipend to study Talmud and Jewish law full-

time, aims to provide women with the tools to study Jewish texts directly from the sources, a domain traditionally reserved for men. "Women here are being trained with the same skills as men," says Ms Henkin.

The Midreshet Lindenbaum, also in Jerusalem, offers intensive programmes for women, including Tenach, Mishnah and Jewish law.

Gila Rosen believes that, in Israel, unlike in the UK, "the unspoken assumption is that a woman tries to learn. A husband will be baby-sitting while his wife goes to a shiur in the evening."

Recently, the Chief Rabbi sponsored a series of seminars aimed at women educators. Evelyn Stern, who attended one, says she was appalled by the level at which it was pitched. "It aimed at the lowest common denominator. I felt enormously insulted if that is how they are educating the educators, what chance does anybody else have?"

She believes the solution may lie in providing promising young women with scholarships to go and study abroad, on condition that they return to teach in this country. But the problems surrounding women's Jewish education go beyond lack of funding and a shortage of outstanding Jewish educators who can serve as role models.

"You educate women, but what happens then?" Stern asks. Rabbinate authorities have generally been reluctant to listen to women, even when they have familiarised themselves with the sources.

"A man who is regarded as learned can sit down with a rabbi or a dayan and have a serious conversation about Jewish law," she says.

As for the learned women: "If the rabbis don't want to listen to us even when we know what we are talking about, they seriously have to ask themselves whether they really want us to be that well educated."

So, are those "doors of knowledge" still locked?

ADDRESSING THE SPIRITUAL AND INTELLECTUAL ISSUES

Jews' College offers undergraduate and graduate degrees in Jewish studies. Tel: 081-203 6427.

Yakar will be running a series of shiurim addressing women's issues in Judaism. Tel: 081-202 5551 or 081-202 9653 (answerphone).

The Spiro Institute will be running a series of courses, workshops and lectures focusing on the lives of Jewish women. Tel: 071-431 0345.

For more information on the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education, write to: 131 West 86th Street, New York, NY 10024.

For more information on Mishnat, the Jerusalem Centre for Advanced Jewish Study for Women, write to: 27 Rechov Michlin, Jerusalem, 96430.