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**"WHAT I AM LOOKING FOR IN MY STUDIES"**

**RUMMAGING AMONG THE SURPLUSES OF NEXT PASSOVER**

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Tamar El-Or

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Between 1992 and 1995 I spent quite some time at the Midrasha for Women at Bar-Ilan University, where young women – most of them university students – study Judaism. In the professional jargon of anthropology, the time I spent there is called fieldwork, and my goal was to gather as much and as varied "material" as possible. I studied with the women, hung out, drank coffee and relaxed in the cafeteria on the first floor, read in the pleasant library located in the north wing of the building, and held personal interviews with the students either in their homes or on campus. My fieldwork formed the basis for research on the changing identity and status of women in religious Zionist circles as a result of their increased participation in Jewish studies, a trend that is growing rapidly.<sup>1</sup> To a certain extent, the project was an outgrowth of questions of "Knowledge / Power / Gender" that I posed in my study on women of the Gur Hassidic sect.<sup>2</sup>

As part of the process of sorting and classifying the information gathered to write the study<sup>3</sup> ("field notes" in the professional jargon), only certain materials were selected while the remainder (quantitatively the largest part) was stored as surplus stock, so-to-speak. Anthropological mythology has often dealt with the relationship between

1. *Next Passover: Literacy and Identity of Young Zionist Women*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press (forthcoming).

2. This study is described in my book *Educated and Ignorant: Ultraorthodox Jewish Women and Their World*, Boulder, CO., 1994.

3. This study will be published in *Next Passover*.

the material included in a study and that which is relegated to the stockroom. The most famous story relates to the personal diaries of the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinovsky which were published posthumously. They shed a completely new light on his work and influenced subsequent anthropological writing and the place given to personal matters in a scientific text. Occasionally, years after their "major study," scholars publish short articles in which they return to their personal surplus stockroom and select stored items that are then studied with the perspective made possible only by the passage of time. These articles teach us about the process of selection and classification, or the reasons why certain material was selected and other material stored.

The material presented in a "major" study ordinarily supports the main body of the proclaimed thesis. This is not to say that other material challenging the thesis or adding to its complexity and diversity will not be included. The assumption is that the researcher did her best to represent all the findings. Nevertheless, the sheer quantity of material gathered during extended fieldwork clearly provides abundant findings on a wealth of issues that cannot be dealt with in a single book.

The conversation presented here was left in the storehouse. At first reading, it appears that it was excluded for structural reasons. Most of the evidence I had used in my study was based on observations in classes and on interviews. This conversation, however, was held at the end of a class on the Homiletic Interpretations of the Sages and began because of my presence in the classroom. I generally did not speak with the women during or after classes. Most of our discussions were held during the long interviews I conducted with forty of them. The women who attended the Midrasha were neither friends nor classmates of mine. Except for Rachel – who approached me because of her own distress, and perhaps one or two other students – I had no one to talk to. The fact that on that day I became involved in a conversation with a number of Midrasha students was an exceptional event.

I reconstructed the dialogue from memory in November 1993, one hour after it took place, when I came home from the Midrasha. At the time I gave it the title *One of Those Days*. By this I think I wanted to indicate routine fieldwork on the one hand, and on the other imply that that was a day on which nothing went as planned.

Reading the material three years after completion of my book may reveal additional reasons why the records were excluded. These reasons may also shed new light on some of the conclusions of the research and on its acceptance by the community it sought to study.

Today I wound up in the first row of the attached seats. Usually I avoided sitting there. They can only be moved by moving the rod, or axis, connected to the desk. You can hardly move or even cross your legs – and I found it annoying. By my side, on one of the single chairs located along the walls, sat a young woman whose hair was gathered in a crocheted velvet net that left her the hair at the front of her head visible. Blue eyes looked through oval-shaped wire-framed glasses. A beautiful woman. I think I had noticed her during previous classes, but she had always worn hats. She looks at me attentively during class and then cannot keep herself from asking: “Do you study here?”

I reply in a few words, but prefer to write her a short note explaining that I am actually a researcher from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem studying how they learn. She returns a note asking whether Rav Cohen (Head of the Midrasha and the class instructor) knows about it, and I nod yes. We continue our written exchanges during the class. As I nonchalantly pass her the paper while presenting an innocent face to the instructor, I feel as if I am back in school, passing notes. I tell her that last year I studied with Tamar Ross and that I chose this course because it was supposed to be very different. She asks whether I hand out questionnaires and indicates that she disagrees with the Rabbi’s approach and therefore all her written notes of his arguments are preceded with “The Rabbi says that...”

At the end of the class we find time for a more comfortable talk. A friend walks up to her, and I learn that her name is Dana, and the other girl is called Ariella. Meanwhile my friend Rachel joins our small circle. Our conversation attracts more and more students who gather around Dana and me. At a certain point, I want to get up to talk to them from a standing position identical to theirs, but I am afraid that such a movement would indicate impatience, and therefore remain seated.

**Dana:** “I don’t like the way he teaches. It’s strange, he was so highly recommended, but I’m disappointed. I just came from a class in a different department in the university and it’s simply a different world. They talk about the same texts, but it is as if they were teaching two totally different subjects. You see, this is exactly what you’re interested in. I’m really curious to hear what you find. Yesterday I spoke with someone who teaches here, and he told me that he asked the students what they expected of their studies at the Midrasha. Exactly what you want to know.”

“So...” **Ariella** urged.

**Dana:** “According to him, the women said they were not interested in research or scientific background. They want the moral and ideological aspects. That’s what they are looking for. Something educational and not intellectual. That’s disappointing, isn’t it?”

**Ariella** wore a long narrow black skirt and a huge blue top that almost reached her knees. She wore her black curly hair down and smiled timidly before joining the conversation:

“That is exactly what I’m looking for, and that’s why I don’t care what you say about Rabbi Cohen. I don’t feel insulted if someone tells us to our face ‘you are wrong’. I want to hear his truth. If he says ‘you are wrong’, it’s a sign that he believes in what he is saying and then I can be convinced. And when you say that he himself said at the beginning that it’s an interpretation of the Sages and that there are different approaches, and that he won’t go into them, but will only give his own, that’s OK, that’s how it should be. He believes his interpretation is the truth, so he speaks from the heart, and then I can think about whether it convinces me or not. After all, there is only one truth and everyone tries to attain it through their own interpretations. For example, today Rabbi Cohen said that a place has no sanctity of its own, but that sanctity is ascribed to a place, or is determined in the *halakha*. On the other hand I heard Rabbi Hess say that The Land of Israel is holy in itself, that its sanctity is inherent and emanates from it.”

“So what do you do with this”, I asked

**Ariella:** I decide according to what suits me. Here I follow Rabbi Hess. This is what suits me now. Perhaps some time when I’m at a higher level, more developed intellectually, I’ll be able to think differently. For now, it suits me this way.”

“And will you follow Rabbi Hess in all matters or argue with Rabbi Cohen about everything?” I continued.

“No, not necessarily. For every subject there is a different choice.”

I looked at **Ariella** and tried to offer her an explanation for her thought processes: “One could say that you wander through the Midrasha and elsewhere as if you were in a market where absolute truths are offered for sale by various people, and you are looking for the one that suits you. This seems to be a process of choice that is no less tiring and relative.”

**Ariella** thinks a moment about the image I have offered, smiles and continues:

“Yes, actually, yes, I choose. However, contrary to the relativity Dana mentioned I still believe there is only one truth that we must seek. One can’t accept her statement that all kinds of approaches can be correct. Every commentator offers what he believes to be the one absolute truth; or he submits the best truth available at present until the coming of the Messiah, at which time there will be a single unassailable absolute truth.”

**Dana:** “I really don’t agree with you. I don’t want every teacher talking as if he had a monopoly on the truth. I want him to indicate constantly that what he says is his opinion and that other opinions are also possible. I don’t tend toward someone like Rabbi Cohen who speaks about theory and then dives into practical interpretations.”

**Micki** who had been standing quietly on the side joined the conversation:

“I don’t like it either. He starts out by saying ‘this is my interpretation’ but when one of us offers her own interpretation he doesn’t want to listen and then he tells her that

what she said isn't right. What does 'not right' even mean?"

**Ariella:** "Whatever he thinks is right, of course, that's what he thinks."

**I:** "But don't forget that he's standing in front of a class. A man, a rabbi, an older person, facing fifty young women, whom he occasionally calls 'girls'. In such a situation it is easy to forget that it's just what he thinks, although it may seem to be 'the way it is'. How do you protect your thoughts? How do you stay afloat in this sea of absolute thoughts without drowning?"

**Ariella** smiles. Apparently my images embarrass her. She waits a few seconds and then continues: "Well, of course, that's the way it always works in class. At home you have to think for yourself. Here I listen with all my heart, I always think of the practical side of things, I don't enjoy theory like Dana. I always try to see how things connect to my life."

**Dana:** "Hey, wait a minute. Do you think I don't see the practical side? I simply have a more pluralistic approach. I extract the pluralism from the texts – the 'seventy faces of the Torah', the 'Both of these views are the words of the living God', the *midrashim* that show how everything depends on interpretation. I regard *halakha* as a practical chapter that is not always derived from such thoughts, and that's why I don't like the immediate connection made between what one thinks and the *halakha*. For example, Tamar Ross teaches Rav Kook, but she doesn't mention anything practical. She separates his philosophy from the practical precepts."

**Ariella:** "I don't like that."

**Rachel**, whom I had met on another occasion, is a young woman struggling to find a way to dance ballet and remain religious. At this point in the conversation, she turns to Ariella: "If there's a painting in only one color, and another in many colors, which is prettier?"

**Ariella** who is not inclined to answer on the spot, looks at Rachel, thinks, and tries: "Of course many colors appear to be beautiful, but they can also be a mishmash, a kind of confusing jumble where you can't see the forest for the trees."

**Rachel:** "Why? You look, enjoy the colorfulness, and understand whatever you want from it."

**Dana** looks at her watch, apparently thinking of her next class. She gets up, straightens her calf-length skirt and says half to herself and half to us: "Perhaps I am the exception here. In Rabbi Breuer's class, which I enjoy very much, there are only a few women. But Rabbi Cohen's class, which annoys me, is packed. What I'm looking for in my studies is what Ariella can't stand and what she wants upsets me. C'mon, we're late."

### The Point of "Remnants"

In my book *Next Passover* I invested much effort in portraying the complexity of the new situation it describes. I asserted that religious Zionism is undergoing a revolution that is spurred on by the young women who dedicate themselves to the intensive study of texts (primarily Talmud) from which they had been prevented in the past. This innovation has had a ripple effect, encouraging women as "believing practitioners" to increase the scope of their activity within their communities. Study leads to an increased sense of belonging and raises questions that require answers in synagogues, *halakhic* interpretations, rabbinical courts, around the dinner table and elsewhere. The force and magnitude of the gender revolution over the past six years is attested by the burgeoning number of students, the establishment of over twenty Jewish Studies colleges for women who have completed military or national service, and the intense preoccupation of religious Zionism (in newspapers, conferences, and workshops) with these questions and their implications.

Nevertheless, a large sector of the religious Zionist public is not party to this revolution. Some hesitate, others oppose it, and there are those who are not even aware of it or who disregard its force, deeming it a marginal phenomenon of a small minority – members of "Meimad," women from religious kibbutzim, or some Jerusalemites originally from English-speaking countries. These people appear sporadically in the book, either as reluctant participants or as people attempting to deny the very existence of the new movement.

Today, though, it seems to me that not a single figure in the book, male or female, is given an opportunity to introduce ideas from outside the debate. That is, a character such as one that I represent, is unable to shed light on the various facets of the tension created by the change, except as someone who speaks for herself outside the discussion. Actually it is difficult to imagine a place outside the debate, if the voices presented are always students of the college. However, women such as these existed before the onset of the revolution (the Bar-Ilan Midrasha for Women has been in existence since 1975 and unlike women's colleges with feminist agendas such as Bruria, Matan, and Nashmat, it never viewed Jewish feminism as one of its priorities, quite the contrary).

Consequently, the views recorded here are based on the motivation for study without *a priori* reference to any feminist aspect. Nevertheless, readers are warned that there may be an undercurrent of such views in my writing.

I hope that this analysis will teach us two things: a) the characteristics of "surplus" material in field notes; b) how and why it is that so many women belonging to the religious Zionist community, even those who partake in intensive and critical study of Judaic texts, do not feel part of the gender revolution. One can guess that Ariella

will speak on their behalf, but it will be through the emerging dialogue that she makes herself heard.

#### Dana

There were many students in Rabbi Cohen's class. Some sat near me and saw what I was doing, but it was Dana who tried to find out my true purpose there. Perhaps my appearance made it clear that I was not one of them – a signal that is potentially either attractive or offputting. It attracted Dana. Apparently the reason she approached me was to signal her distinctiveness, her "otherness" from her classmates. I was familiar with that gesture used by a speaker to distinguish herself from the group as a whole, suggesting by her words that she "is not like the rest of them." Most of the women I interviewed indicated that they were happy to be interviewed, although they did not consider themselves "representative women."

Dana's definition of herself as different was, in this case, an intellectual step, and related mainly to her expectations from her studies. The first signal she gave me was through the little notes she passed me during class. In one of them she wrote that next to all the Rabbi's statements she writes "the Rabbi says that..." To maintain a constant connection between the message and messenger, Dana does not permit the Rabbi's words to be detached from his person, lest they become "general truths" in her notebook. Although she takes notes in a notebook she uses only for his class, and she knows exactly who said the thing she has written down and when it was said, she finds it important to set down during the class that what she hears and what she copies down are primarily and perhaps no more than "what the Rabbi said."

Dana's signal to me sought to indicate her uniqueness as a student and her position vis-à-vis the rabbi and the other students as she perceived them. Indeed, at the beginning of our frank and informal conversation, she repeated her dissatisfaction with the class and the difference between her opinions and those of the many students who had recommended it. Dana is curious to know the findings of my study, to know how the women studying at the college, from whom she wants to differentiate herself, will be portrayed. Meanwhile she tells me about an instructor at the college who asked his students about their expectations. With his question, the anonymous inquirer laid the entire spectrum of possibilities before them ("what do you expect from your studies?"); and they – the anonymous responders – answered unanimously (Unanimously? The majority? Those who chose to speak?) that they had no research, academic, or intellectual interest and sought morals and philosophy. Dana is disappointed. Her friends-sisters are attracted only to morality and education (self-righteousness?).

Dana's position as a student and what she views as the significance of study placed her in the minority at the college. She likes Tamar Ross' class, which is hard to pass, she attends Rabbi Breuer's class, which has a very small enrollment, and she suffers in classes that are considered popular.

In the heated dialogue between her and her good friend Ariella, the expectations of both young women emerge. Ariella, the "standard student" from whom Dana wants to differentiate herself, speaks clearly, as I will soon hear, and Dana gets the opportunity to explain her discontent. For the secular listener, her reasoning is easy to follow. It is rooted in "pluralistic" expectations, the centrality of interpretations and hermeneutics, the discrepancy between thought and the *halakha*, and doubts concerning the existence of an absolute coherent truth. Dana makes simultaneous use of traditional and contemporary signifiers directed towards the same goal. Hence her use of a current expression such as "extract from the texts" along with the traditional "the Torah has seventy aspects" and "both of these views are the words of the living God."

It is reasonable to assume that Dana and Ariella have held similar conversations in the past. However the present discussion was unique in that it took place in public, in front of the small audience that surrounded us, and in that I was present, the stranger researching the source and cadence of the debate. Ariella appeared agitated and embarrassed but not hesitant.

#### Ariella

As soon as the Rabbi's class was over, Ariella crossed the classroom from one side to the other to call her friend Dana. During the half hour between the end of this class and the beginning of the next, they could sit in the cafeteria or chat outside, sitting on the fence or the lawn. But Dana was talking to me and Ariella listened. With other listeners, her voice became clearer, cutting through the confines that enclose her and other girls "who are looking for clear answers," and provided her (and perhaps the others as well) with more precise reasons.

I shall use Ariella's voice to try to understand the standpoint of those who "seek the truth" which Dana regards with a certain disdain, disappointment, and feelings of alienation.

No attempt will be made to enter into the "philosophical viewpoints" underlying the speakers' views. The study will focus on identifying the standpoint, in the sense of positioning, which each student seeks for herself: what position she adopts between herself and the college, and within it; when reading texts; and when confronting the instructors and their declarations, as well as the other students.

Ariella declares herself a person who "believes that there is only a single truth

which must be sought." She therefore seeks "sellers of truths." She uses absolute values when describing the function of instructors. She refers to them in words such as "He believes that his interpretation is true, he speaks from the heart, I am not insulted when someone tells us 'you are mistaken'." Ariella wants to hear people who are convinced that their words constitute the one and only absolute truth. She is not interested in pliant, partial, or hesitant interpretations. She wants an expounder who regards his interpretation as the only possibility. She believes that only that type of individual is capable of speaking "from the heart." All she has to do in class is to listen "with all her heart" without questions, prejudice, or fear.

When questioned about her capability as woman-student to listen "with all her heart" to a man-rabbi, she did not argue. She only said that the task did not end in class. The significant work is done without interference, alone, at home. It is to that private place that she transfers the struggle about truths and posits it in her body, her mind, her heart, her mental state, and in time. It is her responsibility to "think," to "be convinced," to "examine" whether "this suits me now," and "to seek." The words with which she refers to herself are softer, more dynamic, moving in time and in space, from class to class, from instructor to instructor, and from subject to subject. Ariella likes to portray herself as a busy, active woman who is responsible for finding "the truth." But she is aware that this truth may change as she develops intellectually, along with her capacity to experience a certain truth at a certain time, according to her needs at that point.

A critical examination of Dana's and Ariella's respective philosophical viewpoints would indicate that Dana is a critical person, and that Ariella is one of those moralistic women at the college seeking the one-dimensional. However I think that the picture of the position and function of Ariella as a student tends to blur this binary definition.

Is Ariella looking for a function that is less critical than the one Dana wants to take upon herself?

#### Rachel

Towards the end, after having listened quietly to the dialogue between Dana and Ariella, Rachel maneuvered herself into the inner circle and offered a parable. She displayed two paintings to the speakers: one drawn in a single color and the other in a rich variety of colors. Rachel has dedicated her young life to trying to combine religious observance with classical dance, and she tried to transfer the discussion to the level of esthetics. "Which of them is prettier?" she asked Ariella. "Enjoy the wealth," she offers, "for just a moment before extracting that little bit." With this, Rachel perhaps sought to legitimize the strange spot she represents in the painting of religious Zionism;

perhaps she wanted to remind them of the concept of pleasure, also a part of the art of study.

#### Summary

During the conference held by the Religious Women's Forum in July 1999, hundreds of women crowded the halls of the Renaissance Hotel in Jerusalem. Their bodies and voices, the issues raised for discussion, and the reasons given in them, delineated the sweeping changes occurring within religious Zionism. The average age was thirty. Dana, Ariella, and Rachel were not there. I would bet that Dana or the "Danas" will attend one of the future conferences, while Ariella will not feel the need to be there, or might not even know that it is taking place. Be that as it may, Ariella's voice is a layer that is no less important in the erection and stabilization of the structure in which Jewish women relate seriously and critically to Judaic studies as they pursue truths their mothers did not seek.

Translated by Gabriela Williams