

Marc B. Shapiro holds the Weinberg Chair in Judaic Studies at the University of Scranton

## FROM THE PAGES OF *TRADITION*

### *R. ESRIEL HILDESHEIMER ON TORAH STUDY FOR WOMEN*

One of the most important changes in Jewish society in the modern world related to the education of women. As general society started offering girls and young women serious education, the matter of Torah education for females also came to the fore. Not surprisingly, it was in Germany that we first find the recognition that organized Torah study needs to be offered for girls in school, and day schools were established that did just this. Both R. Samson Raphael Hirsch and R. Esriel Hildesheimer were at the forefront of this movement, although we do find organized Orthodox instruction for girls even before these two.<sup>1</sup>

R. Hildesheimer (1820–1899) wrote an essay on the topic that I present here in English translation (the notes on the essay below were also penned by R. Hildesheimer). It originally appeared in the 1871 report of the Adass Jisroel of Berlin’s religious school.<sup>2</sup> R. Hildesheimer’s thoughts were put into practical application in the Adass Jisroel’s school. As summarized by David Ellenson:

In the course of study, young women were taught the Pentateuch, Prophets, Hebrew language and grammar, Jewish history, the grace after meals, *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers), and basic prayers and blessings

<sup>1</sup> See David Ellenson, “German Orthodox Rabbinical Writings on the Jewish Textual Education of Women: The Views of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch and Rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer,” in his *Jewish Meaning in a World of Choice* (JPS, 2014), 158–169. See also Ellenson’s earlier discussion in *Rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer and the Creation of a Modern Jewish Orthodoxy* (University of Alabama Press, 1990), 122–123.

<sup>2</sup> “Etwas über den Religionsunterricht der Mädchen” (Berlin, 1871). I thank Esther Bauer for her corrections to my translation. Regarding the general educational philosophy of the Adass school, see Meir Hildesheimer, “Religious Education in Response to Changing Times: Congregation Adass-Isroel Religious School in Berlin,” *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 60 (2008), 111–130.

for Sabbath and daily devotions. However, they were not taught, as the boys were, Talmud or Codes of Jewish Law.<sup>3</sup>

Regarding R. Hildesheimer and women's education, it is also important to cite the famous story told by R. Jehiel Jacob Weinberg:

It is well known that R. Israel Salanter, after returning to Eastern Europe from Germany, told how he had witnessed R. Esriel Hildesheimer teaching Bible and *Shulhan Arukh* to young women. He commented: If a Lithuanian rabbi would ever institute such a practice in his community, he would be fired, and justly so. Nevertheless, may my share in the World to Come be together with that of R. Esriel Hildesheimer.<sup>4</sup>

The translation offered here is part of my continuing efforts to make important German Orthodox writings available to the English-speaking world.<sup>5</sup> While this is R. Hildesheimer's most detailed discussion of women's education, his collected correspondence also contains another relevant document. In 1888, R. Hildesheimer was asked by his student, R. Josef Rosenthal, to clarify the issue of women's education. For anyone who had been exposed to German Orthodoxy, this issue had been settled. I assume, therefore, that R. Rosenfeld was not asking for himself. He was then serving as a district rabbi in Hungary, and presumably turned to his teacher to receive an explicit ruling so as to defend his approach against some Hungarian Orthodox Jews who were expressing opposition to what R. Rosenfeld was advocating.

R. Hildesheimer replied to R. Rosenfeld's queries by affirming the following: It is permitted, and indeed in modern times religiously necessary, to teach girls the Hebrew Bible in the original. In our day and age, such a statement would not be necessary. Yet the fact that R. Rosenfeld asked such a question shows that he was confronted with objection on this very

<sup>3</sup> Ellenson, "German Orthodox Rabbinical Writings," 166.

<sup>4</sup> *Seridei Esh*, vol. 2, no. 8 (p. 14). Most of this translation is found in Shnayer Z. Leiman, "Rabbinic Openness to General Culture in the Early Modern Period in Western and Central Europe," *Judaism's Encounter with Other Cultures*, ed. Jacob J. Schacter (Jason Aronson, 1997), 201.

<sup>5</sup> I previously published "Rabbi David Zevi Hoffmann on Torah and *Wissenschaft*," *Torah u-Madda Journal* 6 (1995–1996), 129–137; "Rabbi David Tsevi Hoffmann on Orthodox Involvement with the Hebrew University," *TRADITION* 33:3 (1999), 88–93; "Rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer's Program of Torah u-Madda," *Torah u-Madda Journal* 9 (2000), 76–86; "*Torah im Derekh Eretz* in the Shadow of Hitler," *ibid.*, 14 (2006–2007), 84–96; "Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch and Friedrich von Schiller," *ibid.*, 15 (2008–2009), 172–187; "Torah im Derekh Eretz as a Means of Last Resort," *Milnin Havivin* 7 (2013–2014), 162–170; "Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch on Jews in a Non-Jewish World," *Hakirah* 27 (Fall 2019), 167–173.

point, an objection that today only survives within the Satmar communities and similar groups. R. Hildesheimer also notes that in previous years Judaism could be passed on to daughters in the home, but that is unfortunately no longer the case. He adds that it is a disgrace that there are girls who know different languages, as well as dance and music, and yet they remain ignorant of their own religious heritage.<sup>6</sup> Thanks to the efforts of R. Hildesheimer and so many others, it is very rare to find girls in the Orthodox community who fit this description. (Unfortunately, such a description is typical for those outside the Orthodox world, but that applies in a fully egalitarian manner to boys as well.) Yet even in the Orthodox world, we must acknowledge that there are both women *and* men who, while not ignorant when it comes to Judaism, certainly know much more about numerous other fields of study than about their own religious tradition. If R. Hildesheimer were alive today, it is not difficult to imagine what he would have to say about this.



#### CONCERNING THE RELIGIOUS EDUCATION OF GIRLS

When our ancestor Abraham was asked by the angels, “Where is Sarah your wife,” he answered, “she is in the tent” (Gen. 18:9). And when our Sages were asked where the sphere of the Jewish woman is, they also answered, “in the tent.”<sup>7</sup> For so sang the Psalmist: “All glorious is the king’s daughter within the tent” (Ps. 45:14).<sup>8</sup> Inside the tent every Jewish housewife was a queen. She did not spurn any of the household chores, but she was the happiest queen in the world. Her faithful little people whom she served with self-sacrifice—her beloved children—paid homage to her with all the intimacy of filial love. She was also a teacher to her children, and her subject in which she felt particularly at home was the Jewish faith, which had an inexhaustible source in her heart. The *Shema Yisrael* was until not long ago—admittedly, not the most recent years—the first meaningful teaching that the Jewish mother taught her child. How often did the remembrance of those sweet sounds of motherly teachings work wonders on the children during their often difficult adolescent years, when their endurance was severely tested? How often has just this memory of the motherly *Shema Yisrael* given healing to a sore heart, harmony

<sup>6</sup> *Rabbiner Esriel Hildesheimer Briefe*, ed. Mordechai Eliav (Jerusalem, 1965), 233–234.

<sup>7</sup> *Bava Metzia* 87a. [All footnotes from this point forward, aside from those marked in square brackets, are original to R. Hildesheimer’s essay. – *M.B.S.*]

<sup>8</sup> *Shevuot* 30a.

to a broken spirit, and the final comfort and reassurance to a departing soul? Certainly, no one knows how to instill the teachings of the faith so deeply, and at the same time so gently, in the child's mind as the Jewish mother. She inscribes, with a skillful and golden pen, those golden teachings onto the child's soft and pure heart. Thus, the beneficial activity of the Jewish mother always became apparent inside the tent, as well as in the innermost being of the child. Just as she took care in the home that the peace and harmony of the household was not disturbed, so she was able to peer and probe into the child's innermost being, remove all dissonance, and bring about the kind of sound, secure, and enduring harmony that still reverberates most beautifully long after those childhood years are gone.

The sages of the Talmud also knew to appreciate and dignify this two-fold significance of the Jewish woman. One of them never called his wife anything else other than "his house,"<sup>9</sup> because his house would be nothing to him without the work of his wife.<sup>10</sup> Another said that one must, aside from all other commendable merits of his wife, also forgive her for many a harsh word, and put up with this or that, because it is enough that she raises our children.<sup>11</sup> Only rarely did Jewish women step out of the circle of their dual activity as Jewish mothers and Jewish housewives, since this is a task sacred and great enough to satisfy the noblest urge for action, especially that of the woman, who is anyway endowed with a more inwardly focused nature. It appears that the woman is also not called to tasks that can only be completed with great difficulties. Those she entrusts to the vigor and care of her husband. Not so when it comes to educating the children, who do not resist her influence. Impressions that are offered in a mild and gentle manner, such as from the mother, are able to bring the beneficial teachings of the faith and pious Jewish customs to open hearts and receptive minds. It is the mother who is most suitable and thus called upon to achieve this.

While the Jewish mother has been greatly, indeed most essentially, involved with the education of all of her children, she was the only<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *Gittin* 52a.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Rashi there about the parallel with Sarah.

<sup>11</sup> *Yevamot* 63a.

<sup>12</sup> [*Hagiga* 4b: Rav Beivai bar Abaye would be frequented by the company of the Angel of Death and would see how people died at the hands of this angel. The Angel of Death said to his agent: Go and bring me, i.e., kill, Miriam the "raiser" [i.e., braider] of women's hair (מגדלא שיער נשיא). He went, but instead brought him Miriam the raiser of children (מגדלא דרדקי).]

The expression *megadla neshaya* [raiser, or educator of women] appears in *Hagiga* 4b in Rashi's text [our text of the Talmud has *megadla se'ar neshaya*, a "raiser" or braider of women's hair]. There it is described that the messenger of the Angel of

educator and teacher of her daughters. The son was soon handed over to a teacher or to a craftsman, but the Jewish daughter always remained in her mother's house. She would only leave when she married and was entrusted with the sacred occupation of a Jewish wife. Thus, the home of every Jewish family was not only a true religious school for the children, but also the institution where the greatest female teachers in Israel were trained.

We shall not elaborate here how the past relates to the present in this respect, nor whether we can still answer with as much certainty the question, "Where is the wife, where does she prefer to find her sphere of activity?" with the answer that she is "inside the tent." Yet this much is certain: Nowadays, children usually first recite the *Shema Yisrael* at school, and we require schools, where it takes much effort, to explain to the child what *Shema Yisrael* means, because he has never learned to feel it! Did not a glance from the traditional Jewish mother, from whom the entire depth of faith shone, explain more to the child than an entire speech of the teacher? Could anyone doubt this? Is religion a science best taught chapter by chapter, or is it not rather a subject of the heart which the pious Jewish mother can much better and more deeply impress upon the child, the child whose entire inner life, with most tender and unexpressed emotions, are lying open before her loving eyes?

Even if the religious school was justified in flattering itself with the hope that it could substitute for the child's domestic religious education, this might, for reasons already mentioned, be much more likely the case with boys than with girls. When it comes to religious schools for Jewish girls, we can apply the words of the teacher who said to his pupil: "The purpose of my teaching is that you shall soon be able to do without me." The religious school for Jewish girls must strive to become superfluous in time, and to educate its students so that they shall again take up, with love and understanding, the former task of Jewish women. Thus, the religious school should at most have the task of supplementing the religious education received at home, but not of having to replace it.

---

Death brought him a female teacher of girls. This is the meaning of the passage as can be seen in the whole narrative and in the term *megadla dardekay*, which comes to explain the first expression. This suggests that female teachers were not particularly rare. Nevertheless, it is probable that such educators were used only when the mother was absent or could not take care of the education of her daughters due to other obstacles. Regarding the matter itself, cf. *Kiddushin* 49a, Tosafot, s.v. *Mai*, where one can explain the sense of the text according to Rashi's explanation, reading *megadla neshaya* (instead of *megadla se'ar neshaya*, which is the text according to Tosafot).

In order to find the means that can lead to the attainment of this goal, we require only a brief discussion of the questions of where and how it actually came about that Jewish women so completely abandoned their high priestly office of sanctifying themselves in the inner sanctum of faith, and of opening the hearts of their children to all that is holy and sublime in faith. There is a well-known saying that is true: "So many languages, so many souls!"<sup>13</sup> Considering that our daughters learn all varieties of languages except for Hebrew—why should they not be imbued and animated by everything possible, rather than by the Jewish spirit? The genuine Jewish soul, which lies dormant in every Jewish daughter from her earliest childhood, awaits only a Jewish word to awaken it. How could it not fall into perpetual slumber, if instead of being stimulated and awakened, it is covered and overgrown by a colorful mass of other concepts and entirely different ideas?

Those weak traces left by the sort of religious instruction that is usually taught in religious schools, soon fade away when Jewish girls step into the confusion of popular literature, and kneel there in worship before the respective idol of the moment. How will the already watery religious education be absorbed into the flood of the latest literature!? How awkward and barbaric Hebrew must seem to Jewish girls, who either do not know it at all, or know it from the perfunctory translation of prayers, in comparison with those modern languages they have studied with so much care and thoroughness. How dull Jewish literature must appear to them, at the most consisting of tearful prayers! If the holy scriptures of the Bible happen to come into the hands of a young Jewish woman in a language accessible to her, the splendor of the images, the power and majesty of expression, and the richness of thoughts are lost to her through the weakness and poverty of the translation. The names of later Jewish poets, such as Judah Halevi, Gabirol, Alharizi, etc., how could she possibly know them, or grow acquainted with their poetry? Even though our religious schools take great pride in drilling—so to speak—their girls to translate several prayers, this is only of very dubious value. If the child does not learn to feel the prayer intimately, but only to translate it again and again, she will come to regard it as mere lip service. When she comes to sincerely pray she will lack fervent sentiment even in the places she understands. She will feel transported back to her time in school, where she painfully learned to repeat every word by rote. There is only one way

<sup>13</sup> [In an idea attributed to Goethe, among others, for each language (or culture) one immerses oneself in, one also acquires a new soul, as it were, in line with that particular culture.]

to remedy this situation: When it comes to the religious education of girls, *we must make the regular teaching of the Hebrew language the main focus of our efforts.*

As soon as the child overcomes the difficulty of reading Hebrew, and even while she is overcoming it, she should be taught the basic rules of the Hebrew language, which can be easily achieved because girls mature early. Thereafter, simple and easily understandable grammar should prepare them for the translation of simple passages from the prayers and historical texts of the Holy Scriptures, followed by practice in translation and analysis. She should then proceed to active reading of selected biblical passages in the original language. The time now spent in school and at home in memorizing “religion” and biblical history should be used for this purpose, and *it is perfectly sufficient* to learn religion and biblical history from the original source, from the Holy Scriptures themselves. In this way, senior students are able to read the most magnificent passages from the Prophets, Psalms, Proverbs, etc., but the children are spared the agony of memorization. This agony contributes not a little to the fact that in the eyes of children, religious school is considered either as unbearable, or just a necessary evil.

There is no need to experiment on whether this can succeed; it has already been done with great success. At the school of Rabbi Hirsch in Frankfurt am Main, girls are already competing with each other in reading the Holy Scriptures in the original language. And at the school here [in Berlin], where the writer of these lines also has the honor of teaching, they were so successful that it justified our highest hopes, although only preparatory steps could be taken due to its short time in existence. Children who receive their first lessons in reading Hebrew in this school are, after a year and a half, so advanced, that the more able among them have sufficiently mastered enough rules and words that they can read easier passages of the Bible under the guidance of their teacher without any difficulty. How much shall children who were prepared in this way be able to learn once they move up into the two higher grades, where they shall remain for three years!<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> If one uses the saying of the Mishna in *Sota* 20a: “He who teaches Torah to his daughters is like one who accustoms them to a lack of restraint,” as proof that the Jewish woman has nothing to do with biblical teachings, this is terribly wrong. This statement cannot refer to the simple teaching of the Holy Scriptures, since this did not have to be “learned” at that time. The statement rather refers to in-depth involvement in aggadic and halakhic teachings and discussions, as is clear and evident from the context. Ben Zoma says, in the quoted passage, that everyone must teach his daughter Torah, so that when she drinks the *sota* water she will know that her



The translation of prayers, however, which can be accomplished in this way only after appropriate preparation, need not be made tedious to the child by much repetition. For as soon as the words and forms are known to her from before, she learns them easily and therefore gladly.

Once we have reached the point that young Jewish women can read the Bible in the original text, even if only with the use of a translation, its sublime content and brilliant biblical account having suddenly been revealed to her, she will reach for the Book of Books in many a pleasant and unpleasant hour. The instruction received at religious school, without any textbook on religion, shall have left an impression that is strong enough to set a powerful dam that will stand against many other currents. For no language is so intimately connected with the spirit of the people by whom it is spoken as is Hebrew with the Jewish people, the Jewish spirit, and the Jewish essence. When a Gentile who knows Hebrew reads the Bible, he reads it like any other scripture accessible to him, at the most with understanding and love. It is very different with a Jewish reader of the Holy Scriptures. He not only reads them with understanding and love, but with every word feelings arise in him which were perhaps unknown before, elicited by those sacred and peculiar sounds which echo mightily only in the Jewish heart. When a Jew reads a hymn of praise to the God of Israel, he sings along in his heart at the same time. When he reads the wrathful speech of a prophet, he feels this holy anger as deeply as if it were directed against himself. On the other hand, when he reads mild words of consolation, he feels relieved in a marvelous way, as if the holy words were balm especially intended to soothe his pain, to comfort him, and raise him up. While non-Jewish readers of the Holy Scriptures require a vivid imagination to identify with the people who are

---

merits can delay her punishment. In response, R. Eliezer says that one who teaches his daughter Torah is like one who recommends to her a lack of restraint. It is therefore only a question of teachings that are derived through *derashot*. And indeed, according to the Gemara, *Sota* 21b, this saying is justified, and very significant. That is to say, the woman should not occupy herself in the sharp, strictly logical, and cold intellectual work of research and rumination, but in the development of the inner treasures of her heart, her warm feelings. It is the same with the story in *Yerushalmi Sota* 3:4 where a woman asks R. Eliezer, since the sinners at the Golden Calf all committed the same sin, why were they punished in different ways? He replied that “a woman has no wisdom except at the spindle.” The woman received this rebuke only as a result of her question, which delved deep into an aggadic matter. This is how the passage was understood by Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* 1[:13], *Shulhan Arukh*, *Yoreh Deah* 246[:6], and in particular detail, *Taz*, *ibid.* 4. The opposite reading in Maimonides is firmly rejected by *Maggid Mishneh* [read: *Kesef Mishneh*].



## TRADITION

speaking, or with the subjects being described, Jewish readers, male and female, soon discover themselves and the ideals of their heart and their convictions in those subjects, as well as in those people who are doing the speaking.

If it is true that knowledge is power, then the Jewish knowledge of our women and girls must become an invincible Jewish power. It must be a power in the home and in Jewish family life, and an invaluable power in the field of youth education. The Torah states: “And he dealt well with Abram for her sake” (Gen. 12:16). Upon this verse the Sages commented: “One must always observe the honor due to his wife, because blessings rest on a man’s house only on account of his wife.”<sup>15</sup> Thus, the achievements of Jewish women can, and shall, result in blessing that will rest on the house—of Israel!

<sup>15</sup> *Bava Metzia* 59a.