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## GENDER AND LITERACY AMONG YOUNG ORTHODOX JEWISH WOMEN<sup>1</sup>

By Tamar El-Or

The cypresses in Magdiel are tall, like the cypresses in the old towns of Israel. Their gray-green loftiness proclaims the pride of the first settlers who planted these trees in what was Palestine of the 1920-30s. A similar double row of cypresses planted by Magdiel-born Yehezkel Daum when he went up to live at the new settlement of Ramat Magshimim on the Golan Heights in the late 70's are shorter and less slender.



Rabbi Yehezkel Daum died unexpectedly (at the age of 54) in the summer of 1993 and his family found itself discussing the appropriate place for his burial. Most of the Daums are buried in the cemetery at Magdiel, on the Sharon plain north of Tel Aviv. The new cemetery at Hispin on the Golan plateau had only a handful of graves, and an air of uncertainty hung over them. But, in the end, the funeral ceremony took place on the Golan.

When I paid my condolence call, I approached Yehezkel's mother and sisters, who were sitting, as the Jewish laws of mourning prescribe, low, close to the floor. "Those cypresses," his mother said, "they are his Magdiel. You understand, for him the Golan Heights and Ramat Magshimim are like the Sharon and Magdiel for us. The deep mud that was here when they arrived, the delicate seedlings they planted – that was simply his Magdiel."

His mother, knowing that I come from the non-religious, left-wing, big-city side of the family, was guessing – correctly – that the decision to bury Yehezkel on the Golan raised some serious questions for me. After all, I am among those Israelis who believe that the Golan Heights will eventually have to be ceded to Syria in the framework of a peace treaty – thereby putting Yehezkel's grave in a foreign country. By comparing Ramat Magshimim to Magdiel, was his mother deliberately translating the family's decision into language she thought would be more pleasing to me, or that would keep me from completing my train of thought? Or was it she who needed to make the comparison, to make it easier for herself to accept the separation and distance that her grandchildren had imposed on her?

Yehezkel Daum's grandfather, who was also my mother's grandfather, had six children. He was one of the first members of the *mizrachi* movement, a religious Zionist who picked up the members of his family from Warsaw in 1924 and brought them to Magdiel. One of his daughters (following her husband) and one of his sons (following his wife) continued along the religious Zionist road. The others, with the exception of one of the grandchildren, drifted away from it. Yehezkel and his sisters grew up in one of the two religious families.

As a child, I loved to spend long days in the yards in Magdiel, where my mother's uncles and aunts lived side by side. The orthodox Sabbath observance of one of those homes did not stand out, given that the other two were also traditional. Miriam and Yonit, who were about my age even though they were the

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children of my mother's uncles, were wonderful companions for long walks and games, for climbing the citrus and loquat trees and smoking forbidden cigarette butts behind the hen houses. From Miriam I learned that you have to wait until three stars have appeared on Saturday night before you can collect the eggs, and she taught me some dirty jokes, too.

Magdiel was a different world from the neighborhood where I grew up on the edge of the big city. As time went on, the visits became less frequent and the distances became greater. Children's games were replaced by politics and life decisions, fashions and images that colored the old ties and love. The history of the Daum family illustrates the divergence so common in Israeli society, one that put Miriam and me on either side of a social, ideological, and political barrier. This work took me back to Miriam's "field."

I chose to study the women's seminary at Bar-Ilan University. From here on, I will call it as its students do, in Hebrew, the *Midrasha*, because it lies at the crossroads of religious and women's literacy that is my field of study. But the fact that at one of our family weddings I pored with Miriam over the class schedule in order to choose classes worth observing and examining, and that I made use of her name and that of her brother to improve my foothold at the *Midrasha*, is part of the same research path.

Study of one's backyard "home" and not just of distant and foreign cultures, has become the order of the day in current anthropology. In this work, the home is not just a sociological metaphor but a real home. In such a home the communication between the women speaking becomes a charged discourse, one that gathers into it both their private and public lives.

I attended a memorial service for my Uncle Shlomo at the Magdiel cemetery, not long after the Oslo peace talks had become an established fact. "Did you hear?" Miriam told me. "They said today on *Arutz Sheva* (a radio station associated with the right wing of the religious Zionist movement) that our army no longer deserves to be called the Israel Defense Force because it isn't defending us any more."

"I didn't hear that," I whispered to her. "I haven't the slightest idea where *Arutz Sheva* is on the radio dial."

At the end of the ceremony some of the participants headed towards the graves in order to instill in their children something of the family tree and the tradition of visiting the departed. Some of the children, for whom it was the first visit to a cemetery, gazed at their parents as if to find out what level of sorrow and interest they were supposed to express. At the gate, next to the faucets provided for washing the hands upon leaving a cemetery, as religious law requires, Miriam looked at me with her green eyes and said: "Forget politics. Have you gone to sit in on the classes at the *Midrasha* that I recommended?"

"I went to some of them," I answered.

"So, how are they?"

"It's a long story," I replied.

I can begin far from the cypresses of Magdiel, fold the beginning into the envelope that arrived from the *Midrasha* at Bar-Ilan University. In it I found a sheet of paper made to look like yellowing parchment notifying me of the opening of the program for graduates of the *Midrasha* that would begin in 5753 – that is, the 1992-93 academic year. The studies would be concentrated, six hours on Tuesdays from the afternoon until eight in the evening, including two two-hour classes and two hours of study in *havruta*, independent study with a partner. I looked at the yellow parchment, the curlicued heading, and the list of courses offered, and I tried to figure out how such an invitation had reached me.

I refused to give myself over to the feeling that fate had sent me by mail a field of anthropological study, but it was hard to escape that conclusion. As a social anthropologist, who always needs “a field of study” I was at the time facing a decision on a new research project. I had been considering taking a look at one of the seminaries that offer religious studies for women after they complete their military or alternate national service. This field of inquiry had suggested itself after my study on the link between knowledge and gender among ultra-orthodox (*haredi*) women. The program I held before me fit my expectations so well that it was hard to relate to it disinterestedly. It promised a concentrated day of study, including teaching women *Gemara* (Talmud), a class in Bible, and in the writings of Rav Kook in the company of graduates of the *Midrasha*.

My great luck, I quickly understood, was a product of the *Midrasha's* computer, which had me listed as having taken, in 1987-88, a course in Hasidism, in the framework of my Ph.D. studies. All at once a forgotten scene from that year appeared before me. I was standing by the door of the director of the *Midrasha*, waiting for a personal interview with Rabbi Yitzhak Cohen. For the first time in my life I was being interviewed to decide whether I could participate in a course. I had registered for a class that appeared in the university catalogue as requiring the approval of the director of the *Midrasha*. There was a long line of women waiting for a talk with the director.

Inside the room, a man with a black and white beard sat behind a large desk on a high-backed chair. There were a few pictures on the walls, and a vase with fresh flowers. Within the space of a few minutes, tactfully and indirectly, the rabbi made it clear to me that this place, where young Jewish women study, was not for me: “It won't be right for you. The class isn't on the level of a doctoral student. You won't get much out of it. It's not a historical or philosophical class on Hasidism. It's something else.”

At home, I crossed the class off my schedule, but, as it turned out later, the computer had not done the same. In its memory, Tamar El-Or had registered as a student, turned into a *Midrasha* graduate, and five years later was invited for another talk with the rabbi. I returned to Rabbi Cohen's room hoping for a positive answer this time. I mentioned my new status as a scholar, and dropped the names of family members he knew. I was happy to hear that he had read my newly-published book. Rabbi Cohen made inquiries about the nature of my interest in the graduate program, listened to me talk vaguely about wanting to both study Torah and study the women studying it. He understood, I think, that I wanted to join the women in order to observe them. When we parted, he summed up my motives as follows: “I won't stop anyone who wants to study Judaism.” What had been denied me as a student at the university turned out to be surprisingly easy to get as a scholar.

During the three years I spent in the *Midrasha*, and in my visits after I completed my principal field work, I enjoyed cooperation from Rabbi Cohen. When I took part in one of his classes, I presented him with questions, thoughts, preliminary analyses, and criticism. I did not take for granted the responsiveness he displayed, and the very real and non-patronizing assistance he gave me. I also accepted with surprise and joy the responsiveness of the students, instructors, librarians, and office staff, and never stopped wondering about why they cooperated with me.

My motives for choosing to study the corner of Zionism at the intersection of knowledge, gender, and religion are complex. They include a natural continuity with my studies of *haredi* women, an invitation whose source was a computer error, and a family biography that in the course of a generation created boundary lines within my own home. To these reasons was added a realization that this is not the time to search far afield for objects of research, that things are happening at this heavily-traveled intersection, that study among religious women is now in a critical period.

The field and research work produced findings that point not only to a critical and interesting period but to a real revolution. During my years of observation, research, and writing (1992-1997) I followed the beginning of a revolution in real time, and the book I eventually wrote endeavored to portray it. Its central claim is that the spreading practice of intensive Judaic studies among women in the religious Zionist community is a revolutionary phenomenon that will, within a short time, bring about a most profound transformation in orthodox Judaism. Its source lies in a change in the relations between the sexes and in the constitution of gender identities of the members of the community, but its influence is sweeping. Before us is a feminist literacy revolution that bring with it theological and *halachic* (Jewish legal) changes. These changes will not be traumatic because they are taking place gradually and along with a continual institutional metamorphosis. They will make the community both more religious and more feminist. More religious, because it will contain more people, that is women, who know Torah, and more women who believe and observe the *mitzvot* (commandments). More feminist, because of the desire to annul the sex-gender of the female believer as a condition for full participation in the life of the community.

At the turn of the twentieth century, religious Zionism shaped itself as an orthodox Jewish movement that decided to link itself with the Zionist enterprise. This decision required social courage and halachic creativity. At the end of that same century, the religious Zionist community faces a no less serious effort to include changes in the system of gender relations within the orthodox way of life.