Choosing Limits, Limiting Choices:
Women's Status and Religious Life

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WORK IN PROGRESS

Educated for Change—or Changelessness?

Moderator: Gloria Greenfield, Hebrew College/Combined Jewish Philanthropies
Esther Krauss, founding principal, Ma'ayanot High School
Devora Steinmetz, Jewish Theological Seminary
Devorah Zlochower, Drisha Institute for Jewish Education

Gloria Greenfield: I direct the Adult Learning Collaborative, an initiative of Combined Jewish Philanthropies and Hebrew College. The collaborative offers a comprehensive Jewish women's studies program for adult learners. Drawing on Jewish feminist scholars and theologians from Israel and North America, the initiative exemplifies the breadth and depth of contemporary Jewish feminist scholarship.

It is both an honor and a privilege for me to participate in this critical conference and to serve as moderator for this panel addressing "Educated for Change or Changelessness," with Esther Krauss, Devorah Zlochower and Dr. Devora Steinmetz. According to the late feminist historian Gerda Lerner, "in every society, people are assigned specific roles and indoctrinated to perform to the expectations and values of their society." Lerner underscores that "for women this has always meant social indoctrination to a value system that imposed upon them restrictions on

the range of their choices greater than those imposed on men. It has meant that women have been trained to fit into institutions shaped, determined, and ruled by men, and that their own definitions of selfhood and fulfillment have remained subordinate to patriarchal concepts."

In the context of Jewish women studying oral law, breaking out of these restrictions can be appreciated as an act of faithful exaltation or scorned as an act of treachery weakening the structure of Orthodox Judaism for nothing more than what some refer to as a social fad.

As the panel's title indicates, and as Tova Hartman pointed out last evening, whether the explosion in Jewish women's classical text studies leads to growing activism or to greater conservatism is of critical concern. Communal attitudes toward feminism will clearly play a pivotal role in the answer to this question: will feminism be understood as a revolutionary movement of tremendous importance with much value to teach us, as we learn from Tamar Ross, or will patriarchal stakeholders predominate in isolating and/or shutting out feminists as meddlers, troublemakers, and ignoramuses?

It is precisely at this moment that I would like to pause to articulate my deepest respect and admiration for the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance for the courage and strength in wearing its name proudly. While *midrashot* for women have proliferated, their missions can vary dramatically. The late Rabbi Avraham Yosef Wolf, founder and principal of the Beit Ya'akov College for Girls in Bene Barak, was very clear about its mission in his statement: "If we succeed in instilling in our girl students that the purpose of their studies is to aspire to emulate our matriarchs, who did not study, then we have succeeded in educating our daughters." In stark contrast, those *midrashot* devoting a sizable portion of their programs to *gemara* study view their students as part of a new and revolutionary generation that will transform what it is to be a

religious woman, as well as the nature of the community in which she lives.

In her pioneering study of literacy and identity among young Orthodox women in Israel, Tamar El-Or posits the spreading practice of intensive learning among women in the religious zionist community as a revolutionary phenomenon that will, within a short time, bring about a profound transformation in Orthodox Judaism. As El-Or states, "Its source lies in a change in the relations between genders and in the construction of gender identities of the members of the community; its influence is sweeping. Before us is a feminist literacy revolution that is bringing about theological and *halakhic* 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 more religious and more feminist. More religious, because it will contain more people, women, who know *Torah*, and more women who believe and observe the *mitzvot*. More feminist, because of the desire to de-emphasize the gender of the female believer to enable her full participation in the life of the community." In other words, the tensions between the religious world and the modern secular world will be exacerbated by religious women's pursuit of *Torah* knowledge, and this increased tension will lead to the establishment of a new and different social situation.

And now I would like to introduce you to our panelists. We will first hear from Esther Krauss, then from Devorah Zlochower, and then Dr. Devora Steinmetz. On behalf of the planning committee and this panel, I would like to express our deep appreciation to Dr. Devora Steinmetz for joining us at the last minute after we found out that Tamar El-Or was ill and unfortunately could not make the flight to the United States. Our panelists first address the question of how girls and women feel about confronting difficult texts. Secondly, as teachers and

educators, what aspects of today's situation feel empowering or de-legitimizing to you, and thirdly, what are the impacts of the different types of post-high school programs for girls? Thank you.

Esther Krauss: As I was sitting there this morning and listening to the session, I was thinking, if only all the people I know were sitting here and listening to the balanced conversation and the soul-searching that is going on in this conference, we would have such a different view of what we're all about.

Just some biographical notes to put myself into a historical and social context. I was raised in a European family, which would today be labeled *haredi* although that term was not in vogue at the time. I reached adulthood at the cusp of the feminist movement and, although I am viewed as a feminist by many in the Orthodox community, my journey as an Orthodox woman has been long and arduous. Professionally, I have been involved in Jewish education for women for most of my adult life, although I must confess that I initially entered the field by default. Teaching was a good profession for a woman because it accommodated the demands of being a wife and mother, which is whom I was expected to become at an early age.

Looking back at the last half-century, there is much to celebrate in the tremendous progress that has been achieved for Orthodox women. Opportunities for comprehensive, advanced *Torah* learning are, of course, at the forefront of this progress. There are a growing number of scholarly women in the Orthodox community. The Modern Orthodox community has, at least officially, embraced that effort although attitudes have not kept pace. We have also seen increased opportunities for women's active participation in synagogue ritual although that continues to be a more challenging and contentious area. Leadership opportunities for women

have increased significantly, in the field of education and even in the *halakhic* arena, thanks to programs such as the *toanot* and *yoatzot* programs in Israel. With the help of organizations such as JOFA and Brandeis, we have indeed come a very long way and that is very satisfying. So why, am I still dissatisfied?

I guess because I still find myself fighting the same battles I fought twenty years ago. I guess because, the facts on the ground are still viewed with suspicion. I guess because social pressures, especially around marriage, make it difficult for women to confront their own feelings about their place in the Orthodox community, and they are marginalized if they do. I guess because the struggle to balance our allegiance to ourselves as women and as Orthodox Jews is a continuous challenge. But for me, personally, most of all because I have found that educating young women in the context of that struggle is so complicated. How do we, in the current Orthodox climate, empower teenage girls while simultaneously imbuing them with a love and respect for their tradition? How do we help them achieve confidence and learn to take themselves seriously as Jews and as women in the face of a communal reality that is very uncomfortable with such qualities?

Let me explain with some specifics:

About ten years ago, during a sabbatical year in Israel just before I became the founding principal of a girls' high school, I interviewed a young Orthodox woman. She had been educated here in Boston at Maimonides school, where she learned Talmud together with her male counterparts, and never realized that she was doing anything revolutionary. She was, therefore, totally unprepared for the reaction of the dean of a very respectable women's learning program in Israel when, during her interview, she asked him about the Talmud curriculum. That was the

first time she had ever encountered any question about the legitimacy of her studying Talmud.

My interview with that woman remained with me as I enthusiastically accepted the challenge of creating a girls' school whose goal was to educate, respect and empower young women. My enthusiasm was occasionally tinged with fear that, if I succeeded, I would be creating a "monster" i.e., a graduate who believed that the Jewish world was going to appreciate the knowledge, commitment, and independence we had nurtured in her. I recall sharing with the tenth grade *Talmud* teacher my hesitations about the sources she was studying with her class on the topic of *Talmud* study for women. She argued convincingly that students needed to be familiar with the primary sources that legitimated their study. I was troubled, however, by the defensiveness that this material would engender. Whereas boys were held in the highest esteem for learning *Talmud*, girls had to defend their right to do so. But I recognized that, in the face of still existent communal opposition, it needed to be done.

My concerns were not misplaced as I learned some years later during a discussion with a senior class about a student's request that we hold a women's *megillah* reading at the school. The discomfort expressed by her classmates, even after having learned the sources about its *halakhic* permissibility, were ample testimony to the power of communal opinion. In fact, this discussion raised other feminist issues as well. I discovered, to my chagrin, that even after having studied Talmud for four years, some of that time with a female teacher whom they loved and respected, many students were still uncomfortable and felt ostracized by those in the community who disapproved, or minimally, questioned its legitimacy. These reactions correlated to the generally conservative views most of our students held on gender issues, an accurate reflection of communal views as well as of their adolescent need, in spite of their many

protestations to the contrary, to be accepted by their peers and by their "mainstream" religious communities.

I hoped then and do believe that all is not lost and that as they matured, they would gain a greater appreciation for their high school experiences and for the messages they picked up there. Indeed, a respectable number of our graduates show signs of having shed that early conservatism as they continue the struggle to maintain the delicate balance between their Orthodox and feminine selves. I hope that some of them will choose Jewish education as a career, but even if they do not, as parents they will help to educate the next generation of men and women.

For many other students, however, the next stage of their education, especially in Israel, re-enforces their conservatism. There is much to be said for devoting a full year after high school to serious, undistracted Torah study, before going off to college. But that goal is more seriously pursued in the men's yeshivot than in the women's, and in neither one are gender issues addressed honestly or positively. Furthermore, while the primary goal of serious *Talmud Torah* does exist in some of the women's seminaries the inculcation of selective values has a much higher priority. That fact emerged from a study done by Emily Shapiro Katz in fulfillment of an end of year requirement at the Melton Institute's Senior Educator's program at Hebrew University. The study explored the educational experiences of women in three American post-high school programs serving what we would loosely term the American modern Orthodox community. Through interviews with five female teachers, all of whom were learned women grappling with their own gender issues, there emerged a conflict between the educational roles such teachers feel obligated and are expected to play and their own struggles. These women defined themselves, and were defined by the institutions, as role models responsible for

inculcating Orthodox values, and for protecting and inspiring their students religiously, spiritually, and emotionally. Their professional success depended on their ability to maintain credibility with both their students and with the institutions they served. As a result of these obligations, the teachers felt severely limited in their ability to achieve their intellectual goals for their students, to help students develop independent thinking skills, and to help them appreciate and confront issues, particularly gender issues.

Many factors create this situation:

- Modern Orthodox men are not educated about or sensitized to women's issues. In fact, they are generally exposed to polemics against Orthodox feminism both here in the United States and in the post-high-school programs in Israel.
- Orthodox women want opportunities to meet the "good" guys, the learners, but these guys want knowledgeable, but not too knowledgeable or independent wives
- Orthodox women are not usually taught or encouraged to think independently.
- They cherish Orthodox values, as we hope they will, so they either suppress their feelings of discomfort around gender issues or they acknowledge them and find themselves outsiders.
- Women seek recognition and professional opportunities in the Jewish educational community but entry into that professional community often requires commitment to its conservative values. Even women who achieve recognition and stature as *melumadot*, Jewish scholars, often buy into the system to which they have been admitted, especially regarding gender issues, and lose their voice in the face of rabbinic authority.

I am concerned that in our modern Orthodox institutions, both here and in Israel, the subliminal messages and pressures exerted by the establishment do not allow either men or

women to honestly think about gender issues. And women who, because of their disillusionment about how Orthodoxy treats gender issues, leave Orthodoxy altogether or abandon the outer manifestations of Orthodoxy, make it easy to justify dismissing feminism as religiously dangerous. There are some women, however, who manage to navigate the tension between their female and Jewish identities by going back to the sources and finding within them legitimate ways to accommodate both their female and Orthodox selves. If they are learned and intellectually honest, they find room in the sources to satisfy their profound attachment to *Torah*, to tradition and to *halakhic* Judaism without sacrificing their personal dignity.

Change is slow and communal attitudes change even more slowly. However, education is a powerful force that we need to harness more effectively. We need skilled and authentic Modern Orthodox educators, and we need to develop curriculum that sensitizes our kids, boys and girls, from an early age to gender issues and gives them the tools to address these issues in an authentically Jewish way.

Devorah Zlochower: I often tease my husband that one of the advantages that I have not having a title of rabbi is that I tend to talk a lot more briefly than he does. I'm going to try to stick to that and donate my extra minutes to the conversation, because I think the conversation is an important one. It's a pleasure to be on this distinguished panel. I've had the good fortune of knowing Esther Krauss for quite a number of years already, and I really appreciate the good fight she has fought for the cause of young women's learning. She has really not even told you half of the struggle that she has gone through and the success she has had. I also have the distinct pleasure of seeing her every day in the Beit Midrash Drisha Institute.

I'm honored to be on the panel with Dr. Devora Steinmetz, who is one of the path-

breakers in this field, and I'm thrilled to count her as one of my teachers and models. I would also like to note the important work of Dr. Tamar El-Or, who's not able to be here. One of the points that intrigued me about her book was about the really huge cultural differences that exist between the Midrashat Bar Ilan that she studied and the beit midrash at Drisha Institute, with which I'm familiar. I'd like to talk about how cultural differences impact our question.

I too am going to begin by sharing some of my own odyssey, because I think it's illustrative of the dynamic tensions I see in the question posed: education for change or changelessness. I came to *Torah* study as a child but *Talmud* study as an adult. I was raised Orthodox and was educated in right-wing yeshivot. The messages I received in school were offset by the encouragement I received at home for critical and independent thinking. After attending first a post-high school seminary in Crown Heights, then college and graduate school, I found myself at age 25 at Drisha Institute, where I spent the next five years studying *Talmud* and *halakha* intensively. Drisha is a 26-year-old institution of Jewish learning catering to women and founded by Rabbi David Silber. At the time I began attending as a full-time student some thirteen years ago, we were a group of between ten and fifteen women in our twenties. I was the oldest. We were taught at that time exclusively by men, all of whom were graduates of Yeshiva University and Yeshivat Har Etzion of the Gush, and were approximately our age. In fact, I was older than most of them. We also all identified as Orthodox. I, like my colleagues, was at Drisha simply because I needed to learn. We had no idea what we were going to do with this knowledge and honestly, most of us had no intention of changing the world. As a group, we were quite traditional. At that time, I had never attended a women's *tefillah*, I had never made *kiddush* for a man, I had never worn *tsitsit* or a *talit*, and rarely found it necessary to use the term patriarchal—

all of which I do today [laughter]. The heft of those big *gemara*s, quoting *Rambam*, the *Ran*, and *tosafos* in my Ashkenazi accent—that was what it was about for me.

Today I still love the feel of those big *gemara*s. I feel blessed for the opportunity I have as a full-time faculty member and director of full-time studies at Drisha to share this knowledge with women every day, but the larger context and the historical moment in which this learning and teaching takes place is now explicit for me. Learning Torah is simultaneously the most traditional of experiences and a feminist enterprise. What changed? It started to dawn on me that we were not a standard yeshiva, learning traditional text with male teachers with just one small change, the sex of the students. Rabbi Silber used to explain, as he walked past the kitchen and he would see the baby bottles and the breast pumps, that this was definitely not the Mir! But we weren't at the Mir in many ways. When we studied the laws of *gittin* and *kiddushin*, Jewish marriage and divorce, the *gemara* spoke to us of betrothing and divorcing our wives, and when we spent a full year learning the laws of *niddah*, the laws relating to menstruating women, we often didn't recognize our own bodily experiences in these texts written by men. I recognized gradually that I was never going to be an insider steeped in the texts of my tradition unquestioningly. The often alienating language, the role of women as a subject of study, made that impossible. My perspective as a woman, an unintended, unimagined student of these texts, made me an outsider. I was engaged in an impossible dance between the delight in the tradition and the discomfort with its limitations and exclusions, and so I chose and still choose to walk a tightrope as I switch between insider and outsider, embracing my tradition and critiquing it, sharing with my students my love of Torah as well as my conflicts and frustrations.

I'd like to turn for a few moments to some of the changes and the constants that I've

observed at Drisha. Nowadays we have more students, and they come from more varied backgrounds, students affiliated with liberal movements as well as Orthodoxy. Every year graduates of our one-year *beit midrash* program go on to rabbinical school, and most of our students label themselves feminists. Our faculty is no longer exclusively male. Women teach Talmud and *halakha*, and the full-time programs are directed by a woman. Many of our graduates are breaking new grounds in the Orthodox community. Our alumni teach Talmud in high schools, pursue doctorates in Jewish studies, and any inroads that have been made in giving women rabbinic-type roles in Orthodox synagogues have been made by our graduates.

Our curriculum has not changed all that much. We still focus intensively on Talmud and *halakha*, believing that women must be conversant in these topics to enter the playing field of traditional Jewish scholarship. The conversations have changed, though. The year-long course in the laws of *niddah* is now taught by me, and discussions about female sexuality and male scrutiny of the female body are encouraged and entertained. In many ways, Drisha, the women's learning movement, and I have simply come of age. Once the battle shifted from the right to learn to what and how do we learn, questions began to form. My students take their entitlement to learn for granted. *Baruch ha-Shem* (praise God), but that leads us to a new evaluative process. What does it mean for women to learn?

How does the women's learning movement impact the tradition? Can women scholars embrace the tradition wholeheartedly, once they've seen it from the inside? Must we, and should we, engage in the delicate balance I described, or should we challenge the power structures and status quo outright? If we look at the individual women and institutions at the forefront of this movement, one thing we can see clearly is that there's no one answer. In many ways, the

question this panel has been asked to address is the critical ideological battle being waged in the women's learning community. Many of us see a clear connection between gaining knowledge and gaining power and actively seeking to create new opportunities for women and new leadership roles without shifting the tradition to unrecognizable places. Some believe this is a pipe dream. I've had students who are not interested in walking a tightrope and who reject the message of slow, careful change**.** And some would maintain that increasing women's access to sacred texts can only increase religious observance. They draw an unbridgeable line between access to text and access to ritual and power. As a member of JOFA, as a mentor to budding female Torah scholars, and as an individual who seems to thrive on internal conflict, I have chosen the path of simultaneous multiple allegiances. The texts of my tradition fill me with sweet delight. They fulfill a lifelong dream. But I feel equally impassioned about raising questions about the writers of these texts with my students. I want them to leave my class at the end of the year with a deep desire to continue learning and to continue questioning. I want them to recognize problematic texts and be unafraid to voice their outrage, to notice when their subjective experiences are ignored and to do something about it. I want us to fulfill the maxim *"talmud Torah kineged kulam"*—the study of *Torah* is above all else—when that *Torah* is dynamic and grows with us as we grow. Thank you.

Devora Steinmetz: As Gloria mentioned, I was recruited very much at the last minute, so my thoughts will be a little bit more ad lib than most of the thoughts that we've benefited from today and last night. I also didn't have the list of questions that Gloria mentioned. I'll tell you the question that I thought I was trying to answer, and that's the question I'll address. I'm happy, with my colleagues, to try to address some of the other questions, or other questions people have,

in the question-and-answer session.

I thought the question that we were to address was simply whether we think that the trend of Jewish women learning is leading to greater activism or greater conservatism. Or, to put it another way, do we have to worry when we find that within the women's learning community there are those who choose very much to take a conservative path? I myself tend to be a person who sees the glass as half empty, or usually nine-tenths empty. But I apologize in advance—I'm going to take an unabashedly positive approach to this question. And what I'm going to try to do is share some thoughts as to why I think that the phenomenon of women's learning is revolutionary and will have revolutionary effects, whether or not individual women choose a path of challenging the traditional religious system. I have two lists of thoughts. The first has to do with what I think the impact on the community of the phenomenon of women learning is, and the second will be some thoughts on the potential impact on women of learning in relation to the place they ultimately take within the community.

First, in terms of the community. I think that the practice of women learning or the increase in women learning has really been developing over the past two-and-a-half to three decades. But this being taken for granted, at least in certain parts of the community, I think is really quite new. In fact, the last time there was a *daf yomi siyyum*, people weren't so much mentioning that there were some women who do this too, whereas this time around, I think, in many of the talks and writing about the *daf yomi*, it was mentioned that some women do this too. So, it's here in a different kind of a way and in fact, in a certain way, it's almost become mundane. In preparation for coming here, I downloaded from the web something from Midreshet Lindenbaum's website in June. It's just a list of *mazal tov*s, and the last one says "Mazal tov to

one of our *ramim*, Ms. Noa Jesselsohn, and her husband, Rav Yitzchak Blau, on the birth of Tehilla Nava. "One of our *ramim*"—for those who don't know, *ram* stands for *reish metivta*. It's a traditional name for one of the *roshei yeshiva*, one of the people who teaches in an advanced study institute. A couple of years ago, nobody had heard of a female *ram*, and at this point, we can say "one of our *ramim*, Noa Jesselsohn." To me, that's quite revolutionary. Learning *Torah* is the cultural marker within Judaism. It's what matters most within the culture. As such, it has been the primary cultural boundary between men and women. The breaking of this boundary, the fact that women share this cultural space, is inherently significant as part of a revolutionary transformation. When we can talk about a *ram* and her name happens to be Noa, that is in and of itself revolutionary.

The second point I wanted to make is that it does not bother me when there are pockets—individual women, groups of women, or institutions of learning—in which women who learn buy into most of the system as it is. First of all, I believe strongly that we need to be educating in such a way that allows for different people to come to different conclusions, to different places, to different paths. I would be very suspicious of any educational setting that predetermines the conclusions to which women should come in the course of their learning. I think that *talmud Torah*, to be authentic, must allow for this. I'm happy that there are women who, on the one hand, have chosen to live a life that challenges the status quo with respect to *talmud Torah* but who nevertheless find that they can accept the tradition in other ways. That's not my own personal conclusion, but it makes me happy that our community is diverse enough to include that.

But secondly, in terms of the community, I think that for revolutions to take place, it

takes not only people who stand on the outside and try to challenge the system, and not only people who stand on the inside but try to change the system, but also people who stand absolutely on the inside, yet whose very presence represents a challenge to the core of the system. I'm thinking, for example, about the *yoatzot* program, the women who are being educated to answer questions about *niddah*. This program and the women are sometimes criticized: aren't we simply teaching them to replicate the system as it is? Maybe so, but nevertheless, I think that is part of the revolution. I think it's very important. I want to offer a quote from my first professor when I went to Barnard, a professor at Columbia at the time named Nathan Huggins. He later taught in this town at the black studies program at Harvard. In his book, *Black Odyssey*, he talks about free blacks before the Civil War, right before abolition, and about the choices that some of them made. He says, "To identify with white authority, to show himself in tune with community interests rather than those of his own race, might do more for the uplift of his people than to be run out of state as an abolitionist hothead." Huggins is not saying we don't need abolitionists, but he's saying that it really takes both to work together to make change.

The third point that I wanted to make is that my own sense—and I'm not a sociologist—is that the first wave of any subordinate group that tries to take its place within the dominant culture employs strategies that are different from those that the second wave can employ. Freed slaves didn't celebrate African culture. They tried to show that they could succeed in white culture. It takes another one hundred years to be able to invent Kwanzaa and celebrate it. I suspect that this has been true of women entering the fields of medicine and law and business. They need to dress and play like men before they can dress and play like women. This has

certainly been true with women's learning. The first wave tries to show that they can learn like a man and talk like a man and *shuckel* like a man. They're not trying to learn in any different way. They need to show that they can be just like the men—but just a little better than the men. It may be sad that people have to do that, and it may be sad that people might even buy into the value of the very system that has oppressed them or marginalized them—though they may not buy into that. But, it is, I think, an inevitable and necessary stage along the way of the transformation of any group from being subordinate and invisible within a culture to taking their place as shapers of the culture. So buying into the system is as much as part of the revolution, in my mind, as standing outside and challenging the system. As I've said, it's often the insider who's most effective. Ideally, you need both the insiders and the outsiders, and in this generation we are fortunate to have both.

The more learning programs there are, and the more advanced learning women take for granted, and the more learned women there are, the more there will simply be those who will make change. I put a trust in *Torah* and the strength of intellectual inquiry and in people. You never know the path that somebody will take long term, even if they start out buying in—over the course of their lives, over the course of life experiences, the role that they will have. I want to make the caveat, though, that we're not yet there, in terms of making the highest level of learning available to women. The reason doesn't only have to do with whether or not we have enough adult programs that challenge women on an advanced level; it has to do also with the education of the women who are going into those programs. We need to pay more attention to elementary school and to high schools and make sure that, when the women are graduating high school, they are already at a stage of learning that these adult programs can take them all the

way.

Finally, I want to offer some reflections on the impact that I think that learning can have on *women* in relation to the issue of change. It doesn't mean that it has this impact on all women. I'm very aware that it doesn't. (When I say "learning," by the way, I mean learning in the classical sense in which it has dominated the male Jewish curriculum for the past several hundred years. I'm talking about advanced Talmud learning. I want to put that out there.)

Number one, learning generates confidence. Learning generates a sense of authenticity, and becoming truly learned can give a person the confidence to make decisions and to act. You can do some pretty radical things and still feel very much a part of the tradition if you're deeply involved in *talmud Torah*.

The second point I wanted to make is that learning can actually keep people focused on the real stuff, meaning what is really within the bounds and what's not within the bounds. What's really *issur* and what's really *mutar*, as opposed to what people say, what makes people comfortable, what we're used to. It doesn't always, but it *can* do that. Often, for both women and men, people who care about learning, and who put *Torah* at the center, end up being surprisingly open to a range of possibilities within *halakha*, even if they still accept the limits of the text as the limits of possibility.

The third thing I wanted to say is that access to one thing aligns with access to other things. For many women, it's natural that, just as they have access to learning, they should have access to the other things that define participation in Jewish life: *talit*, *tefillin*, *minyan*—and by *minyan*, I mean *minyan*. For some people, being a learned woman makes it not only unacceptable but simply inconceivable to be excluded from the things that every man, learned or

not, committed or not, has access to. It's one thing not to be welcomed into *shul* with an *aliyah* when you know that men are. It's another thing when you see men whom you can learn circles around getting a *khibud* while you remain invisible. So I think that having learning, for some women, makes it natural to have those other things as well.

And the fourth thing I wanted to say—and maybe this gets to the question that Gloria asked about what kind of learning is useful—is that authentic, unfettered learning, learning without boundaries, generates a sense of possibility, a disposition to eschew predrawn boundaries. Learning, especially within the Talmudic tradition, which in its essence encourages all possibilities to be examined, and within an intellectual tradition that encourages analysis, intellectual boldness, and creativity, disposes people to go as far as they can go. In other words, I think that there's a correlation between the notion of learning and the notion of accomplishment and doing what needs to be done.

I just want to point out as a caveat at the end that, for the most part, it's not control of the sources per se that makes for change, in the sense of people using the sources to make arguments for why things should or can be different. Working with the sources to justify change is only one small part of the process, which allows some people to justify their involvement in doing things that they have already largely decided that it is right to do. This is important, but it's not where change really comes from. Change really comes from people doing things differently, and what I've tried to show is how women learning per se makes things different, as well as how learning can contribute to a woman's disposition to do things differently.

Gloria Greenfield: We will now take some questions from the floor.

Q: I am Carol Newman, president of JOFA. This question is for Esther Krauss. At a JOFA

conference, men and women were talking about asking their daughters if they wanted a *bat mitzvah*. I said, "Do you ask your son if he wants a *bar mitzvah*?" I start with that because of *megillah* reading. How would you say the girls in your school did not want the *megillah*? I heard the same thing about *pelloch* [?]in Israel. Why give them a choice? Rabbi Yehudah Henken's book just came out that said that women can read *megillah*. Rabbi Henken told me that in mishva [?] the women do. Why give a choice? Why not teach them that this is what is?

Esther Krauss: First of all, because I'd be out of a job! In a high school setting, you are dependent on numbers, and [you cannot alienate] large segments of the community because of the positions that you take. So therefore you have to choose the battles. What I did in that particular situation was to say to the two young women who came to me, "You're right, but don't be naïve in terms of thinking that it's going to be fine in eyes of the community." I said I would put it to the faculty, which I did. I put it to the faculty, I put it to other people in the community. I knew that it was not going to happen, but I told them, "Do it in your own home, and I will personally be there." I and the assistant principal of the school attended that *megillah* reading. That was as far as I was able to go.

Q: Hi, I'm Rachel Klein. I'm president of my family. I have three questions, and I have a thought after that. First, you said we have to start by dressing and playing like men before we can dress and play like women. I'm wondering if each of you could think about what would it look like if we dressed and played like women. I feel very much that I was taught in schools that were styled by men's learning, but they invited women to learn, and I'm wondering what would our schools look like if they were geared towards a unique way that women can learn. I'm wondering not just about the way that it would look in the classrooms, but also the way it would

look for our teachers. For example, if we wanted our female teachers to be there for *daven*ing, we might have to start classes later, because they have to drop off their kids first at daycare. That's really challenging. Right now, at Maimonides [school], we have very few women in the *tefillah*, because we're blessed with beautiful, yummy people to take care of.

Part of that question is, what would *bat mitzvah* celebrations look like if we were actually teaching our daughters to do what they're going to do in real life? I feel like a lot of *bat mitzvahs* are pretending to be men, and we're not. Most of us are not going to do that every *Shabbat*, and most of us aren't doing that every week.

And the third question I have is how can we challenge parents, the parents of these beautiful children and young women, to model what they want for their daughters? For men and women to talk to their daughters in such a way that it assumes that they're interested, and also that our adult women are learning, not just our daughters. I'm falling into the danger zone here. It's very hard to teach girls *Torah* on a high level when they're getting the message at home that they can pick and choose. If I have parents coming to parent-teacher conferences who are not dressed according to *halakha*, and who speak *l'shon harah* at their *Shabbes* tables, and are not keeping *halakha*, and who don't put *daven*ing on a high level, and who don't attend *shul*, or don't go on time, it's really hard to advocate for all this. I'm wondering how you can advocate study without full commitment and practice?

Devora Steinmetz: Wow. I'm glad I didn't have that list in advance. I heard five questions, even though you labeled them as three, so I'm just going to address one or two of the things you mentioned. I have no idea what it means to dress like a woman, play like a woman, learn like a woman. How do I know? I'm a woman. I do what I do. I assume that's what men do. So I wasn't

suggesting that I had a preconceived idea of what women's learning is, or even that women's learning is different. My own take on feminism is neither that women are just like men, nor that women are inherently different from men. My own take on feminism is to give people the whole range of opportunity. Ask them to go as far as they can go, and let's see what comes out. That's how I educate young children as well. Every kid in front of me is different. Give them all the opportunities, and let's see what they do with it. The idea of prejudging what it means to learn like a woman is different from assuming, as I hope we do in education, that everybody learns differently.

In terms of *bat mitzvah* celebrations, I'm in a different place from you. I think *bar* and *bat mitzvah* celebrations should not be so cookie-cutter. They should not have parties at all, as far as I'm concerned. You know, a *kiddush*, without liquor, after shul would be more than enough. For each *bar* and *bat mitzvah* celebration we probably should work with the family, work with the child, on what makes sense. I'm not against bat mitzvahs where they *leyn*, even though they're not going to be doing that, because as far as I'm concerned, they should and will be doing that. So I have no problem with that. If we're talking about working with each child on what really makes sense in terms of their own development and their own talents, I'm all for it. If we're talking about prejudging that for some reason for girls it needs to be different, I simply don't agree with that.

In terms of your issue of enabling women to come to *daven* in the morning, I think, in general, as a founder and administrator of a school, there are huge problems with the structure of schools in terms of allowing men and women teachers to grow, to develop, to live like human beings. I think all of this needs to be taken into account, and I don't know that the issue is

different for women than for men. In general, what we need to do is restructure our workplaces for families.

As far as parents modeling for their kids, that's huge. I'm not going to go there right now. I want other people to have something to say.

Devorah Zlochower: Well, Devora said basically everything I was going to say, so I guess I'll take the last question. Although I also happen to be of the mindset that individual differences are probably greater than gender differences. Therefore it's hard for me to imagine what it means to dress and learn as a woman as opposed to as a man, except that it should feel authentic and real, and be an expression of who you are and you feel. You should be really present in that moment and not play acting. That develops from having done it for a long enough time that it is part of your personality and part of who you are. I have chosen very deliberately to live in a little bubble. I live in Riverdale. I attend the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. I teach at Drisha, and I send my children to Beit Rabban**.** Therefore, it's hard for me to sit here and prescribe what should or should not be done.

I do feel, though, that it is very important to send messages in which girls' choices and girls' values and the values of true *Torah* life for girls are emphasized from such a young age that the option of choosing a *bat mitzvah* that has a very strong spiritual, ritual, learning component is a given. What it looks like? I'm not here to make choices for anybody. Just like I have no idea what my sons' *bar mitzvahs* will look like. Hopefully, we will work it out, depending on what their exact needs and talents are.

The modeling question is always interesting for me personally, because I, like most of my colleagues at Drisha, have sons exclusively. There seems to be some sort of conspiracy going

on that if you graduate the three-year program, you cannot have a daughter; but if you're a man teaching women in the *bat mitzvah* class, you only have daughters, so you can be totally surrounded by women. So on a personal level, I have very serious concerns about what I model for my sons as a Jewish woman, and how much do I want them to see me as Jewish woman versus a Jew, right? Their father they're going to relate as a Jew. Are they going to relate to me as a Jew, or as a Jewish woman? To be totally upfront about it, one of the major pieces in my decision to start wearing a *talit* when my first son was born had to do with trying to minimize some of the differences that he would see between what his father did and what I did. It is a project in the making.

Esther Krauss: In terms of this role-modeling issue—I've been involved in founding four institutions. The one before this last one was a *Torah* institute for adult women. What I found was that adult women who have not grown up in an environment in which [learning] was part of their self-identity and part of what they were doing, had a very hard time with it and were very uncomfortable with it, particularly when you do *khevruta* learning, etc. I think it has to be a very gradual thing. For example, *Simchat Torah,* for me, was always a good time to stay home and read a good book and learn. But now I show my face because as a *rebbitzin*, I needed to be in *shul* for a few minutes. But, I never spent a lot of time in shul on *Simkhat Torah*. I found, however, that many women in my community felt very left out. So—talking about unique celebrations—I devised a program in which, on *Simkhat Torah* night, we asked a few women to have *divar Torah*. Whoever wanted to would give a short *divar Torah*, and we sang. We sang together, and I couldn't get over how happy the women were. It was much more comfortable for them and much more authentic for them than dancing with the *sefer Torah*, which they didn't

exactly know what to do with when we were in a circle.

I think it's a gradual process. I think that the young women we're educating today hopefully will be different kinds of role models, and they will encourage their daughters, and they will show their daughters what it's all about.

Q: I guess I have a two-part question as well. I was wondering what you saw as the place of single-sex education, particularly male-only education. Do you see the end goal as being a universe in which all Jewish education is coeducational? Is there ever an acceptable place for male single-sex, as there are a lot of places for female single sex?

The second part is about my first experience with adult Orthodox study. I was at what I guess you'd call a *haredi* women's yeshiva in Israel, while my husband went to the Conservative *yeshiva* in Israel. He had a female *havruta,* and I had a female *havruta*, and he commented to me at one point that some of the people in class talked about whether or not their wives and husbands were jealous of their *havruta,* and about the romantic aspect of *havruta* study. I'm wondering if that's an issue for teenagers. For adults there is something very special about the *havruta* relationship and how that plays out for the husband-wife relationship.

Devorah Zlochower: I'll start with the first one. As I noted in my little bio, I grew up in a *haredi* community, and I tend to be somewhat suspicious of single-sex education. I also direct Drisha, which is a single-sex institution, so there you go. But when it comes to male single-sex education, what are the problems? Can we say that there are advantages to it? And I think there are some. The disadvantages obviously have to do with the ideology and the attitude towards women in the institution. If it's an institution in which women are on the faculty, and women are teaching central and important subjects, and the messages are that women are valued and women

are entitled, then I think it would be possible to construct a school in which you could have male students alone, and it would not necessarily lead to the results that I think it has so often led to generally in *yeshiva* education.

As a mother of young sons, I am often concerned about the fact that educators, particularly of young children, are almost exclusively female. I have—let's just call them very all-American boys. Having male role models and male teachers in the classroom is something I want for them.

As far as the havruta question—I have not really had the experience of a coed havruta. The one coed havruta that I had was my husband, and we did that in the first year of our marriage. We studied the *daf yomi* together, but after I ended up crying almost every night, I decided that that probably wasn't such a great idea. That's just my own little story. I realized that he just knew a whole lot more than me, and I was going to have to stop competing with him and accept that. But I think a havruta relationship can have all sorts of interesting dynamics. I certainly have seen my fair share of all sorts of emotional ties, both positive and negative, so I can't come up with one answer. I think it has to do with are you comfortable or not? You know, if it makes you uncomfortable, then that's something you need to say. If it doesn't make you uncomfortable, great. I don't think there's anything particularly wrong with that. It really depends on what is going on. The havruta relationship does have the potential to be very intense, but I don't necessarily think that intense relationships between males and females have to be connoted negatively.

Female Speaker: I'll just address the coed question. I think that Devorah's description of this male *yeshiva* is a fantasy, utopian. I don't know of any male *yeshivot* in which that philosophy

exists. As a matter of fact, I think it's one of the problems even in coed environments, where the Talmud teachers are male, and the Bible teachers, the *tanach* teachers are female.

Esther Krauss: I've sat in on Devorah's classes a number of times, and it is not only refreshing but it is, I think, absolutely important that the kinds of things that girls feel when they come across certain things in the text is not glossed over but is addressed. I think that that's absolutely important, because I think that some of those things are really very, very difficult for them to digest. What happens is that they either are alienated from it or they become very angry. So I would say that, generally speaking, I think that single-sex education for women is a very important thing. But, I've always said that one advantage of a woman being in a coed environment is that if she makes it in that coed environment, she's made it big. I think that builds a certain amount of confidence. As the situation stands, it's certainly a better environment for girls; and I think, for boys, a coed environment is better simply because they have that exposure. Yet I would love to see the kind of environment that Devorah talks about.

Q: My name is Mel Newman. *Mayanot* had some very, very intelligent young girls there and I was just curious. Who are the people who put them down as far as their learning goes? What are the specifics? Their parents send them to a school where they know they're going to get an advanced education, so where are the put-downs coming from?

Esther Krauss: It's not a question of their being put down, I think it's basically what they integrate from the society around them. For example, in a discussion that we had about the Talmud curriculum, they're basically happy to be learning. Some of them are very excited about having an opportunity to learn Talmud. But those who are questioning it or who have ambivalence, who are excited and yet uncomfortable with it—some of that comes from the fact

that they have brothers who have gone to *yeshivot* and come home and say this is not the right thing to do. Even parents who send their daughters to school knowing full well what it is sometimes ask, why are you learning this *sefsharad* [?] instead of this one? It's not necessary for a girl to learn, I don't know, *Sanhedrin* or whatever it may be. So it's messages that they're receiving. It's not direct. And then in youth groups with women and even men from other institutions, they have had confrontations in which they have been questioned and challenged about what they're doing by people saying that it's *halakhically* unacceptable. There is this sense of authentic Judaism. The whole attitude towards modern Orthodoxy is, in a sense, ambivalent. Are they really authentic because they're doing the things that they do? It's certainly nothing within the school. The head of the Talmud department was a woman, so that has never been an issue.

Shulamit Reinharz: I just want to make an announcement about two resources that people might like to use to deal with these questions. One is from a senior scientist at Brandeis. Her name is Rosalind Barnett. She wrote a book called *Same Difference*. It came out this year from Basic Books, and it explains exactly what the panel said: there is much greater variation within a sex than there is between. The differences are at the margins, and they are so tiny, they're almost immeasurable. So although it does not come from the Jewish world, I recommend it. The other book I'd like to recommend will be out in about a week and it's called *The J Girl's Guide*. It's about the question that was asked concerning *bat mitzvah*s. It's not designed for any denomination, but it teaches girls how to be a *bat mitzvah* by teaching them not so much how to be a *bat* but how to perform *mitzvot*.

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