

Photos by Michael Dattikash

The Gift Of Gemara

The girls at Yeshivah of Flatbush have a champion in Leora Bednarsh.

Martha Mendelsohn, *JW Correspondent*

Today's tractate is not part of the regular fall syllabus for the freshman and sophomore girls in the intensive Talmud School at Yeshivah of Flatbush High School, which meets 10 periods a week.

It was chosen in response to a student's query, one that calls into question the validity of the enterprise: Is it really OK for women to study Talmud?

"The Mishna is asking if girls should be educated in Torah," says Leora Bednarsh, YF '88, Princeton '93,

perched on the edge of a standard-issue teacher's desk, hair tucked into a flapper-style cloche. For past six years, she has been educating teenage

girls in Talmud, which includes Mishna and Gemara, the Oral Law and rabbinic commentary.

"My father doesn't agree with my learning Gemara," a girl with a wavy ponytail admits. "When he went to school, women learned Jewish history. But my mother wanted me to, because it's an opportunity to learn."

The rabbis put forth opposing opinions, of course; one cites a case that finds little virtue in ignorance; another argues that studying might prompt women to seek ways around halacha. (His opinion prevailed.)

"Why would a woman misuse knowledge more than a man?" one girl wants to know.

"How much of your education has to do with your ability to understand

things?" Bednarsh counters. "Say you knew nothing about logical skills, math or Torah — would you have the ability to understand Talmud?" In Talmudic times, "there was no system in place for girls to be educated."

Daughters were taught learned their religious obligations by their mothers. "There were other means than textual," says the 31-year-old Bednarsh. "They learned didactically. There was a long, unbroken chain of tradition."

But the links loosened in 19th-century Europe, when girls, ineligible to attend their brothers' yeshivas, started going to public school. By then, post-talmudic decisors had modified the anti-learning-for-girls ruling. Sara Schnirer, a chasidic woman in Poland, founded the first girls' yeshi-

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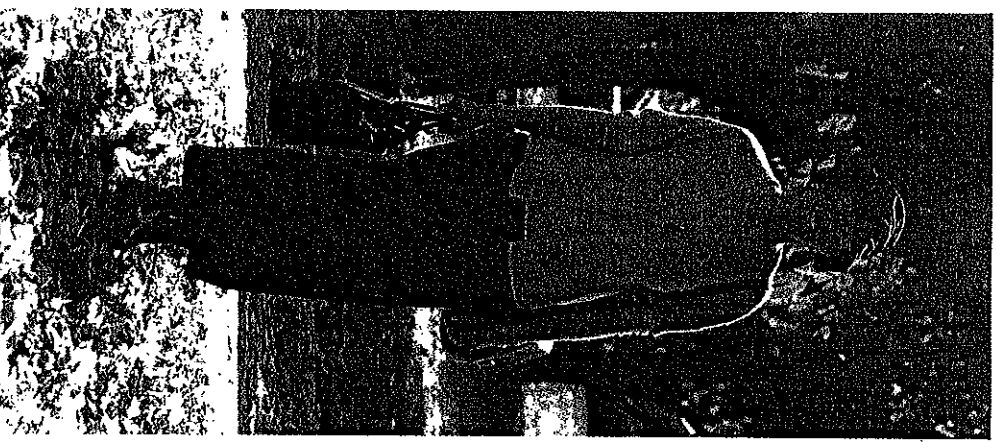
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Beyond the classroom: Bednarsh is both intellectual guide and role model for her charges.

va in Cracow in 1917.

Which leads Bednarsh to an indisputable point of logic: If girls can study Torah, they can study Talmud (as, in fact, they are required to do at YF). What are Rashi's commentaries on every page of the Bible but his own distillations of Talmudic opinions? To teach one without the other denies "the centrality of Gemara in our tradition," Bednarsh says.

Leora Bednarsh fine-tuned her gifts for logic and research as a psychology and linguistics major at Princeton, but the highlight of her week was an off-campus Gemara shiur.

She was active at Yavneh House, the university's small Orthodox center, where "people were always looking to me for answers." There, she

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met her husband Assaf, now a rabbi and teacher at Yeshiva University Boys' High School and Stern College for Women.

After college, she was accepted to the Drisha Scholars' Circle in Manhattan, where she mastered the same vast body of knowledge as an Orthodox rabbinical student. Summers, she taught at Matan, a women's Torah study center in Jerusalem.

In 1987, a YF alumna had become the first woman to teach Talmud at the school. Bednarsh says, "I remember thinking that teaching Gemara would be so cool."

While at Drisha, she substituted for a YF Talmud teacher on sabbatical. She knew she had found her calling. Her decision surprised friends and family, who suggested she might prefer to go for a law degree or doctorate. "Teaching is not a common career choice in the Modern Orthodox community," she says.

In her estimation, the low rung assigned Jewish educators in the nachas-and-prestige pecking order points up a serious logical flaw: "If certain values are important to you, how can you not want to have people with those values teaching your children?"

Her value has not escaped notice. Bednarsh is the 2001 Brooklyn winner of a National Award for Excellence in Jewish Education from the Harold Grinspoon Foundation. Each of the 31 winners received a \$1,500 stipend for professional development and \$1,000 from a local agency (the UJA-Federation Commission on Jewish Identity and Renewal for New York recipients). In November, they were honored at the annual General Assembly of national Jewish leaders in Washington, D.C.

"The purpose is to recognize the importance of classroom Jewish educators — and to do it in a serious, quality way," says Amy Amiel, director of the Grinspoon Awards.

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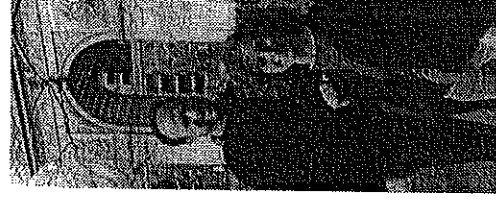
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of Jewish Education of Greater New York, calls attention to the fact that "dynamic and creative people who could do anything else are going into Jewish education," says Joel Wolowelsky, chairman of advanced placement studies and a YF math and Jewish philosophy teacher, who nominated Bednarsh. ■

The bell has rung, and a senior halacha class gathers for another round of sichot (discussions). The subject: kosher slaughter. A shochet will visit the school to demonstrate the technique used in killing a chicken. (Attendance is optional.)

Then, before you can say fleishing, the conversation shifts from meat to matrimony.

"My father won't even let me go out with someone who isn't religious," a girl says. "But if I set an example, couldn't the man become religious?"

"Seeing eye to eye religiously is very important in a marriage," says Bednarsh, who gives "Kallah classes" for prospective brides. "It affects many decisions. It's important to help each other grow — but in ways in which you want to grow."

Later, in a senior Gemara class, reminiscences about "Freshie Day" ("I was so scared!") digress to the laws of family purity.

To some, that's scary too. "The mikveh really intimidates me, even though I know it's a beautiful thing," a student says, squirming slightly.

Correcting some misperceptions about the procedure, Bednarsh describes the satisfactions of the monthly immersion ritual. "It's a rebirth. You're in the embryonic position," she says. "And there's the anticipation of coming home to your

husband."

One girl wants to know if you "have to do it right away."

Propping her feet on a student's desk, Bednarsh tells it like it is. "If you don't want to be with your husband after 12 days of no touching," she says, referring to the middah peri-od, "you should examine what's going on in your marriage."



Making a point: Students say Bednarsh "doesn't just know the surface but has all the background information."

Loudspeaker announcements don't disrupt the deliberations. No one stares at the clock. No one feels "saved" by the bell.

Like the rabbis of the Talmuud, like Sara Schnirer, Bednarsh believes in confronting sensitive issues, not ignoring them. Some girls of Sephardic background will get engaged right after graduation. Others will be dating. "They should know what to expect out of a relationship."

In her senior unit on marriage, she covers the new halachic prenuptial agreement, a legal document that aims to prevent agunah situations by imposing financial penalties on husbands who withhold a get, and arranges sessions with the Shalom Task Force to teach girls how to recognize signs of abuse in a relationship.

"There are things you can discuss with a woman Gemara teacher," says Michal Kabasso, a junior, who studied with Bednarsh last year. "She can empathize with us. I think learning Torah is a very personal thing."

Her classmate, Shoshana Frucher, adds, "And she doesn't just know the

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surface; she has all the background information.”

“Not many women are educated on the level that I am,” Bednarsh admits over a lunchtime bowl of pasta at an Avenue J pizzeria, after trading spirited hi’s with a gaggle of her students at the next table. Separate but parallel Judaic studies tracks for boys and girls have existed at YF since the 1970s, but she is the school’s only female teacher of halacha and Talmud. Her mission is to “lay the groundwork” for her students to embrace a Modern Orthodox lifestyle committed to halacha, secular knowledge, and Zionism. “I want to encourage them to take an active part, and to give them the skills and the confidence to learn more on their own.”

In the process, she is mindful of the widening range of religious observance among YF students — a growing number are shomer negiah (abstaining from physical contact before marriage), while some come from families that are not shomer Shabbat. “The general approach to teaching halacha is, ‘this is the way you should behave, but you have to do it in a way that can be readily digested and that won’t turn people off.’”

The most potent way combines the textual and the didactic, where the teacher is both intellectual guide and role model. Bednarsh’s students come to her apartment near the school for breakfast or Shabbat lunch. They have met her husband and played with her toddler sons, Tami, 3½ and Akiva, 2. “I want to give my students a realistic view of what it is to be a woman,” she says, “with all the tensions, pressures, and expectations she will have for herself.”

Bednarsh adds with a wistful smile, “There are a lot of things I want to do, but don’t.” She hopes to pursue her studies when she and her family fulfill their dream of making aliyah in a few years. In Israel, she may decide to acquire the skills needed to become a certified women’s halachic adviser, a yoetzet halacha. And after she’s learned more, of course, she’ll teach. □



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