

Ahead Of Her Time

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Maidi Katz, 34, was a gifted Talmudic scholar, successful professional and warm friend. That's why her suicide came as such a shock.

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In the pages of the Talmud, the scholar Breuriah stands out. Amid the discourse of men emerges a lone female voice, so brilliant and pure, whose life was cut short by suicide.

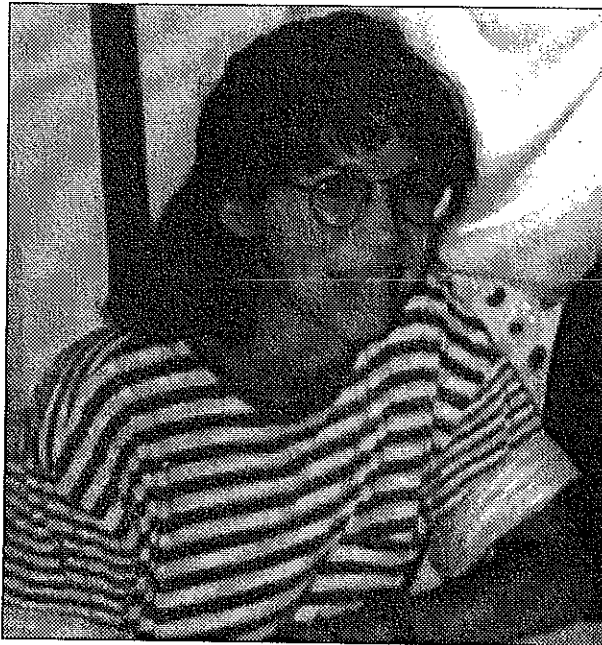
There are those who would compare Maidi Katz, a 34-year-old Upper West Side woman, to Breuriah, not only in terms of her scholarship but also because her untimely end last month came by her own hand. But she would have been embarrassed by the comparison, say those who knew her best, for she didn't see how many people stopped to pick up the sparks along the trail that she blazed. Perhaps she couldn't appreciate all that she had accomplished because, in recent years, simply surviving each day in a body wracked with chronic back pain took precedence.

Katz was found in her apartment on the afternoon of Nov. 11 by her roommate. Friends say she left a 20-page note.

Hailed as a brilliant Talmud scholar, a pioneer of Orthodox Jewish women's education and as a "really cool" person who loved the beach, cooking and French existentialist writers, Maidi Katz will be recalled by family, friends and colleagues Sunday evening when they gather at the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education at the service marking the *shloshim* (month-long) period of mourning. They will remember a small woman described as moving "like energy going by," who tread new ground in female Jewish scholarship at Drisha, a school of advanced Jewish study for women; the Ramaz School; Yeshiva University; Midreshet Lindenbaum, a yeshiva in Israel for women; and other Jewish educational institutions where she studied and/or taught.

They will remember a woman of depth and complexity, equally comfortable sitting by a pool or studying Talmud — or doing both at the same time. Katz could have easily directed her own Jewish institution, her colleagues say. Instead, she turned to a career in law, although she never stopped turning to the pages of the Talmud.

"Maidi would laugh if people called her a great Talmud scholar. But she could have been a major player in Jewish educational and religious life," says Rabbi David Silber, director of Drisha, who noted that she was held in "enormous re-



Maidi Katz, above, was "incredibly driven to learn, know and master," says long-time friend Dr. Donna Zwas.

spect" by those who knew her.

Now, those closest to her wring their hands helplessly. Was the pain in her back too much to bear? Was she devastated by the limitations placed on a woman scholar in the Orthodox Jewish world? Did she suffer from depression and learn how to hide it like a pro?

Katz came to Drisha the year after Rabbi Silber founded the school in 1979. In the days before her death, Katz had been part of a small group of scholars involved in Drisha's new "halachic think-tank." She had been researching the issue of women reading Torah in front of the synagogue congregation.

"She was one of my favorite students. She wanted to learn Talmud and didn't let anything stop her," Rabbi Silber says. "The way she soaked up knowledge like a sponge. ... You've never seen anything like it."

"Precision and rigor were her two gifts," says Dr. Donna

Zwas, a cardiologist and longtime, close friend of Katz's. "She was incredibly driven to learn, know and master."

Born Sarah Gittel Katz on Sept. 15, 1962, in Brookline, Mass., "everyone was calling her *maidele* (Yiddish for little girl) from birth," says Avi Katz, Maidi's older brother and only sibling. "In high school, she had her legal name changed."

Katz's father, Norman Katz, was a professor of mathematics and a student of the eminent Orthodox scholar, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik. When the family moved to St. Louis in 1967, Katz's father found a disciple in his daughter and taught her Talmud. For Katz, "school was a hobby ... she really just wanted to learn Talmud and she was learning Talmud at a time when it was not the thing to do," says a close friend of the family who is active in the St. Louis Jewish community and did not want to give her name. "Her brilliance was just dazzling ... and her father would always speak about her with such pride."

According to Avi Katz, his parents, dissatisfied with the existing high school options in St. Louis, sent his sister to a school in Toronto because "they placed a top premium on higher education." After spending the year after high school at Michlalah, a women's yeshiva in Israel, Katz enrolled at Barnard College in 1980. "Maidi used to finish her schoolwork by eight in the evening and then stay up all night learning Talmud," says Rifka Rosenwein, one of Katz's college roommates.

In addition to learning part-time at Drisha, Katz spent much of her college years learning at the Yeshiva University library and "hanging out with an informal *chevra* [or, group] of people who shared the same basic values of Jewish scholarship," according to a member of this *chevra* who did not want his name used. "She was one of the most informed people there, and I think most guys felt intimidated because she knew more [Talmud] than they did," he says.

On the other hand, Katz was not without suitors. Her friends note that she had several long-term, serious relationships. "She certainly wasn't sitting in a room being a hermit, and I think that's what is so unique about her," recalls Rosenwein. "She was not just a brilliant mind but a very three-dimensional, regular person."

After graduating from college, Katz became the first woman to teach Talmud at the Ramaz School — an Orthodox day school known for its innovations in Jewish education. Simul-

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taneously, she earned a master's degree in Jewish history from Yeshiva University's Bernard Revel Graduate School.

"She was a teacher who had great empathy and interest in her students and we saw great potential in her," says Noam Shudofsky, an administrator of Ramaz.

Shudofsky compares Katz to Jackie Robinson. "Like the first black ball player was exceptional, Maida [as the first women Talmud teacher] was exceptional," he says. "We were very sorry to see her go but we always followed her career; she was always viewed as one of those rare individuals."

From 1985-86, Katz learned at Drisha full-time before spending the next few years inspiring students in Israel. She taught at Midreshet Lindenbaum in Jerusalem and other institutions

that attracted women serious about rigorous Torah learning. "Maida was so inspiring, she was a woman who was really a role model to me but she was also someone I would have wanted to have hung out with," says Shani Cohen, who spent her junior year of college studying

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at Midreshet Lindenbaum, where Katz was her Talmud teacher.

Cohen went on to study full-time at Drisha for almost three years and credits Katz for altering the course of her life. "She changed my whole way of looking at Judaism," she says. "I had always felt so second-rate as a woman, but Maida showed me what I could do and I felt this empowerment, that these doors were no longer closed to me."

In 1990, Katz entered Yale Law School, a decision that baffled many of her friends. Some felt the career change was based on Katz's coming to recognize that "there weren't many avenues open to her" as an Orthodox woman scholar, according to the Yeshiva University chevra member.

"Had Maida been a man she would have been a Rosh Yeshiva," says Rabbi Silber. "I think she was frustrated. ... With her learning, she had nowhere to go, the Orthodox world became closed to her."

Rosenwein agrees. "I do think that Maida felt frustrated, that as a woman, there was no degree she could earn in a Jewish sense that would reflect her knowledge," she says. "She could not be an [Orthodox] rabbi."

Then came the physical pain. In 1991, Katz developed chronic back pain. "From that point on, Maida would never have a good day," says Zwas. "She would have bad days and worse days, and this was a woman on the run from 5 in the morning until 11 at night. The pain no longer let her do that."

The pain got so bad, say those who know her, that Katz would sometimes have to lie down on the floor at Debevoise & Plimpton — the law firm where she worked as a tax attorney after graduating from Yale. Unable to obtain a diagnosis from Western doctors, she turned to alternative medicine. "She did acupuncture, two hours of exercise every day ... she was Maida ... she did everything to figure out a way to manage her pain," Zwas adds.

Zwas spoke to Katz the Friday before she died. "She called to ask me for a recipe. Later, I thought why couldn't she have said goodbye, but maybe there were certain things I could have interpreted differently. She was in constant, unbearable pain and no one can understand someone else's pain."

Seth Aronson, Katz's cousin and a clinical psychologist, says that if there's anything to learn from this tragedy, "it's important to recognize that there are people prone to serious depression or who are suicidal, but that's it's not shameful or a weakness. I hope people will recognize that [depression] is an illness and that they can receive help."

As for Katz, "I never thought she was suicidal ... this came as a complete shock," Aronson says.

Daily, those who loved Maida Katz try to put the pieces together. "Maida was ahead of her times," says Devorah Zlochower, a graduate of Drisha's Scholars Circle program. "There's Maida the legacy — the contribution she made to women's more intense involvement in Jewish learning and in Jewish life. But there's also Maida the real human being — this really great woman that everyone misses so much." □