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Summary of Thesis

My thesis, Girls Education in Inter-Bellum Poland: The Bais Yaakov Schools studied the founding of the Bais Yaakov schools in Poland. The thesis, divided into three main chapters, focused on Sarah Schenirer (the founder of the Bais Yaakov Schools), the rabbinic reaction to Schenirer's schools, and a limited examination of the Bais Yaakov Schools in the late 20th and early 21st century in America.

The goal of this thesis was to understand the social, historical and political circumstances which led to a young woman's founding of a school system for girls in her ultra-Orthodox community and why these schools were so successful. The first chapter was based mainly on Schenirer's diaries and memoirs contained in the book *Em B'Yisrael*. It was supplemented with the large body of secondary literature written about Schenirer. The second chapter analyzed textual support for and against the study of Judaism by girls, including Talmudic references, commentaries found in the Shulchan Aruch and the Mishne Torah. However this work was mostly background for the responses to Schenirer's schools. Schenirer was greatly influenced by S. R. Hirsch so his writings on education from Horeb were examined. And finally, a rabbinic conference in 1903 discussing the issue of girls' education and excerpts from rabbis who were supportive of the Bais Yaakov schools (the most notable of them the Hafetz Hayim) give the rabbinic response to the schools. The third chapter was based on six interviews of Bais Yaakov alumnae and a visit to a Bais Yaaokv school. This thesis offers a critical analysis of Schenirer's life's work asking how the schools emerged, how they gained popularity and whether the current schools live up to their founder's vision.

**Girls' Education in Inter-Bellum Poland:
The Bais Yaakov Schools**

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Ordination

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Introduction

The effects of the modern world have changed almost every aspect of Jewish society, none perhaps more radically than the education of Jewish women. In the pre-modern world Jewish girls, for the most part, received no formal education. On rare occasions some girls studied with a tutor, but most girls learned how to be Jewish women at home, through the instruction of their mothers. Today, of course, this is not the case. Even the most traditional Jewish communities send their daughters to school where these girls learn both secular academics and Jewish practice. In liberal Jewish communities girls, along with boys, took advantage of public education beginning in the mid-1800's and soon after the Reform movement, with its egalitarian emphasis, offered religious instruction to both boys and girls. In more conservative communities wide-spread religious schooling for girls emerged with the idea of a school for girls, by a young ultra-Orthodox woman named Sarah Schenirer.

The path which led me to Sarah Schenirer and the schools she founded, the Bais Yaakov schools, began with a desire to know how formal education of girls emerged in Orthodox Jewish circles. As a female rabbinical and education student I have sought to learn more about the education of Jewish women. In my own liberal movement egalitarian values overrode Jewish legal concerns about girls study. However in the Orthodox community, where Jewish law is generally valued about social concerns, ancient Rabbinic statements condemning the teaching of Torah to women and a desire to separate young men and women for fear of sexual indiscretions, seemed to prevent Jewish girls from having access to any sort of formal education. The first major proposal for a Jewish girls school came from the founder of modern Orthodoxy, Sampson Raphael

Hirsch. His ideas spread throughout Western Europe, as did the modern Orthodox movement without major opposition because so many Western European Jews sought to abandon Judaism altogether in their desire to become modern, enlightened citizens. Eastern European Rabbis, still exerting a considerable amount of control and influence in their communities, did not need the reforms of modern Orthodoxy and by in large rejected them. Although they had no desire to change, as time went on the effects of modernity and acculturation penetrated Polish society, especially among Jewish women, causing deep social changes, even in the ultra-Orthodox communities in Poland. It was in this environment that Sarah Schenirer began a movement to educate Jewish girls in order to counter the effects of assimilation. The Bais Yaakov movement, founded in 1918, still thrives today.

How was it that a relatively uneducated woman could make such a change in a male-dominated society? What social and historical factors caused the shift from home bound education to a school setting? And how did the conservative Polish rabbis come to endorse the notion of girls learning in a formal setting in general and what led to their support of the Bais Yaakov schools in particular? After all, it is rare for such a fundamental change to be made in conservative religious traditions; the factors behind this change must have been significant. Knowing that rabbis almost always based innovation on textual analysis of law, I wanted to read the writings of Polish rabbis of the time who supported the Bais Yaakov schools and study the sources they used to foster this innovation.

The more I learned about the schools, the more fascinated I became with the founder of the schools, Sarah Schenirer. As a young Jewish woman I was inspired to

know that she, not any Rabbinic organization, that launched this revolution in Jewish girls' education. Even Hirsch himself, who certainly paved the way for Schenirer's work, did not found a network of schools as successful as Schenirer's. What were the circumstances of Schenirer's life that led her to the founding of the Bais Yaakov schools? How was she perceived in her own time? And why is she venerated today as one of the great teachers of Torah in the ultra-Orthodox world?

Finally, as an educator I sought to learn more about the school itself. What is it that the girls learn? What does the curriculum consist of? What is taught, and what is not taught? What was the original goal of the school and are they true to that goal today? How do the Bais Yaakov schools continue to thrive as an international movement.

The goal of this paper is this: to understand the historical and sociological circumstances that led to the founding of the Bais Yaakov schools and thereby enabled the eventual success of the Bais Yaakov movement today. My theory is that the Orthodox movement, known for its opposition to change, will encourage change only if that change will in turn strengthen the faith of Orthodox Jews. In order to answer this question I relied on primary source materials, including diaries and memoirs by Sarah Schenirer, writings of rabbis who influenced and supported Schenirer and internal publications of the school and its teachers. In addition, I found two major secondary works to be of great use on the subject: *And all Your Children Shall be Learned* by Shoshana Zolty, a principal at a religious girls school in Toronto, which pointed me to many of the sources that discuss both girls' education in the early twentieth century and the history of the Bais Yaakov movement. The other is an unpublished dissertation, and subsequent published articles based on that dissertation by Deborah Weissman, also a

principal of a religious girls' school in Jerusalem.

The thesis contains three chapters. In the first chapter, I examine the life of Sarah Schenirer, the period in which she lived, and how she came to found the Bais Yaakov schools. In the second chapter I examine the Rabbinic sources which helped to support Schenirer's endeavor. After providing an overview of the ancient Rabbi's opinions on teaching girls, I trace the writings of Hirsch, whom Schenirer read extensively while she lived in Vienna, and then focus on discussions about girls' education held at a conference which met shortly before Schenirer's attempt to found the Bais Yaakov schools. The conference proceedings address some of the key arguments supporting Jewish girls' education in the modern era. Finally, I review the words written by prominent rabbis in support of the Bais Yaakov schools at the earliest stages of their development. In the third chapter I turn my attention to the fruits of Schenirer's efforts in our own day. I present the results of interviews of women who attended Bais Yaakov schools over the past two decades and administrators employed at a Bais Yaakov school in Brooklyn today. While my findings are only tentative (as the subject pools was small), these interviews helped to shape my understanding of how the Bais Yaakov schools function today in light of the goal originally espoused by Schenirer in her writings. I conclude with a discussion of what can be learned from a study of the Bais Yaakov schools and how I, as a Reform Jewish rabbi and educator, can apply what I have learned to my work in Reform Jewish supplementary religious schools.

Chapter 1: The Founding of the Bais Yaakov Schools

Sarah Schenirer and her Bais Yaakov schools are legendary throughout the Jewish world in general, and the world of Jewish education in particular. As a young Polish seamstress, with relatively little Jewish education herself, she became concerned with the increasing distance between religious Jewish girls and their families. She noticed how her peers and her clients were drawn to secular culture, desiring to assimilate¹, to abandon their religious upbringing. Schenirer became obsessed with the way her sisters, the daughters of Krakow, abandoned traditional Jewish ways: desecrating the Sabbath, and ignoring dietary laws. While seeking refuge from World War I in Vienna, she imbibed the ideas of modern or neo-Orthodoxy² and learned how modern Jewish women were studying about their history and their roles in Jewish life. Influenced by Sampson Raphael Hirsch and others, she returned to Krakow intent on changing her peers' outlook and behavior.

Overcoming ridicule and financial hardships, Schenirer worked to establish a one-room schoolhouse in her sewing shop. Within two years, 80 pupils attended her school, and, she began to gain international prominence. In fact, shortly thereafter,

¹ This paper will focus on assimilation as a sociological process, as defined by Paula Hyman in her book *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History*, p. 13: "Assimilation consists of several different stages. The first steps, often called acculturation, include the acquisition of the basic markers of the larger society, such as language, dress, and the more amorphous category of 'values'. The integration of minority group members into the majority institutions follows, with the attendant weakening of minority institutions. The end point of assimilation is the dissolution of the minority by biological merger with the majority through intermarriage." Hyman continues to explain that if the majority culture does not accept the minority culture then the minority could be fully acculturated and yet remain poorly integrated. The Ultra-Orthodox also opposed assimilation as a project – the desire for Enlightened Jews to acculturate into the majority society – however this opposition, and this type of assimilation, will not be the focus of the paper.

² Neo-Orthodoxy is a term used for the German Orthodoxy which sprang up in opposition to Reform Judaism. Emerging in the early 19th century, it is most closely associated with the teachings of Rabbi Sampson Raphael Hirsch. It advocated maintaining a traditional Jewish life alongside modern society, taking the best of both worlds, but remaining true to Jewish law. Neo-Orthodoxy encouraged modern dress and education combined with traditional observance and Torah study. Today we might refer to the Modern Orthodox as the inheritors of this movement.

Agudat Yisrael International³ helped to found and fund the movement. By the eve of World War II, 38,000 young women had studied in 250 Bais Yaakov schools throughout Eastern Europe.⁴ A young, relatively uneducated, Hasidic⁵ girl saw a problem, conceived of a solution, and succeeded in changing the lives of thousands of Jewish girls for generations to come.

Her story compels many questions for the student of Jewish history. How is it that a woman like Schenirer could achieve so much in the male-dominated Hasidic world? How much of the Bais Yaakov schools' success can actually be attributed to Sarah Schenirer, and why? Is she a heroine of Jewish history or might she have done more for the Jewish woman of her time? While her school was novel -- never before had there been a school for religious girls that met with Rabbinic approval -- was it revolutionary? How widespread was Schenirer's influence? Was it confined only to the ultra-Orthodox⁶ world?

In this chapter it is my goal to explore the historical and sociological factors that led to the creation of formal religious schooling for girls in inter-bellum Eastern Europe. Focusing on the life of Sarah Schenirer and the time in which she lived, I pay special attention to events leading up to the founding of the Bais Yaakov movement. Most of the

³ Agudat Yisrael is the unifying body of ultra-Orthodox Jewry. It was founded in the early 1900's in opposition to the Reform, Zionist and Socialist movements in Eastern and Central Europe. There were three main components of the movement, the Germans neo-Orthodox, the Hungarian traditionalists and the Polish and Lithuanian Orthodox Jewries. The movement sought to unify Orthodox Jewry and give authority to the Rabbis on all matters. This paper will focus on the Polish branch of Agudat Yisrael.

⁴ Miriam Eisenstein, *Jewish Schools in Poland* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1950), 84.

⁵ The modern Hasidic movement originated in the mid 18th century with Israel ben Eliezar Baal Shem Tov and is characterized by ecstatic prayer and a turn away from austere Torah study. Led by a Zadik, known for his faith and piety, the movement grew rapidly. However the emphasis had shifted by the late 19th and early 20th centuries to a movement of Torah study and a haven against the forces of the enlightenment. Hasidic Jews specifically guard against changes in dress, language, and education.

⁶ The term ultra-Orthodox is used today to describe those members of the Orthodox movement who dress in traditional clothing and who seek to guard against the forces of modernity. It is used in contrast to the

information in this chapter is based on memoirs and diaries of Sarah Schenirer, which were collected and translated into Hebrew in the 1950's by Netsah Publishers of Tel Aviv in conjunction with Bais Yaakov teachers in Israel and the women's Agudat Yisrael organization.

The State of Girls' Jewish Education Before World War I

Before the modern era, Jewish girls rarely attended any type of formal school.⁷ The Rabbis were little concerned with the education of girls, quoting from the Mishna that it is a waste of time to teach a daughter Torah.⁸ The Talmud expands on this statement, clarifying that a father is only obligated to teach his sons Torah, while women are neither obligated to study Torah, nor obligated to teach other women.⁹ Since Jewish law did not prescribe girls' education Jewish communities presumably did not focus on girls' schooling. However, it would be inaccurate to conclude that Jewish women were uneducated. Although there was no singular form of formal Jewish education, girls were usually literate and were taught basic Jewish values, either at home, in heder or through a private tutor.¹⁰ Anecdotally, we know of girls who sat at the back of their brother's heder (traditional Jewish schools for young boys), learning all they could from limited participation. According to Shimon Frost, an Israeli historian of Polish education, in rare

modern Orthodox.

⁷ The Modern Era in Judaism is generally traced to the French Revolution and the subsequent emancipation of Jews in France and elsewhere or to the life of Moses Mendelssohn in Germany. When referring to the Modern Era, or modernity, I refer to a time when Jews were increasingly integrating into non-Jewish society, resulting in wide spread political and social change.

⁸ A more extensive discussion of Rabbinic views of girls studying Torah will be discussed in Chapter 2.

⁹ *Kiddushin* 29b, *Berachot* 2:7, *Eruvin* 10:1 as cited in Zolty 56.

¹⁰ Shaul Stampfer, "Gender Differentiation and Education of the Jewish Woman in Nineteenth-Century Eastern Europe," *From Shtetl to Socialism, Stories from Polin*, ed Antony Polonsky. (Washington: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1993). 192.

instances a woman even taught at girl's heder.¹¹ However, the majority of formal instruction for girls – if available at all – was typically conducted by private tutors. These lessons focused on basic literacy and ethical and moral training rather than formal study of Torah and Jewish law.¹² Additionally, in the later middle ages, most Eastern European Jewish women frequently studied *Tzena u'rena*, the Yiddish translation and interpretation of the Bible specifically designed for women, and read other Yiddish stories written for religious women.

This all changed as Jewish men became citizens (first in France and later in selected Germanic lands) and began to send their children to secular schools in their native lands. Specifically in Galicia, within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a systematic public school was implemented and available for non-Jews and Jews alike.¹³ Although most boys, especially those from religious families, continued to study in heder and yeshiva, girls, who had no obligation to learn Jewish subjects, were commonly sent to public Polish schools.¹⁴

The “breaking down of the ghetto walls” and the availability of public schooling coincided with another significant social change – the delay in average age of marriage for girls. According to Shaul Stampfer, professor of Jewish history at Hebrew University, early marriage, once a sign of affluence among Jews, grew out of favor in the mid-nineteenth century and girls began to wait until their twenties to marry.¹⁵ Whereas at one time Jewish girls might attend heder with their brothers until age 13 and then

¹¹ Shimon Frost, *Schooling as a Socio-Political Expression* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1998), 43.

¹² Shoshana Pantel Zolty, *And All Your Children Shall Be Learned* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aaronson Inc, 1997), 224.

¹³ Stampfer, 203.

¹⁴ Deborah Weissman, “Bais Ya’akov as an Innovation in Jewish Women’s Education,” *Studies in Jewish Education* 7 (1995): 280.

marry within a few years, now they stayed home for an additional eight to ten years. Consequently, as early as the 1860s, increasing numbers of Jewish women entered newly formed, non-Jewish, public and private schools in larger Eastern European cities.¹⁶ Not only did these schools provide something for the girls to do, but they provided vocational training as well. In this way girls who received training could then work, helping to support their families before marrying. Thus this new schooling became even more attractive. Rebekka Kohut, former president of the World Jewish Congress described these state schools only as, "a means for keeping [a daughter's] time and mind occupied"¹⁷ until she was ready to get married. However the schools themselves had one goal: the Polanization of society, namely, educating the children to become unified citizens of Poland.¹⁸

At this same time, Zionism and socialism were beginning to take root and each had an influence on Jewish education. As historian Miriam Eisenstein explained, "the school was developing as the major medium through which various political and religious movements sought to mold the minds of the young in its particular ideology."¹⁹ In liberal Jewish circles, for instance, schools were established to teach the Hebrew language and Zionist ideas.²⁰ These schools did not, however, focus on religious education. They were secular in nature and they did not meet the standards of the religious community,

¹⁵ Stampfer, 201.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Rebekka Kohut, "The Dawn of a New Day for Jewish Girlhood," *History of the Beth Jacob Girls School* ed. Dr. Leo Deutschlander.(Beth Jacob Centre, Vienna, 1933), 3.

¹⁸ Zolty, 238-9.

¹⁹ Eisenstein, 94.

²⁰ Ibid., 94-95.

nevertheless they did provide more options for girls in the community.²¹

By the 1900s the religious Jewish community faced a unique social problem: a stark differentiation of education between Jewish boys and girls. In a single family, for instance, a son might remain in heder, maintaining his status as yeshiva bocher (student) slaving over complex Jewish texts; while a daughter would be thrust into the wide world of secular learning, reading romance novels, studying Polish language and culture, and learning a trade. He would learn Rabbinic principles of talmudic logic, where ancient wisdom is valued more than innovation; while she might learn principles of rational thinking and scientific discoveries that heralded the advances of the modern world. Not surprisingly, these young Eastern European Jewish women grew distant from their families and their communities, questioning the religious traditions that ensconced them.

Mother and daughter ceased to understand each other. Brother and sister no longer seemed to have a common language. A "modern" daughter, who had learned how to recite a few of Mitzkiewicz's²² and Slowacki's Polish poems, began to feel ashamed of her "backward" mother. She began to look with disdain upon her "fanatic" father, and had nothing but ridicule for her brother, the batlan [unworldly one]. She began to feel embarrassed over her parents "broken jargon," and finally began to hate everything Jewish. Jewish fathers and mothers, frightened and powerless, could not understand what was happening all around them.²³

Oddly enough, as daughters slipped away from their families, Jewish authorities paid little attention to these girls' needs. Kohut writes that Jewish parenthood focused on sons, "little if any thought was given to [daughters'] inner problems, and most especially

²¹ Zolty, 240.

²² Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855) Polish poet who wrote the epic *Pan Tadeusz*.

²³ Joseph Friedenson, "Sarah Schenirer: the Mother of Generations," *The Jewish Observer* (February, 1964): 14.

those regarding judaism (sic)."²⁴ The vast majority of Religious girls attended public, mostly Catholic, Polish schools dismissing Zionist alternatives. The Polish school system succeeded in Polanizing these young Jewish girls while their own community continued to ignore the disastrous effects of "free schooling."

The advent of public education and the inclusion of Jews in the national societies of European countries forced a debate on the question of Jewish girls' education within the community. As the religious community continued to allow their daughters to attend public schools, they, in effect, brought the females into the modern world, while leaving their male counterparts behind. The situation was ripe for someone to call for a change. And it would be a woman - herself a product of Polish education, yet a devoted traditional Jew- who would take action.

Sarah Schenirer: Childhood and Teenage Years.

Sarah Schenirer grew up in Krakow in a period of great transition. Although she came from a religious family that valued Jewish education Schenirer, like her contemporaries, attended a Polish school as a child. But Schenirer did not follow the path of her contemporaries: she neither became a dutiful Jewish wife and mother, nor did she reject the traditional Jewish world of the shtetl. Rather, Schenirer tried to buttress the former, while preventing the latter. As a product of this newly-bifurcated existence, Schenirer tried to reach out to her peers and remind them of Judaism's benefits. When rejected by them, she turned to her younger, more impressionable, contemporaries.

²⁴ Kohut, 3.

Born in 1883, Sarah Schenirer could trace her lineage on both sides to "notable Polish rabbis."²⁵ Her father, Betzael haCohen of Tarna, was descended from Shabbetai ben Meir haCohen, the author of *Sifte Cohen*. Her mother Sheine Feigel was descended from Rabbi Joel Sirkis, author of *Bayit Hadash*, a commentary on the *Arbah Turim* which traced the Talmudic sources of the *Shulchan Aruch*.²⁶ Her family also maintained a successful fabric business, which left them considerably well off.²⁷ Aware of her reputable family lineage, in her diaries Schenirer praised her relatives. She made special mention of her paternal grandmother, a great tzadkanit (righteous Jew) and role model to the community, and her father, who devoted himself to the education of his children, spending time and energy on the blessings of Torah and Judaism.²⁸ One can infer that Schenirer was grateful for the education her father had given her, and hoped to follow in her grandmother's footsteps, so as to honor her family with her life's work.

Schenirer must have inherited her family's love of knowledge. In her diaries, she recorded stories from the eight years of studying in the "school of [her] people." The school focused on basic education with supplementary religious training. Educational historian Z. E. Kurzweil described Schenirer's attitude toward her supplementary religious training: "Sarah was the only girl who took these lessons seriously, although she, too, could not help feeling that they were not very conducive to progress."²⁹

Schenirer described these experiences in her memoirs:

²⁵ Sarah Schenirer, *Em B'Yisrael: Kitvei Sarah Schenirer*. Vol. 1, (Tel Aviv: Netsah publishers with participation of the Bais Yaakov teachers and the women and daughters of Agudat Yisrael, 1955-60), 21.

²⁶ Deborah Weissman. *Bais Ya'akov - A Woman's Educational Movement in the Polish Jewish Community*, (Master's thesis, New York University, 1977), 14.

²⁷ Schenirer, 21.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Z. E. Kurzweil, *Modern Trends in Jewish Education*, (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1964), 267.

By age six I was already stuck with the nickname chasidnut [little pious one] because in school I excelled especially in Religious Studies. I was talented and I studied with good skill and delight and on top of this, I, was also a determined student. Every year I was going even higher with a diploma of distinction. I was also talented in all kinds of handiwork.³⁰

Schenirer refers to the Polish public school (which seems to have included some separate religious instruction) as the school of "my people." At first glance one would imagine that Schenirer, who lived in a devoted Jewish household, and strongly identified as a Jew, would only refer to a Jewish school as a school of her people. But this was not the case, as the passages are clear, Schenirer attended only one school – a Polish secular school. This remark serves to reinforce Schenirer's beliefs about the mindset of young Polish girls: even Schenirer herself identified with the Polish people and the school she attended. Schenirer never spoke negatively about those schools, and even expressed regret when she ultimately was unable to continue her studies. Only later did she come to understand that these schools were the enemy.

Schenirer set herself apart from the very beginning. Little concerned with others' opinions of her, she was able to brush aside all nicknames and side comments, believing that her dedication to school and to her religion was the proper path. From reading her memoirs, one gets the idea that she was sanctimonious, describing herself at every opportunity as standing above her peers. Nowhere is there any mention of her feeling lonely or out of place. In fact, her contemporaries even describe her self-righteous behavior with praise.

³⁰ Schenirer, 21-22.

Throughout her teenage years, Schenirer described herself as a perpetual student, not wasting time dancing or socializing but focusing her attention solely on Jewish learning. Yet, despite her desires and aptitude, by age thirteen, Schenirer stopped left school in order to assist with housework.³¹ She described her sister and friends dancing and singing while she withdrew to a corner of the room, reading or meditating. On Shabbat she records the special joy she felt pouring over parshat hashavua (the weekly Torah portion), the haftara (additional readings from the Prophets or the Writings) or *Nachalat Zvi* (ethical literature for women).³² As she put it, "In my days I never felt a greater joy, then when I studied and read holy Jewish books."³³

Schenirer's self-perceptions can be garnered by examining her personal relations as well. Her diaries, for instance, include memories of a vacation to Kalvaria. After devoting many paragraphs to her awe, evoked by her natural surroundings and the power of "The Creator," she launched into a tirade about her traveling companions who had possibly eaten non-kosher food. She described their reaction, and her counter-reaction:

They mocked and laughed at me and called me by the name "chasidnut." Indeed, I wasn't further embarrassed by this nickname. Inside me was awakened again thoughts to do something...because in order to be a Jew it is necessary to do so on every side and to fulfill the Torah commandments ...in all places, to remember that it is not a little thing to be a Jew. God brought us out from the house of bondage, a place where we surrendered to the will of man, and it is because of this that we are bound to serve Him. I am not able to explain this to them.³⁴

³¹ Friedenson, 15.

³² Schenirer, 22.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid, 32.

Schenirer's diaries reveal her as a preacher of morals, regularly expressing anger when her sister and her friends, did not behave in a traditional manner. Yet these descriptions of Schenirer are meant to evoke sympathy from the reader – poor Sarah, we are meant to imagine, who lived in a world where people did not even have a fear of Heaven. Judith Grunfeld-Rosenbaum, who would become Sarah's "right-hand woman" in the development of the Bais Yaakov schools, described a heated debate between Schenirer and her brothers over some issue of Jewish law. As soon as their father entered the conversation, Schenirer's voice was silenced. Meanwhile Schenirer's mother, symbol of the Old World, meekly sat in the corner reading *Tzena u'rena*. Frustrated with the situation, Schenirer stormed out of the house, seeking refuge at the home of a neighbor, a family of five daughters. There Schenirer found no woman freely discussing Torah, rather, in this observant family, one daughter had already left home to free herself from the bonds of traditional Jewish life, and three more yearned to follow her out of the ghetto to city life. As Grunfeld-Rosenbaum tells it, upon seeing this home Schenirer thought to herself: only one additional daughter remains young and innocent, if only she could learn the beauty of Judaism and be saved.³⁵

Stories like the one recorded by Grunfeld-Rosenbaum leave the modern feminist sympathetic to Schenirer's cause. Unable to sit at the table with men who study Torah, Schenirer seemed to be a real-life "Yentl". Stories of her childhood reveal her desperate desire to know more about Judaism, to study and learn like her father and brother. Although later she would refine these desires, learning the subtle difference between

³⁵ Judith Grunfeld-Rosenbaum, "Sara Schenirer – The Story of a Great Movement," in *Jewish Leaders*

acquiring appropriate Jewish knowledge and the world of text study open only to Orthodox Jewish men, one thing remained constant: Schenirer's desire to learn more. True to her faith and family, she did not want to leave traditional Judaism behind, rather she wanted show her peers the value of traditional Judaism by teaching them its contents.

Fully aware of the world around her, Sarah Schenirer understood why her peers were not attracted to Jewish tradition. The girls were uninvolved and found Jewish ritual and practice irrelevant to their lives. On holidays, for example, the men traveled with their sons to the rebbe, their spiritual leader, while the women remained home. Excluded from these celebrations, the girls grew spiteful at the restrictive customs, while their fathers, elated by the trips, were blind to their daughters' disdain.³⁶ Schenirer remained convinced that her Jewish sisters would embrace the Sabbath and holidays if they truly were taught their meaning and were able to appreciate their beauty.

Sarah Schenirer did not completely alienate herself from her family and friends. It seems that she would attend secular activities mostly out of curiosity. There were several accounts in her diaries that describe friends encouraging her to go to a meeting or even the theatre. For example, she followed her cousin to a women's organization called Ruth. Held on a Shabbat evening, the lecturer spoke to the young Jewish women about modern feminist ideas then beginning to percolate. Schenirer was unable to listen to anything being said by the lecturer because she concentrated solely on the Jewish laws being broken by the organizers. How could these women call themselves Jewish leaders if they desecrated the Sabbath? It was here at this very meeting, according to her diaries,

1750-1940. ed. Leo Jung. (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1953), 410.

³⁶ Grunfeld-Rosenbaum, 411.

acquiring appropriate Jewish knowledge and the world of text study open only to Orthodox Jewish men, one thing remained constant: Schenirer's desire to learn more. True to her faith and family, she did not want to leave traditional Judaism behind, rather she wanted show her peers the value of traditional Judaism by teaching them its contents.

Fully aware of the world around her, Sarah Schenirer understood why her peers were not attracted to Jewish tradition. The girls were uninvolved and found Jewish ritual and practice irrelevant to their lives. On holidays, for example, the men traveled with their sons to the rebbe, their spiritual leader, while the women remained home. Excluded from these celebrations, the girls grew spiteful at the restrictive customs, while their fathers, elated by the trips, were blind to their daughters' disdain.³⁶ Schenirer remained convinced that her Jewish sisters would embrace the Sabbath and holidays if they truly were taught their meaning and were able to appreciate their beauty.

Sarah Schenirer did not completely alienate herself from her family and friends. It seems that she would attend secular activities mostly out of curiosity. There were several accounts in her diaries that describe friends encouraging her to go to a meeting or even the theatre. For example, she followed her cousin to a women's organization called Ruth. Held on a Shabbat evening, the lecturer spoke to the young Jewish women about modern feminist ideas then beginning to percolate. Schenirer was unable to listen to anything being said by the lecturer because she concentrated solely on the Jewish laws being broken by the organizers. How could these women call themselves Jewish leaders if they desecrated the Sabbath? It was here at this very meeting, according to her diaries,

1750-1940. ed. Leo Jung. (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1953), 410.

³⁶ Grunfeld-Rosenbaum, 411.

that Sarah Schenirer fixed on to the idea of devising a means to move these women away from heresy and back toward Judaism.

Sarah Schenirer: Dressmaker and Refugee

As her parents' economic situation worsened, Sarah Schenirer not only continued the housework taken on after her sister's marriage but also served as an apprentice, learning to sew and embroider.³⁷ Following her apprenticeship, Schenirer became a seamstress, working all day, coming home to her father's books at night. To enhance her education she read and re-read biblical texts and Rabbinic legends³⁸ found in her father's library as well as Yiddish literature for women.³⁹

Once Schenirer grew older, and more successful, she continued to sew and set herself up as a dressmaker.⁴⁰ Her clientele quickly developed and Schenirer found herself observing mothers and daughters more than ever. She watched as the girls selected clothing for their bodies, intensely choosing these material decorations. At the same time she was struck by how they neglected their internal needs; they left their souls without spiritual nourishment.⁴¹ According to Schenirer, these girls thought that fancy dresses would bring them happiness, they did not realize their insides needed adornment. The mothers, Schenirer observed, wanted desperately to win the approval of their daughters, and therefore went to great lengths to please them. Yet their efforts related

³⁷ Kurzweil, 268.

³⁸ Mircea Eliade et al., eds., *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), s.v. "Sarah Schenirer" by Blu Greenberg.

³⁹ Kurzweil, 267.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 268.

⁴¹ Grunfeld-Rosenbaum, 408-9.

only to the material world, and not to the spiritual realm. Late at night, as she sat sewing their clothing, she wondered how it was that she could make a difference in the lives of these young women.⁴² How could she give them what they really needed?

Schenirer's answer would develop over a period of years, most notably those spent as a refugee in Vienna. Schenirer was one of hundreds of thousands of Jews who fled from Galicia to Vienna for refuge at the outbreak of World War I.⁴³ She devoted her initial weeks there to finding a place to live in the Jewish quarter, and securing an appropriate religious community. By word of mouth, she found a newly-formed Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) synagogue, not too far from her temporary home. It was here, at the synagogue on Stumpergasse Street, that Schenirer was first influenced by the ideas of modern Orthodoxy.

On Shabbat Hanukah 1914, the synagogue's rabbi, Dr. Moshe Flesch, a follower of the neo-Orthodox school of thought, decided to devote his sermon to women's role in Hanukah, and in Jewish history.⁴⁴ Little did he know the impact he would come to have on Jewish women. Speaking about Judith, a heroine of the Hanukah story, he argued that women should be leaders of their people, striving to do mitzvot and actively participating in Judaism. His words deeply influenced Schenirer. Not only did he give her encouragement to work actively toward solving the problems she found in Krakow, but his method of delivery, actively engaging the women in his midst, modeled a path that Schenirer could follow.

⁴² Ibid, 409.

⁴³ Kranzler reports 200,000 refugees.

⁴⁴ Zolty, 275.

Sarah Schenirer hoped to relay Dr. Flesch's message to the young women of Krakow.⁴⁵ Thus she attempted to record every word of his lecture and those she subsequently attended. She believed that if other women heard these progressive ideas, then they would understand how they could be active participants in their religion. She assumed that if they learned about the Jewish heroines of old, then they would want to know more about their heritage. She also thought that with the acquisition of knowledge they would be motivated to change their ways and turn toward "a respectable" Jewish life.⁴⁶ Although Schenirer herself went to public schools she did not understand the depths to which those Polish schools had influenced young Jewish women. She was an idealist and an optimist, and she pursued her goal with all her energy.

For the next three years, Schenirer recorded every lesson given by Dr. Flesch.⁴⁷ She became his "constant and most contentious pupil."⁴⁸ She noted that he never treated her like an outsider. Even in times of danger from the war, or during uprisings, she was never considered an obstacle or a nuisance.⁴⁹ (It seems that Schenirer, a woman who was unaccustomed to studying with a rabbi was grateful for his lessons, especially at such a tense political time.) At the same time she read more about German Orthodoxy, focusing on the writings of Rabbi Sampson Raphael Hirsch and Rabbi Esriel Hildeshimer, founder of the Berlin Rabbinical School. She also read popular Yiddish authors like Marcus

⁴⁵ Grunfeld-Rosenbaum, 413.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ David Kranzler, "An Orthodox Revolution: The Creation and Development of the Beth Jacob Seminary for Girls," The Yad Vashem International School for Holocaust Studies Educational Workshop. Jerusalem, 11 Oct. 1999. (19 August 2002) <www.yad-vashem.org.il>.

⁴⁸ Grunfeld-Rosenbaum, 413.

⁴⁹ Schenirer, 24-5.

Lehmann⁵⁰ who depicted Jewish life that appealed to modern audiences.⁵¹ In Vienna, Schenirer observed a traditional Judaism synthesized with modern enlightenment thinking.⁵² These tools would become Schenirer's means for understanding how modern thinking could help attract young women who had strayed from traditional Judaism. According to Holocaust historian David Kranzler, in this way, Schenirer thought, she would be able to ensure that "the daughters of Israel no longer brought disgrace upon themselves, their families, and their heritage."⁵³

In Vienna, Schenirer not only learned about neo-Orthodoxy and increased her knowledge of Judaism, she also encountered the Jewish Enlightenment movement – the Haskalah. As the secular enlightenment spread through Europe, and emancipation was granted little by little to the Jews, proponents of Jewish integration into the greater society emerged. The Haskalah sought to help Jews improve themselves so that they would more readily fit in and acculturate into modern European society.

"The adherents of Haskalah shared the rationalist belief in the boundless efficacy of a rational education. They therefore turned to a change in the curriculum and methods of teaching as the main means of shaping a new mode of Jewish life."⁵⁴ The old mode of Talmud study would not suffice in the modern world; according to adherents of the Haskalah, Jews needed to learn humanities and the art of reason, they needed to understand politics, and develop a secular consciousness. In this way they would be

⁵⁰ (1831-1890) He was a German Orthodox Rabbi, scholar and writer. He wrote historical novels and short stories that have religious and educational value.

⁵¹ Kurzweil, 269.

⁵² Weissman, *Studies in Jewish Education*, 279.

⁵³ Kranzler.

⁵⁴ *Encyclopedia Judaica*., CD-ROM edition version 1.0, s.v. "Haskalah"

productive, and could participate in the greater culture. The Maskilim educated both boys and girls together, founding Jewish schools that taught Bible and Hebrew along with arithmetic, history, geography, natural sciences, art and foreign languages.⁵⁵

The Haskalah's focus on learning and education bolstered pre-existing educational programs and led to founding new schools. As noted before, like their nationalist contemporaries, not only the Zionists but almost every newly-formed Jewish movement began to establish its own school for both boys and girls. Hirsch himself encouraged the establishment of schools for girls, fully appreciating the necessity of education for both sexes.⁵⁶

Beginning to think about how she would teach the daughters of Krakow, Sarah Schenirer understood it would be necessary to adopt Hirsch's modern techniques. She realized that girls would have to be taught not only Jewish traditions, but also secular subjects. She was not opposed to secular education, but she found some of the material (such as the Romance literature) detrimental to the enforcement of Jewish values, such as modesty. The existing girls' schools in Western Europe used contemporary educational theory and applied it to Jewish subjects. However, Schenirer herself was never able to fully comprehend the modern world and its ideals. This is evident in accounts written by those who disparaged Schenirer's absolute rigidity but stayed in the *Bais Yaakov* movement, nonetheless, encouraged by more enlightened thinkers.⁵⁷ Even at the outset, Schenirer refused to teach in the vernacular, as Hirsch did, believing that abandoning

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Hirsch's ideas will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2, where I delineate Rabbinic reactions to the education of girls.

⁵⁷ Grunfeld-Rosenbaum, 426.

Yiddish would lead to abandoning Jewish practice.⁵⁸

By the time she left Vienna for Krakow Sarah Schenirer was clear about the crisis and its implications for the Jewish people, as well as a first step toward a solution. The major problem was the dichotomous education system that existed in Poland through the 1920s: boys studied classical Jewish texts, while girls focused on secular studies, if they studied at all. As Schenirer grew older she better understood the cultural clash between boys and girls in her community. It was expected that once grown, daughters and sons would become one cohesive observant family. She worried not only about marriages between these dissimilar girls and boys, but also about the education of their children. After all, the mother provides a child his or her earliest education. Schenirer worried about how a mother who had no real Jewish education could properly raise her child? A mother might not know that she should instruct her child on reciting the Shema al ha-mitah (the bedtime prayer), she might not recount tales of the Jewish people to her children. Worst of all, she might refuse to teach her children about Judaism altogether.

At the same time, Schenirer knew that the daughters of Krakow would ask her why, in the twentieth century, she advocated a return to traditional ways. For her, this return was necessary in order to save the Jewish people. As she put it:

An internal voice called to me: You are obligated to realize your ideas, to create a Haredi [ultra-Orthodox] school for girls in order to save the new generations of girls from destruction (God Forbid). ... Immediately after returning to Krakow I will call together a group of women, and Jewish girls, and I will put before them my plans and ideas. Here I find great support in the words of our sages, "all that is undertaken which is for the sake of Heaven, its end will be established."⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Kurzweil, 269.

⁵⁹ Schenirer, 25.

Schenirer perceived a problem that affected her personally and would affect generations to come. During her time away from home she not only gained perspective but knowledge that her ideas had been realized already in other parts of the world. She understood that her solution would not be popular, or easy, but she was focused and determined. All she needed to do was bring it home to Krakow.

Return to Krakow: Implementation and Adjustment

Sarah Schenirer returned to Krakow in 1917 with a concrete plan. First, she wanted to gather as large a group as possible to teach them the role that they might play in their own religion. Indeed, a group did assemble to speak who heard of Schenirer's experience in Vienna. According to her memoirs, the women were enthusiastic about the idea of learning like the women of Vienna did.⁶⁰ Schenirer immediately began planning a public lecture, in a sense, she had begun her one-woman crusade to educate the women of Krakow. With hard work Schenirer secured a local orphanage's auditorium as a lecture space.⁶¹ Schenirer spoke to 40 young women, attempting to inspire them in the way that Dr. Flesch had inspired her. She recited and explained the ethical precepts found in *Pirke Avot*, (ethical teachings of the Sages included in the Mishna) and suggested they study this material on long summer Sabbaths. She explained how some laws are created as a fence, so that other, more serious laws might not be broken. She then provided an example, muktze (those items that are not prohibited themselves on Shabbat but should not be touched because one might, unintentionally use them, thereby desecrating the

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Weissman, *Studies in Jewish Education*, 282.

Sabbath). At this point in her lecture, the extent of the challenge before her became clear, as she put it:

I watched the recognizable part of those present; they gave me an astonished look. **What?** (her emphasis) For this we were summoned here? On many of their lips they asked if this was an ironic joke. The walls were filled with scorn.⁶²

These girls - educated in Polish Catholic schools, products of Polish culture - could not believe what Sarah Schenirer had brought back from worldly Vienna. Schenirer assumed that she would open a gate previously locked to her contemporaries and they would rush in. However, as she would soon discover, while she had increased her own Judaic knowledge, she was not able to make that knowledge attractive to the young women of Krakow. Simply reciting the lessons she had learned would not be sufficient. Schenirer desired, above all, to change people's actions. Older women, already devoted to Judaism, came to learn more, but they were not always willing to change their habits. Younger women, not interested in their religion, remained distant from Judaism.

Reaching only limited success with her peers, Schenirer turned to young children.

⁶³ After all, she figured, a young child was impressionable and open to learning new things. As a dressmaker she surely watched young girls turn into young women before her eyes. Observing how mothers first select clothes for their daughters until the latter took it upon themselves to make choices in their dress, so too, with religious practice. At the same time, Schenirer knew that younger girls would not yet be tainted by outside society. And so they would be more amenable to bringing Judaism into their lives. If she

⁶² Schenirer, 26.

⁶³ Schenirer, 28.

could influence a child from an early age, then as an adult, too, that grown child would select a Jewish way of life.

Schenirer's writings, as well as the testimonies of others, demonstrate how her strength came from her ability to positively influence people. Yet, it seems to me, Schenirer initially failed to understand how to appeal to these educated young women. Schenirer sought to teach these women as Dr. Flesch spoke to her. However, Schenirer was not the product of western education, she had only just been exposed to enlightenment thinking, and therefore was not able to appeal to these women intellectually. Unlike Dr. Flesch, who spoke of heroines that took a stand, Schenirer did not try to appeal to the women she was instructing, rather she lectured on what she thought the women should know. Putting the content first she did not think about her learners. By switching her focus to younger children, Schenirer engaged a different group of learners – students eager to hear her message. Younger children who seek routine and strive to behave like “good” children proved a receptive and enthusiastic audience for the seamstress they loved and knew: Sarah Schenirer.

Support for the Bais Yaakov School

Schenirer's decision to reach out to young girls would require assistance. Lecturing to her peers was one thing, but founding a school required permission from Rabbis. She assumed that the leaders of the Hasidic community would oppose the school because it was a deviation from the past. But as she learned from S. R. Hirsch, a change that resulted in increasing Torah learning was no threat, but rather an attempt to preserve

Jewish life. Not sure how to proceed, she wrote to her brother for advise.⁶⁴ At first, he wondered why she needed to enter into the politics of girls' education, but as her resolve emerged he invited her to visit him in Marienbad to speak to the Ardmore⁶⁵ of Belz.⁶⁶

Sometime after Yom Kippur, 1918 Sarah Schenirer traveled to Marienbad with hopes of obtaining the Rebbe's blessing. She lived in a world in which the Hasidic leader was deeply admired and devoutly followed. She knew how important the Rebbe's imprimatur was. By this step alone, Schenirer's obedient nature is discernable as she traveled miles to obtain permission to establish a one-room schoolhouse.

Once in Marienbad, Schenirer's brother wrote the Rebbe, Rabbi Issachar Dov Rokeach (1854–1927), leader of the Belzer dynasty.⁶⁷ "She wants to instruct and teach Jewish daughters in the ways of Judaism and Torah," Schenirer's brother wrote. Despite the rabbi's conservative disposition, he felt that this type of innovation might be necessary for the time.⁶⁸ The Rebbe sent the reply, "Blessings and Success."⁶⁹ Schenirer was elated and regarded his blessing as permission to start a school.

Although Schenirer's permission came from the Ardmore of Belz, her students were not members of the Belzer Hasidim. The Rebbe refused to allow the daughters of his community to attend the school. The Ardmore of Ger, on the other hand, supported Schenirer wholeheartedly.⁷⁰ The Ger dynasty was the largest group of the Agudat Yisrael

⁶⁴ Ibid., 29.

⁶⁵ A term for a Hasidic rabbi – an acrostic of the Hebrew words adoneinu moreinu rabenu – our lord, our teacher, our rabbi.

⁶⁶ Schenirer, 29.

⁶⁷ The Belzer dynasty was one of the most important Hasidic groups in Galicia, known for its opposition to the Enlightenment and its denouncement of innovation. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, CD-ROM edition version 1.0, s.v. "Belz")

⁶⁸ Weissman, *Studies in Jewish Education*, 282.

⁶⁹ Schenirer, 29.

⁷⁰ Weissman, *Studies in Jewish Education*, 283.

organization.⁷¹ The Gerer Rebbe, Abraham Mordecai Alter (1866–1948) encouraged attendance at Schenirer's schools. It seems the Ardmore of Ger was particularly concerned with the needs of young people, especially the establishment of schools and youth organizations.⁷² Consequently, Schenirer's desire to educate young girls interested him, and he gave absolute support to her endeavor.

The Founding of the Bais Yaakov School

The founding of the Bais Yaakov schools by Sarah Schenirer is remembered like a fairy tale, or perhaps a Hasidic legend. In the Jewish month of Heshvan 1917, dressmaker and seamstress Sarah Schenirer transformed her small workroom into a schoolroom with benches and a blackboard.⁷³ Twenty-five girls, mostly from among her clients, arrived bright-eyed and eager to learn.⁷⁴ As Grunfeld-Rosenbaum described it, "...the dressmaker turn[ed] overnight into a teacher and the workshop into a school room, and the customers, instead of sending in their orders, sent their children to be pupils of this school."⁷⁵

Schenirer herself used the fairy tale metaphor, describing how she once sewed dresses for these girls, and now she fashioned "spiritual clothing", teaching them blessings and rituals to become good Jews.⁷⁶ She reported that her students were "babies

⁷¹ The ultra-Orthodox political organization founded in 1912 which did not include the previously mentioned Belz dynasty.

⁷² *Encyclopedia Judaica*, CD-ROM edition version 1.0, s.v. "Gora Kalwaria".

⁷³ Schenirer, 29.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Grunfeld-Rosenbaum, 414.

⁷⁶ Schenirer, 29.

without a taste of sin."⁷⁷ She was pleasantly surprised by their eagerness to learn and she recorded that they asked each other daily: "Tomorrow will we also here these wonderful things?"⁷⁸ Within a month, she reported that the student body grew to 40.⁷⁹

Sarah Schenirer's school had tremendous success. As the school grew, she employed two young aids. After only a year, she sent her aids to establish schools in nearby communities.⁸⁰ Within two years she had attracted nearly 300 pupils.⁸¹ In the beginning the new schools' teachers did not have a formal Jewish education. They were chosen because they were good role models, embodying the values that Schenirer hoped to impart in her students. Additionally, they often were able to manage the classroom, having strong supervisory skills.⁸² Over time, Schenirer recruited graduates for teaching positions. Although they too had little training, their dedication to the Jewish heritage (learned from their teacher, Sarah Schenirer) permeated every aspect of their teaching and helped them succeed.⁸³

Growth of the Bais Yaakov School under Sarah Schenirer

Part of Schenirer's success was due to her efforts to reach out to families throughout the region. Traveling from city to city, and village to village, Schenirer was neither shy nor subtle, seeking to make parents understand that their children's actions would lead to thorough going assimilation, and the abandonment of Jewish tradition by

⁷⁷ Ibid., 30.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 29.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 30.

⁸⁰ Eliade, 98.

⁸¹ Eisenstein, 83.

⁸² Schenirer, 50.

⁸³ Kurzweil, 272.

their children's children.⁸⁴ She cried out in the village streets:

How can you see your daughters as they sit at the holy Sabbath table wearing licentious clothing and immersed in non-Jewish books? Mothers of Israel how can you look with a cold spirit and see your daughters going and distancing themselves from you more and more? Indeed, aren't they singularly sweeping away your seed?⁸⁵

She warned them not to be reassured by neighbors whose daughters also behaved impiously.⁸⁶ Schenirer emphatically encouraged them to take action: basic education for their young daughters would be their saving anchor. The Bais Yaakov Schools would correct the perversion and immorality that crept into their homes from the streets.

Schenirer influenced both fathers and mothers. She commiserated with Hasidic fathers: how sad it was that his daughters did not revel in the beauties of Judaism. She lectured them saying that they must realize that their daughters think of them as dark (unenlightened)⁸⁷ and fanatical.⁸⁸ At the same time she empathized with the mothers' shame. She knew that these mothers felt guilty, having neglected the ways of their own mothers. "Have pity on your daughter," she said, "and save the life of your family from extinction."⁸⁹

Sarah Schenirer was clear that education alone would not save a family. Parents should not only send their children to Haredi schools, but also reinforce the learning at home. The parents were obligated both to support the Bais Yaakov schools and to be role

⁸⁴ Schenirer, 45.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 45.

⁸⁶ Schenirer, 51.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 47.

⁸⁸ Friedenson, 14.

⁸⁹ Schenirer, 50.

models for their children. A Jewish school would only complement what was missing from the home.⁹⁰

Schenirer even spoke to the girls themselves. With renewed confidence, she warned the next generation of Jewish women that a non-Jewish education would steal their innocence, exposing them to foreign thoughts and ideas that would lead them far away from their home. She would not give up on young women, even those too old for her school. She encouraged them to take a stand against assimilation, even at the face of mockery and ridicule.⁹¹ Over the course of her lifetime, Schenirer would explain to thousands, that Bais Yaakov schools filled a real and pressing need. Secular schools "were like gold, bright, shimmering and rich, ...yet they can not satisfy the soul."⁹²

Until this time the Jewish community had relied on parents to educate their daughters, but these parents, according to Schenirer, were no longer qualified to do so.⁹³ Turning a blind eye to the realities of their daughters' lives, Jewish parents sent their children to Polish schools to learn a trade and earn money for the family. These schools were the hidden enemy, not only educating girls' minds, but taking the souls of young Jewish women.⁹⁴ Schenirer sought to create a reasonable alternative – a new educational system to re-integrate Jewish girls into traditional Jewish society.

Reasons for Success

Schenirer's personality undoubtedly influenced the success of the schools. In

⁹⁰ Ibid., 49.

⁹¹ Ibid., 47.

⁹² Schenirer, 39-40.

⁹³ Ibid., 49.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

every account of Schenirer's life she is described as an endlessly devoted nurturing mother figure. Those that knew her describe her as charismatic, having an almost magnetic personality. From her diaries one infers that Schenirer is extremely reverent and pious. The combination of these traits enabled her to capture the hearts of her students, to keep them interested and to train them in a path of righteous devotion.

Although Schenirer never had children of her own, she seemed to have adopted every child of the school, caring for each of them one by one. Judith Grunfeld-Rosenbaum, who worked side by side with her at the Bais Yaakov teacher's seminary, wrote:

When I first met Sara Schenirer (sic), she was a woman of forty-two. She wore a plain black dress and her very lively face was framed in black silk, in a motherly, old-fashioned way. You would not think of her as a personality in her own right, but as someone's mother who had come to greet you. Liveliness, simplicity and motherliness were the first impressions.⁹⁵

While to the modern-day reader this description may not seem entirely positive, to me it depicts a woman of selfless devotion; her personality was expressed in the care she gave to others. She must have made a great impression on the girls personally, as it is said that upon her death thousands of girls and women mourned, tearing their clothing and sitting shiva as if she had been their own mother.⁹⁶

Almost every article written about her describes how students' eyes would glow in her presence; they would run to sit with her and learn from her. Miriam Zakon, author of a children's biography of Dr. Grunfeld, described Schenirer's love for all her children. "Just as she looked at Polish Jewry and saw the potential within its womanhood, and

⁹⁵ Grunfeld-Rosenbaum, 407-8.

brought it out to a full flower, so she looked at each girl and saw, not an unlearned child, but a Jewess with the potential of immeasurable account."⁹⁷ It was this faith in every individual student, that encouraged each to continue studying with her, to choose a life devoted to the details of Jewish law

Schenirer may not have truly been able to care for every girl in such a dedicated way, but the fact that her students believed so says something about how others perceived her. This devotion drew the girls to her, and they responded by devoting themselves to her teachings. Schenirer was a legend in her time. Grunfeld-Rosenbaum recalled how Schenirer never took disciplinary actions; they were not necessary. The students simply needed to listen to her, and she gave them her time and patience.⁹⁸ Upon Schenirer's death Grunfeld-Rosenbaum reports that

tens of thousands of women and girls knew then that to the end of their days they would feel the eye of Sara Schinierer (sic) watching them, her wishes urging fulfillment; that her questions to them would forever demand the right answer and that they would have to live their lives in such a manner as to be able to meet the eye of Sara Schinierer again in Eternity.⁹⁹

Schenirer's depiction of herself as a pious and devout child, persisted throughout her life. In letters contained in *Em B'Yisrael* she draws continued strength from her heritage, from her ideals, and from her beliefs. Zakon writes that Schenirer modeled the importance of observing God's commandments wholeheartedly – she believed that every

⁹⁶ Friedenson, 14.

⁹⁷ Miriam Zakon. *The Lessons of Sarah Schenirer*, Bais Yaakov Collection, Orthodox Jewish Archives at Agudat Yisrael, New York, 6.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Grunfeld-Rosenbaum, 407.

mitzvah was important.¹⁰⁰ Even at the moment of death, at age 52, it is reported that Schenirer requested to light Shabbat candles just one last time.¹⁰¹ She worked to engender this complete devotion in her students.

The stories and histories written about Schenirer depict her as an dynamic figure who received letters from all the surrounding communities, begging her to come and establish a school in their town. Once in her presence they glowed, inspired with the tasks that she imparted to them. The descriptions read with remarkable similarity to the Hasidic tzadik. Just as the tzadik drew followers by his charismatic personality, so she drew students by her warmth, love, and exemplary behavior. Her words and ideas took flight and within a few short years many knew of this woman and her accomplishments. Imanuel Etkes, in his article entitled "The Zaddik," describes how the tzadik considered himself to be responsible for the welfare of the community.¹⁰² He was a guide through personal example, individual instruction, and sermon.¹⁰³ Schenirer too took an active role in trying to save her community, doing more for the women of Krakow than the rabbis were able to do. However, she remained exceedingly humble, a servant to her Creator.

Not only her personality, but the Bais Yaakov movement itself closely paralleled the Hasidic movement. Grunfeld-Rosenbaum highlighted this parallel, remarking on how Schenirer as head of the schools swept thousands of young girls off their feet, creating a fervent movement. The Bais Yaakov movement adapted a system used to attract Jewish

¹⁰⁰ Zakon, 3.

¹⁰¹ Grunfeld-Rosenbaum, 407.

¹⁰² Imanuel Etkes "The Zaddik: The Interrelationship between Religious Doctrine and Social Organization" *Hasidism Reappraised* ed. Ada Rapaport-Albert. (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1996), 160.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

boys to one for Jewish girls, an adaptation that filled the Jewish daughter's life with love and spirit. Schenirer was keenly aware early on of the void left in the women's lives when their brothers and husbands left to see the Rebbe. She fought for women's libraries and camps and youth groups, not because she felt that women should have institutions similar to men, but because she knew these organizations were mechanisms to keep students involved. Schenirer wanted her fellow women to have a community, a school, a youth group and activities to fill their days.¹⁰⁴ And in this way she helped ensure that Hasidic girls, like the boys, became immersed in traditional Jewish life and thereby insulated from modern, secular forces which surrounded them.

Although Schenirer's work may have been revolutionary, she was not a rebel. She did not create a rebellion. Rather, she found a way to preserve a society that was slipping away. She herself may have been an outcast in her own acculturated environment, she became a model for the ultra-Orthodox community she helped to create. In essence, she taught her students to be like she was. She taught them to resist secular temptations, she encouraged them to dress modestly, and she trained them in every aspect of Jewish observance necessary to be a Jewish woman and a Jewish mother. Schenirer worked to impart to her students traditional behavior while censoring out anything that could alienate them from that tradition.

Schenirer's personality led to success not only with her students, but with the movement's supporters as well. Sociologist Deborah Weissman explained how her personality gave her access to those whom might have otherwise feared that she would

¹⁰⁴ Grunfeld-Rosenbaum, 429.

overstep her bounds.¹⁰⁵ Her "feminine" qualities of modesty, warmth, and motherliness were always emphasized.¹⁰⁶ Those who might have doubted her motives, who worried that she was trying to introduce modern feminist ideals into the ultra-Orthodox society, merely had to meet her to know that this was not her goal. Her respect both for the rabbis that enabled the Bais Yaakov schools to thrive, as well as for the Haredi way of life, assured would be nay sayers that she shared their values and ideals.

In truth, of course, one woman alone could not have established the international movement that Bais Yaakov was to become. The adoption of the Bais Yaakov movement as the women's educational arm of Agudat Yisrael just two years after its beginning, and the financial support given to the schools from Keren HaTorah (Agudat Yisrael's fund raising branch) were crucial to its development. Dr. Leo Deutschlander, head of Keren HaTorah and an enlightened western thinker with modern educational training, became not only an educational leader of the school but also the financial mastermind behind its future. He recruited new students, stimulating and satisfying the minds of those that felt the "ghetto" was too confining.¹⁰⁷ He was able to speak in an academic way yet keep the students within the arms of Judaism.¹⁰⁸ In addition to the two months he spent in Krakow yearly, he spent much of his time traveling with world to raise funds for the school.¹⁰⁹ These international efforts secured new schools, helped retain students, and developed new teachers throughout the continent.

¹⁰⁵ Weissman, *Studies in Jewish Education*, 291.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Grunfeld-Rosenbaum, 427.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

Is Sarah Schenirer a heroine for Jewish women? Her life's work gave the gift of Jewish education to thousands of girls across Eastern Europe and beyond. She most likely prevented thousands of girls from leaving the traditional Jewish world of their parents and engaging in a more secular life. Her courage and dedication to a cause she believed in, her desire to inspire others with a love of Judaism, and her ability to create systematic change while maintaining the integrity of the system serve as sources of inspiration for the Jewish woman. But did she, by founding schools for ultra-Orthodox girls, deny them the benefits of a modern, scientific education? Did she create a medium that enabled male rabbis in the modern world to keep women subjected and inferior? To answer these questions a further examination of the Rabbinic responses to her schools and the effects the Bais Yaakov schools have had in the last century is needed.

Chapter 2: Rabbinic Support for the Formal Jewish Education of Girls

There is no Jewish movement today, no Jewish organization and no Jewish leader, which has not been shaped by the effects of modernity. Even those who seem shut off from the forces of modernity have made a conscious choice to do so. All modern movements of Judaism came into existence "out of a confrontation with a changed political and cultural environment."¹¹⁰ All respond. What varies is how and to what extent.

In the last chapter, I described how and to what extent Sarah Schenirer responded to modernity. In her desire to "save" Jewish girls from the ill effects of modernity, she proposed a solution: a Jewish school for girls. Unlike others who suggested that girls be removed from Polish schools and remain at home, trying to shut out the forces of modernity completely, Sarah Schenirer embraced the idea of the modern school but used it to preserve traditional life.

Sarah Schenirer was not alone in thinking about education for Jewish girls. As discussed at the end of the first chapter, Schenirer was not rebelling against a system, rather she took what she had learned to create something new to reinforce traditional values. The models of the Polish school that she attended as well as the influence of the community in Vienna in which she lived guided her thinking. Sampson Raphael Hirsch's impact on Schenirer's thinking can not be underestimated. But Hirsch's influence extended far beyond Schenirer. At the same time that Schenirer was working to establish her schools, two of Hirsch's students, Rabbis Dr. Pinchas Kohn and Dr. Emanuel Carlebach, traveled to Poland to help Polish rabbis reform the educational and

¹¹⁰ Michael Meyer. *Response to Modernity* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999), 9.

organizational frameworks of the Jewish community.¹¹¹ The rabbis that Kohn and Carlebach worked with would be instrumental in supporting and expanding Sarah Schenirer's school.

Schenirer's initiative was launched within a Jewish community vexed by the question of Jewish girls' education. She was not the only one to notice the effects of Polish education on the Jewish girls and women in the religious community. Indeed she raised her voice after at least fifteen years of protests. We know the issue was raised as a matter of concern as early as 1903 at a Rabbinic conference in Krakow, and then again at a founding meeting of Agudat Yisrael in Kattowice.¹¹² Newspapers in the early nineteenth century carried articles decrying the situation of the Jewish woman.¹¹³ By the second decade of the 1900s it appeared that the effects of a widespread (secular) education for Jewish women and escalating integration into non-Jewish society had created an atmosphere ripe for change. But it remained in Schenirer's hands to initiate that change.

In order to understand the development of the first system of Jewish education for girls, it is necessary to provide an overview of both the Jewish laws that govern education and the issues that surround the study of Judaism by women. This chapter will begin with an explanation of the debate surrounding women's Torah study and then focus on the innovation proposed by Sampson Raphael Hirsch. Finally, I will explore how that debate was carried out in the traditional communities of Eastern Europe and how all of

¹¹¹ Alexander Carelbach, "A German Rabbi Goes East," *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* VI (1961), 60.

¹¹² Weissman, *Studies in Jewish Education*, 281.

¹¹³ Aaron Marcus, "Al Yisrael V'Al Rabanan Shalom," *HaMitzpeh*, 28 June 1912, p. 1.

these factors led to a Rabbinic support for the Bais Yaakov schools.

Women's study of Torah: A background

Despite misconceptions to the contrary, Jewish women have under certain circumstances studied Torah, learning both practice and Jewish law throughout history. In general, however mothers taught their daughters what they needed to know to live as Jewish women.¹¹⁴ Judith Baskin, in her article about medieval Jews in *Jewish Women in Historical Perspectives*, writes that during the middle ages, most Jewish men were literate and a small elite knew considerable more amounts of Jewish law.¹¹⁵ She adds, "Occasionally these higher standards also applied to women, particularly those from families distinguished for their learning." According to Deborah Weissman, in her article on the education of Jewish women in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, there are examples of a girls' talmud torah (religious school) as far back as 1475 in Rome.¹¹⁶ Still, throughout history, even if girls studied, there remained a stark gender differentiation at the highest levels of Jewish study. This difference is based on the halacha or Jewish law, regarding the education of boys and girls.

The distinction between what girls and boys should learn is rooted in the Biblical commandment to teach children. (Deuteronomy 11:19) In this verse Moses addresses the Jewish people stating God's commandment: "You shall teach these words to your children". The commandment is in fact also recited twice daily in worship. Yet the meaning of the verse is not exactly clear: both the Hebrew word for "you shall teach"

¹¹⁴ Deborah Weissman, "Education of the Jewish Women" *The Encyclopedia Judaica Yearbook 1986-87*. (Keter, Jerusalem: 1987), 31.

¹¹⁵ Judith Baskin. "Jewish Women in the Middle Ages" in *Jewish Women in Historical Perspectives*. ed. Judith Baskin. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 104.

¹¹⁶ Weissman, "Education of Jewish Women", 32.

(v'shinantam) and the Hebrew world for "to your children" (l'vanecha) appear in the masculine plural form. In the Hebrew language in general, the same grammatical form is used to address a group of men (or in this case sons) as to address a mixed group of men and women (or in this case sons and daughters). Thus, it is impossible to determine if the correct and simple English translation of the verse is "you shall teach them to your **sons**" or "you shall teach them to your **children**."

In the Jewish tradition when multiple interpretations are possible (which lead to variants in practice) the commentaries often engage in a discussion in order to clarify the intended translation of the fact. In the Babylonian Talmud tractate *Kiddushin* the following appears:

'To teach him Torah.' How do we know it? — Because it is written. And you shall teach them to your sons. And if his father did not teach him, he must teach himself, as it is written, "and you shall study."

How do we know that she has no obligation? Because it is written, v'limadetem or u'lemadetem¹¹⁷: Therefore we learn whoever is commanded to study, is commanded to teach; whoever is not commanded to study, is not commanded to teach. And how do we know that she is not bound to teach herself? — Because it is written, v'limadetem or u'lemadetem: the one whom others are commanded to teach is commanded to teach oneself; and the one whom others are not commanded to teach, is not commanded to teach oneself.

How then do we know that others are not commanded to teach her? — Because it is written: 'And you shall teach them to your sons — but not to your daughters.'¹¹⁸

This interpretation was quoted by later rabbis and preserved in codes of Jewish law,

¹¹⁷ By changing the vowels, which do not appear in the Torah scroll, the meaning is changed from teach to learn. The rabbis of the Talmud capitalize on this word play saying the verse means both to teach and to learn simultaneously.

¹¹⁸ B.T. *Kiddushin* 29b.

thereby becoming the primary understanding of the verse. Based on this interpretation, the Rabbis then expounded regarding women's education: girls were not obligated to learn, women were not obligated to teach their children, girls were not obligated to teach themselves, nor were they obligated to study at all.

It is important to point out that the rabbis did not **forbid** a woman to study Torah, she was merely not obligated to do so. In fact, the Torah itself provides an example of women learning words of Torah. In Deuteronomy 31:12 the Torah specifically obligates women to learn the words of Torah on Sukkot:

Assemble the people, the women and the children and the stranger within your gates in order that they may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God and be cautious to do all the words of this Torah.

In its simple form it appears that women are commanded to learn Torah at least once during the year. However, Rabbi Eleazar ben Azaria explained the meaning of this verse by claiming that it is the men who would **learn** and the women who would **hear** the words of Torah.¹¹⁹ This Talmudic interpretation of the Sukkot commandment differentiates between men and women's learning. This distinction created two separate and unequal learning programs for boys and girls. Jewish boys are obligated to talmud¹²⁰ Torah, or to engage in a rigorous course of mastering the intricacies of Torah, whereas Jewish girls are not.

These disparate approaches to Torah learning for boys and girls are exacerbated by the often-quoted Talmudic passage in tractate *Sotah* regarding the study of Torah by women.

¹¹⁹ B.T. *Haggiga* 3a.

¹²⁰ Talmud means to learn or in this case refers more broadly to the system of Torah learning through pilpul (the study of the generational layers of the Talmud and their meanings).

In a tractate that discusses the punishment for the adulterous wife (sotah), Ben Azzai says that a man should teach his daughter about the sotah ordeal so she will understand the process. It reads: "A man is obligated to teach his daughter Torah so that if she has to drink (the waters which will declare her innocence or guilt) she may know that her merit will protect her."¹²¹ Rabbi Eliezar retorts, "Whoever teaches his daughter Torah it is as though he teaches her tiflut (obscenity/licentiousness)." Although these opinions appear to contradict each other, over time Rabbi Eliezar's infamous words became famous. These words influenced girls' education for centuries to come. While study by individual female students may have been permissible, formal instruction was deemed unnecessary and therefore not encouraged. Women learned what they needed to know from their mothers, and in later generations their learning was supplemented by the availability of Yiddish literature such as *Tzena u'rena*. Formally the *Shulchan Aruch* acknowledged that women may study Torah but recommended against it,¹²² quoting Rabbi Eliezar:

The Sages have said, "Whoever teaches his daughter Torah teaches her tiflut": this they said about the Oral Law. As to the Written Torah to begin with, one should not teach it to her, but if he already has, it is not as if he teaches her tiflut.¹²³

Clarifying the woman's obligation, Rabbi Moses Isserles, in his commentary to this section of the *Shulchan Aruch*, stated that women must still learn laws that pertain to them.¹²⁴

¹²¹ B.T. *Sotah* 20a.

¹²² *Shulchan Aruch*, *Yoreh Deah Hilchot Talmud Torah* 246:6 in Rachel Biale *Women and Jewish Law: an Exploration of Women's Issues in Halakhic Sources*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1984), 36-7.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

Circumstances changed in the modern era. While Jewish tradition turned a blind eye, girls began to study non-Jewish subjects in a formal way. And new questions arose. Should Jewish girls be prohibited from studying non-Jewish subjects? What if Jewish girls no longer modeled their behavior after their mothers, disobeying Rabbi Isserles's ruling that girls had to learn about their obligations? Should there then be formal Jewish education for girls? Can girls be taught as a group like boys? And who should teach the girls?

Sampson Raphael Hirsch was among the first to attempt to answer some of these questions. It is perhaps not surprising, given that Hirsch devoted his life to trying to combine traditional Judaism with modernity. Hirsch addressed these questions and others, and was at the forefront of advocating the need for formal education for Jewish girls.

Sampson Raphael Hirsch on the Education of Girls

As emancipation spread throughout Europe the fabric of the Jewish community as a whole, and of the Jewish family in particular, changed dramatically. Paula Hyman, professor history at Yale University, argues that the structure of family life was central to adherence of bourgeois norms. As the Jewish family changed, and identity shifted, children's education became the mother's responsibility.¹²⁵ Furthermore, "the elevation of the Jewish woman to the status of primary religious influence on her ...children made

¹²⁵ Paula Hyman. "The Modern Jewish Family: Image and Reality" in *The Jewish Family: Metaphor and Memory*. ed. David Kraemer. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 180.

possible [her] access to Jewish education."¹²⁶ After all, if the Jewish woman was not sufficiently educated, how could she educate her children? Hyman sights newspapers as early as 1844 blaming Jewish women for high rates of assimilation.¹²⁷ It was in this environment that leaders of the newly-formed Orthodox movement advocated for the education of Jewish girls. In the modern world the mother would help shape the family, and if the future of Judaism rested upon the mother, then Judaism should invest in her education.

Sampson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) is known as the founder of Orthodoxy. Living in Germany, he responded to the Reformers of the nineteenth century by showing how traditional Jewish life could be compatible with modernity. Having studied both in a *yeshiva* and a university, his appearance and manner were different from that of his counterparts in Poland. Dressing in modern clothing, writing in the vernacular, he was able to appeal to a more acculturated group of Jews. Yet, at the same time, his ability to synthesize modern enlightenment thought with traditional Jewish life influenced Jews throughout Europe, even the initially-reticent Polish rabbis. A history of the period published by Agudat Yisrael described Hirsch in the following words:

[The German] community might have disappeared entirely if not for the stubbornness of the small religious kehilla (community) which took as its Rav the talented young Godol Batorah (great Torah scholar). Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch...In a short time Rabbi Hirsch managed to stem the tide of defection in the Jewish camp. He was himself uniquely equipped with the strongest most modern weapons to fight this battle...Shortly before his death Rabbi Hirsch, together with other rabbis, founded the "free Union of Orthodox Jewry." This Union succeeded in...serv[ing] as a blueprint for similar efforts (Including

¹²⁶ Ibid, 189.

¹²⁷ Ibid, 188.

Agudat Yisrael) in other countries where the plague of Reform and assimilation had made inroads.¹²⁸

Indeed, Hirsch fought to save a Jewish community that was rapidly changing. His ability to stay true to "Torah Judaism," while participating in the highest forms of modern culture, enabled him to make "Torah Judaism" attractive to the elements of society that sought to reject it. Moreover, Hirsch understood the need to be practical.¹²⁹ He attempted to capture bourgeois attention with his impassioned style. His major work, Horeb, essays on Israel's responsibilities in the Diaspora, displays his realistic attitude. Striving to clarify the responsibility of a modern Jew living outside of Israel, Hirsch understood that the requirements of Jewish life needed to be written in a way that was accessible to Jews.

Hirsch focused on three main obligations for the Jew, one of them being education. Z. E. Kurzweil, in *Modern Trends in Jewish Education* remarks that Hirsch's greatest contribution was in the field of education.¹³⁰ Hirsch believed that Jews must educate both themselves and others in order to preserve Judaism in the modern world. He was familiar with the type of Jewish woman that Sarah Schenirer would describe years later in Poland. He understood how the neglect of Jewish education in general, and girls education specifically, impeded the ability of the Jewish community to preserve a "Torah-true" way of life. Hirsch therefore worked for the establishment of Jewish schools for boys and girls. According to Kurzweil, Hirsch felt so strongly about the need for modern Jewish education that in 1853 he advocated for a school (for both boys and

¹²⁸ Joseph Friedenson, *Yaakov Rosenheim Memorial Anthology: A Concise History of Agudat Israel* (New York: Orthodox Library, 1968), 1-2.

¹²⁹ David Sorkin *The Transformation of German Jewry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 159.

¹³⁰ Kurzweil, 50.

girls) to take precedence over the building of a synagogue in Frankfurt.¹³¹

In *Horeb* Hirsch declared that parents must "equip and train up [their] child according to the requirements of his future path in life."¹³² While in the past parents may have done this exclusively at home, now they must provide for their children by sending them to school. Hirsch carefully instructed parents to prepare a child both for a Jewish life and to "give a child a capacity to earn a living."¹³³ He specified the curricular implications, suggesting that children learn Hebrew and the vernacular, Bible and history how to function in the religious world as well as and secular world.

Hirsch also distinguished between what a boy needed to know and what a girl needed to know:

In the girl's instruction domestic life occupies the central position which in the boy's case is taken up by the requirements of a Jew and a citizen. Similarly the girl finishes up with needlework and house management as the boy with gainful occupation.¹³⁴

One should note that even these "domestic" lessons occur in the school. Hirsch believed that the educational goal of the modern Jewish society must be "to promote Jewish regeneration by providing their students with an occupation that would make them productive citizens and the religious training that would ensure their moral obligation."¹³⁵ Recognizing that this education was not occurring at home, he suggested that the best way to preserve the Jewish community was to teach all children in schools. Hirsch

¹³¹ Kurzweil, 63

¹³² Sampson Raphael Hirsch. *Horeb*. 4th ed. trans. I Grunfeld. (London, Soncino: 1975), 407. (n.b. Grunfeld was the husband of Judith Grunfeld-Rosenbaum)

¹³³ Hirsch, 411-2.

¹³⁴ Hirsch, 411-2.

¹³⁵ Sorkin, 126.

specifically advocated girl's education because he recognized the importance of their role in the preservation of the People of Israel.

Many times have Israel's daughters saved the purity of the Jewish life and spirit. The deliverance from Egypt itself was won by the women; and it is by the pious maidens and mothers in Israel that the Jewish spirit and Jewish life can and will again be revived.¹³⁶

Hirsch is clear on his position regarding the education of girls: The Law (Torah) declares that both daughters and sons should be trained.¹³⁷ "No less", he stated "should Israel's daughters learn the content of the Written Law and the duties which they have to perform in their lifetime as daughter and young woman, as mother and housewife."¹³⁸ Hirsch approached the education of girls through reason rather than tradition. Reversing generations of thought on the subject, Hirsch argued that it did not make sense to teach only half the population how to be Jewish adults.

Steeped in Jewish tradition, Hirsch did not limit his comments on education to the realm of philosophy. He challenged Rabbinic tradition on the education of girls in his commentary to the prayer book. In a more traditional Rabbinic form, he commented on the verse "And you shall teach them to your children" found in the daily prayers. Hirsch clearly stated, "We must teach our daughters like our sons."¹³⁹ He interpreted the text to command parents to "work to form a full heart and spirit of the girls exactly like the boys."¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ Hirsch, 371.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 407.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 371.

¹³⁹ Shimshon Raphael Hirsch. *Sidur Tefilot Yisrael Im Perush HaGaon Harav Shimshon ben HuRav Raphael Hirsch*. (Jerusalem: Hotzaat Mosad ha Rav Kook, 1992), 70. my translation.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

As noted above, Hirsch did acknowledge differences between male and female study. He maintained the Rabbinic understanding of the mitzvah of talmud Torah, stating that only boys are obligated to fulfil this mitzvah. He then explained, "girls are obligated to read and know the explanations of the Torah in order to fulfill the commandments completely."¹⁴¹ In other words, girls must study Torah so that they can observe the commandments that apply to them. This type of study would more likely be one of memorization and discussion, rather than an intense study of the layers of Jewish tradition. Hirsch did not say that boys and girls should study the same material, or study in the same manner, but Hirsch clearly and boldly stated that parents must teach both their sons and daughters; communities have an obligation to help parents train their children so that Judaism will endure.

Striving to appeal to the rational, enlightened thinker rather than the Torah scholar, Hirsch's explanations are based on logic and reason rather than the Rabbinic arguments. According to historian David Sorkin in his book *The Transformation of German Jewry*, Hirsch advocated for a new interpretation of Judaism from within Judaism's textual heritage.¹⁴² This was an entirely internal speculative approach, based on a new form of Jewish identity, one which concentrated on the individual.¹⁴³ Borrowing from elements of German bourgeois culture, Hirsch translated traditional Judaism into a new language. In this way Hirsch sent a powerful message: there are reasons behind the commandments. In this new synthesis between tradition and reason both women and men needed to be educated because both were venturing beyond the

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Sorkin, 158.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 5.

pale of tradition.

In some ways Sampson Raphael Hirsch's world may have looked very similar to Sarah Schenirer's. Both lived in communities in which they observed the disintegration of Jewish life, and they both worked to bring back Jews in their respective communities who had gone too far.¹⁴⁴ Hirsch's influence can be seen in Sarah Schenirer's approach to education. Schenirer founded a school that sought to train individuals to observe the mitzvot so that they could become better Jewish woman. This, too, was Hirsch's message: self-improvement could only be obtained through Jewish tradition.¹⁴⁵ Schenirer learned from Hirsch that it was possible to synthesize the lessons of modern education with Jewish tradition in order to produce a "Torah-observant" Jew.

Rabbinic Conference of 1903

The effects of the Jewish Enlightenment in Eastern Europe were different than those of Western Europe. According to Deborah Weissman, it was the strength of the Hasidic movement and their institutions of learning (the yeshivot) that prevented wide scale religious reform of any kind, including Hirsch's neo-Orthodoxy.¹⁴⁶ The Jewish community in Poland did not resemble Hirsch's Germany and probably, for this reason, the Orthodox leaders were not pressured to adapt the reforms of their neighbors. However, the effects of the enlightenment in general, and secular schooling in particular, did cause a tremendous change for women in Eastern Europe. By the beginning of the

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 159 on Hirsch; see Chapter 1 for a discussion of Schenirer.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 159-160.

¹⁴⁶ Deborah Weissman, "Education of Jewish Women", 32.

twentieth century rabbis were slowly beginning to take notice of these changes. In 1932, Mordecai Kaplan wrote:

Jewish Emancipation or the change in the civic status of the Jew, has alienated the Jewish woman from Judaism far more than the Jewish man..., Jewish women who felt the impact of the Jewish Emancipation usually developed a negative attitude towards things Jewish.¹⁴⁷

Thus, Kaplan demanded an increase in Jewish education for women. He was not the only one to do so, Weissman notes that by the 1920's there was "a new anxiety, previously unknown to Judaism – an anxiety about the religious education of our women..."¹⁴⁸ As Paula Hyman discussed in *Gender and Assimilation*, by the early years of the twentieth century some Polish rabbis were beginning to take interest in the type of education their girls were receiving.¹⁴⁹

While Sarah Schenirer may have been the first in Krakow to actually do something for the women in her community, she was certainly not the first to identify the problem. Years before Sarah Schenirer fled to Vienna, concerns about Jewish women's assimilation appeared in newspapers and was spoken of at rabbinical gatherings. While Schenirer was shunning her friends and neighbors for their behavior, distinguished rabbis were meeting to call for action on this issue. A record of a 1903 meeting of Polish rabbis convened to discuss the breakdown of traditional Jewish society was preserved and later published for future record by the main proponent of education for girls, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Landau.¹⁵⁰ In the eleventh of a group of letters, he called upon the

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Paula Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History* (Seattle: University of Washington, 1995), 59.

¹⁵⁰ Landau was the grandson of Rabbi Avraham of Ciechanów. Menachem Mendel Chaim Landau was a rabbi in several Polish communities, later settling in Detroit.

assembly to broaden its discussion of education in general to the pressing problem girls' education.¹⁵¹

Rabbi Landau addressed the situation of the Jewish woman at some length, wrestling with the traditional sources that limit the scope of girls' education, and describing the situation of contemporary Jewish girls. Among other suggestions, he advocated establishing religious schools in every town as an alternative to the Catholic, Polish school. After his initial presentation, a rabbi from Palawata opposed his suggestion on the grounds that formal study by girls was contrary to Jewish law.¹⁵² Although they tabled the discussion, their arguments are a copious record of the struggle to establish legitimacy for girls' education.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel Landau opened his remarks with a justification for engaging in such a discussion.¹⁵³ Starting with a description of the importance of Jewish girls to the community as a whole, he reminded his colleagues that today's Jewish girls are the mothers and wives of the next generation. Their personal attachments to the ancient faith thus affects Judaism as a whole.

The little girls will not only come to educate their own sons and their own small daughters but they will be the mothers of the next generation. In their laps they will raise not only their sons but also their husbands - because the woman exerts an enormous influence on the husband of her youth.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ Zolty, 66.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ The text refers to "the rabbi from Navadvar", based on Shoshana Pantel Zolty's reference in her book on women and the study of Torah, it seems that the speaker, the Rabbi from Navadvar is Rabbi Menachem Mendel Landau.

¹⁵⁴ Menachem Mendel Landau, *Miketz Nerdamim* (Piotrkow: 1904), 3.

He continued, "The future of Judaism is in her hands...and we have a responsibility to be concerned about them." Supporting his claim with a midrash from *Genesis Rabbah* 17, he explained how a man's allegiance to Jewish law depends on his wife.¹⁵⁵ He continued by recounting the effects of a generation of Polish education for girls:

The awful consequences (of girls not being educated Jewishly) is already before our eyes, [namely] [our] daughters have abandoned the religion of Israel in Galicia. And if she has not abandoned her people in actuality, her heart is already distanced from her people and we have no hope that the generation born from her will be raised with a Jewish spirit.¹⁵⁶

Therefore, he argued, we must be concerned about these young women.¹⁵⁷

Once he gained permission to discuss the matter further, Rabbi Landau expounded on the unique forces that helped to create the current situation. He spoke about fathers and brothers who left wives and mothers for the New World, abandoning these women without supervision or proper care. He quoted the Talmud *Gitten* 6b, "He has sold his daughter for a harlot." Describing girls left in orphanages or at home to be looked after by relatives, he reported that in reality the hectic life of the big city was swallowing them up. Suggesting that the council create guardians to supervise the girls of the city, he asked for money to be raised for their dowries that individual communities take responsibility for their care.¹⁵⁸

Supervision and financial assistance were just the beginning. Girls who had no parents in their lives had no way of learning the practices of the Jewish people. Landau

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Landau, 6.

wanted to teach the daughters knowledge from the Torah and the commandments, stories of the lives of the people of Israel and its beliefs.¹⁵⁹ He figured that all Jewish girls could benefit from this as well, even those that lived with their parents. He also demanded that parents know what their daughters were learning. Rabbis needed to monitor young women's books, so that they would not read about impious material. "In this way," Landau wrote, "perhaps a love of God might permeate their [the Jewish girls] hearts"¹⁶⁰

Many Jewish parents who desired a Jewish education for their daughters hired a tutor. Landau was wary of this system, accusing tutors of wasting young girls' time. According to him, tutors were not God-fearing people and even if they possessed the proper knowledge, they often did not set a good example for the girls. Landau even went so far as to suggest that the tutors gave the daughters of Israel improper reading material.¹⁶¹

If parents could not teach their children, and tutors were not sufficient or appropriate, Landau suggested only one solution:

I say that the times demand that we start teaching [our] daughters knowledge of Torah so that they will come to fulfill the mitzvot. And behold - we see before our own eyes, the daughters' slackness regarding the commandments, even amongst Haredi daughters, so that they have no conception at all of Judaism.¹⁶²

Reporting to a group of rabbis who would not even wear modern clothing, Landau's ideas about changing the system of Jewish education were radical. He would not be successful if he based his arguments on rational explanations, like Hirsch, or social

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 4

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

needs. Hirsch was trying to work from the inside to draw their Jews back. Landau, in many ways, was speaking to a group of rabbis who refused to see the realities of the situation around them or how desperate it might become.

Landau's suggestions met with immediate opposition. A certain unnamed rabbi from Palawata declared that all tutors should fear Heaven and behave according to the Torah, but regarding teaching girls Torah he stated, "God forbid! It is desecration!"¹⁶³ Landau responded by discussing the communal needs which he bolstered with textual evidence.

Should anyone quote the words of the sages that "every one who teaches his daughter Torah it is as if he teaches her tiflut...", I say that this was only in earlier days when women only became wise in the workings of the spindle ... (*Yoma* 66b) they remained only behind doors – in their homes (and never ventured beyond) and knew nothing about life outside. ...now that all kinds of obscenity are studied among them, why demote the study of Torah...?¹⁶⁴

He expounded on the *Sotah* quote as well as the Rabbinic thought that surrounded it.

He began by explaining that the Rabbis of the Talmud wrote in *Kiddushin* 80b and *Shabbat* 33b that a woman's knowledge is "light." Later, "light" was interpreted to mean more easily persuaded or seduced. He combined this opinion with the understanding of how one studies Torah, as explained in *Sotah*. The wisdom necessary to understand Torah subtly enters the mind and one must be "naked" to receive it. Therefore a woman, in order to learn Torah, would have to be exposed. And since her mind is already more easily seduced, then the whole experience would be sexual. All of this evokes images of

¹⁶² Ibid, 6

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

the Garden of Eden and the woman as a seductress and sinner. The sages had employed a metaphor to justify women's exclusion from Torah learning.

Landau did not dwell too much on the metaphor, or the degree to which a woman's mind was more easily seduced or persuaded, because he was more concerned with the "tiflut" that the girls were actually learning in the Polish Catholic schools. An infiltration of Jewish tradition was desired to counteract the stories of the Polish people and the books that illustrated immodest behavior. The Jewish community needed to stop sending its daughters to learn tiflut and teach them Torah. As he put it, "We believe that the holiness of Torah itself will rescue her, benefit her, and defend her from the evil inclination (as is said in *Sotah* 21a)."¹⁶⁵

Landau also addressed the possibility that women's minds were "light" and thus not suited for Torah study. He quoted Maimonides who, in *Hilchot Talmud Torah*, stated that "a majority of women's minds were not intended for study and therefore they interpret the words of Torah in an exaggerated or irrational way, according to the inadequacy of their knowledge." Landau then noted that in the *Shulchan Aruch* Joseph Caro decided not to include Maimonides' reference to inadequacy or exaggeration, stating only that women were not obliged to study because their minds are not intended for study.¹⁶⁶ Therefore, the reasons for women's exclusion from study are neither precise nor fixed. To alleviate any concern, Landau proposed that women be supervised so that they not be led to misinterpret or exaggerate the meaning of the Torah.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵ Landau, 7.

¹⁶⁶ *Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah* 245:6.

¹⁶⁷ Landau, 7.

Landau then added proof for his argument by quoting Rabbi Moses Isserles, (known as the Rema).

The Rema says in *Yoreh Deah* 245:6 that "although the woman is exempt from studying Torah in any case she is obligated to study the laws that are relevant to a woman." And you don't have anything more relevant for women than studying Judaism itself, in our time.¹⁶⁸

Further bolstering his point, Landau also used the Deuteronomy text about Torah reading on Sukkot. Landau cited Caro's commentary in the *Shulchan Aruch* on Sukkot observance. There Caro argued that: women should say the Torah blessing, because they are not merely listening to the Torah. Landau explains that the matter is further discussed in the *Beit Yosef* commentary to the *Orech Hayim*

In *Beit Yosef* it is written, "The women say the Torah blessing because it is necessary to study and engage in the commandments relevant to them." And if this is so, therefore, it is necessary to study substantively and not to make do with listening alone. Of course, with regard to the meditations on words of Torah, there is no need to say the Torah blessing, as it is written in *Orech Hayim* 47:60.¹⁶⁹

This is not to say that Rabbi Landau advocated for women's Torah study equal to that of men's. Rather, he wanted to expose girls to the values in the Torah to draw them near to their tradition.

I'm not saying that they should teach halacha [to girls] with the same depth as they teach boys. Only that they should show [girls] the issues within the Torah and the faith and holiness of Israel by way of story and ethics... as was received by the sages. These matters, that don't have depth, of course, would be permitted.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

Rabbi Landau was not the only rabbi at the conference to advocate for girls schooling. Another leader, Rabbi Meir Horowitz of Krakow, joined the discussion.

The Rabbi from Navadvar spoke correctly about girls' education. I want to bolster [these words] with a practical suggestion that they establish in every city houses of talmud Torah for poor and wealthy girls to study there, together, prayer and blessings and the laws necessary to live as Jewish women, also the language and texts of our people to educate them with the Jewish spirit. And they won't need to knock on foreigners' doors.¹⁷¹

Following Rabbi Horowitz, the rabbi from Palawata again rose to state his objections, and at this point the matter was tabled.

Rabbi Landau's words had no immediate impact. The conference merely voted to encourage parents to improve their daughters' education. Perhaps the participants at the conference were not ready to admit that parents were unable to teach their daughters how to be proper Jewish mothers, or they were not prepared to hear the truth about Polish education. Whatever the case, Landau's words certainly planted seeds in the minds of many of the Polish rabbis. Over the next decade more people would step forward to support his position.

In June, 1912 Aharon Marcus wrote a series of articles in the newspaper *HaMitzpeh* denouncing the continuing social problems of Jewish girls. That same year he raised the issue at the founding conference of Agudat Yisrael. He argued that the rabbis themselves sent their daughters to schools where crosses hung.¹⁷² Taking another tack, he said that in *Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah*, Caro forbids young children from being

¹⁷¹ Landau, 8.

educated in gentile schools, lest they pursue them for conversion.¹⁷³ In an anonymous reply to Marcus's article the argument is made that there is nothing one can do, for even if a man would remove his daughter from school, or teach her from the beginning, it is all really in the hands of the mother.¹⁷⁴ Though in 1912 the solution to the problem was still unclear, what was clear is how the blame began to shift to the mother. Five years later, when Schenirer would asked for permission to establish her schools, it seems that the time had come for action; the Rabbis had stalled long enough.

Reaction to the Bais Yaakov Schools

In the years following World War I many of the leaders of Polish Hasidism rallied together to support the idea of Jewish girls education, and they did so by supporting the idea a young woman in Krakow. Having both time to consider the arguments of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Landau, and an actual example of girls education before them, Rabbis such as the Ardmor of Belz, Yisachar Baer Rokeach and the Ardmore of Ger, Abraham Mordechai Alter¹⁷⁵, as well as the widely respected Hafetz Hayim and others took a stand in favor of the Bais Yaakov schools in particular, if not for girls' education in general. How their decisions emerged is not entirely clear. Only the Hafetz Hayim's words were published in a larger commentary. All of the other evidence of Rabbinic support for the Bais Yaakov schools was preserved in internal documents such as the Bais Yaakov

¹⁷² Marcus, 1.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ (1886-1948) Rabbi Abraham Mordechai Alter was known as the Imrei Emet and was the son of the Sefat Emet, succeeding him as the leader of Gerer Hasidim in 1905. Under Alter's leadership Gerer Hasidut gained great popularity, becoming a movement of more than 250,000 adherents, the largest in pre-war Poland. One of the founders of Agudat Yisrael he was also one of the first rabbis to adopt the suggestions of western rabbis Kohn and Carlebach. Based on their ideas he added secular study to the

Journal. It is clear in these words that general resistance towards the idea of girls' schooling remained, especially among the laity, but the societal pressures of the day made the Jewish education of girls an urgent priority.

Rabbi Abraham Mordechai Alter, the Ardmor of Ger was known for his willingness to accept some of the reforms of neo-Orthodoxy, especially in the realm of education.¹⁷⁶ Alter readily accepted the Bais Yaakov schools writing that, "It is a holy obligation to act in our time for the good of the Bais Yaakov schools, because the question of the education of girls is most urgent."¹⁷⁷ His words were preserved in the *Bais Yaakov Journal* in an issue commemorating the 25th yahrzeit of Sarah Schenirer. Shoshana Zolty, in her book on teaching girls Torah, quotes a fuller text from another Bais Yaakov Journal that adds, "the question of a Jewish education for Jewish daughters is more important than the education of our sons, for that has always been taken care of (by the Jewish community)."¹⁷⁸ Additionally Harry M. Rabinowicz in his book *Hasidim: the Movement and Its Masters* records that the Ardmor of Ger said, "[In the Bais Yaakov schools] the future mothers of Israel are being educated in the true traditional spirit of the Torah and are receiving a sound all-round schooling."¹⁷⁹ His support for the schools helped their success in large measure.

Rabbi Avraham Yeshiah Karlitz (1878-1953), known as the Chazon Ish for his publication of that name in Vilna, also lent his support to the Bais Yaakov schools. Revered as one of the greatest Torah scholars of his time, he believed that secular studies

veshiva curriculum among other modern changes.

¹⁷⁶ Deborah Weissman. *Bais Yaakov-A Woman's Educational Movement in the Polish Jewish Community*, 68.

¹⁷⁷ *Beit Yaakov Journal* (Jerusalem, 1960). my translation.

¹⁷⁸ *Bais Yaakov Journal* 150 (Lodz: Spring 1938) cited in Zolty

¹⁷⁹ Harry M. Rabinowicz. *Hasidim: the Movement and Its Masters*. (New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc.,

led to a fuller understanding of Jewish law and practice.¹⁸⁰ It is because he heard that others objected to girls studying Torah that he decided to intervene and give his opinion on the matter. Although the opposing opinions were not preserved, his supporting one was. The Chazon Ish quoted no Rabbinic texts, and only casually referred to social problems, however his support clearly worked to secure the future of the Bais Yaakov schools. A world authority on Jewish law and practice, his words appeared in the same *Bais Yaakov Journal* published on Schenirer's *yahrzeit*:

Behind the curtains (secretly) I heard that the existence of the Bais Yaakov depended, God forbid, on the question of [a girl's] obligation [to study Torah]. When the entire world was created male and female, they were created. And before this, creation was not complete, only with the two of them was there a completion. In order to secure the way of Torah it was necessary to have both young boys and young girls. And because of this I intervened [on behalf of the Bais Yaakov Schools] to lift up their burdens with them. Your hands will be strengthened.¹⁸¹

Karlitz understood that the only way to preserve traditional Jewish life was for both boys and girls to study Torah so that the community could be whole.

The rabbi most closely associated with the Bais Yaakov movement is Rabbi Israel Meir ha-Cohen Kagan (1838-1933) known as the Hafetz Hayim. Still revered in Bais Yaakov schools today,¹⁸² Kagan's support of girls' education can be found in his halachic commentary on the Talmud entitled *Likutei Halachot*. Published in 1918 and contemporaneous with Schenirer's earliest attempts to teach women in Krakow, Kagan

1988), 350.

¹⁸⁰ M.G., "Great Leaders of our People: Rabbi Avrohom Yeshaya Karelitz, the "Chazon Ish" (1878-1953)" *Great Leaders of our People*, 2002. < <http://www.ou.org/about/judaism/rabbis/karelitz.htm> > (3 Dec. 2002)

¹⁸¹ *Beit Yaakov Journal*

¹⁸² Shoshana Stein. Interview by author. Personal Interview. Brooklyn, NY., 8 Jan. 2003.

wrote on Torah study and Rabbi Eliezar's famous comment about tiflut :

And we see that all of this was in previous times when everyone, living in his father's place and under family tradition, was strong enough for everyone to behave in the way of his parents, as indicated in the verse, "Ask your father and he will tell you." And on this we were able to say that the daughter should not be taught Torah, but rather rely on the conduct of her upright parents. But now, because of our great sins, parental traditions have become very weak, and also one finds that the children don't live in their parents homes at all, and in the same matter the daughters have accustomed themselves to learning reading and writing of the people. Of course it is a great Mitzvah to teach them chumash (the five books of Torah) and also the Prophets and the Writings and the moral instruction of our sages, for example, the Ethics of our Fathers, or the books of *Menorat haMaor*, and the like, in order to verify themselves the matters of our holy faith, otherwise they are liable to stray far from the party of the Lord and transgress all the principles of our religion, God forbid.¹⁸³

Because he was one of the most influential rabbis of the time, the Hafetz Hayim's support was extremely important to the growth of the Bais Yaakov movement. His words became the definitive answer to the question of the school's appropriateness.¹⁸⁴ In addition to providing this responsum he also wrote to communities to encourage them to establish schools. The text of one of these letters, written six months before his death in 1933 appeared in the *Bais Yaakov Journal* of that same year:

When I found out that reverent and *Haredi* people volunteered to speak up in [local] cities to establish Bais Yaakov schools so that loving daughters of Israel might study Torah and [learn to] Fear of Heaven, [the would be

¹⁸³ Rabbi Yisrael Meir ha-Cohen Kagan, *Likutei Halakhot* (St. Petersburg, 1918) Sotah 20a Reprinted in Zvi Scharfstein. *Gedolei Hinukh be-Ameinu*. (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 1964), 230-1. my translation.

¹⁸⁴ Deborah Weissman, "Bais Yaakov: A Historical Model for Jewish Feminists." *The Jewish Woman*. ed. Elizabeth Koltun (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 141-43. Also discussed in Zolty, 66 who attributes the responsa to *Likutei Halachot*.

taught] values and manners, I said: Because of these actions may The Good strengthen their valor and the work of their hearts be established - because in our day the matter is profound and necessary. [At this time] seeds of impiety, God forbid, govern every attack [against us], different sects lie in wait [offering] freedoms and they capture the spirit of those that love Israel. And all those who insult the Fear of Heaven in their hearts [need not worry at this time.] Any apprehensions or prohibitions regarding the commandment to allow his daughter to study in a school, and all the commandments about teaching his daughter Torah [are not violated] in a special house such as this [the Bais Yaakov school], in these days of ours. And here, this isn't the place to elucidate at any length, because it is not like the generation of the *Rishonim* [The first generation of European rabbis, generally dated from the middle of the 11th to the middle of the 15th centuries], in our generation modernity enters into every Jewish house. [In the past] devoted fathers and mothers lived according to the way of Torah and the religion and read from *Tzena u'rena* on every holy Sabbath; this is not so in these generations of ours, due to our great sins. And therefore with all of our might and our spirit it is our responsibility to support and expand schools such as these to rescue and save all whom are in our powers and is possible to save.¹⁸⁵

Again appealing to changed social conditions, he told fathers not to be concerned with the law, this was a special circumstance. He encouraged them to do what they could to support these schools so as to save the daughters who would attend them.

Hafetz Hayim's support for girls' education proved essential to the founding of the Bais Yaakov schools. However, once the school was in operation and the founding of additional schools followed questions arose that required further rabbinic counsel. One such question was the presence of men and their role in the girls' school. In 1925 a publication by the Bais Yaakov movement included the following responsa regarding the teaching of girls by men:

¹⁸⁵ *Bais Yaakov Journal* (Lodz: 1933) my translation.

The Bayaner rebbe Abraham of Krakow calls Bais Yaakov a holy institution. He says that men can be present at the school registration and collect tuition monies, provided there are at least two of them present and neither is a bachelor. Married men may lecture in the schools.¹⁸⁶

HaRav HaGaon Elchanan Wasserman of Baronovitch¹⁸⁷ says that men may be appointed to run a school. Not only would this be permitted to them, but also it would constitute a big "mitzvah" – the act of saving souls. Certainly, men may give lectures to groups of women.

Noticeably, neither these responsa nor the Hafetz Hayim's writings required a lengthy discourse on the halacha (Jewish law) to support the existence of the Bais Yaakov schools. In striking contrast to Landau, 20 years earlier, by this time it was no longer to justify this innovation on halachic grounds; the social threat was too great. Indeed, a lengthy responsum would eventually be written on the question of women's study, but it pertained specifically to the halachic question of studying the Oral Law in Israeli Orthodox girls' schools.¹⁸⁸

Conclusions

The evolutionary shift toward acceptance of education for girls within the Jewish community closely paralleled the degree to which the girls were integrating into non-Jewish society. Once rabbis like Hirsch or the Hafetz Hayim realized the desperation of the matter, then change became mandatory. The degree to which this is clear is depicted

¹⁸⁶ Weissman, *Bais Yaakov - A Woman's Educational Movement in the Polish Jewish Community*, 59.

¹⁸⁷ (1875-1901) Contemporary of the Hafetz Hayim and the Chazon Ish he was Rosh Yeshiva in Baronovitch, an activist in Agudat Yisrael, and he was deeply involved in communal matters. In addition to his lectures and Talmudic writings, he was also a thinker and interpreter of contemporary events. For more information see "Great Leaders of our People" at www.OU.org/about/judaism/rabbis/default.htm.

¹⁸⁸ The responsum, written by Zalman Sorotzkin, then in charge of religious education in the state of Israel, appears in *Moznaim l'Mishpat*. Jerusalem, 1955.

in the fact that the Hafetz Hayim and his contemporaries did not even ground their arguments in Jewish law. It is interesting to note that a similar phenomenon occurred within the American Orthodox community. According to Rabbi David Silber, director of Drisha Institute for Jewish Education (the world's first and premier institute for women's study of advanced Jewish texts¹⁸⁹), at Drisha women study Talmud because the major Orthodox rabbinic authority, Rav Solovetchik,¹⁹⁰ taught women Talmud. Silber relied not on the Rav's writings but on his actions, Solovetchik did not author a responsa delineating the halacha but he did teach Talmud to women.¹⁹¹ His example was more than enough for Rabbi Silber to found this ground-breaking institution.

The education of Jewish girls has changed over the centuries, depending on time period and location, though two factors remained constant. The first was that the primary goal of education for girls was to prepare them for their role as Jewish women in the community. Secondly, the education of girls was generally not in fulfillment of the commandment to study Torah. Moreover, girls did not engage in the dissection of Jewish texts for its own sake; it was always a means toward an end. In this way the advent of religious schools for girls in the Orthodox community maintained the traditions of the past. Hirsch, Landau and the Hafetz Hayim, as well as Schenirer herself had one goal in mind: to educate the Jewish woman so that she may become a righteous mother in Israel.

¹⁸⁹ "Drisha Institute for Jewish Education" www.drisha.org (18 Feb 2003).

¹⁹⁰ (1903-1993) Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik was the undisputed leader of Orthodox Jewry in America during the mid to late twentieth century. Professor of Talmud at Yeshiva University and chairman of the Halakhah Commission of the Rabbinical Council of America, he was the preeminent Orthodox halachic scholar and was referred to simply as "The Rav". Born in Poland he was asked to be a candidate for chief Rabbi of Israel in 1959 but declined, residing most of his life in America.

¹⁹¹ Silber, Rabbi David. Interview by author. Phone. New York, September, 2002.

And the mode of education, however it varied, never advocated a study of the text for its own sake, rather it advocated a study of the text to enhance the behavior of the student.

Why Menachem Mendel Landau or the Ardmor of Ger never took matters into their own hands and founded their own schools remains unclear. What is clear is that Schenirer benefited from a unique experience of having a glimpse at a Western, acculturated, and innovative society. She then brought this idea back to her own community that by then was ready to support her. The quick expansion of the schools, in an almost unprecedented fashion, points to the communal desire of both communal leaders and parents alike.

The question must therefore be asked: Did the schools achieve their goal? If a generation of mothers had already been lost, what happened when their daughters were immersed in Jewish tradition? What characterized the Bais Yaakov schools, and how did they realize their success? Today, almost 100 years later, are they true to the mission and ideals by which they were created? These questions form the subject of the third chapter.

Chapter 3: The Bais Yaakov Schools Today: A Subjective View

It has been over 80 years since the first Bais Yaakov school was founded. Today there are Bais Yaakov schools in North America, Europe, South Africa, and Israel. The first Bais Yaakov school in America was founded in 1944 by Vichna Kaplan, a student of Sarah Schenirer's. Currently there are approximately 50 high schools and several elementary and intermediate Bais Yaakov schools in North America.¹⁹² Has Sarah Schenirer's vision been realized in these schools? What has happened to the Bais Yaakov girls and how do the schools today work to honor their founder and her ideals?

To begin to answer these questions, I interviewed graduates of Bais Yaakov schools, as well as current employees. This chapter, which provides only preliminary observations, is based on the personal reflections of five alumnae and one principal. It is admittedly a subjective view of the schools gathered from recollections by these women. I obtained all data from people whom I knew or names given to me by friends.¹⁹³ These reflections are in no way meant to form conclusive study, rather they are meant to supplement material explicated in the first and second chapters of this paper.

The Subjects:

- (1) Caryn – my first cousin, bal tshuva (newly Orthodox) student. Caryn turned to Orthodoxy after her parents sent her to a yeshiva during a teacher's strike in Pittsburgh. Caryn attended a Bais Yaakov high school in Cleveland, living with a local family. She now lives in Israel, having made aliyah (immigration to Israel) with her family and is Orthodox. She has three children, all of whom attend religious schools in Israel but none attend Bais Yaakov schools because of their anti-Zionist

¹⁹² Shoshana Bechhofer. Dissertation Proposal, (Doctoral thesis, Northwestern University, Winter, 1997). 2.

¹⁹³ I experienced a fair amount of difficulty when attempting to call schools directly.

stand. Caryn is 39.

- (2) Bessie – Caryn's friend, Bais Yaakov alumnae and mother. Bessie was also from Pittsburgh and made her way to a Bais Yaakov high school in Baltimore for the last three years of high school. Bessie still lives in Baltimore and her two daughters currently attend Bais Yaakov middle and high schools.
- (3) Rivka Chaya - a friend's first cousin, Bais Yaakov alumnae. Raised in an Orthodox family Rivka Chaya attended a Bais Yaakov school in Los Angeles for high school and now lives in Boro Park with her young children and husband. She too is Orthodox and she is 27.
- (4) Este - Rivka Chaya's sister, Bais Yaakov alumnae, teacher at a religious high school in Los Angeles. Este attended the same Bais Yaakov high school in Los Angeles as her sister. She was student body president of her Bais Yaakov school and recently returned from her seminary year¹⁹⁴ to teach at a school similar to a Bais Yaakov school. Este is 20 and still lives in Los Angeles with her parents.
- (5) Mrs. Stern – Rivka Chaya's mentor, Bais Yaakov principal. Mrs. Stern is a principal at a Bais Yaakov elementary school in Boro Park. She herself did not attend a Bais Yaakov school but her children did. She has worked at the Bais Yaakov school for twenty five years.
- (6) Sharon – a teacher at the Reform religious school in Staten Island, New York where I serve as principal, Bais Yaakov alumnae. Sharon is an Orthodox woman in her late 40s. As a child she attended a Bais Yaakov elementary school in East New York and Bais Yaakov high school of Boro Park. She is the mother of three children and works

¹⁹⁴ Seminary refers to a post-high school program where girls study religious subjects intensely for one year. Many girls go to Israel for the year though there are Seminary programs all over the world. Besides

at a local Orthodox day school.

(7) Shoshana Bechhofer – Jewish Educational Services of North America (JESNA) researcher, former Bais Yaakov student and principal. Shoshana Bechhofer is writing her doctoral dissertation at Northwestern University on identity issues in the Bais Yaakov movement today. Although I did not interview Ms. Bechhofer observations and insights from draft chapters of her dissertation are included in this chapter.¹⁹⁵

My interviews consisted of questions related to all aspects of the Bais Yaakov schools: school culture, academic life, extra curricular activities, hopes for the graduate, and goals for the school. Additionally I asked specific questions about Sarah Schenirer and how she was remembered at the Bais Yaakov school.

In the pages that follow I will relay the data gained from the interviews. Then I will examine the role of the Bais Yaakov school in the community and how that role has changed from the time of Sarah Schenirer. I will also reflect on whether Schenirer's vision has materialized in contemporary schools. Finally, I will re-visit the question posed at the beginning of this thesis: How strong an influence was Schenirer on Jewish Orthodox women?

Culture of the School

I visited the Bais Yaakov School of Brooklyn, an elementary school that serves grades 1-6. There I spoke at length with Mrs. Shoshana Stein, the principal. The building

religious studies there are also courses to prepare the young women for marriage and raising a family.

¹⁹⁵ My thanks to Ms. Bechhofer who spoke with me about her findings and enabled me to use draft sections of her materials.

was small and the space limited, but it seemed to be sufficient for the student body¹⁹⁶.

There was only one classroom per grade and a larger multi-purpose room in the front of the school, three offices and a few student lockers and coat hangers. In the halls were bulletin boards of the students' work, mostly praising success. Additionally, other school projects focusing on specific values that the students were studying that year (such as femininity, timeliness, and love of God) and special presentations were posted in the hallways and at the entrance to the school.

Rivka Chaya described the school she attended from 1989-1993 as also being of modest means, where the students mainly stayed in the same class the entire day. However her sister, Este, took pride in the new, modern building. Este boasted of the projects and posters that the girls created which were displayed around the classroom, emphasizing that with their brand-new building everything in the LA Bais Yaakov had changed.¹⁹⁷ Bessie describes the current school in Baltimore as much larger than the school that she attended in the early 1980's. She estimates they graduated only 36 girls per grade and now her daughters have four or five classes per grade. She too portrayed in detail her daughter's classroom projects and emphasized museum-like displays that the girls created based on different themes (such as candle-lighting or Mount Sinai), remarking on how extraordinary they were. Although generalizations can not be made from these few accounts, most of the women I spoke with described schools that wanted to display the successes of their students and the school administration used facilities that were within their means.

¹⁹⁷ Shoshana Bechhofer argues in her thesis that the Bais Yaakov schools in New York are the least resistant to change and under the most scrutiny while those schools in the periphery are able to be more inclusive and more open to change. For more information see Bechhofer's chapter "Boundary Dynamics in

Prominent in the schools were images of famous rabbis (mostly nineteenth and twentieth century figures like Hafetz Hayim) on the walls, especially inside the classrooms and office, however there was no picture of Sarah Schenirer, as per her personal request. These photos were strung about in a sort of unsystematic way, without care toward aesthetics but their presence was important, according to Mrs. Stein. Most of the women interviewed remembered images of famous rabbis displayed on the walls of their own schools as well.

Values of modesty and proper dress were emphasized in the school, according to the women I spoke with, and based on my own observations. Among the school projects posted on bulletin boards there were two remarkable signs hanging in the small hallway in the Brooklyn school: (1) "Tznius (modesty) is the crown of a woman's glory" and (2) "A little tight is like a little un-kosher," referring to the need to wear loose clothing. Caryn and Sharon both remembered teachers' and administrators' concern for what a student wore and how she presented herself. Rivka Chaya explained that socks were stored in the principal's office so that if your socks were too short they might give you a more appropriate extra pair. Both Rivka Chaya and Caryn recalled a time when someone was sent home for immodest dress. Caryn reports that her niece, who attends a Bais Yaakov school in Israel today, is required to wear her hair in a pony tail, has a specific school bag she must carry, is not allowed to wear makeup and must adhere to a strict uniform. On the other side of the world, Este seemed defensive about the type of clothing a Bais Yaakov girl might wear. Although at school they have a uniform she explained, "We are really modern, we shop at the Gap and stores like that".

Sharon and Caryn described the cultural make-up of the student body. They emphasized that these girls were not exposed to any secular culture: no TV, movies, or magazines. Sharon explained that their classmates lived in completely sheltered environments. Sharon's parents had not chosen to raise her in this sheltered way, which made social interaction difficult for Sharon. Both Caryn and Sharon also remembered that they were seen as radicals because they spoke to boys, something that was expressly forbidden. Bessie, who has chosen to raise her children without television or the internet, (unlike both Caryn and Sharon), discussed her concern about the world and its dangers. She prefers that her children "not be friends with students that are exposed to those sorts of things" and "is glad that they schools help reinforce traditional values." Caryn felt that most girls are sent to the school because their parents like the regiment of restrictions and are reassured that the girls are learning "what they need to know but not more." To summarize, the schools seek to shield the girls from the "seductions" of the secular world.

Academic Life

The Bais Yaakov school day is divided between secular and religious subjects. The religious subjects are taught in the morning, and the secular subjects are taught in the afternoon. It is my impression that the school values the religious, or Hebrew subjects more than the secular or English subjects. Students study the religious subjects first, when they are fresh and only products of religious study was displayed in the hallways. When asked if the secular subjects were emphasized, Caryn said that everyone was encouraged to do well in the subjects, although she cannot imagine why and she does not

remember them being very difficult. Additionally the type of person who taught the class sent a message to the students. Teachers at the Bais Yaakov school either teach the secular subjects or the religious subjects. Although the schools would prefer that all teachers be role models for the girls, the secular teachers are not often Orthodox. Caryn explained that the school preferred that these teachers be non-religious or even non-Jewish teachers rather than presenting alternative modern-Orthodox options for the girls. These teachers were required to wear skirts but they did not have to cover their hair. It was clear, Caryn explained, that these were teachers were not to be emulated.

Caryn explained how the secular subjects were tailored to be appropriate for the religious community. She recalled a controversy over a proposal to teach Greek myths. Eventually permission was granted and some parents refused to allow their daughters to read the myths. She voiced her own frustrations about her desire to study more advanced levels than were offered. "Sure a general science was taught, but if you wanted to study biology or chemistry or something like that the courses were only offered after school, from 3:30 – 5:00 PM." Caryn recalled that the English reading list was censored so that the girls would only read appropriate books. Examples she gave included such as the *Diary of Anne Frank* and the *Great Gatsby*. Even if Jewish books like the *Diary of Anne Frank* were read in English class, there was no integration of subject material between the secular and religious parts of the day.

Nearly all the Bais Yaakov schools appeared to offer some vocational courses or courses for college credit (aimed at vocational preparation like a teaching degree). Bessie said that by the twelfth grade in her daughter's school there was only one secular class required, but the girls stayed all afternoon either taking college-level courses or courses

that might prepare them for work to assist their families financially. Este spoke of computer and typing courses in Los Angeles. Caryn remembered a music class where the girls learned notes and musical techniques and how to recognize classical music; this was part of the secular curriculum. Bessie repeated to me several times, "I am glad to have my daughters at a school that produces well-rounded students." She described the courses taken in the twelfth grade year including sewing, art, computer, teacher training and a hashkafa or values class. These types of courses seem to simulate the types of preparatory classes taught at the original Bais Yaakov schools.

Bessie told me that she expected her daughters "to have a very good Hebrew and English education at the Bais Yaakov school," this included "excellent Hebrew language skills and understanding of the Torah, the Prophets and Jewish law." Mrs. Stein described to me how the students learning begins at a young age. In the pre-school program (beginning at age 3) "the children get their roots, being introduced to the Hebrew alphabet and making toys to play with on Shabbat that are connected to the weekly Torah portion." The formal elementary education begins in the first grade.

Each morning in Mrs. Stein's elementary school, from first grade on, they pray together, without a prayer book, in a singsong fashion. "Eventually", she says, "little by little, the children take over (leading the service)." A formal ceremony is held during this first year where each girl receives her own prayer book, which Mrs. Stern called "a life long friend", "a ladder to God." During worship different prayers are explained or translated each day. In this way, the students begin to understand the meaning of the prayers.

Rivka Chaya described the high school morning prayers. The entire school would

pray together in the morning and prompt arrival was very important. Some prayers were read in unison and others were read alone. However, as the girls did not constitute a minyan (in Orthodox Judaism ten men are needed for a prayer quorum or minyan) there was no Torah reading, and prayers that required a minyan were not recited. In the afternoon, Rivka Chaya reported, they would gather in a big room for the afternoon prayers and pray on their own. When I arrived at the Bais Yaakov school in Brooklyn the older girls were finishing their lunch and as they finished they would individually rise and say their afternoon prayers before returning to the secular classes. The girls have all been taught not only to understand what the prayers mean, but also to translate prayers so that they have a full understanding of what they are saying.

The students also take a class in the parsha or the weekly Torah reading. Students hear the entire content of each week's parsha and discuss it verse by verse. As the students Hebrew skills advance, the parsha is taught with greater depth. The goal of the parsha studies, according to Mrs. Stern is hashkafa (an appropriate philosophical outlook on life). She explains, "Teachers should imbue a child with Jewish values that emanate from the weekly Torah reading like loving your fellow person, respecting your parents, obeying God, and other important lessons." As students progress they study traditional commentators as well. Mrs. Stein elucidates, "The goal of this study is to know what the commentator is saying to us, what is the commentator saying that we should do." "Everything, of course, should be couched in a way that is relevant and interesting to the child," she concludes.

Beginning in the second grade the young girls study the books of the Torah in a separate class that focuses on methods of Torah study rather than the moral messages of

the weekly parsha. Students are given home-made booklets where they study Biblical grammar and skills to help them understand the meaning of a Biblical verse. In the upper levels of the chumash class each Torah verse was studied with the traditional commentators, as appear in *Mikrot Gedolot* (a compendium of traditional commentators and Biblical verses arranged by verse with the commentators words surrounding the verse on the page). Both Rivka Chaya and her sister Este report on the challenging nature of the classes. For instance, it was important to know which commentator said what and how two commentators differed. "A typical test," explained Rivka Chaya, "would contain the sentence Mi amar (Who said) and then a quote from *Mikrot Gedolot*, it was tough." Bessie also remarked on the difficulty of the different course work, saying that she never remembered studying as hard as her daughters now study. However, when I asked Rivka Chaya about student analysis of the text she told me that the students were never asked what they thought of the Biblical text, only what the commentators thought. If someone had a question about one interpretation they were encouraged to look toward a different interpretation.

The students also begin studying halacha or Jewish law in the earliest grades. Mrs. Stein explained that they begin with simple commandments, like washing hands and saying blessings and increase to commandments of greater complexity such as Kashrut, however it is the laws and not the source of the law that is taught. Teaching the laws but not their source distinguishes the "female" from the "male" method of studying the text of the laws and mastering that text, as discussed in Chapter 2. In the Bais Yaakov school there is no discussion of why one does something, or which rabbi wrote the law, or when it came into practice. The class focused on the laws that a woman needs to fulfill in her

life.

Mrs. Stein herself said that she never studies the Talmud. "It's too overwhelming," she tells me, "Women's minds are not made for that type of logic." "I, myself have not even begun to learn the skills necessary to understand the Talmud, a lady does not think like that." Mrs. Stein had been working at this school for over 25 years, she is extremely knowledgeable and many Jewish law books sit behind her on a bookshelf. Nevertheless, she herself said that she is "not an authority on Jewish law." Mrs. Stein never said that Talmud study was forbidden to women, only that she was "not capable of understanding the complexity of the text." Mrs. Stein explained when questions arise in the school they ask "poskim (rabbis who decide on Jewish law) at of one of the local yeshivot." According to her, "many of the local rebbes, in fact, command a strong influence in the school."

The girls also learn history, both secular and Jewish. Both Caryn and Rivka Chaya reported that the two history programs were taught separately. The Jewish history class begins with creation and the forefathers of the Jews: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Mrs. Stein said there was no book; the students listen and take notes. In her school, she reported, that history lessons ranged to the present day while both Caryn and Rivka Chaya said that they learned only ancient Jewish history¹⁹⁸ Nevertheless, both Caryn and Rivka Chaya recalled learning about the Holocaust, but not about the history of the state of Israel. Rivka Chaya remembered using a textbook published by Artscroll (a well-known Orthodox press) in high school. She said the class focused on the Rishonim and

¹⁹⁸ Ancient Jewish history in this case refers to the time period from the beginning of the Jewish people, through the Kingdoms in Israel and the prophets that served those kings, to exile from the land and resettlement of the Jews throughout the Diaspora. The classes especially emphasized the lives of prominent rabbis throughout history.

early Achronim (the rabbis that followed the Rishonim, living in the late middle ages) and there was not a lot of analysis of the historical events. I asked if material learned in history class about the medieval rabbis was connected to the comments they made about the Torah. For example, was it ever mentioned that Rashi might have been led to say something about the Jewish community because he lived through a time of great persecution? Rivka Chaya replied, "I suppose you could make those connections on your own, but nothing like that was ever said." She thought the goal of the class was "to articulate the survival of the Jewish people through portraits of their history."

The Bais Yaakov schools are not Zionist in any way. Caryn does not recall the history of Israel being taught at all. Girls are encouraged to spend the year after high school in a Seminary, which is often in Israel (although there are seminaries in the United States and Australia) however they are completely separate from the land and the people. "They are even separated from their religious Israeli counterparts", according to Caryn. Conversational Hebrew is taught, but it is not clear for what purpose as aliyah (religious immigration to Israel) is not directly encouraged. She recounted a story about a recent visit to her niece on Yom Haatsmaut in Israel. "I asked my niece if she had any idea why she there was no school that day, she told me she had no idea." Even in the state of Israel itself, no history of the state is taught at the Bais Yaakov schools.

There is a strong desire for academic success at the schools, and a lot of social pressure to succeed. Tutors are provided for the students to help them succeed and parental involvement is encouraged. When I arrived at the Bais Yaakov school in Brooklyn I was privy to a conversation about a third-grader who had not been doing her homework in either secular or religious studies. The principal and her teacher were there,

and they called her mother on speakerphone. The teacher suggested moving the child back to second so that "the child could get 100's and have her work posted on the board." She said to the mother, "I was thinking about your daughter in shul on Shabbas when the Rabbi was speaking. He was saying that we can only go from hayil (strength) to hayil and so by placing the child back in second grade, she too might gain confidence and go from hayil to hayil." This was not their usual path, they explained but they "used every option both positive and negative". All of the women remarked on the strong foundation they gained from attending the schools. Bessie, who herself only went to the high school for three years, says, "She really appreciates the skills she gained whether she is teaching someone else a lesson she learned or helping her children with their own work." The Bais Yaakov schools have a serious program for learning.¹⁹⁹

Extra Curricular Activities

When asked about extra curricular activities only Bessie said that they had several activities at the school. Her daughters could participate in "dance (more like aerobics it seemed), or choir or band as well as their yearly choir performance". I asked about Bnos (the youth group founded by Sarah Schenirer to keep the girls involved in religious activities) and both Este and Rivka Chaya told me that Bnos was for younger students to "occupy their time" (so that they stayed out of trouble after school). At the Bais Yaakov school in Brooklyn they had a Sunday program and a camp for daughters of families that wanted their daughters to be involved in additional programs. Sharon described a general

¹⁹⁹ The Bais Yaakov schools must abide by state and national educational standards which keep their secular learning on par with other schools. It would be interesting to find out what the secular requirements in Israel are like and if secular studies are given the same amount of attention.

fear by the administration regarding the girls and what they did after school. "They tried to stop us from socializing with boys but the Kosher pizza place was right across from our school and even though our schools got out at different times the boys would walk to the pizza place after school and we would be there." Sharon revealed that she did all sorts of things wrong, "like talking to boys".

It seems that all of the Bais Yaakov high schools have a large performance towards the end of each academic year. This production consumes the time and effort of the entire school throughout the year and is the major extra-curricular activity in the school. From scheduling and ticket selling to set design, and production, the girls are immersed in this project for months.

Bessie described the Baltimore production: a choir concert. She told me with pride how today they rented out the auditorium of a local college. "There are practices every day after school. Girls work on every aspect of the performance, lights, stage, etc. It's a great way to involve all the girls," she said.

Rivka Chaya also recalled the yearly performance. At her school it was a community production where the talents of the school were showcased. She remembered the whole school being engaged in it. "The girls wrote the script, cast parts, directed, choreographed and often wrote the songs." Of course, because of the singing and dancing no men were allowed to attend and she reported the principal saying it was "like having your daughter married and not being able to go." Este recalled it being "a real community wide event for Jewish women in the area."

In addition to men being barred from the performance, there are other restrictions imposed on the girls. Caryn reports that the dancing was "not modern in any way."

When I asked how the girls would know how to choreograph the dances Este replied, "some girls had taken dance classes when they were younger and knew dance moves, but all the moves had to be approved by the administration." Caryn said, "even when a girl would play a boy in the performance she may wear a kippah or tzitzit but never pants."²⁰⁰ Este described how "now they have special pants that they can wear, that are not men's pants." The music too is important, girls might re-write words to a traditional Hassidic melody, but they must be careful about the melodies they choose. Caryn remembered "we once wanted to re-write a Simon and Garfunkel song and it was an outrage among the administration."

The Bais Yaakov schools are loosely associated and, according to Shoshana Bechhofer, there is no national governing body, but rather a conglomeration of schools that call themselves Bais Yaakov. Each year students of Bais Yaakov schools and their administration come together for a national convention. The convention is hosted at a different school each year and it is up to that school to determine which schools are extended an invitation.²⁰¹ Caryn discussed the procedure for going to the convention:

Girls sign up far in advance so they can begin working on the production and the trip is always subsidized so the cost is minimal. The girls travel by bus; no public transportation is used. The entire convention is held at the school with home hosting. There were no activities like roller skating or bowling, as occurred in other youth organizations, including Orthodox ones.

The hosting school also chooses a theme for the convention, which was also the theme for all of the performances of the individual schools. Caryn described the themes, "They

²⁰⁰ The Torah prohibits a woman from wearing man's clothing in Deuteronomy 22:5

²⁰¹ According to Bechhofer there is a desire only to include those schools that demonstrate the strictest level of religious scrutiny. See page 7 of her chapter "Boundary Dynamics in North American Bais Yaakov High Schools"

were always around simple feminine values such as Shabbat, baking hallah, or loving your neighbor as yourself."

Although all the girls spoke of the excitement of the convention Caryn described the strict nature of the convention. Proper behavior was very important, not only because of the values of the individual school, but also to preserve their reputation among other schools. Este, for example, recalled being shocked that other schools were allowed to wear socks, where her uniform required tights. Participants were told that they were representatives of their Bais Yaakov School and given a stern talk about the proper behavior on the trip. Caryn said that they were specifically told they could not call boys, although she remembered standing in a long line to use the phone and calling a boy.

Like Schenirer's goals for establishing a youth movement, both the local and national productions give the girls something positive to do with their time. The preparation for the show takes months, occupying the after school time of the girls for much of the year. Given that socialization with boys was not allowed, this gave the girls something to do in the afternoon, fun that was encouraged by the school, according to Caryn. Este stressed the sheer delight and amazement of the whole process and how it comes together. She described how "the production was all that the girls focused on for months." Bessie also described the importance of the theme, saying, "the girls understand it is not just book learning, there are creative expressions to their knowledge."

Hopes for the Graduate

When asked what the goal of the Bais Yaakov schools were almost all of the women replied, to give the girls the right hashkafa or perspective on life. This is best

described by Este's final high school project. She was asked to write a paper entitled "Women: What is their role?" explaining, "The paper had several sections: women's place in learning, women in the Bible, a section on two appropriate values for women and personal stories which supported the rest of the paper." Este summarized her learning, "The emphasis of the school is to make you a better person, to serve God." Bessie added her concerns about the modern world, "The world is a scary place and the Bais Yaakov schools will help my daughters to navigate through the world while fully adhering to the Torah laws."

Bais Yaakov girls are generally discouraged from going to college. The amount of pressure from the administration toward these girls seemed to vary from school to school. Caryn said that her classmates "wouldn't have even thought about going to college and it was not discussed." Sharon recalled "the school really geared its students away from college or anything that had to do with secular education." Rivka Chaya shared her frustrations on the subject. She wanted to go to college and was unable to find out when the SAT was being given. Her "college advisor", who was also her principal, made the entire process nearly insurmountable.²⁰² She recalled numerous discussions about "the dangers of college and reasons not to go." Some of her classmates were forced by their parents to go to college and this was an area of great contention for their families. Wanting to go to college herself, Sharon remembered that her classmates actually asked her why bother going to college. Bessie said that the Baltimore school is a bit more liberal and girls do go on to local colleges in the area.

I asked most of the women what was expected of them when they graduated from

²⁰² Rivka Chaya did attend college pursuing the necessary information

the Bais Yaakov school. Rivka Chaya reported, "There was no question about what you would do when you were older, you would become a mother and raise children." She described career day at her school: "they invited a teacher, a real estate broker, and a sheitel (wig) maker." Girls were encouraged to have a career that would allow them to be home with their children. Caryn had "no memory of jobs being discussed or talked about." Nevertheless she did recall the girls yearbook:

below every girl's picture was a mention of what each girl was doing after high school. Most of the girls were going to seminary but four girls were getting married and under their names Eishes Hayil, (a Woman of Valor) was printed. For the future girls spoke of cutting hair or becoming matchmakers or teachers.

While Rivka Chaya was frustrated with the lack of options suggested to her at the Bais Yaakov school her sister, Este reported tremendous change in this area. Este described how the administration had come to understand the need for a college education so that graduates would be qualified for jobs that might pay more, enabling them to make more money while raising their family. "We had lots of high school advanced placement classes and now they give college credit for seminary classes so you can earn a college degree." Rivka Chaya mentioned this new program, saying how smart the school was, "They figured out that they could call a class on Rishonim 'Medieval Jewish History' and it would equal a college level class". The schools worked with local universities paying professors to come to the high school or seminary so that they could control the social environment of their students. By the time a student finished high school and the seminary year she might have earned two years of college credits.

Goals for the school

When asked what the goal of the school was, Mrs. Stein answered:

I hope that every child in the school would absorb the heritage of their people. We teach the truth and I know that the truth will grow in the child. For one thousand years the Jewish people have had the most successful educational system of any people, and no other product can compare to what they are selling.

I asked Mrs. Stein how the school had changed over the past 25 years. She could not answer me. She paused for a while and then stated, "I believe children are the same and teaching is the same: we must love them and show them how to love our tradition."

Este proudly described a Bais Yaakov school as one with the highest standards of religious Orthodoxy. Caryn and Sharon, who both seemed to be on the periphery of their religious environments as students, validated her description. Sharon expanded on Este's point. "The school wanted to educate us as to why we should be proud of who we were and there were always lessons as to why we should obey the strict rules. Caryn recalled a certain leniency toward her, because she had turned to Orthodox Judaism on her own. However she told of a time she went too far: "Mini-skirts were in and my skirt was too short. The principal came in and ripped the hems out of the bottom of my classmate's and my skirt.

Sharon also described pressures from other students. "Me and a few of my friends, were known as 'burns' because they were not as religious as the other students." "Many of the girls in her school were from Satmar²⁰³ type homes and they told me I was not religious". Sharon recalled feeling "the other students in the school did not really respect me." There was no emphasis on being kind or friendly to those who did not listen

to all the rules. Bessie, coming from the opposite end of the spectrum, as a mother of children who were more religiously conservative than some of their classmates, struggled with this issue as well.²⁰⁴ "I hope that my children will make friends with those girls who are like them," she told me, "but Bais Yaakov schools taught her to be tolerant of all sorts of people." Bessie recounted a story about a recent class party that her eldest daughter was invited to:

It was held at the home of a student who my daughter would not normally associate with. But she (the daughter) thought it was important to support her classmate, so she went to the party for ten minutes. I was proud that daughter could see both sides of the issue. Still, these types of things are getting more difficult and I know everyone is being more careful.

At these schools there seemed to be a real tension between the desire to educate and the fear of outside influences in the school.

The Bais Yaakov teacher.

The most significant role models in the Bais Yaakov schools are obviously the teachers and administrators. This is a tradition that has continued since the days of Sarah Schenirer. Mrs. Stein was clear that all of her teachers were Bais Yaakov high school graduates who then attended seminary, and returned to teach. "They all had a type of eagerness about them, wanting the children to love being Jewish," she described. "However", Mrs. Stern pointed out, "love alone will not suffice, it becomes like a bubble that can be burst. Children need content and a teacher must want the children to learn as well."

²⁰¹ An ultra-Orthodox Hassidic sect.

²⁰⁴ According to Bessie the Baltimore Bais Yaakov school is unique in that it is more of a community wide

Bessie affectionately reminisced about her childhood principal, "a man with both knowledge and devotion." "He could have walked into any class, algebra, historia, or chumash, and just begun teaching," she described proudly, adding, "Often when I get into a tough situation I think, what would he do?"

According to Este, "only a Bais Yaakov type of person would be hired at the school." "No teacher training is necessary because if you are a Bais Yaakov type of person you will know what to do and how to be the right role model," Este explained. By the time she became a teacher, Este declared, "My text skills were excellent. There was no question that I was qualified to teach because I have been learning for my whole life." Este told me that the teachers had workshops on how to discipline students and some teachers studied education in seminary or at a Bais Yaakov-sponsored college class, however, "Most teachers just taught their students how they were taught."

The memory of Sarah Schenirer

When asked about the memory of Sarah Schenirer, Bessie declared,

There is not a woman who went to a Bais Yaakov school who does not know who Sarah Schenirer was, or Rebetzin Grunfeld, or Rebetzin Kaplan (the founder of Bais Yaakov in America) their stories are surely taught in historia class and their accomplishments mentioned in the school.

Rivka Chaya remembered that "Sarah Schenirer was on par with the gedolim" or great Torah scholars of the modern era. She knew people "that went to see her school in Poland and knows people who gather in New York on the day of her yahrzeit." She recalled being told "the stories of her life and times and legends of the Bais Yaakov girls

in the Holocaust.”²⁰⁵ “There were speakers and speeches given on her yahrzeit praising her and telling the story of her life” at the Bais Yaakov school in Los Angeles. Her sister, Este described programs, workshops and games for Schenirer’s birthday and yahrzeit in addition to speeches and assemblies.

Mrs. Stein displayed similar reverence for Sarah Schenirer. When asked why her picture does not appear with the gedolim on the walls, she told me that Sarah Schenirer requested that her picture not be taken and displayed. According to Mrs. Stein, in the Bais Yaakov school in Brooklyn, “The teachers discuss Schenirer’s outstanding qualities during different lessons.” At assemblies or discussions a teacher or a member of the administration might ask what Schenirer would have wanted them to aspire to. Every year there is a “Gedolim Gallery” a display of different personalities, both historical and contemporary. Schenirer is always included among the gedolim. Additionally the Hafetz Hayim holds a special place in the school. Each year, Mrs. Stern recounted, “three or four weeks are dedication to extra education about minding their words”, the greatest concern of the Hafetz Hayim’s. His life and teachings are a major focus of the curriculum, as with the Lubavitcher rebbe (Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the leader of Habad Hasidism) and Rabbi Moshe Feinstein (former president of the Union of Orthodox Rabbis and leading Orthodox Rabbinic Authority known for his rulings on Jewish law and modernity). Mrs. Stern fully believed in the words of the school song, which she quoted to me “We are part of the chain of generations begun by our forefathers and accorded unto us at Bais Yaakov.”

²⁰⁵ There are a serious of stories about the piety of the Bais Yaakov girls in difficult situations during the Holocaust.

Caryn also remembered the school song and mentioned that Sarah Schenirer was praised in the song. Caryn does not remember a big commemoration of Sarah Schenirer. She could not retell the story of the founder and felt that it was not emphasized. She did remember hallways with pictures of rabbis but could not state that Schenirer was revered in her school.²⁰⁶ Caryn said the Bais Yaakov school's focus on its founders in no way compared to the constant focus on the Lubavitcher rebbe found at the Habad school she previously attended. Sharon also did not remember a lot about Schenirer.²⁰⁷

Carrying on the Legacy

Are the Bais Yaakov schools today carrying on the legacy of Sarah Schenirer? What might she say if she went to one of these American schools? What can we suppose her reaction would be?

First, it is important to know the sociological differences between the first Bais Yaakov schools and the Bais Yaakov schools today. Sarah Schenirer's schools were a form of communal intervention. In other words, she sought to intervene and change the status quo in her community. Many of the girls came from homes where their mothers were no longer capable of rearing them to be traditional Jewish women because they had abandoned the ways of their mothers. Schenirer found out early on that she could not intervene in the lives of older women or even teenagers, so she worked with the youngest children. Schenirer was reaching out to a community with hopes of changing it. The Bais Yaakov schools today are mostly preventative. The school does not actively recruit non-

²⁰⁶ Shoshana Bechhofer told me that Caryn's school in Cleveland called the Yavneh school has Lithuanian roots and although it is considered a Bais Yaakov school, it is rooted in the Yavneh school movement which was contemporary to the Bais Yaakov schools.

²⁰⁷ One might ask if an increased emphasis has occurred over the years of if Caryn and Sharon, both on the

Orthodox students. They work to prevent their students from being exposed to the non-Orthodox world and its temptations. The Bais Yaakov schools are located in communities that have strict Orthodox standards and their students come from Orthodox or ultra-Orthodox Jewish homes. Perhaps a few students come to the Bais Yaakov schools who are modern Orthodox, children of baalei tshuva (newly Orthodox Jews) or they themselves are religious but their families are not, but these students are not the majority. Based on reports of the women interviewed, the school does not work to integrate these students into the school and ensure their success, but rather they are often socially ostracized. Schenirer certainly would have supported the desire to drive out secular influences from the schools, and I think she would have been proud to see schools that sought to imbibe a student with the right hashkafa. One might simply ask if Schenirer wanted her schools to continue to work to draw in the non-observant community as well? I think she would have, based on her reaction to the assimilated Jews in her community.

Schenirer certainly would not have supported the type of judgement that emerged between the different Bais Yaakov schools, especially in conjunction with the yearly convention. Schenirer established a network of schools and she personally helped to place various students as teachers in the new schools. The schools worked together to form one unified system. Shoshana Bechhofer quotes a Bais Yaakov principal who discusses the realities of the schools in America:

Let's face it, there is no such thing as a Bais Yaakov 'movement' for high schools or seminaries. This is a figment of the imagination of some that would like to believe this. At best, there is an association of competing schools who share certain common goals...He continued, "Each school will compete for students within the

periphery of their communities, simply did not pay attention to the mention of the founder.

[Orthodox] community. Since Bais Yaakov schools must represent [religiousness] in a[n impure] world, the school that portrays the most and the greatest degree of the [religiousness] that the community wants, gets the students. This will breed splintering and divisiveness within our groups. And no matter how much common cause we share, survival [of the individual school] is the key word.²⁰⁸

This type of competition is due to the fact that there are sometimes more than one Bais Yaakov school in a community, or there is often more than one religious girls school in the community. Moreover, girls sometimes go outside of their communities, living halfway across the country if their parents feel that the proper education could be obtained there. All of this creates an atmosphere, as this principal describes, where the school must become the "most" religious, adhering to the strictest of standards. The competition between schools thereby infiltrates the atmosphere in the school, leading to a less tolerant, less diverse student body. These observations are supported by Bessie's description of the Baltimore Bais Yaakov school. In Baltimore there was only one school for religious girls in the community up until about 8 years ago, reports Bessie, so the school developed in a communal fashion. Now there is a more liberal school, and, as was referred to earlier, new decisions are being made about with whom girls associate. The school is becoming increasingly conservative. Caryn described a similar phenomenon when a new school opened in Cleveland just before she graduated, pushing her high school's limits.

Schenirer's first goal was "to educate the daughters of Israel so that they will serve the creator and fulfill all His laws and commandments with a full spirit, with all

²⁰⁸ Shoshana Bechhofer. *Boundary Dynamics in North American Bais Yaakov High Schools*. (Doctoral thesis, Northwestern University), 7.

their power and might, until their last breath."²⁰⁹ This goal is maintained today. The graduate of a Bais Yaakov school at any age will surely know what is required of her, and truly understand that she should serve God with love, reverence, and joy. Schenirer wrote in her diaries that "only when Israel engages itself in Torah will her interests be peaked – and all this is possible only at the hands of a true Jewish school for the faithful daughters of the people of Israel."²¹⁰ Thanks to her, schools for the daughters of Israel exist throughout the world. Schenirer would have agreed with Mrs. Stein that the goal of all courses was to influence the hashkafa of the character of the student, and she, too, would not have advocated for a more intellectual approach.

Grunfeld-Rosenbaum wrote that Schenirer was tough on her students and demanded perfect obedience.²¹¹ Like the schools today, Sarah Schenirer emphasized the value of tznius and spoke about it time and time again. She might have been pleased to see the posters on the walls of the Bais Yaakov elementary school in Brooklyn.

According to Caryn, there was no integration between secular and religious studies. However, it is important to remember that Schenirer was not part of the neo-Orthodox movement. She regarded secular studies as a waste of time, feeling that only Judaism could satisfy the soul.²¹² She would have approved of the limited English reading lists in modern American schools. Indeed, as schools developed, the dual curriculum became more problematic, as Bechhofer described:

The goal espoused in the early years of the movement - to engender positive Jewish identity - seems too vague to

²⁰⁹ Schenirer, 43

²¹⁰ Schenirer, 44

²¹¹ Grunfeld-Rosenbaum, 411.

²¹² Schenirer, 39-40.

adequately account for the extensive and intensive learning of text, the high academic standards, and the many extra-curricular additions to the school day, which are found in most contemporary Bais Yaakov schools. It does not address the problematic relationship between Jewish and secular studies in Bais Yaakov schools. These schools tend, therefore, to adopt vague goals which, while legitimizing the enterprise, are essentially non-committal and very difficult to translate into policy. (For example: The school aspires to create true Daughters of Israel who will follow in the ways of the righteous matriarchs.)²¹³

Whether this is a result of religious conviction, cognitive dissonance, or a rhetorical construction of themselves is not apparent. What is clear is that it is important to them to be, or to seem to be, faithful perpetuators of the legacy rather than creative re-interpreters of the legacy.²¹⁴

New Directions for the Bais Yaakov Schools

In her interviews of Bais Yaakov teachers, Shoshanah Bechhofer reported that she discovered a disconnect between the personal realities of the women who were teaching and their understanding of the Bais Yaakov schools. Women would report that they went into teaching because of their love of learning, that the rich layers of the Jewish tradition excited them, and that they thrived on the differences between one commentator and another. But, if you asked them what the purpose of their class was, they would report that all learning at Bais Yaakov schools is to produce good mothers and wives. They themselves had been excited by the intellectual pursuit, but they did not see themselves as transmitters of a heritage of study, rather as role models for wives and mothers in their makings. Interestingly enough, in the Baltimore school, which is more progressive, Bessie was able to articulate a desire both for values and knowledge, academics and

²¹³ Bechhofer, "Boundary Dynamics in North American Bais Yaakov High Schools", 8.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 10.

behavioral goals.

Both Este, the new teacher and recent graduate, and Shoshana Bechhofer report changes in the realities of the Bais Yaakov schools that have yet been realized in school's self-perception. Bechhofer's own experience, as well as her research, show that the Bais Yaakov schools are indeed places of Judaic intellectual learning. This is only natural given the amount of time and dedication that these girls and women spend studying Jewish texts. Although they may not pour over the Talmud, their study of Bible and all its intricacies seems to model a more "male" process of study. Este described her knowledge with pride and did not seem to couch her language in the same rhetoric that Mrs. Stein used.

As the school system has shifted from generations of girls needing to re-learn how to be Jewish wives and mothers, to girls who not only have excellent educational experiences, but come from homes rich in Jewish tradition, the ability to teach girls more and more only grows. The current Bais Yaakov movement is therefore beginning to enter into an identity crisis. Sarah Schenirer herself was a perpetual student who loved to study Torah to increase her knowledge, and found great joy in it. However, once a shift is made from study for the sake of practice to study for the sake of knowledge, it may become more difficult for the ultra-Orthodox world to maintain their gender distinctions within the realm of Torah study. For the time being these women do not study Talmud, although some of the Seminary (post high school) programs do teach Talmud to women. The future may force a re-evaluation of the content of a Jewish girls' education within their schools.

Additionally Este described new ways to gain college degrees through the Bais Yaakov schools and seminary programs. The students, who take Advanced Placement and college level courses and eventually earn a college degree, have more options than those students who graduated in years past. Bais Yaakov students are encouraged to follow careers such as speech pathology or graphic design. These college graduates can earn more money and help ease the financial demands of the ultra-Orthodox life. Rivka Chaya had expressed great dissatisfaction with the old system. She said that those students who did not go to college can not afford to help send their many children to Orthodox private schools, especially if their husbands spend all day studying. This is very different than Mrs. Stein's perspective. When speaking about money Mrs. Stein tells a story about her children, who study all day, and she remarks, "I don't know how, but I never worry, knowing that God will provide for them."

The opposition to secular college, coupled with a desire to introduce college credits within the Bais Yaakov system in some way parallels Schenirer's own efforts. Schenirer argued that public schools were the enemy; they stole the innocence from young Polish women. But Schenirer understood the need for secular education to the extent that it assisted with financial responsibilities and thus attracted some girls to her program. Este and Bessie both described similar programs that endorsed secular learning as long as it was for the sake of supporting a religious life. Bringing college to Bais Yaakov girls (instead of them to it) negated some of the concerns associated with secular college. There are opponents, especially in New York, who think this is unnecessary and too extreme which echoes the discussions of girls' religious education in the early 1900s.

At the same time, of course, the Bais Yaakov are not immune to change. Most changes have come about as a result of large increases in the numbers of Orthodox Jews in America, as well as the effects of having second or even third generations of Bais Yaakov girls attending the schools. The schools might benefit by remembering Hirsch's principle: A change for the sake of increasing Torah is a permissible change.

Effects of the Bais Yaakov schools

The contemporary Bais Yaakov schools are in many ways the type of schools that Sarah Schenirer imagined. They have enabled young Jewish women to gain a firm understanding of their heritage and prepared them to be good Jewish wives and mothers. Even more than this, they have succeeded in providing Jewish women with the foundation they need to live a life according to Jewish tradition. Every woman I spoke to was thankful for the excellent education she received at the Bais Yaakov school. But the greatest achievement of the Bais Yaakov schools, the empowering of Jewish Orthodox women, may not have been the intent of their founder at all

Although the Bais Yaakov schools were not focussed on developing their students intellect per se the desire for academic success and the depth of Jewish knowledge has surely impacted the ultra-Orthodox community. True, classes do not encourage critical thinking or analysis and higher scholarship is generally not pursued,²¹⁵ yet Bais Yaakov students like Este clearly display a thirst for Jewish knowledge. A new generation of Jewish women are emerging from the Bais Yaakov schools who are confident in their knowledge, ready to study more and to teach others. And with this knowledge, these

²¹⁵ True, the Judaic classes do not encourage critical thinking but this may not be true of secular classes, which follow state requirements.

women will clearly be different then the graduates of ages past. They may choose to stay within their ultra-Orthodox communities or they may decide to pursue other academic goals, either secular or religious, including the once-forbidden study of Talmud. With the education that they have received they will be well prepared for either path.

Conclusion

I have been asked many times since I began this project why I, a Reform Jewish rabbinical student, wanted to study the Bais Yaakov schools. I was drawn to the schools for several reasons, the first being that I am a religious woman and I was fascinated to know how the first religious girls school began, and what they emphasized. The second is that, although I choose to live my life in a modern, liberal world, I am fascinated by those who make other choices and live almost exclusively according to the words of our ancestors. But, most of all, I wanted to study a different model of education to see what it was that I, a future Jewish educator, might learn from a different Jewish world, one that is highly successful in its goal of educating girls and preserving Jewish communal life.

Jewish education in the liberal world entered a new stage in the 1990's. When the National Jewish Population Survey reported that the intermarriage rate was over 50% people began looking for ways of insulating our children from the harmful effects of intermarriage. Education was heralded as the answer, and millions of dollars were spent in educational research. However the past ten years have yielded limited results. While there has been new energy directed toward Jewish education, the one conclusion reached is that the most successful educational programs are those that are "total educational experiences" — they last for many hours over many weeks with more time spent in the educational environment than the home environment. These experiences were the day school, the overnight camp, and the Israel trip. The Bais Yaakov schools are a "total Jewish experience" for their students. From its origins, Schenirer understood that her schools must provide both strong curricular and extra-curricular activities to be effective. For instance, in the summer, the Bais Yaakov school retreated to the mountains, in a

camp setting so students could enjoy the benefits of nature and continue their Jewish education.

Although these "total educational experiences" are, perhaps, the best way to both educate Jewish children and prevent further acculturation into secular society, the vast majority of American Jews only engage in supplemental educational experiences, such as religious schooling. Although the differences between families that might send their children to a Bais Yaakov school and those that might send their children to a supplemental religious school are vast, I have gleaned lessons which might be applied fruitfully to other educational settings:

Change occurs when both the laity and the leadership are concerned about a problem. Education for Jewish women did not happen on its own. Parents and rabbis alike were concerned about Jewish girls, and how their lack of education was influencing the community as a whole. Schenirer herself had spent part of her life enrolled in an educational system that was tearing her community apart. Rabbis had been discussing the need for change for fifteen years by the time Sarah Schenirer founded her school. Parents had been observing the effects of Polish schooling first hand. In other words, various segments of the Jewish community realized that there was a problem. This is not to say that all change must be reactionary, but in Schenirer's case she did not even have to convince the leadership of the movement, they readily supported her. Additionally, once the mechanism for change was put into place, it caught on rapidly. People were lacking something and this school filled the need. Schenirer addressed the problems that people were talking about, and she did it in a flexible way. Some communities established full Bais Yaakov day schools, others only established after-

school programs; each fit the program to its need. Schenirer understood the problem clearly and proposed a way to solve it. She helped to build her schools by traveling from city to city reminding people of the problem, and empathizing with them, then offering them one solution: give Jewish girls a religious education. She went to the root of the problem – targeting girls in childhood, having quickly learned that it is difficult to change teenagers and adults. In this way Schenirer was a success.

Schools succeed when they mirror the structure of the movement with which they are affiliated. In the Modern Era schools were invented in an era of nationalism to perpetuate the ideals of the nation and homogenize the population. In the Jewish community, which often founded its own schools, different political movements each established their own schools. Schenirer may not have been conscious of her actions, but she created a movement and a style of leadership that paralleled the Hasidic movement itself. Her somewhat radical innovation was not seen as a threat but an additional system of support, and her schools were adopted by the Agudat Yisrael movement within four years of their founding. Although Schenirer did not intentionally orient the Bais Yaakov schools toward the Agudat Yisrael movement, the successful merging could certainly be attributed to their shared ideology. Schools that are founded by or oriented toward a particular ideology thrive when they espouse that ideology in both form and content.

As Reform Jews we could benefit from ensuring that our educational systems mirror our organizational structure and uphold the ideals of our movement in both form and content. Our congregants are drawn to Reform Judaism because we are a movement of choice and flexibility, teaching acceptance for all and preaching ethical imperatives. Yet our educational systems are often rigid offering little choice in educational

opportunities and imposing numerous requirements on our families. I and my colleagues are often shocked when my congregants seem unable to understand mandatory requirements, yet it is of little surprise when they have chosen a movement that theologically, by in large, rejects the idea of mandatory requirements. We should be offering educational systems with choices, different ways to achieve the same goal, being willing to negotiate the challenges of living in religious and secular worlds. Some Reform religious schools are starting to do these things, and they are thriving.

Clear goals: All Jewish learning leads to action. One of the major goals of education in the Bais Yaakov schools is to teach the young Jewish girls how to be engaged participants in the Jewish world (as appropriate for their gender as understood by their ultra-Orthodox world view). This was Schenirer's goal: to ensure that Jewish woman would be good Jewish mothers and bring devout Jewish children into this world. She wanted to inspire them to love God and fear Heaven and observe all the commandments. With this goal in mind many rabbis promoted the schools, reminding their constituents that girls of today would become mothers of tomorrow. Ultimately they understood women exerted their influence, either positive or negative, on the home. At the Bais Yaakov schools today, teachers instruct young girls in proper behavior and thinking linking every lesson to a real life example. When they study Torah they ask the primary questions: What is this saying to us? What do we learn from this? How does this verse teach us how to behave? In this way each student understands the relevance of their education and the students are expected to abide by their lessons. Additionally, the Bais Yaakov schools demand from each and every parent that they too follow the lessons taught in the schools. Schenirer was well aware that without parental support,

demonstrated partially through Jewish observance in the home, the girls would fail to integrate their religious education into their lives. The Bais Yaakov schools have clear goals and expectations for the parents of the children who attend their schools. Most liberal religious schools have broad goals and little parent expectation. There is a fear, especially among Reform religious schools, that too many requirements will turn families away. In cases where there are clear expectations these expectations are not always reinforced by the content of the curriculum. Although there is a need to reach out to the broadest cross section of Jews our schools would all benefit by clear goals and expectations.

The Bais Yaakov schools provided "total educational experiences": for young children and support mechanisms for questioning adolescents. Sarah Schenirer understood that young children are eager to learn and ready to please their teachers. Like sponges absorbing new material, they eagerly learn new rituals and routines. Schenirer did not spend a lot of time explaining the reasons why students should follow mitzvot rather, she focused on what to do, and modeled behavior.

We can learn a lot from her. Why not provide our children with opportunities to do rituals rather than reading about them in a textbook. Most Jewish educators already do this in pre-school, celebrating Shabbat on Friday morning and adding Jewish ritual objects to play stations. But even when our elementary education is strong, we all too often fail our adolescents. Finding teachers to teach in Confirmation programs is difficult and our rabbis do not, often enough, invest themselves in teen-age programs. And even if our confirmation programs are strong, we have very few methods of interaction for young adults ages 16-26. Research studies confirm that this is the most under-served

population. In Schenirer's schools and teacher's seminary intellectual, enlightened individuals worked with older students and answered their questions, helping them to understand how to synthesize being Jewish with the modern world. They learned in order to teach and their questions were focused on what they needed to know and how they could incorporate their knowledge into their lives. We too might consider training more of our students to teach in religious schools, thereby maintaining their connection to Judaism.

Teacher as role model. The Bais Yaakov movement grooms its students to become the next generation of teachers. Sarah Schenirer asked two graduates of her first class to establish new schools. These efforts served a dual need, it provided the students with a way to maintain a connection to the movement prior to bearing children of their own, and it strengthened the schools by having new, young teachers who had only recently mastered the material. They were then able to pass it on to the next generation. The Bais Yaakov schools were able to quickly expand because their graduates stayed on, thereby strengthening the program internally and perpetuating the ethos of the school from one generation of girls to the next.

In supplementary religious schools, or even in liberal day schools, our teachers could be more involved in our communities. Our students and our congregations should see them as role models. In order to do this, our teachers must be willing to share parts of their personal lives and they must live their lives in a way that is consistent with their teachings. In this way, students can see models of who they might become just a few years from now. Additionally we should encourage our high school graduates to consider teaching in religious schools in college and while they are young adults. Currently I

teach at a teacher training program where high school seniors receive college credit for basic Judaism and education courses. They can then use these skills to teach at a religious school during their college years.

Have exciting extra-curricular opportunities . The modern Bais Yaakov schools have found inventive ways to keep their students busy after school, which in turn generated enthusiasm about the Bais Yaakov school. This was one of Schenirer's first projects after founding her original school in Krakow. She created groups for young girls and older girls alike. What is interesting is that although they may use traditional material, they engage the girls in cultural activities: theatre, music and dance. By choosing subjects for the performances that reinforce the values of the school these extra-curricular activities actually supplement the curriculum. There are currently several different models of Jewish theatre troupes, most synagogues have children's choirs, and there are newly emerging Jewish dance troupes, but these programs are not nearly as widespread as they might be.

The Bais Yaakov schools have taught me a lot about the way one educational system works, and how its current existence was shaped by the circumstances of its founding. However, the lessons need not be limited to an analysis of the Bais Yaakov schools. There are many ways to provide a total Jewish experience for students. As a Reform Jew I too have a tradition that I am proud of and I hope to use the Bais Yaakov schools as a model to impart my tradition unto my students.

However, beyond any lesson the Bais Yaakov schools have inspired me to follow my goals of being a Jewish educator. Reading Sarah Schenirer's words when she was my age, and understanding her dedication to teaching the women of Krakow all about the

Judaism she loved truly touched my soul. Although there were times when her beliefs clearly differed from mine, what was clear is that we shared a love for Judaism and the Jewish people. I was inspired by her goal, and captivated by her story. Above all Schenirer succeeded, thousands of girls attend a Bais Yaakov school each and every day, and they are taught to love their religion, and they do. I feel privileged to have been able to spend the past eight months studying her life, the schools created, and the individuals who helped her.

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