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Women's Whispers: Educating Bruria

By VIVA HAMMER
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For a year I tramped America searching for a suitable Orthodox high school for our daughter. Attending to headmistresses’ recitals, listening in classes and open houses, I heard not one answer to the question facing us: Why do we educate Jewish girls? The schools kept their charges madly busy, but none could tell me what they were trying to accomplish.

Orthodox girls’ schools require their pupils to take seven to 10 religious subjects on top of a similar number of secular subjects. Most puzzling to me is the great load of Jewish studies. Overwhelmingly, Jewish law forbids a man to teach a woman Torah. Throughout the ages, women imbibed what they needed of tradition from their mothers. A very few became learned, but we know of them only from legends written by men; not one composed a work that has survived.

With the spread of mandatory education in Europe, the old mechanisms could no longer keep Jewish girls loyal to tradition; they left in droves. Samson Raphael Hirsch, founder of German neo-Orthodoxy, believed girls were being seduced away from Judaism by Goethe and Shakespeare, and that equivalent offerings from the Jewish corpus would woo them back. In 1871, he established a girls’ school in which students were taught Bible with Rashi, Hebrew literature, Jewish history, law and custom, as well as a full complement of general studies.

The German experience was repeated in Poland 50 years later. Jewish girls attending public schools defected from religious practice en masse. The visionary Sara Schenirer founded a school system offering general studies on par with the Polish competition, combined with a rich Jewish curriculum. In doing so, she had to convince the rabbinic leadership that it was necessary to teach girls texts that had been forbidden to them since the Talmud was canonized.

In developing their educational philosophies, Hirsch and Schenirer were competing with the Enlightenment. In response, they saturated their students with diverse fruits from Jewish culture, capturing their hearts by captivating their minds.

NO SCHOOL TODAY battles with the Enlightenment for the souls of its students. They battle with the Endarkenment: Nonstop stimulation delivered through the Internet, iPods and TiVO. The century-old Hirsch-Schenirer curriculum used by the schools offers a remarkably modern response: An exhausting timetable cobbled from a dozen disciplines. But what is being accomplished other than keeping everyone crazy busy?

Aching for some guiding principle behind all this activity, I approached the principal of a modern establishment that offered Talmud to its girls. I wanted to know whether she offered Talmud as a prelude to a life of learning, a goal every boys’ school would have taken for granted. She threw off my question: Lifelong learning would be impossible, she informed me, while raising a family. So what was she trying to do?

I AM a semiliterate Jew. Vowelized Hebrew I can manage, but unvowelized Hebrew I read only with the greatest effort, slowly and painfully. Jewish civilization is embodied in unvowelized Hebrew texts, and I can access none of it. And yet I lead a life immersed in Jewishness. When I married a scholar, the scion of a scholarly family, no one sought to examine my proficiency in Bible or Talmud in evaluating my suitability as a wife. Jewish semiliteracy has not held me back in any sphere.

My spouse and I named our firstborn daughter Bruria. Among the pantheon of scholars who animate the Talmud, there is one woman peer, Bruria. The wife and daughter of talmudic giants, even among them she stands out as the embodiment of brilliance. When in one story, a man sets for himself a study goal, he is chided that such ambition would be impossible even for Bruria, who learned 300 laws from 300 teachers in one day!

What of our Bruria? She holds out her hand to the shunned and broken; she writes poetry about bullies and their victims. She reads Shakespeare for pleasure. And she will not pick up a Jewish text unless forced. Her education has failed to rouse in her any curiosity about our heritage.

Text is the core of Jewish civilization. If we want our daughters to know whence they have come, they need to be literate in all manner of Jewish texts. And more, if we want them to be part of that which is handed to future generations, they must be able to create Jewish texts. The literacy of which I am talking does not come from reading a sourcebook of sheets torn from books written over 3,000 years, the standard method for educating religious girls. Nor does it come while zigzagging giddily from Gemara to softball to math. It comes from several hours a day of intensive struggle with terse, unvowelized Hebrew-Aramaic text.

A person can live a full and meaningful Jewish life even if, like me, she is semiliterate. But such a person cannot speak up in the great dialogue of Jewish civilization, cannot be a Bruria. A girl marching through a Hirschian- Schenirer curriculum may be the subject of a story, or a legal precedent. But she will never be the author; her view will always be described from another’s vantage point.

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| There is no girls’ school in the world which provides its students with the kind of literacy necessary to participate in enduring Jewish civilization. Forbidden texts have been opened to girls, but they are not allowed to revel in them. Instead, they are given a taste of this, a smattering of that. Such morsels fill you up for a moment, but are unsatisfying.We did find a suitable school for our Bruria, where a measured quantity of accomplishments was ladled out by earnest instructors within a well-designed structure. But too late. Just as we were about to move, she enrolled in college. There she could learn 300 laws from 300 teachers in one day. Not our laws – no school would teach her those.*The writer is a tax lawyer.* *vhammer@brandeis.edu* |