

BOOK REVIEW

Naomi Seidman, *Sarah Schenirer and the Bais Yaakov Movement: A Revolution in the Name of Tradition* (Littman Library, 2019), 448 pages.

Reviewed by
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Sarah Schenirer (1883–1935) opened the first Bais Yaakov school in 1917, and her contributions, as well as those of her schools, over the intervening century are acknowledged by Jews as diverse as Rav Aharon Kotler and Blu Greenberg. Nonetheless, while the collective memory of Schenirer’s story is told and retold by Orthodox presses in a large number of titles, academic scholarship on her and her school system has been markedly scant, numbering a few unpublished dissertations and chapter-length articles. Naomi Seidman’s recently published *Sarah Schenirer and the Bais Yaakov Movement: A Revolution in the Name of Tradition* is a worthy and effective corrective to this lacuna and serves as an important first major study of a figure and a movement that marked a significant shift in the position of Orthodox women.

That Sarah Schenirer’s contributions could be celebrated today by the traditionalist right as well as the feminist left underscores some of the complexity of the Bais Yaakov project, as alluded to in the book’s subtitle, *A Revolution in the Name of Tradition*. Many of Seidman’s chapters return to exploring this theme, that Bais Yaakov was fraught with ideological and rhetorical tension from the outset, as it revolutionized Jewish girlhood—with its schools, Torah learning, youth leagues, and employment opportunities—while also endeavoring to effect an increased dedication on the part of young Jewish females to traditional practice and affiliation. The book succeeds on some level in unspooling these contradictions: that Bais Yaakov was modern in its reevaluation of halakhic precedent about women’s Torah study while also conservative in encouraging girls to grow up to be Jewish mothers; that the divorced Schenirer and her cross-country-trotting young charges were *not* actually models of traditional domesticity; that Schenirer was herself a modern woman—literate, emboldened with agency, disconnected from matrices of male authority—and yet that “by all accounts, her traditional appearance and her unimpeachable piety reassured those who worried about the novelty of women’s Torah study” (43).

In places, Seidman’s analysis of the question of “radical or traditional?” loses focus by taking both sides of the argument, perhaps by design. This

distractedness is apparent, for example, in the investigation of men's involvement in Bais Yaakov schools. Seidman notes that men were involved as board members, rabbinic chairs, and office bureaucrats in Polish Bais Yaakov, and she attempts to interpret this arrangement as "one of the revolutionary aspects of the system" (92) in that it restructured work relationships between men and women. However, she also emphasizes the absence of men in most of the schools' activities, and again interprets this space for female leadership as particularly revolutionary, a "benefit of marginality" (149). Therefore, while she takes pains to note that the schools were radical for *including* men, they were also radical for *excluding* them. Seidman runs into similar logical contradictions in understanding Bais Yaakov's Torah curriculum: she considers it traditionalist in that it dared not include Talmud study for women; on the other hand, she lauds it as innovative and modern in accepting a formalized Judaic studies curriculum that leaned heavily on the works of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch—a feature that she interprets was included *because* traditional yeshiva curricula were out of the question. Embracing these dichotomies, as Seidman does, causes some whiplash for the reader, but accurately depicts Bais Yaakov as a movement fraught with ideological tensions.

Seidman's book, which is a somewhat-chronological history of the school movement, opens with the period before Bais Yaakov's establishment, continues to Sarah Schenirer's decision to start a school, and goes on to a chapter seeking to understand how the charismatic efforts of one visionary leader translated into a movement operated by hired Agudah bureaucrats. She favors an interpretation that maximizes the role of Schenirer herself in founding the schools rather than the Agudist narrative that has sometimes minimized the impact of her activities. What follows the chronological analysis is a chapter on Bais Yaakov's intellectual history as informed by essays in the *Bais Yaakov Journal*, the movement's regular Yiddish magazine of the interwar period, and a lengthy chapter on cultural and social influences on Bais Yaakov, from Neo-Orthodoxy to Hasidism to socialism. The final 130 pages comprise appendices, including a translation of Schenirer's essays collected from long-ago published compendia in Yiddish and Hebrew; this collection, which has, astonishingly, never been published in English before, is enough on its own to render the entire volume a critical contribution to scholarship.

Seidman writes with passion, scholarship, and lucid prose. She weaves historical analysis with literary criticism and the sociological theories of Max Weber, and many of her deep-reads of longer sources highlight her background in comparative literature and her analyses of gender. She takes obvious delight in exploring how situations relating to gender played

out in Bais Yaakov's world, such as the men who wrote for the *Bais Yaakov Journal* ("ventriloquizing women's voices") and the boys who disguised themselves to watch Bais Yaakov productions ("cross-dressed boys in the audience were watching cross-dressed girls on stage," 95). Perhaps her finest observations concern Sarah Schenirer's innovation in "finding collective female expression for [spiritual] practices, creating occasions for groups of young women to walk the streets of Krakow, hike the steep slopes of Polish mountains, and take trains together throughout the country. . . she gave meaning to a female collective" (158). Astute observations and glitteringly innovative interpretations from Seidman are a steady feature throughout the book.

Seidman graciously concedes in her introduction that this volume is not meant as an exhaustive treatment of the Bais Yaakov movement, and a great deal of further research on the topic is required. In her reliance upon sources written by many establishment figures within the Bais Yaakov movement, her narrative is focused far more on the movement's centers than on its peripheries. Seidman justifies this perspective by repeatedly downplaying the importance of the branch schools: she describes them as unprofessional and bare-bones operations, insists that the Central Office was primarily focused on the elite experience of the seminarians, and repeatedly suggests that the schools were a half-hearted aspect of the movement because many of Bais Yaakov's teachers sought provincial teaching positions just for the sake of employment. This approach ignores that what made the movement revolutionary was the way in which it rewrote the script for Jewish girlhood, and prescribed that Orthodox primary education, including in Torah studies, was to be the standard experience; this experience took place not only in elite, cosmopolitan centers, but in hundreds of shtetls. The writings of teachers and of students who cover the myriad dispatches and paid notices throughout every edition of the *Bais Yaakov Journal* are evidence that membership in Bais Yaakov as a movement was an important part of the girlhoods of tens of thousands of Orthodox Interwar girls. Seidman is correct that the Central Office concerned itself with the fiscal operation of the seminaries, while branch schools operated with local monetary control, and therefore they leave less evidence in official documentation. She is also correct that most shtetl schools were supplementary, bare-bones operations, led by a single teacher. But she does not succeed in expressing how, in spite of these physical shortcomings, they were the spine of what made Bais Yaakov transformative to the masses. Bais Yaakov was not the first institution to offer some girls a Torah education; it was the first to effect a structural societal shift, and this shift was felt in the branch schools.

Another shortcoming of this treatment is its weakness in contextualizing many of the new practices featured in Bais Yaakov's cultural climate, such as its members' appreciation for hiking and theatrical performance. Although Seidman offers excellent information about Bais Yaakov's relationship with Zionism, Yiddishism, socialism, feminism, and other ideological movements of the time, she describes many activities of Bais Yaakov schools and Bnos youth leagues without reference to other groups. The 1920s and 1930s were a period of tremendous ferment of the very notion of "youth," and across the world, new forms of adolescent culture began to emerge. Seidman doesn't do enough to situate Bais Yaakov's activities within this context. Bais Yaakov's productions were events that garnered high anticipation and enthusiasm, but in many shtetls, they competed for this attention with the theatrical performances of other youth groups. Likewise, Bais Yaakov's celebration of the Fifteenth of Av may have been a distinct feature of the single-gender culture created by Bais Yaakov; however, the decision to celebrate that date was almost certainly borrowed from Zionist groups who had already favored reinterpreting the Talmudic minor-festival into a Holiday of Love (not to mention that youth groups were desperate to find a date to celebrate that fit into their summer camp calendars). In discussing a rhetorical habit of Bais Yaakov leaders to analogize their teachers' work to temple service of priests, Seidman expounds in detail about how the metaphor would work—both groups represented socially removed, single gender, elite corps of religious functionaries—and that the metaphor would serve to distinguish women's Torah learning from yeshiva activity (139). However, this analysis misses that the priestly metaphor had long been so very ubiquitous in women's Yiddish pietistic writing that Schenirer, much more likely, referred to it to rhetorically entrench Bais Yaakov teaching within words that she had associated, all her life, with traditional and domestic forms of female piety. Across the entire work, Seidman offers creative interpretations, but in a good number of cases the more accurate read of Bais Yaakov is to acknowledge its derivative nature.

Thorough and well-sourced, Seidman's research spans a range of interwar Yiddish writings as well as memoirs and postwar Orthodox works. However, some available sources are conspicuously absent; Seidman relies heavily on a sample of memoirs without including others that are available, including many entries in *yizkor* books with first-person reflections on Bais Yaakov schools. She likewise omits reference to some public-relations pamphlets produced by Bais Yaakov in the interwar period that are accessible in archives, such as Leo Deutschländer's book-length summary of Bais Yaakov activities from 1927. It is especially striking, in her discussion

of Sarah Schenirer modeling her role as a feminized form of Hasidic Rebbe, that she never refers to the Maid of Ludmir, Hannah Rachel Webermacher, or Nathaniel Deutsch's excellent treatment of the subject. A surprising amount of her research relies upon citing primary sources as they were found in other secondary sources, particularly in the cases of her reliance on Rachel Manekin in the chapter about Bais Yaakov's context and Shoshana Bechhofer in her concluding chapter about the post-war period. That said, these points are mere quibbles in light of a lengthy and well-researched book. The sources that she *does* include are impressive; they range from a very full sampling of *Bais Yaakov Journal* issues and other Yiddish periodicals to records of conversations with Schenirer's elusive surviving distant relatives, to never-before-seen words of Sarah Schenirer herself.

For students of history and students of the Bais Yaakov movement, the section of the book that will elicit the most interest is her treatment of new Schenirer biographical sources. Seidman's reconstruction of the Schenirer family tree and the religious trajectories of Schenirer's family members is an impressive accomplishment in historical sleuthing, producing information that this reader had never before seen in any other source, scholarly or popular. The greatest surprises in Seidman's work appear near the end in the form of excerpts from Schenirer's Polish diary from the years 1910-1913, which has recently surfaced and is currently undergoing publication in Poland. Seidman was granted permission to view this source shortly before completing the manuscript of her book. The intimate details about Schenirer's young adulthood, her courtship and her failed first marriage, offer a great deal of insight into the thinking of a person whose identity is frequently wrapped up in myth and legend. In Schenirer's diary, she reveals in passionate vibrancy her theater-going habits and secular academic interests as well as her conflicted conscience that wished for greater spiritual outlets, her insecurities about her physical appearance, and her desperate efforts to avoid marriage to a man in whom she felt no interest. Seidman treats Schenirer with great sensitivity here as she does throughout the book (in a salute to a Bais Yaakov girl's habits, she always refers to her by full name, "Sarah Schenirer"), and holds back from speculation about how these intimate reflections inform our understanding of Schenirer's motivations for creating Bais Yaakov schools.

However, this taste of insight into Schenirer's inner life leaves the reader wishing that the book had taken a structural route that favored a more direct biography of Schenirer instead of tucking details into later chapters where they do not integrate smoothly. One leaves with the impression that all of the appendices, the diaries and annotated essays, were produced

after most of the book was completed, and many of the gems of insight from Schenirer's essays are not fully referenced in the principle text itself. To give just one example, Schenirer's holiday essays feature frequent moral admonitions that employ thematic references to social class conflicts. Seidman analyzes one of these essays at length, which deliciously asserts that the Jewish value of modesty is important because downplaying ostentation smooths tensions between middle-class and working class people (173), but never extends her point to acknowledge that Schenirer regularly wrote with socialist-inflected language, as the writings in the appendix generously attest. A second edition is hoped for, with more proper integration of its own appendices, and with Schenirer's biography earning a place in the structure of the book to match the position to which Seidman places her within the Bais Yaakov movement. Until then, this volume deserves recognition for opening up Bais Yaakov as a field that deserves scholarly attention to equal its place within the popular imagination as a significant feature of twentieth-century Orthodoxy.

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