

Breaking Down the Rabbinic Walls

Haviva Ner-David is set to become the first woman to receive ordination as an Orthodox rabbi. Trouble is, the Orthodox world isn't ready to accept her.

NETTY C. GROSS

WHEN HAVIVA KRASNER-Davidson filled out her application for Yeshiva University's rabbinic seminary, she penciled in a line for "mother's occupation." The school that produces most of America's modern Orthodox rabbis had only asked what her father did. Then she clipped on a picture of herself with her baby girl and mailed her request to become the first modern woman to study for Orthodox ordination.

That was three years ago. Krasner-Davidson — who has since moved to Israel and changed her last name to Ner-David — says she never got an answer from the Rabbi Israel Elchanan Talmudic Seminary (RIETS). A Talmudic solution: neither yes nor no. Rather than giving up, Ner-David, 27, is now preparing for ordination, to be granted privately by a respected Orthodox rabbi in Jerusalem.

To understand Ner-David's tilt at the windmills of Orthodoxy, flip the pages back to the late 70s, when modern Orthodox rabbis and educators liked to talk about the "quiet revolution" going on in the education of young women and the ascent of a "new class" of highly educated Orthodox professional women who could navigate through Jewish texts with ease.

The male educators, though, had no intention of encouraging women to make a serious bid for positions of leadership or to join men at the pulpits in tony modern Orthodox towns. Instead, recalls veteran Orthodox feminist Blu Greenberg — organizer of an international conference on feminism and Orthodoxy opening in New York in mid-February — "The point was to open up the world of Torah study. There was a situation where women were becoming brain surgeons, but were Jewishly ignorant."

As women's study became accepted and even fashionable, young Orthodox women began spending a year before college at

schools like Jerusalem's Midreshet Lindenbaum and taking courses at the cerebral Drisha Institute on New York's Upper West Side afterwards. Leaning over volumes of Talmud, commentaries, and Shulchan Arukh with a study partner suddenly was part of women's lives.

The women quite naturally noticed what their teachers had chosen to ignore: Torah knowledge is supposed to be power. The more learned the "new class" became, the greater the women's desire to be contented not only in brain surgery or business, but also in Jewish law, a realm ruled by ultra-conservative Orthodox rabbis. All-women minyanim — where women read the Torah but do not recite certain blessings — popped up, as did a host of all-women yeshivot. In Israel, women won the right to be "pleaders" — essentially, halakic lawyers — in rabbinic courts.

"Women discovered that the rules that govern observance today have more to do with social conventions than with religious law," says Drisha's Rabbi David Silber. He cites as an example the *mehitzah* — the barrier that separates men and women in Orthodox synagogues. Outside of the basic requirement of a divider, he says, religious texts say little about how the *mehitzah* should look.

But until Ner-David, a graduate of New York's liberal Orthodox Ramaz school and Columbia University applied to RIETS, her father's alma mater, no woman had dared seek Orthodox *smikhah* (ordination).

THE THIN, STERN NER-DAVID'S decision to be an Orthodox rabbi was complicated. As a feminist, she had struggled for a number of years with what she felt was the lack of equality for women in Orthodox ritual. While in college, she had strayed from Judaism altogether. But after a period of study she discovered that "the empowering time-bound commandments required of men — such as donning *tefillin*, praying three times a day and wearing *tzitzit* — are

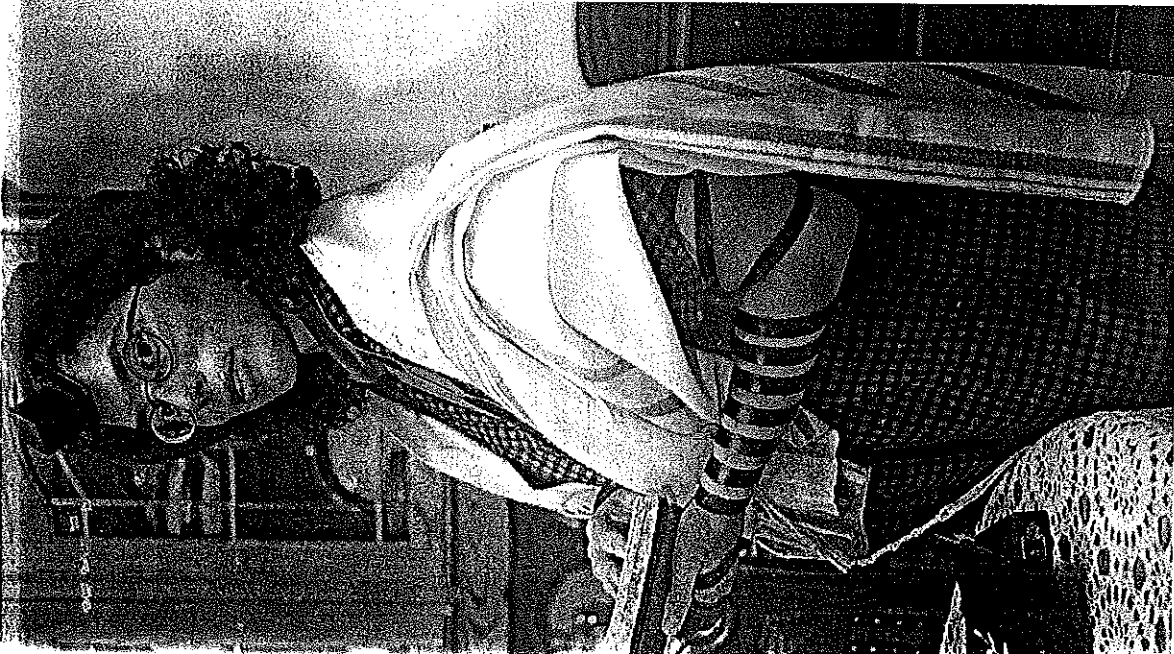
indeed not required of women, but they aren't forbidden either." She began showing up in the women's section of her local Orthodox shul in Riverdale, New York, for early morning services in *tefillin* and tallit. (Only one irate male parishioner quit the shul in protest.) "Something stirred within me," she recalls. By then married, with Orthodox head covering, baby girl and *tzitzit* under her sweater, Ner-David decided to take the plunge and mailed her application to RIETS.

Ner-David says she never got the courtesy of an answer, and Yeshiva University insiders later told her that her application was considered "something of a joke" when it arrived.

When a male friend of Ner-David confronted YU president Rabbi Norman Lamm publicly, he said that Ner-David had, in fact, been formally rejected — and that she had sent a hostile letter in response. Ner-David denies both points, but notes that she and her lawyer father were indeed "very disappointed by YU's disrespectful attitude toward her" and wrote a letter asking to clarify the status of her application. She says she never got a response to that either.

"YU convinced me that I don't belong at YU," says Ner-David. She later applied to the Conservative Jewish Theological Seminary's rabbinic program but withdrew, she says, after I "realized that I didn't want to be the only observant person in my congregation."

Yeshiva University's Lamm, who is said to be anxious neither to antagonize the deeply conservative RIETS rabbis nor damage the seminary's standing among



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TO SMIKHAH:
But Ner-David isn't sure what she'll do with it

Not all Orthodox rabbis agree. Shlomo Riskin, rabbi of the West Bank suburb Efrat, insists that there are few halakhic problems posed by a female rabbi. "She can't read the Torah or lead prayers before the public," says Riskin, "but I don't do those things either, because I have a terrible voice."

Riskin heads Midreshet Lindenbaum, the women's yeshiva that pioneered training women as "pleaders" in rabbinic courts. And he recently initiated a two-year program to qualify 24 Orthodox women to be *poskot* — halakhic authorities — for questions relating to the laws of family purity and *kashrut*. "It makes total sense that women and not men should decide these halakhic issues for other women," he says. But he will not ordain women or refer to them as rabbis, he says, explaining that "socially and politically it's not acceptable yet, if ever."

Fortunately for Ner-David, that position isn't unanimous. Rabbi Aryeh Strikovsky, a Jerusalem educator and former RIETS student, is teaching her privately and plans to ordain her. Even Strikovsky, who has taught women Talmud for many years, admits that "realistically, I don't

the chief teacher of Torah in Kurdistan.

"While I'm not sure Haviva or any other Orthodox female rabbi will have a parallel kind of communal support," he says, "I will ordain her just as the Chief Rabbinate does with male rabbinical students, specifying exactly which field of Talmudic law she has studied. To call it anything less than *smikhah* is hypocrisy."

IN THE MEANTIME, FEMINIST BLU Greenberg is optimistic that Orthodox women rabbis are the wave of the future, despite signs of a backlash by hard-line clergy on related issues.

In mid-January, for instance, the Queens Rabbinical Council in New York issued a warning that women's *minyanim* — even if technically allowable under *halakah* — "break the gates of Jewish tradition." The rabbis voted 49-47 to "prohibit" prayer in such groups after learning that a local Orthodox girl wanted to celebrate her bat mitzvah and read the Torah at a women's *minyán*. The response of the girl's family may be as significant as the resolution: They ignored it.

So have other women. Batsheva Marcus, head of the New York-based Women's Tefila Network, estimates that 4,000 Orthodox women attend such separate services.

And while Greenberg lauds both Riskin's efforts to encourage women in leadership roles, "roles of *poskot* in the fields of family purity and *kashrut* are simply not enough. Doesn't a female physician expect and deserve to be called 'doctor'?" Gaining *smikhah* and the title of rabbi for women, says Greenberg, is second in importance for Orthodox feminists — women denied religious divorces by their husbands.

For her part, Ner-David isn't sure what she'll do with her *smikhah* once she has it. She'd forego at least some of her feminist

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RABBI ZEVULUN CHARLOP

think the Orthodox will countenance female rabbis any time in the near future." He himself has no other female students lined up for ordination. But he does offer Ner-David the comfort of historical precedent. His favorite concerns the little-known 17th-century Kurdish rabbi, Yeshiva head and communal leader Osnat Barzani, who succeeded her husband as

ideals to be accepted: She says she'd preach a sermon from behind a *metizah*, and not read the Torah or lead prayers in a mixed crowd.

What could she do? What a rabbi is meant to do: rule on questions of Jewish law; teach Torah; minister to the sick and needy. And, oh yes: Let her daughter list Mom's profession as "rabbi." □

the even more hard-line Orthodox American rabbinate, did not respond to The Jerusalem Report's repeated requests for his version of events. "He has piles and piles of faxes and mail to go through," said his secretary. But a Yeshiva University spokesman said that the episode is "remembered well over here" and that Ner-David's application was considered a "provocation." The spokesman added that, since RIETS is deliberately structured as a private college that does not receive U.S. federal funding, it can legally maintain a male-only policy.

RIETS dean Rabbi Zevulun Charlop would also not discuss details of the case. He did tell The Report that "we are sensitive to what's going on vis-à-vis women and what the needs are today." But ordaining women, he says, is "halakhically untenable. There are a broad area of reasons why" — he preferred not to list them — "and it just won't happen. Any Orthodox rabbi who ordains a woman is by definition not Orthodox."