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Orthodox Women's Leadership: A Proactive Approach

Malka Z. Simkovich

I've been following the conversation on *The Lehrhaus* regarding women's halakhic education and leadership, and want to weigh in not only with regards to the question of halakhic training, but more broadly in terms of whether we are sufficiently nurturing young Orthodox women to become leaders in a variety of communal, educational, and halakhic facets.

Prof. Chaim Saiman argues that Orthodox Jewish women, even the most talented ones, cannot attain positions of halakhic leadership because of societal strictures within the Centrist Orthodox movement. He suggests that there are different tiers of women's halakhic leadership which are more or less accepted by centrist organizations like the OU. I believe, as Saiman likely does, that among the "third tier" and "second tier" elite women are some women who have the required qualifications to lead congregations and give basic *pesak*. These women have the ability and interest to commit themselves to intense and long term study that would result in their being ranked with high level male halakhic experts. As Saiman suggests, most of these women have failed to attain positions of halakhic leadership not because they were insufficiently committed or lacked the necessary time, but because they reached the limit of their training, and saw no professional doors being opened to them.

My question, then, is not about women's potential, but about whether we are doing enough to train and mentor women into such positions. Fortunately, there are those who oppose the societal strictures described by Saiman. I would ask these people to make some proactive changes, changes that are perhaps riskier than Rabbi Judah Goldberg's approach, which requires both men and women who are committed to women's halakhic leadership to keep their heads down and toe the line. Whereas Rabbi Judah Goldberg has suggested that women study as much as possible in order to make organic change, I believe that there may be more proactive steps that can be taken.

As a start, women could more actively support organizations that are devoted to nurturing and supporting their goals, training, and professional development. These organizations enable women to network with one another and provide them with a platform to make their voices heard in the public sphere.

While such organizations provide Orthodox women with significant benefits, they do not, as far as I know, offer mentoring or training to younger women scholars. This is where I see a major opportunity for improvement in preparing young Orthodox women to take on leadership roles. If women in mid-level and senior positions took a proactive role in mentoring women in junior positions, the level of retention when it comes to young women in leadership positions might rise. Unfortunately, however, I have read and heard statements by women in high-level leadership positions to the opposite effect, discouraging young women from pursuing such positions because the uphill battle is demoralizing and often defeating. With more training and mentoring of women on the part of more experienced women, a collaborative cohort could emerge that would yield a more supportive system that

would help ensure women interested in Jewish education, academia, and other forms of communal leadership to thrive.

Both within and outside of the framework of such organizations, Orthodox women also might consider systematically communicating with one another regarding how to make the diverse chorus of their voices heard. More women should consider sharing, for example, professional and financial information that one is often expected to keep private. Women should likewise communicate with men who hold positions that are similar to those that women aspire to occupy. When women know what other men and women in their positions make, they are more comfortable asking for the price that they deserve – and the people hiring them are more willing to give it.

While women should take ownership of some of the proactive changes that can be made, men who work in the fields of rabbinic clergy, yeshiva and higher education, and community leadership should also work to help women rise into leadership positions. Too often public learning events and leadership organizations include no women. Although some have excused all-male panels and all-male *yemei iyun* by saying that the kind of women they sought were unavailable, organizers of these events must be persistent and proactive in ensuring that women are included. Assembling a database listing talented and qualified Orthodox Jewish female leaders will help enable such inclusion.

While it may be unrealistic to organize events where half the speakers are women, it is also unsatisfactory to organize events and panels with three or more men alongside a single "token woman." This is unfair to the woman in question, who must act both as representative of her own interests, and as a representative of women in general. I have been in such a position many times and often have had to make clarifying statements such as "I don't claim to represent all women on this issue," when asked to speak from a "woman's perspective." Moreover, studies have shown that when a participant who represents a minority has another partner who shares her representation, the participant feels freer to more actively and honestly engage with others who represent the majority.

An additional drawback to including merely one "token woman" is that having just one woman on a panel or speaking event creates rivalry between women rather than collaboration. When women are become accustomed to receiving opportunities primarily as "token women," they risk viewing one another as competitors for these lone spots. Including more than one Orthodox woman on a panel, board, administration, or learning event will enable women to take part in a supportive network of leaders whose goal is to nurture collaboration rather than competition.

By implementing the strategies above and proactively working to mentor and include women where they have traditionally been excluded, young women scholars who have already received training in education, Tanakh, rabbinics, Jewish history, and communal leadership can become situated in upwardly mobile careers. Above all, however, we must treat young women scholars as the potential *talmidot hakhamim* that they can become, and will become, once they see that there is a seat at the table waiting for them. My hope is that we will reach a point in time when the above strategies are no longer necessary, since they are meant to accommodate a reality in which most high-level leadership positions are controlled by men. Indeed, perhaps a time when half of the leadership positions in Orthodox

communities are held by women is not so far away. Such equity in our leadership system will give way to an environment which nurtures the potential of both men and women.

Dr. Malka Simkovich is the Crown-Ryan Chair of Jewish Studies and director of the Catholic-Jewish Studies program at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, as well as a Core Faculty member of Drisha Institute. She earned a doctoral degree in Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism from Brandeis University and a Masters degree in Hebrew Bible from Harvard University. Malka's articles have been published in such journals as the Harvard Theological Review *and the* Journal for the Study of Judaism*, as well on online forums such as* TheTorah.com *and the* Times of Israel*. Her first book,* The Making of Jewish Universalism: From Exile to Alexandria *was published in 2016, and her forthcoming book,* Discovering Second Temple Literature: The Scriptures and Stories That Shaped Early Judaism*, will be published by the Jewish Publication Society in November 2018.*

"I'd Fast a Second Day"

Julie Goldstein

During the year that the *midrasha* I eventually opened was in the planning phase, my teenage son came home from yeshiva high school, where he had spent Yom Kippur, and exclaimed "If I could experience Yom Kippur like that again, I'd fast a second day." An *oleh hadash* with a complex relationship to the new world around him, this was a raw and simple statement of satisfaction and contentment, a refreshing and profound moment of clarity for him that was both gratifying and mystifying to me. I had heard before from my husband and other men about the apparently indescribable yeshiva *Yamim Noraim* experience. Waxing nostalgic, men I know who are my age and aware of the vast changes that have taken place in the world of Jewish education since the turn of the millennium, harbor a deep-seated hope that this aspect of yeshiva has remained untouched, that their sons will encounter the majesty of a Rosh Hashanah and awe of a Yom Kippur alongside their *rebbeim* in the *beit midrash* and that they, in turn, will experience what has become a sort of rite of passage in the brotherhood of Orthodox Jewish men. My husband noticeably beamed while I tried to dig deeper—What made it so special? The content of the *derashot*? Gorgeous *hazanut*? A lot of singing and dancing? In a home that prides itself on the equal distribution of Torah learning, ideas, and religious experiences, I was left out of the loop on this one, as my husband and son shared a knowing nod about the inexplicability of it all.

To be honest, I was jealous. I wanted in—for myself, my students, and all young women with the fortune to find themselves part of the Torah learning community in Israel. If my decision to open the *midrasha* grew largely out of my sense of mission to strengthen a Jewish community already on a track toward the democratization of intellectualism, why shouldn't it also tackle its attendant, the democratization of spirituality? While certain *midrashot*, particularly Israeli ones, already hold Yom Kippur *tefilot* with a yeshiva flavor, I was acutely aware that they are in the minority and that the vast majority of young women learning in Israel for the year are dispersed to various *yeshivot* and communities, where the default is for them to simply tag-along to whatever shul happens to have space for them. Knowing that it could be otherwise, it was important for me to harness the potentially transformative power of Yom Kippur for my students. Thus began my search for the elusive *Yamim Noraim* experience for women.

A few weeks ago, we held what I hope will become a tradition—our first annual *midrasha*-centered and run Yom Kippur *davening*. Without a real grasp on what makes *tefilah* in yeshiva so meaningful, but with an eye toward avoiding the typical scenario in which young women are sidelined within the mainstream service, I invited my students to constitute the majority and *daven* alongside a traditional minyan of ten men in my living-room. To prepare the women to take on a central role, connect them to the *tefilot*, each other, the *midrasha* and, of course, the endeavor of *teshuvah* itself, our *ba'al tefilah* conducted a pre-Yom Kippur *nusah* workshop at the *midrasha*, explaining how the different unique High Holiday tunes, dating back at least as far as the early Middle Ages, set the mood for the *tefilot*, and, if understood properly, constitute a musical Midrash on the prayer. We

practiced a bit, vowed to sing and dance when it made sense but did not feel contrived (as per students' request), and I stepped into the shoes of a *Rosh Yeshiva/gabbai/shamash* to whatever extent possible—by day: utilizing my *shiur* to galvanize the girls to ponder the significance of Yom Kippur; by Night: begging the men of my community to abandon their regular Yom Kippur plans and join our experiment, making executive decisions regarding *zmanei tefilah* and *shul* protocol (the *mehitzah* would be opaque on bottom and somewhat transparent on top to allow for visibility; no, we would not have women do *petihah* even though we could argue that it is halakhically acceptable, since it would be cumbersome and distracting within the confines of the space and make the men feel uncomfortable), gearing up to carry the singing (yes, I would sing extra loudly, even though it might make some men feel uncomfortable, since it was necessary for the success of the *minyan*), preparing *derashot*, setting aside Yom Kippur-appropriate reading material for anyone interested, publicizing my post-Kol Nidrei *shiur* and, along with the *midrasha*'s *mashgiah ruhani*, handling logistics, including arranging transportation and housing, the acquisition of chairs, *mehizot, sifrei Torah, seudah ha-mafseket* and break-fast foods. My children, who for lack of time would not be provided with clothing that actually fit for Yom Tov, nevertheless proudly told neighbors that their house would become a *shul* this Yom Kippur. "I think my mommy is the rabbi," said my 4-year-old.

After *hatarat nedarim* and *kaparot* for those who needed it, *seudah ha-mafseket* together, the exchange of fasting tips, and feverish calls home for apologies and well-wishes, all of which lent a palpable energy to the air even before the onset of the fast, Yom Kippur finally arrived. Kol Nidrei on the porch with the sun setting behind us immediately rendered this Yom Kippur "different" and set a tone, directing our attention toward the cosmos. With their newfound appreciation for the rhyme and reason of *nusah*, a *davening* peppered with popular songs, at a good pace, without the weeping hazanish machinations that the students professed to find alienating and disorienting, the girls sang powerfully, freely, and from a place of authenticity, throughout the day, often guiding the men when they tended toward the off-key. After a review of the *halakhot* associated with bowing, many of the girls scrambled to find a small cloth or towel and all but one opted to get down on the floor completely, the one who remained standing—a creative, contemplative, and independent type—ostensibly wrestling with the spectacle and meaning of an entire room of prostrating Jews. After a woman, their *Rosh Hamidrasha*, gave the *derashah*, we shared a laugh, as the students offered the traditional compliment—"*shkoyah*!"—and the hearty handshakes usually reserved for the other side of the *mehitzah*. During the "break," each girl made a conscious decision of what to do with herself and ultimately, tellingly, everyone stayed in *shul*—some to rest, some to entertain the kids who hung around, some to learn Torah and some (honest to God) to continue *davening*. In the aftermath of a long day of introspection, navigating the balance between being an individual and part of a community, as *Neilah* descended, a pensiveness hung in the room. "*Hashem hu he-Elohim*" rang out confidently by some, tentatively by others, but seemingly not by rote. Our little experiment had been a success, to the extent that Yom Kippur *davening* did not have the run-of-the-mill affect. We had accomplished some version of the idiosyncratic yeshiva experience.

In the aftermath of Yom Kippur, I have only a few empirical statements from students to point me toward the subtle elements that contributed to the quality of our *davening* and may stand at the crux of the yeshiva experience I sought to capture. Students said: "This was the first time in my life that I attended all of Yom Kippur *davening*. I was surprised and proud of myself," "I felt like I was front and center," "This is the first time in *shul* that I felt my voice mattered," "I felt like the *derashah* was speaking directly to me," "I forgot that you're a mother. It was strange and nice to see you with your children," and "This was the most enjoyable Yom Kippur I have ever experienced." In trying to put my finger on precisely what made this Yom Kippur effective, I understood their statements to mean that they learned that *davening* could be pleasant, desirable, engaging, and uplifting, that they felt a new sense of responsibility, membership, and ownership in shul. They had an appreciation for how Yom Kippur applies to each one of them, as an individual and part of a specific demographic with particular needs, concerns, anxieties, and desires. They discovered that simply sharing space with people who are as vulnerable, on a similar quest, or whose inclinations and aspirations are clear, engenders a sense of intimacy, purpose, and meaning. Experiencing Yom Kippur with teachers, who are usually contextualized within the *beit midrash*, takes religion out of the realm of abstractions and into the realm of application. They found that Yom Kippur need not be associated with only guilt, sin, and fear but also pleasure and joy, that creating an atmosphere on Yom Kippur through the selection of tunes, quality of the singing, dancing, speeches, pace and/or other elements is a kind of art that is possible for them to take in and savor.

Entirely in keeping with the *shanah ba-aretz*'s—and dare I say millennials'—toolbox for spiritual growth, factors such as attention, "mattering," relevance, applicability, ownership, identification, belonging, and enjoyment ultimately brought my students inspiration and satisfaction. Males in the room seemed, fittingly, to have been moved by a sense of altruism, as one participant in the minyan, said: "During the *davening* I kept thinking about the idea of *hazal* that the most meaningful prayer, is 'selfless' prayer, where one's prayers are directed toward or for the other. To the extent that this *davening* had an ulterior motive of inclusiveness, I feel that we were all given an opportunity for an enhanced experience on *Yom ha-Kadosh*!" Contrastingly, but equally unsurprising, young women who for a long time have felt themselves as spectators on the periphery of the *tefilot*, found uplift in being tended to. Knowing that Yom Kippur was for them, about them, and by them was key for my students.

As for me personally, this Yom Kippur presented a whole slew of conflicted thoughts and feelings. First and foremost, I was proud—that the men and women had stepped up and helped to produce a robust "event," that things were going well, that I had discerned and harnessed an opportunity for spiritual growth for my students. I was also anxious, the entire time, mainly because of the magnitude of the responsibility to create a more meaningful Yom Kippur after convincing the girls to trust me that it could have meaning. To me, this seemed my one shot to prove it.

When it came to my contributions and leadership as a woman, of course, "the balance," as those interested in the predicament of modern life for women are wont to call it, reared its ugly head, as I was expected to function simultaneously as the consummate rabbinic professional and as hostess and caretaker to both my children and my students (at least while my husband was occupied as the *shaliah tzibbur*). I wondered, after a long day of basically ignoring my children so that I can serve as educator, mentor, and spiritual guide, only to find myself at the end of the day frantically heating up and setting out the break-fast foods in the kitchen, whether expectations on women can ever allow them to function fully in either the clerical or maternal sphere. I wrestled with two main aspects of my experience: a) the necessity of choosing between being present for my family or my students/congregants/"flock" and b) that I am being judged for my warmth and maternalism (a notion expressed in various ways throughout my tenure as a rabbinic personality, including when one young woman said it was heartwarming to see me with my kids), and not only for wisdom, erudition, quality of my analysis, or pedagogy. This kind of judgement is not usually placed upon *Roshei Yeshiva*.

I will be honest and say that I was also surprisingly self-righteous. Knowing what a central role I played in the *davening*, my husband asked me afterwards if I felt disenfranchised and demeaned when I was relegated to a place behind the white curtain. In fact, my thoughts were to the contrary. Each time I gave a speech, answered a *shailah*, directed the *minyan* on logistical matters and the like, and then withdrew awkwardly and incongruously from the scene, I considered it a lesson or, at least, food for thought for anyone present about the role of women in Jewish praxis. I hoped it gave pause, especially to my students, to consider either a) the extent to which we can include talented and capable women even more in communal *tefilah* or b) reframing our understanding of the *Ezrat Nashim*, so that it does not have to be associated with subjugation and inferiority. After all, the majority of praying people in this particular set-up was women and the most "important" or "rabbinic" figure in the room was on the women's side of the *mehitzah*. If behind the curtain is where great things are happening, including the more robust singing, *derashot*, *shiurim*, and where the spiritual and intellectual leaders are located, perhaps that can be seen as the more desirable place to be.

At the end of the day, I was concerned with one major question: whether the model before me was sustainable long-term and replicable. Could we–and should we–continue to limit the number of men interested in joining us so that we could demographically lean female? Boys who return home can often recreate some aspects of yeshiva or evoke memories of yeshiva *davening* by incorporating their special tunes or traditions into *shul* prayer. Even if a *midrasha* could create the kind of shared language that *yeshivot* establish, would young women have the wherewithal to bring such a phenomenon to their communities outside of Israel? If the *midrasha* would sing a special *niggun* at a certain point in the service, would it stay at the *midrasha*, since none of my students would be able to bring it to the *bimah* of any Orthodox shul? When women from my community stood outside our living-room "sanctuary" with their small children or told my students that they had been putting their ears to the wall to be

able to take part in the most salient parts of *davening*, and when women and other seminary students packed the room for a late-night *shiur*, my students discovered that women long to nourish their intellectual and spiritual sides even when they have families and that the community can and should provide frameworks for them to do so. Would my students have the capacity to bring about the type of cultural revolution that would allow them to demand more of their communities later on in life?

Our Yom Kippur *minyan* consisted of 40 people in my living-room, but to me, and I believe to my students, it was representative of something much larger. It was a commentary on what already exists, an assertion of what can be, and a challenge to ourselves, our institutions, and communities. For twenty-five hours, a group of young women *davened*, sang, contemplated, and grappled with sincerity, intensity, and emotion, and ultimately captured that quality that to me once seemed to be the *je ne sais quoi* of a *shanah ba-aretz* Yom Kippur. Reflecting on that day helps me to identify with my son's declaration a couple of years ago. If this kind of experience awaited me again, perhaps I too would consider fasting a second day.

Julie Yanofsky Goldstein is the founder and Rosh Hamidrasha of Amudim, an innovative gap-year program for women in Israel, which fuses traditional Talmud Torah and modern scholarship. Her teaching experience includes NYU, Ma'ayanot High School, JLIC at UCLA, and nearly two decades of Jewish communal and adult education lectures. After completing a joint PhD in medieval history and Judaic Studies at NYU, Julie was a Golda Meir postdoctoral fellow at The Hebrew University and a research fellow at The Global Research Institute at Tel Aviv University. She has received a number of awards for her work on Jewish and Christian conceptualizations of children and childhood in the Middle Ages, including fellowships from Cardozo's Center for Jewish Law and Civilization and The Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture.

He Sent Out the Raven

Miriam Gedwiser

Noah's dove-with-the-olive-branch has become an icon, carrying positive associations if also sometimes a hint of naivete. But the dove was not the first bird Noah reached for when he opened the Ark's window; that distinction went to the raven:

Genesis 8:7 reads:
וַיְשַׁלַּח, אֶת-הָעֹרֵב; וַיֵּצֵא יָצוֹא וָשׁוֹב, עַד-יְבֹשֶׁת הַמַּיִם מֵעַל הָאָרֶץ.
He sent out the raven; and it went to and fro (yatso va-shov) until the waters had dried up from the earth.

Why did Noah send out the raven? What did the raven do, and why? Although the verses are silent as to the reason for sending the raven, it seems that the bird does not fulfill whatever mission it may have had, leading Noah to send out a dove "to see whether the waters had decreased." The dove first returns with nothing, then with an olive branch, and finally does not return, signalling that the earth is habitable again.

The absence of a stated reason for sending the raven led the ancient Jewish allegorist, Philo of Alexandria, to suggest that the raven, a symbol of vice, was in fact being sent away not on a mission but simply to purge evil from the ark.

The rabbis also interpret the raven symbolically on Sanhedrin 108b, where a baraita asserts that the raven was one of three creatures that violated the ban on copulation in the ark. The raven, in this reading, is identified with sexual sin.

The prior segment of the same talmudic passage also presents the raven in sexual terms. Perhaps reading the root *shuv* in the phrase *yatzo va-shov*as related to teshuvah, an answer, Resh Lakish has the raven "retorting" to Noah: "Your master hates me and you hate me" -- God hates the raven and therefore told Noah to bring only two ravens, as opposed to seven of the "*pure* (*tahor*)" animals (including doves) - and Noah hates the raven too because he then chose an *impure* animal to send out, imperiling an entire species.

The raven therefore accused Noah of intentionally trying to kill him, asking, "maybe you are after my wife?"

The idea that the Noah would be sexually interested in Mrs. Raven may sounds strange, but it does fit well into a larger tradition that identifies cross-species mating as one of the forms of corruption that precipitated the flood. According to various midrashim (e.g. Tanhuma) the animals that were saved were the ones that had not engaged in such violations. So to say that the raven suspected Noah of desiring Mrs. Raven identifies the raven with the

antediluvian lack of boundaries rather than with the attempted new world order after the flood.

The combination of passages in *Sanhedrin* presents the raven as an animal that sees itself as a sexual rival of man, one that is lusty, that disobeys orders with triumphant retorts (*teshuvah nitsahat).* This characterization echoes another tricky, sinister animal who, according to the rabbis, desired a man's wife (the mirror image of the raven's suspicion of Noah): the snake.

The snake set off the chain of events that led from the initial bliss of creation to human exile from Eden and the world's eventual near destruction. It's therefore noteworthy if the first animal to be singled out after the waters begin to subside, the raven, is in fact a snake-like surrogate.

While the post-flood world may be a clean slate in some ways, the same challenges and potential for sin that caused downfall the first time are still there, and will require vigilance to overcome.

A non-symbolic reading of the raven episode by medieval commentator R David Kimhi (Radak) generates a similar impression. Radak suggests that the reason for sending the raven was the same as for sending the dove, namely, to check whether the waters had subsided. Ravens and doves share many features of habitat and diet, and both are known as land-sighting birds. But the reason Noah initially chose a raven was that ravens, unlike doves, eat carrion, and Noah assumed that the subsiding waters would expose the corpses of the humans and animals killed in the flood. If the raven came back with flesh in its mouth, Noah would know the waters were low. Instead, however, the raven did not provide useful information because it would go in and out of its nest, looking for a place to land, but would not fly far enough to actually encounter whatever the waters might be exposing.

Radak's explanation is simultaneously pragmatic and shocking. A simple reading of the story does not encourage us to ask what was left over. "All existence on earth was blotted out (*va-yimah*)" (Gen. 7:23) -- erased, perhaps, without a trace. Later we learn that Noah saw that the earth had dried, but we never hear of him seeing anything else left on its surface.
And yet, even if the new world was truly new, without a trace of the old, Noah didn't know that it would be that way. He sent the raven because he quite reasonably thought he might be greeted by piles of corpses when he left the ark.

The raven's mission was unsuccessful, however, and instead Noah got his information from the dove, not in the form of strings of carrion but an olive branch. As one of my students at Drisha pointed out to me, the sign Noah originally sought was one that looked backwards to the destruction, but the sign that comes through is the one that looks forward, to new growth.

The harbinger of Noah's exit from the ark must come from not from an animal that harkens back to the sins of the past - and that literally feeds on the destruction they caused - but from one that helps Noah and his family begin afresh.

And yet, we can't forget the raven that is still flying around out there.

Miriam Gedwiser is a faculty member at Drisha. She has a BA from the University of Chicago in the History and Philosophy of Science and a JD from NYU School of Law. She studied in the Drisha Scholars Circle as well as at other programs in Israel and Boston, and has taught at several New York area synagogues and Hillels. She previously practiced commercial litigation at a large law firm.