

# J<sub>o</sub>FA Journal

JEWISH ORTHODOX FEMINIST ALLIANCE

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## From Our President Sing a New Song

By Carol Kaufman Newman

I am an endangered species—I still make Pesach at home. While not nearly as grueling as it once was, it is still a lot of work. I often get caught up with the cleaning, shopping and cooking and forget to take time for the studying. My friend Alice, who is not observant, recently started making *seder*. As she studied the *Hagadah*, she would periodically call me with the most wonderful questions, and, for just a moment, I would sit and remember what the holiday is all about.

It is hard to find the “new” in something you have been participating in for over fifty years. I love the old traditions passed on to me by my parents. I want to keep them for the next generation. However, I also want my granddaughters to feel part of the extraordinary story of the Exodus from Egypt. The women were, after all, also part of the miracle. It was Yocheved, Moses’ mother, who had the faith to bring a child into the world. It was the midwives, Shifrah and Pu’ah, who had the courage to deliver the children of the Israelites. And it was Miriam, with her unrelenting optimism, who watched over her brother’s basket as he traveled down the Nile.

I love setting the table before the *seder*, with its traditions old and new. One of the new items on my table is Miriam’s Cup. As I fill this cup with water, I am reminded of the well that accompanied the Israelites through the desert. This well, we are told, was given by God to Miriam to honor her. Miriam’s Cup, the new symbol on my table, allows me to begin a conversation about the women who have been an essential part of the story of the Exodus and of the Jewish people.

The *Midrash* tells us that there are ten occasions when the experience of redemp-

tion found expression in song. One of those is *Shirat HaYam*, the Song at the Sea. There are two versions of this song. First Moses and the children of Israel sing and then:

ותקח מרים הנביאה אחות אהרן את התוף  
בידה ותצאן כל הנשים אחריה בתפלים  
ובמחלות. ותען להם מרים שירו לה' כי  
גאה גאה סוס ורכבו רמה בים.



Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took the tambourine in her hand; and all the women followed her with tambourines and dances. And Miriam called to them: “Sing to God, the most exalted; horse and rider God cast in the sea...(Exodus 15:20-21)

I read the following based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe:

The men sang, and then the women. The men sang...they sang their joy over their deliverance, they sang their yearning for a more perfect redemption—but something was lacking. Something that only a woman’s song could complete. Miriam and her chorus brought to the Song at the Sea the intensity of feeling and a depth of faith unique to womankind.

The *Midrash*, quoted above, goes on to say that the tenth song will be the *shir hadash*, the “New Song” of the ultimate redemption—a time when suffering, ignorance, jealousy and hate will vanish from the earth. So much of our liturgy is filled with references to this “New Song.” Everyday in our morning prayers we recite the words of the Psalmist: “*Shir lo shir hadash*”—Sing to God a new song. At our *seder* we sing again:

ונאמר לפניו שירה חדשה.

Let us sing before God a new song.

As we sit around our *seder* table this year, may we all be privileged to sing the old songs that are part of our heritage. At the same time, let us not be afraid to open ourselves to the new—the *shira hadasha*.

A Happy and Kosher Pesach!

## Fifth International Conference on Feminism & Orthodoxy

Close to a thousand women and men attended JOFA’s Fifth International Conference on Feminism & Orthodoxy in New York, entitled “*Zachar U’Nequevah Bara Otam* (Male and Female God Created Them): Women and Men in Partnership.” Twenty per cent of the attendees at the conference were men, and there were representatives from all over the United States, Israel, England, Canada, and Spain. Partnership was the theme of the day, as participants considered the ways in which women and men are partners in Jewish practice, learning, growth and change. As in the past, sessions explored increasing ritual opportunities for women and examined *halachot* that relate directly to women. However, this conference also addressed broader social questions, examining the larger implications of changing gender roles in Jewish families, institutions, synagogues and schools.



Chavruta study and text sessions.

Dr. Tamar Ross’s opening plenary touched on these issues by examining the consequences of redefining gender roles. Rabbi David Silber, Rabbanit Malke Bina and Rabbi Dov Linzer participated in a forum moderated by Giti Bendheim about the future of Jewish leadership. The session confronted new ideas and tough issues. The likelihood of one day having women as Orthodox rabbis was discussed and viewed by many as an inevitable and positive development.

Many of the conference’s smaller work-

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At JOFA's Third International Conference on Feminism & Orthodoxy in 2000, an exhibit was presented entitled *A Place at the Table: An Orthodox Feminist Exploration of the Seder*. The exhibit was much admired by conference participants. The texts below were originally written for that exhibit by Lisa Schlaff, Tammy Jacobowitz and Andrea Sherman.

## A PLACE AT THE TABLE

### An Orthodox Feminist Exploration of the Seder

**T**he Passover *seder* is a communal celebration, commemorating the journey of the Jewish people from slavery to freedom. An exploration of the Passover rituals from a feminist perspective affords contemporary Jews an opportunity to reveal the strong women's tradition that already exists within Judaism. Inspired by the *seder*, we can enhance and enlighten our understanding of Jewish concepts and further integrate into Jewish tradition the realities of women's lives and contributions. Identifying female motifs and symbols contained within the traditional *seder* can stimulate discussion about the expanding spiritual and intellectual opportunities for women in Orthodox Jewish life.

Feminist ideas and images are woven throughout the fabric of our ancient heritage. Some feminist themes intrinsic to the Passover holiday include the development of women as religious and communal leaders and the connections between the covenantal birth of the Jewish nation, the seasonal rebirth of springtime, and the cycles of the female body. We can also pay tribute to the struggles and gains of Jewish women through the ages and in our own time, and acknowledge women as guardians, teachers and advisors of *halakha*. The Passover themes of birth and liberation speak both to the biological connection of women to the birthing process, and to women's desire for freedom from their circumscribed roles.

By gathering together around a *seder* table of our own creation, may we derive inspiration and strength from one another, and begin to incorporate women's concerns as normative, rather than marginal, components of Jewish spiritual life. Harmonizing our voices with those of our foremothers, may we begin to prepare a place for feminism at the abundant table of Jewish tradition.

**P**assover, a time of liberation, has also been a difficult time for women as we struggle to rid our houses of every last bit of *hametz*. While today our household responsibilities are increasingly shared by women and men alike, our Jewish foremothers alone took on the task of preparing their homes for the holiday. Some viewed this as a labor of love, a means of experiencing the Exodus, while others felt the burden of preparation detracted from the spiritual experience of the *seder*. Today, as we clean our houses, we remember generations of women before us who toiled to ensure that their families would have a *shulhan arukh*, a set table for Passover.

As women were traditionally in charge of household affairs, the Rabbis assumed that women would take on the task of baking *matzah* for the holiday. The job came with a great deal of responsibility—women were entrusted to ensure that no *hametz*

contaminated the dough. The *Mishna* lays out rules for baking the *matzah*:

רבן גמליאל אומר שלש נשים לשות  
כאחת ואפות בתנור אחת זו אחר זו.  
וחכמים אומרים שלש נשים עוסקות  
בבעק כאחת אחת לשה ואחת עורכת  
ואחת אופה. (פסחים ג, ד)

Rabban Gamliel said: Three women may knead the dough together, and bake in the same oven one after another. The Rabbis said: Three women may work with one piece of dough, one kneading, one rolling, and one baking (Pesachim 3:4).

Entrusted with the baking of *matzah*, women were also responsible for ridding their houses of *hametz*. The Jerusalem *Talmud* points to the special zeal of women in performing this *mitzvah*:

הכל נאמנין על ביעור חמץ אפילו נשים...  
הן נאמנות מפני שהן עזילות והן בודקות  
כל שהוא כל שהוא (גמרא פסחים 1:1)

All are trusted with the responsibility of *biur hametz*, including women... Women are especially trustworthy because they are scrupulous in performance of this task, searching every little bit, every little corner (JT Pesachim 1:1).

**A**dopting the tasks of baking the *matzah* and cleaning their homes, women often found that the work was backbreaking and difficult. In the eighteenth century one of the most famous Hasidic figures noticed how hard women worked to bake the *matzah*:

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev discovered that the girls who kneaded the dough for the *matzah* drudged from early morning until late at night. Then he cried aloud to the congregation gathered in the House of Prayer: "Those who hate Israel accuse us of baking the unleavened bread with the blood of Christians. But no, we bake it with the blood of Jews!" The rabbi pronounced the *matzah* "treif" because it was produced through *oshek*, the oppression of workers (M. Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim*).

While we remember the hours upon hours of physical labor our foremothers invested in preparing for Passover, we also note their spiritual contributions to the holiday. In nineteenth century Italy, Rachel Morpurgo wrote the following prayer, invoking our Matriarchs and expressing her wish that the Temple be rebuilt so that the people of Israel may once again offer the Passover sacrifice:

מי שברך אבותינו אברהם יצחק יעקוב  
שרה רבקה רחל ולאה הוא יברך את  
כל קהל עדת ישראל ונוכה ונחיה  
ונעלה להקריב פסחים על גבי המזבח  
שמחים וששים בבנין בית מקדשינו  
במהרה בימינו אמן.

May the One who blessed our ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah, bless the entire congregation of Israel. May we merit and live to make pilgrimages to offer the paschal sacrifice on the altar, happy and rejoicing in the rebuilding of our Temple, speedily in our days. Amen. (Letter dated 1850, reprinted in *Ugav Rachel* 1903)

בכל דור ודור חייב אדם לראות את עצמו  
כאילו הוא יצא ממצרים.

In every generation, we must see ourselves  
as if we went out of Egypt.

**I**n every generation, we reclaim the heroines and heroes of Jewish history whose visions are truly timeless.

Miriam is one such heroine. An





Miriam holding timbrel and women dancing at the Red Sea. *The Golden Haggadah, Spain, probably Barcelona, c.1320. British Library, Add.MS.27210, folio 15r, a.*

instrumental part of the Exodus, she carefully watched over her brother Moses and joyously led the people in song following the crossing of the sea. While Miriam is not mentioned in the *Haggadah* (the name of Moses actually appears only once in Rabbi Yossi the Galilean's elaboration on the number of plagues), her story has been retold throughout the centuries by Jews who look to her as a model of faith, forbearance, and leadership. Miriam's song is heard once again.

The Bible tells us that Miriam "took a timbrel in her hand," and sang:

שירו לה כי גאה גאה סוס ורכבו רמה בים.  
Sing unto God for God is great, a horse and its chariot have drowned in the sea.

However, the Bible does not record the full text of Miriam's song. A complete version of the song of Miriam was found among the Dead Sea Scrolls (1st c. BCE):

God, you are great, the savior, the enemy's hope has died and he is forgotten, they have died in the copious waters, we extol him who raises up, and performs majestically (4Q364: 6,2).

Others took note of Miriam's absence at the *seder* and strove to remember her with ritual. A medieval collection of responsa preserves a dialogue between the people of Kairouan and Rav Sherira Gaon (10th c.):

They asked of the two foods placed on the seder table, and he responded that they symbolize the two messengers, Moses and Aaron, whom God sent to Egypt. There are those who place a third food on the seder table in memory of Miriam, as it says, "And I will send before you Moses and Aaron and Miriam" (Micah 6:4). These three foods are fish, meat, and an egg, which correspond to the three types of foods Israel will eat in the world to come (*Ma'aseh Roke'ach*, 59).

The fish was in memory of Miriam; as both the Bible and *Midrash* associate her with water, the fish is a fitting symbol. It also recalls the fish that the Israelite women fed their husbands in Egypt.



*Midrashic* tradition associates Miriam with the well that followed the people of Israel in the desert, quenching their thirst in time of need. Miriam's well became a symbol of sustenance and healing for Jewish people of all times, and especially for women. A medieval encyclopedia of customs (14th c. France) records the following practice:

ונהגו הנשים לדלות מים במוציא שבת שבארה של מרים בימה של טבריה וכל מוציא שבת מחזירין על כל מעינות ועל כל בארות. וכל מי שהוא חולה ויזדמן לו מים וישתה אפילו כל גופו מוכה שחין מיד נרפה.

It is the custom that women draw water on Saturday night, as we find in the aggadah that the well of Miriam is located in the Sea of Tiberias. Every Saturday night this well taps into all the wells and springs of the world, and all who drink from this water, even if their entire body is full of boils, will be healed (*Kol Bo* 41).

While Miriam is remembered as a healer, she is also invoked as an intercessor. In the Yiddish *tekhines* (individual prayers of Ashkenazi women) the heavenly Miriam is called upon to plead on behalf of her sisters on earth:

In the merit of Miriam the Prophetess, a well of water accompanied the Jews in the desert from the month of Iyar and on. Beloved God, remember us now in her merit, for she sang with the women when the Jews went out of the Red Sea, as it states, "Miriam the Prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took up the drum in her hand." Wake up, Miriam the Prophetess, wake up from your rest and stand in front of the King of all Kings, the Holy One, and beg Him to have pity on us in this month of Iyar! (*Tekhine* for *Shabbat* before *Rosh Hodesh* Iyar).

As we strive to increase women's

involvement in Jewish spiritual life, we can look to Hasidic thought for inspiration. In the early nineteenth century, Rabbi Kalonymos Kalman Epstein interpreted Miriam's dance on the banks of the sea as a symbol of the equality men and women will enjoy in the world to come:

לעתיד יתקן כל אחד חלק נשמתו ויהיה העיגול והקו שווה ולא יהיה אז בחינת דכר ונוקבא... וזאת היתה כוננת מרים הנביאה שהוציאה כל הנשים אחריה ועשתה עמהם הקפות... וזוהי המשיכה אוד עליון אשר אין שם בחינת דכר ונוקבה.

In the future there will no longer be the categories of male and female. All will come to realize the divine light equally. This is just like a circle dance, where every part of the circle's circumference is equidistant from the center. So will all absorb the clear light of divinity equally. This was the intention of the prophetess Miriam. She had all the women follow her and performed circle dances with them, in order to draw

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upon the supernal light from the place where the categories of male and female do not exist (*Ma'or va-Shemesh, B'shalakh*).

בזכות נשים צדקניות נגאלו  
אבותינו ממצרים.

By the merit of the righteous women, our ancestors were redeemed from Egypt.



Deep in the darkness of Egyptian slavery, our foremothers caught glimpses of light. The pyramids of hardship surrounding their vision did not persuade them; they dreamt of openings for themselves and moved swiftly through them. How could they weep at night, when a nation was waiting to be born?

These ingenious women devised elaborate plans to reawaken desire in their work-worn husbands. They fed them, bathed them, and drenched them with sweet-smelling oils—and their magic worked wonders. Our mothers' wombs grew to be as full as pomegranates. The *midrash* relates that each woman could have birthed the whole nation—six hundred thousand in each womb!

Shifrah and Pu'ah, the mighty pair of midwives, defied Pharaoh's strict orders to ensure life continued for a new generation. Girding themselves with the fear of God, they acted willfully and gracefully—and they were successful.

But our mothers' foresight and skill extended beyond the birthing room. With Miriam as their able guide, they greeted God's splitting of the sea with an eruption of their own beautiful music. "From where did they have instruments in the middle of the desert?" asks the *midrash*. They were believers in God's miracles, these women and they were prepared for redemption.

As we greet redemption at Passover each year, we, too, are the midwives of our people. Preparing our houses and families for the holiday is a true labor of love, fueled by fear of God and faith in the future. All year long, as we assume leadership roles in our homes and in the community at large, we see new possibilities where there appears to

## MIRIAM CHAIR



Detail of Front

*Miriam Chair, Miriam Stern, 2000.*  
Part of a series on the ushpizot, the chair was painted in a stylized manner representing Egypt. The back of the chair depicts the Nile and the bulrushes. The front shows Miriam with a tambourine at the Red Sea.

be darkness. We gather strength from Shifrah and Pu'ah, Miriam and Yocheved, joining our forces together to effect change. Let us allow Miriam's song of praise to inspire us and guide our steps.

### Maggid: Telling Our Story

Teaching and learning, *mesorah* and *kabbalah*, they form the core of the *seder* experience. The *halakha* instructs that even if one celebrates the Passover alone, the tale of the Exodus must still be told. The night's obligations cannot be fulfilled without transmission, absorption, renewal. We all shine as teachers at the *seder* as we endlessly explore new ways to engage our children and ourselves. The chain of Jewish tradition and learning is kept strong all year long by our teachers.

As part of this chain, Jewish women have long held the keys to Jewish

knowledge and tradition. Women have carefully molded Jewish identity for their children, as they passed down the intricate ways of our foremothers. At times, Jewish women could not even write the *Alef-Bet*, but they shared the wealth of knowledge, from mouths to ears. Women, along with men, are responsible for the education of their children, as the verse says, "Listen, my son to the lessons of your father; do not stray from the Torah of your mother" (Proverbs 1:8).

Outside the home as well, women are visible as teachers and models of Torah. In ancient times, Miriam, Deborah, and Hannah lit the torch for the public teaching of Torah. Today, we reclaim that early flame. Female Torah giants of our times, like Nechama Leibowitz and Sara Schenirer, have left indelible marks on the ways we study biblical texts. They did not emerge from an unlit path. The *firzogerins*, or female prayer leaders, of Ashkenazi synagogues and the tenacious

female masters of Torah in Sephardi lands were the forebears of our teachers.

We have only begun to witness the impact of female teachers on our community. As more women are trained in Torah study and are afforded the opportunity to share their knowledge, our community will be transformed. As the *Haggadah* says, the more we teach, the more we shall be praised.

כל המרבה לספר הרי זה משבח.

### Matzah: Struggle and Liberation

When extended *Maggid* discussions give way to pangs of hunger late on the *seder* night, and we munch on our *matzah*, we experience the freedom of the Exodus. *Matzah*, representing the bread of the Jews who fled Egypt, is primarily a symbol of liberation. We eat the unleavened bread on Passover to remember that ancient journey of free-





Dedication page to haggadah commissioned in 1816 by the Hatam Sofer, Rabbi Moshe Sofer, for his wife Serel, the daughter of Rabbi Akiva Eiger. In the Grace after Meals, the Harachamon which usually says: “May the All Merciful One bless my wife...” here says: “May the All Merciful One bless my husband...”



Red Sea, Jewish women in *niddah* constitute a holy community temporarily set apart until immersion in the purifying *mikvah* waters.

Water, like blood, symbolizes transitional states of being. Intimately connected with the cycles of women’s bodies, these twin elements permeate the threshold between our selves and the world. Images of blood and water infuse the Passover *seder* in the four cups of blood-red wine that some commentators consider represent our mothers Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah; in the *haroset*, whose wine-soaked apples recall our foremothers in Egypt who conceived beneath apple trees. Rivers, wells and seas; images of feminine consciousness recur through the Passover story. They connect us with the deepest meaning of the festival, hallowing through our rituals God’s essential partnership with women as agents of transfiguration and salvation, and as bearers of new life.

dom and to recreate the journey in our own lives. However, *matzah* is also the bread of affliction, of poverty. It is bread without luxury or substance—flat and dry. A poor person, a slave, subsists on *matzah* without recourse.

In this sense, “freedom *matzah*” is baked with the ingredient of slavery. *Matzah* reminds us of our lowly origins and humbles us. At the same time, *matzah* teaches us to celebrate the privileges God has granted us. Jewish women of the late twentieth century are all too familiar with this type of duality. We live with enormous freedom and burgeoning possibility, far greater than our foremothers could have imagined. Jewish scholarship and study are no longer closed to us. We are day school principals, philanthropists, professors, and *halakha* advisors. We may choose to congregate as women to pray, to celebrate *Rosh Hodesh*, to honor the bride. We are the masters of our own Jewish identities.

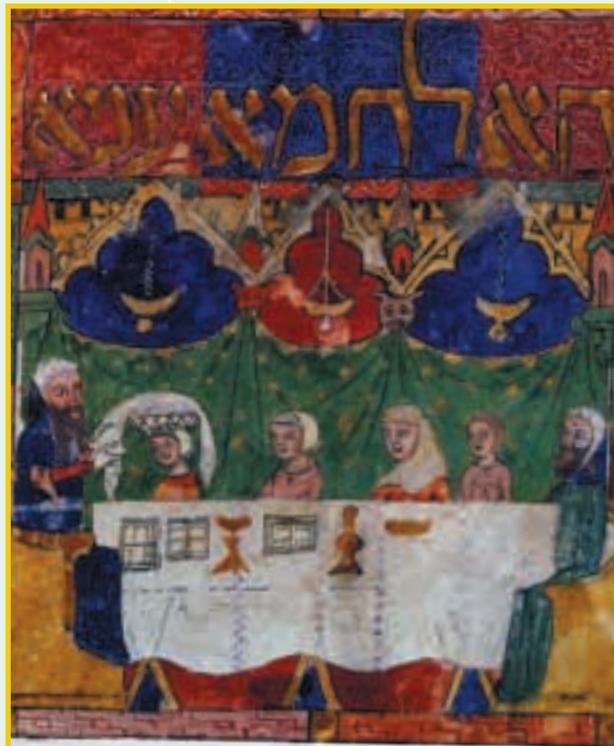
And yet our freedom is still limited—we incur losses on our journey. There are those among us who live in the chains of the *agunah*. We still struggle to find the solutions within our life-giving *halakha* to release them from their personal slavery. Despite our collective gains as Jewish women, we suffer from marginalization, rifts and misunderstandings. We search for bridges to connect disparate groups, to foster dialogue and create widespread change, but we still meet with difficulties on our way.

And so *matzah* remains a powerful symbol of caution amidst celebration. It pushes us to reach higher and higher,

without ever forgetting to look back—and all around us.

### Blood and Water

**T**he mark of blood on the doorposts of the Israelites signals not only God’s mercy in letting danger “pass over” our ancestors, but our arrival as a nation at a sacred threshold, a point of transformation, a borderline to be crossed. At this time of year we are summoned to “pass over” physically and spiritually from winter to spring, from dormancy to awakening life, from the cities of Egypt to the wilderness of Sinai, from the narrowness of slavery to the exultation of freedom. For Jewish women, blood marks the crossing of other sacred thresholds; from girlhood to adulthood, from maidenhood to motherhood. Our rituals are a stopping place, an oasis, the brink between the realms of the sacred and the profane. Like the Israelites sheltered within the bloodstained doorposts of their homes until their passage through the redemptive waters of the



Scene showing a father leading the seder, a male guest opposite him, and the mother with two boys on her right and a girl on her left. Spanish Haggadah, 1350-1360. British Library, Add.MS.14761, folio 28 v (detail).





The fourteen ritual stages of the Passover Seder are specific ceremonial acts that can help us reflect on the many rituals that enhance our lives as Jewish women throughout the year.

**קדש: Blessing the Wine**

*Kadesh* evokes images of women's voices, which can be heard loud and strong, as we recite *kiddush* over wine on Shabbat and holidays.

**ורחץ: Washing the Hands**

The many ways water can be used to wash away ritual impurity are familiar to women. Here we celebrate the generations of women who have served on their community's *hevra kadisha*, performing the final act of kindness for their fellow sisters by cleansing them with water before burial.

**כרפס: Dipping the Vegetable**

The fresh green vegetables on the *seder* table remind us that each spring we celebrate the earth's ability to create life anew, and that we have new celebrations of *simhat bat* and *bat mitzvah* to welcome Jewish girls into the community with joy.

**יחץ: Breaking the Matzah**

Just as we separate the *matzah* and set apart a portion, women for centuries have been separating *hallah*. In temple times, the separated dough was given to the priests. As we separate *hallah* today, we remember the temple and the giving hands of our foremothers who sustained those who served in it.

**מגיד: The Narration**

As we recount the story of the Exodus, we honor our mothers who sang songs of praise after leaving Egypt. We add our voices to theirs as we serve as *ba'alot hamaggid*—leaders and tellers of the Passover story.

**רחצה: Washing the Hands**

This use of water in the *seder* to wash away ritual impurity resonates in the minds of women as we think of our own monthly uses of the waters of the *mikvah*.

**מוציא מצה: Blessing the Matzah**

In reciting the blessing over the *matzah*, we are reminded that we

may recite the *hamotzi* for our families each week at the Shabbat table.

**מרור: Bitter Herbs**

As we experience the bitter taste of the maror, we think of the many *agunot* in our community whose lives are truly embittered.

**כורך: The Matzah Sandwich**

Representing the uniting of the various elements of the *seder* plate, *korekh* alludes to the uniting of women's strengths in gatherings such as women's *tefillah* and women's *Rosh Hodesh* groups. It may also represent women uniting with men in their communities to work in partnership to address inequities and injustice that affect us all.

**שלחן ערוך: The Meal**

As the food appears on the *seder* table, our thoughts are drawn to the various ways in which women are involved with the ritual observance of *kashrut*. Throughout history, women have been trusted in matters of *kashrut*, and today, many women turn to other women with *halakhic* questions regarding *kashrut* and food preparation.

**עפון: Eating the Afikomen**

As the hidden portion of *matzah* emerges at the end of the *seder* meal, we celebrate of the emergence of women from the shadows of modern Jewish life. We reaffirm the importance of modesty in the lives of both men and women, even as we take on public communal roles.

**ברך: The Blessing After Meals**

The recitation of *zimmun* at the beginning of *birkat hamazon* reminds us that women may lead and participate in our own *zimmunim*.

**הלל: Praise**

As we sing the *hallel*, we reflect on the growing power of women's voices, and the ways in which the voices of Miriam, Devorah and Hannah resonate in our lives and prayers. We pay tribute to more inclusive *minyanim*, like *Shira Hadasha* in Jerusalem

and *Darkhei Noam* in New York, for providing a place for women to more fully participate in *tefillah* and community leadership.

**נרצה: Thanksgiving**

Concluding with notes of hope and praise, the *nirtzah* service reminds us to be thankful for our many blessings as Jewish women. While the struggle for involvement of women in religious ritual may be painful and slow, we learn to cherish each new gain, and are encouraged by the words "Next Year in Jerusalem."



Young girls being instructed by elderly male teachers. Since it is highly unusual to find such a scene in an illuminated haggadah, scholars consider that the manuscript might have been commissioned by a woman. The Darmstadt Haggadah, Middle Rhine, mid 15th century, folio17b.



## Women and the Fast of the Firstborn

Traditionally, firstborn males have observed the fast of the firstborn on the Eve of Passover either by fasting or by participating in a *siyyum* or another *se'udat mitzvah*, where the obligation to eat or be part of the *simcha* overrides the fast. The original source for the fast in *Tractate Soferim* does not specify the reason for the fast, or whether the fast is limited to males. The *Vilna Gaon*, the *Mishnah Berurah* and the *Aruch Hashulchan* all point out that there are two possible reasons for the fast—either because the Israelite firstborn were saved in Egypt or because of the particular holiness of firstborn males. They indicate that if the former reason is correct, it is equally applicable to women, since women were also included in the miracle in Egypt, while if the latter reason is correct, women would not have to fast. The assumption that women were also saved is based on the *midrash* that relates that Bitya, daughter of Pharaoh, was spared in the merit of Moshe,

thereby implying that other female Egyptian firstborn were killed. The *Shulchan Aruch* therefore writes: “*v'yesh she'omer she'afilu nekeiva bekhora mitaneh*” (and some say that even a woman fasts if she is a firstborn—*siman* 470, *se'if* 1). This is also the view of later Sephardi authorities (see *haggadah* of the contemporary Sephardi authority, R Ovadiah Yosef who adds leniencies for women who are pregnant or nursing, but says that if a firstborn woman can attend a *siyyum* without too much trouble she should do so). The *Maharil* and the *Bach* went further, saying that women should fast or go to a *siyyum*. Nevertheless, the primary Ashkenazi authority of the sixteenth century, the *Rema*, writes “*ein haminbag ken*” (this is not the custom). While this is endorsed by some other authorities, it might be that attending a *siyyum* on *Erev Pesach* is a custom that firstborn women today should adopt since many sources believe that women logically should have as much of an obli-

gation to fast as men.

It is interesting that while the *Rema* stated that it was not the custom for firstborn women to fast, he considered that a woman should fast instead of her young firstborn son if the father is also a firstborn. The rationale is that the father's fast is for himself, and cannot fulfill his son's obligation as well as his own. The *Mishnah Berurah*, noting that some authorities disagree and hold that the father's fast can fulfill the son's responsibility as well, advises that when it is very difficult for a woman to fast, there is room to be lenient and allow her not to fast. Thus it would seem that nowadays when the general practice is to attend a *siyyum* and not to fast, that a mother of a firstborn child whose father is also a firstborn should go to a *siyyum* on behalf of her child.

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*JOFA is grateful to Samuel Groner for sharing his sources and research on this topic.*

## Yocheved and Serah bat Asher

Two women bridge the stories of Genesis with that of the Exodus. Both women are involved in the birth of the nation and its redemption. They are Yocheved and Serah bat Asher. Both are granddaughters of Jacob; both are identified in different sources as the seventieth member of the family of Jacob to go down to Egypt.

According to the *gemara* in *Bava Batra*, Yocheved, mother of Moses, Aharon and Miriam, was conceived on the way down to Egypt and was born “between the walls”—at the entrance to Egypt. Her face had the look of the Divine Radiance of Glory, and that was the meaning of her name—God's glory. Despite Pharaoh's decrees, Yocheved had the faith to give birth to Moses and then trusted in Divine Providence when she hid the baby in the bulrushes. She is also identified by the *Midrash* as Shifrah, one of the midwives who saved the Israelite babies during this period of great affliction. To reward her faith, we are told, she entered the Land of Israel at the age of 250, though none of her children did.

Serah bat Asher is mentioned three times in biblical genealogies and census figures. According to the *Midrash haGadol* and *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, it was Serah who, in music and song, told Jacob that Joseph was still alive. (Thomas Mann in *Joseph and His Brothers* describes the scene beautifully.) Because Serah restored Jacob's life and spirits, she lived a long life and became one of the few individuals taken up to heaven to enter Paradise while still alive. According to one rendition, Jacob said to her, “the mouth that told me the news that Joseph is alive will never taste death.”

Serah, like Elijah, is said have returned through the ages to help the Jewish people when needed. Serah was the one who managed to convince the Israelites in Egypt that Moses was God's chosen leader because she recognized in Moses' speech the special verbal signs that her father had revealed to her. According to the *Midrash*, it was also Serah who was able to tell Moses before the Exodus where the bones of Joseph were located so that the promise to take him for bur-

ial in the Land of Israel could be fulfilled. During the reign of King David, the *Midrash* identifies her as the Wise Woman of Abel who managed to ward off a rebellion without a battle by persuading a city to surrender Sheba, a traitor and rebel, to Joab, David's general. Finally, *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* records a much later appearance of Serah in Jewish history, noting that in the first century C.E., it was Serah who was able to give details of the crossing of the Red Sea to Yochanan ben Zakkai and thus keep the miracle of the Exodus accessible for future generations.

Thus in Yocheved and Serah bat Asher we have two transitional figures that according to the *Midrash* were instrumental in ensuring the future of the Jewish people. Both of them appear in the quite extraordinary descriptions of women's paradise that are found in the *Zohar*, in other kabbalistic works and in certain *tekhines*, where women sit together and learn Torah.

# ויהי בחצי הלילה • It Was in the Middle of the Night

## Additional Stanzas Concerning Women

By Yael Levine

### Introduction

The *piyyut* (liturgical hymn) *Va-Yehi ba-Hazi ha-Lailah* (It Was in the Middle of the Night), sung at the *sefer* on the first night, was composed by the classic liturgical poet Yannai, whom scholars date to the 6th to 7th centuries. The *piyyut* refers to events that occurred at various times in Jewish history on Passover night. Most of these events involved male personalities. There is one indirect reference to a female figure: *Danta Melekh Gerar ba-halom ha-lailah* (You judged the king of Gerar in a dream at night). This refers to Avimelekh who was judged for “taking” Sarah on the eve of Passover (see Genesis, chapter 20). There is no known source for this, and it is most probably based on the linguistic and contextual similarities between the Avimelekh story and that of the “taking” of Sarah by Pharaoh on the eve of Passover, which is mentioned in *midrashic* literature.<sup>[1]</sup>

I have composed two additional stanzas, consisting of three lines each, to *Va-Yehi ba-Hazi ha-Lailah*. They are based on references to events on the Eve of Passover involving female figures that are found in *midrashic* literature. These stanzas are written in the linguistic style of the original *piyyut*. The women included in the first stanza are Sarah, to whom the first two lines are devoted, and Rebecca. The second stanza deals with the actual story of the Exodus as well as the Purim story. It refers to Rachel, an Israelite woman in Egypt before the Exodus, and to Bitya, daughter of Pharaoh, as well as to the Biblical Esther. The traditions concerning Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel all appear in *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, compiled in the first half of the eighth century.

The following is the Hebrew text of the extra verses, a linear English translation, and a commentary.

### Commentary:

1. Sarah was also included in the *Brit ben ha-Betarim* (Covenant between the Pieces) (*Midrash Sekhel Tov*, ed. Buber, Genesis 15:18, p.5). According to various sources, this Covenant was established on the first night of Passover (see, inter alia, *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishma'el*, ed. Horovitz-Rabin, Bo, Masekhta de-Pisha, chapter 14, p. 51). Sarah is called *Rosh le-khol ha-Imahot* (the Head of all the Matriarchs) in *Beresheet Rabbati* (ed. Albeck, 23:1, p. 101).

2. *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* states that Sarah was taken by Pharaoh (Genesis, chapter 12) on this night (*Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, ed. Higger, chapter 26, p. 185). As already mentioned, according to the *piyyut Va-Yehi ba-Hazi ha-Lailah*, Sarah was also taken by Avimelekh (Genesis, chapter 20) on this night.

3. According to *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, the switching of the blessings between Jacob and Esau took place on Passover night at Rebecca's initiative (*Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, ed. Higger, chapter 31, pp. 197-198). Rebecca is compared to “a rose among the thorns” (Song of Songs 2:2) because she remained pure even though she grew up in a corrupt household (*Va-Yikra Rabbah* 23:1, ed. Margaliyyot, pp. 526-527).

4. *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* relates the plight of Rachel, an Israelite woman in slavery in Egypt before the Exodus who is not mentioned in the Biblical text at all. Although she was about to give birth, the Egyptians still forced her to make bricks by treading clay. Her child was born and became stuck in the bricks. Rachel's cry of horror ascended to the Throne of Glory, and that very night the angel Michael came down to earth and took the brick mould containing the baby up to God.

### ויהי בחצי הלילה

ברית הבטחת את ראש האמהות לילה.  
מובלת לבית-פרעה ולאבימלך הצלת לילה.  
משולת שושנה יעצה להחליף הברכות בלילה.  
ויהי בחצי הלילה.

זעקה היולדת והכית ראשית אונים לילה.  
בכורה מלטת לא יכבה נרה בלילה.  
הדסה עסוקה היתה בסעודתו של המן בלילה.  
ויהי בחצי הלילה.

### Translation:

You promised a covenant to the head of the Matriarchs at night.

She who has been taken to Pharaoh and Avimelekh you have saved at night.

She who has been likened to a rose suggested exchanging the blessings at night.

It was in the middle of the night.

The woman who gave birth cried out and you smote the firstborn at night.

You saved a firstborn, her candle did not extinguish at night.  
Hadassah was busy with the feast of Haman at night.

It was in the middle of the night.

The Holy One, Blessed Be He, then descended “on that very night,” and smote the firstborn of the Egyptians. Thus it was Rachel's cry that triggered the Plague of the Firstborn and the Exodus. (*Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, ed. Higger, chapter 47, pp. 239, 294). The term *reshit onim* is based on the depiction of the Exodus in Psalms 71:51.

5. This line refers to Bitya, daughter of Pharaoh, who saved Moses by night, and who, we are told in *midrashic* sources, was not killed in the plague of the firstborn although she was a firstborn child (*Exodus Rabbah* 18:3 and parallel sources). This is connected to the verse from *Eshet Hayyil* (A Woman of Valor): *Ta'amah ki tov sabrah, lo yikbbeh va-lailah nerah* (Proverbs 31:18). In Exodus, this woman is known only as “the daughter of Pharaoh.” However, she is identified in talmudic and *midrashic* sources with “Bitya, daughter of Pharaoh” mentioned in Chronicles I 4:18.<sup>[2]</sup>

6. According to *Midrash Panim Aherim*, (ed. Buber, p. 74), Hadassah, i.e. Esther, was occupied on Passover Eve, the night King Ahasuerus could not sleep, with preparing a feast for Haman.

Yael Levine holds a Ph.D. from the Talmud department at Bar-Ilan University. She has published numerous articles in scientific journals, mainly on issues related to women and Judaism.

[1] See *Mahzor Pesah*, ed. Y. Fraenkel, Jerusalem 1993, p. 26.

[2] See Y. Heinemann, *Darkhei ha-Aggadah*, Jerusalem 1970, pp. 28-29.

## Conference

...continued from page 1

shops had a different feel from those in previous years. These workshops were geared toward facilitated discussion groups that were incredibly interactive and lively. The discussion groups centered around such pertinent topics as raising Orthodox feminist children, dealing with *mikvah* and sexual desire, the changing demographic of Orthodox families and the effect of gender on dating in the Orthodox community.



Rabbi Daniel Sperber engages in discussion with enthusiastic attendees.

Gender and education played a large role in the conference. One Sunday afternoon panel focused on Orthodox day schools and highlighted education as a centerpiece toward future change. Participants noted that there was an enormous gap between JOFA's work and the current attitudes and thought processes of Orthodox day schools. The panelists noted that, while the feminist movement has done a tremendous amount in expanding educational opportunities for women post-high school, there is an urgent need for greater parity in the earlier years of Orthodox education.

Participants were especially pleased with the highly successful *chavruta*

learning program on Sunday afternoon. A loud buzz filled the ballroom as people paired off to learn in traditional *chavruta* style. The learning sessions explored texts involving a wide variety of subjects, including the partnership of Mordecai and Esther, the Biblical figure of Deborah, and the Talmudic character Imma Shalom. Accessibility of all texts to all people is one of the greatest achievements of the feminist movement in general and JOFA in particular. The open atmosphere of the JOFA *bet midrash* exemplified this accomplishment.

After a full day of programs, more than four hundred people returned Sunday evening for the screening of "Tehora" (Purity), directed by Anat Zuria. A panel consisting of Blu Greenberg, Devora Steinmetz and Devora Zlochower and moderated by Sylvia Barack Fishman discussed issues of *niddah* from a *halakhic* and emotional point of view. A spirited question and answer period followed.



Morning workshop elicits smiles from spirited participants.

A crucial element in this year's conference was a panel addressing clerical abuse. Rabbi Yosef Blau and Rabbi Mark Dratch confronted the issue directly, in a panel discussion moderated by Judy Heicklin. Rabbi Dratch addressed three traditional mechanisms that have been misused to silence victims: directives against *lashon hara* (malicious gossip), the principle of



Rabbanit Malke Bina of MaTaN responds to questions.

*mesira* (turning someone over to the civil authorities) and that of *hilul Hashem* (desecrating God's name). Both Rabbis concluded that the Orthodox community and Rabbinat need to do more to protect the victims from the outset by putting a clear system in place for dealing with accusations of abuse and making victims feel safe coming forward with such accusations.

Other conference sessions reflected JOFA's commitment to breaking the silence surrounding abuse within the Orthodox community. Two workshops, aimed at "Shattering the Silence" discussed the sexual abuse of children in the Orthodox community. There were also a number of sessions devoted to the *agunah* and how the community is working to free women chained in untenable marriages.

In an e-mail to the conference planners, Rachel Keren, head of Midreshet Ein Haatziv in Israel, summed up the feeling of the conference. "I felt this conference was an upgrading of the previous ones, mainly because it gave the sense that on the basics we already stand on solid ground and there is a way to move ahead. Let us hope that a lot of good will result from the conference."

Tapes of all sessions of the conference are available through our website at [www.jofa.org](http://www.jofa.org).



### Miriam's Cup

Linda Gissen, *Miriam's Dance*.  
Picture Courtesy of  
HUC-JIR Museum, N.Y.

Visit JOFA's website at:  
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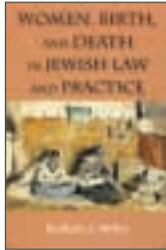
Have you visited our new website? Please be sure to check back regularly as it is constantly being updated. Look for the weekly *d'var Torah* by Erica Brown and order the tapes from the Fifth International Conference on Feminism & Orthodoxy.

## Women, Birth, and Death in Jewish Law and Practice

By Rochelle L. Millen

Brandeis Series on Jewish Women

Brandeis University Press 2004 (paperback)  
\$27.50

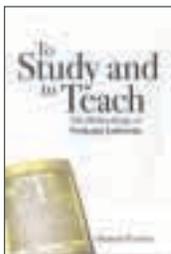


In this book, Rochelle Millen, Professor of Religion at Wittenberg University, explores Jewish birth and death rituals in a comprehensive fashion. She examines how these rituals are treated in *halakhic* literature, and considers the written views of Conservative and Reform Judaism as well as Orthodox. She includes details of her own personal experiences as she explores issues of contraception and birth control, fertility and birth rituals, and then of *kaddish* and mourning rites. She usefully includes complete texts of four *simhat bat* ceremonies. Aware of the importance of determining the place of custom and its authority in determining religious practice, she focuses on the broader issues of women's roles in Judaism and the expansion of *halakhic* boundaries. In addition, she explores the extent to which modern day Orthodoxy recognizes the need for women to act publicly as autonomous individuals within the community structure. The communal celebrations of a *simhat bat* for a female child and the welcome extended by many congregations to a woman who comes to say *kaddish* are indications of that recognition. Millen concludes that, "The public autonomous woman must not only be tolerated, but also respected, accepted and integrated within the tradition's view that recognizes, values and welcomes her full humanity."

## To Study and To Teach: The Methodology of Nechama Leibowitz

By Shmuel Peerless

Urim Publications 2004 \$21.00



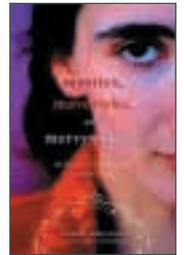
Nechama Leibowitz *zt"l* requested to be identified on her *metzevah* (tombstone) only as "morah" — teacher. As one of the great contemporary teachers of *Tanach*, she was a role model to the many who attended her classes, studied her weekly *gilyonot* (study-sheets) and read her books. While she never identified as a "feminist," her influence on Jewish women of all ages has been immense. Shmuel Peerless, one of her many students who knew her simply as "Nechama," skillfully presents her method of teaching and pedagogic techniques with detailed examples from her lectures and published works. As a teacher, her goal was to inspire a love of Torah learning and observance of *mitzvot*, but there was nothing of the "feel-good" approach to texts in her teaching. Always aiming at making the text come alive, she modeled rigor in her method of independent and active learning. She introduced her students to a broad range of commentators and taught them how to use the commentaries to answer questions and resolve textual difficulties. Nechama gave her students a competence in literary analysis that could be applied to any form of liter-

ature in any language, but most significantly opened up the richness and complexities of Torah to them all. This well-organized book will help to preserve the legacy of Nechama's teaching and provide teachers and students with the essential skills she aimed to provide in her classroom.

## Mystics, Mavericks, and Merrymakers: An Intimate Journey among Hasidic Girls

By Stephanie Wellen Levine

New York University Press 2003 \$26.95



Stephanie Wellen Levine spent a year in Crown Heights as a Harvard PhD candidate in American studies, examining the world and experiences of Lubavitch girls. She was surprised to find the girls were far more secure, lively and full of self-esteem than many of their peers in general society. While Levine considers the single-sex nature of their education and social life a central factor in fostering this confidence, she also attributes it to their specific Lubavitch mission—the belief that each person, male and female, has the power to bring *Mashiach* (Messiah), and the sense of purpose in going out and "proselytizing"—bringing this message to other Jews. (Thus it is *Habad* in particular, rather than *Hasidism* or ultra-orthodoxy in general, which seems to be the determining factor in this prevalent sense of self confidence.) Levine interviewed 32 girls between the ages of 13 and 23. She gives us seven fascinating portraits of individual girls and young women who each relate very differently to their Lubavitch community and to the outside world. She concludes that their community gives these girls, "a combination of comfort, direction and sense of strength that eases their lives and cultivates a deep seated confidence." Levine vividly portrays these girls, their hopes and their struggles, as well as her own feelings towards Orthodoxy and the Lubavitch way of life.

## Women in Israel: A State of Their Own

By Ruth Halperin-Kaddari

University of Pennsylvania Press 2003  
\$59.95



Law Professor Ruth Halperin-Kaddari, who spoke at the recent International JOFA Conference, heads the Rackman Center for the Advancement of the Status of Women at Bar-Ilan University. She authored Israel's official report to CEDAW (the United Nations Convention on the Elimination Of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) and this book is a revised and expanded version of that study. Halperin-Kaddari explores the legal status of women throughout Israeli government and society, combining statistical data and a sociological perspective with her legal description and analysis. In her view, Israel lags behind other Western countries in concern for and sensibility towards women's rights. She discusses the effect of the integration of religion and state on women's lives in both public and private

spheres. An important chapter deals with marriage and family life, detailing how Israeli family law is governed by principles of religious personal law. Halperin-Kadarri skillfully analyzes Jewish marriage and divorce laws, issues of child and spousal support, as well as developments in reproductive technology and surrogacy. She examines the possibilities for women's inclusion in the rabbinical court system, assesses the effect of women's certification as rabbinical advocates, and analyzes the court decisions that allowed female participation in the committees for the selection of Chief Rabbis and in municipal religious councils. She sees the internal mobilization of women within the religious community itself as vital for the movement towards change.

### The Women's Haftarah Commentary

Edited by Rabbi Elyse Goldstein  
*Jewish Lights* 2004 \$39.99



While the origin of the institution of *haftarah* reading is somewhat obscure, the texts themselves are a window into the world of "The Prophets"—the second section of the *Tanakh*, which

is their source. They are replete with prophecy and poetry, historical narratives and tales of relationships, both between individuals and between the Jewish people and God. A companion to an earlier volume on the weekly Torah portions, this book contains insights from women rabbis on the 54 weekly *haftarah* portions, on the readings for the special Sabbaths, and on the five *megillot* of the Bible also read in synagogue during the course of the year. All of the writers look for something in the text that speaks to them directly as women, seeking particularly to put the female characters in perspective and exploring the imagery in the readings. Included are pieces on the special readings for holidays, a section on particular biblical women who do not appear in *haftarot* and a commentary on *Eshet Hayyil*, the Woman of Valor. While the contributors to the volume are not Orthodox, there is much that we can learn from the wide-ranging commentaries which often give a new perspective and an enlarged understanding of the readings. (JOFA is proud to remind readers of the weekly *d'var Torah* on our website by Erica Brown that now focuses on the *haftarah* readings.)

## צא ולמד • Go and Learn

### Opportunities for Summer Learning 2004

#### Drisha Institute for Education, New York

Drisha has a full array of summer programs for women of all ages: two Summer Institutes—a three-week program from June 7-25, and a five-week program from June 28-July 30—with options for full-time or part-time study in *Talmud*, Bible, Jewish Law, Biblical Hebrew, Philosophy and *Midrash*. The Summer High School Program (June 28-July 30) offers teenage girls a unique experience of intensive text study combined with sports and cultural events. Contact Judith Tenzer, Program Director at (212)595-0307 or [jtenzer@drisha.org](mailto:jtenzer@drisha.org).

#### Nishmat Summer Programs, Jerusalem

**Speaking With and Listening to God: Prophecy and Prayer, July 4-July 22.** Exciting beginner, intermediate and advanced level programs for women in text-based Torah learning. For information and registration call the American Friends of Nishmat at (212)983-6975 or visit the Nishmat website at [www.nishmat.net](http://www.nishmat.net).

#### Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem

Pardes offers two summer sessions—June 1-23 and /or July 6-29—for male and female students over the age of 19. All levels, from Beginner to Advanced, are welcome. Weeklong seminars and mini-sessions are also available. For information contact [info@pardes.org.il](mailto:info@pardes.org.il) or in the U.S. call toll free 1-888-875-2734 or write to [info@pardesusa.org](mailto:info@pardesusa.org).

#### MaTan Summer Programs, Jerusalem

**Mighty Waters Cannot Extinguish Love: Exploring Family Relationships in Jewish Sources.** Session 1; July 4-15; Session 11; July 18-29. An advanced *Gemara* track is offered. Some dorm-style rooms are available in apartments. For information contact [matan1@netvision.net.il](mailto:matan1@netvision.net.il) or in the US contact Leora Bednarsh at Tel/fax (718) 951-6421.

#### Midreshet Ein Hanatziv, Kibbutz Ein Hanatziv, Beit She'an Valley

**Women in the World of Torah** Summer study program. Two sessions are available: June 23-30 and July 7-14. The program will be offered for both sessions with a minimum of 10 participants. Study of *Gemara*, *Tanach* and Contemporary Jewish Thought in classes taught by leading Israeli instructors of the *Midrasha*. All instructors are English speaking. Participants will be housed in *Midrasha* guest rooms with all meals provided in the kibbutz dining hall. Access to outdoor swimming pool and tennis courts. *Tiyulim* (trips) are included. For information, contact Dalia or Rachel at [midrasha@hanatziv.org.il](mailto:midrasha@hanatziv.org.il) or visit website [www.midrasha.co.il](http://www.midrasha.co.il).

#### Midreshet Lindenbaum, Jerusalem

This summer program is primarily for alumnae of Midreshet Lindenbaum, though a limited number of other students will be accepted. The single session runs from June 21- July 8. Classes daily from 2-7 pm, though the *Beit Midrash* is available all day. Morning volunteer programs will be arranged for those interested in conjunction with *Yavneh Olami*. For further details and registration, email [office@lind.org.il](mailto:office@lind.org.il).

## Mission Statement of the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance

The Alliance's mission is to expand the spiritual, ritual, intellectual, and political opportunities for women within the framework of *halakha*. We advocate meaningful participation and equality for women in family life, synagogues, houses of learning, and Jewish communal organizations to the full extent possible within *halakha*. Our commitment is rooted in the belief that fulfilling this mission will enrich and uplift individual and communal life for all Jews.

**COUNT ME IN!** I want to support JOFA's work and have an opportunity to be part of a community striving to expand meaningful participation for women in Jewish life.

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