

The Human Spirit: Can women decide Halacha?

Barbara Sofer, THE JERUSALEM POST

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Chicagoan Lynn Shapiro had just read an interesting magazine article about religious law advisers, *yoatzot halacha*, of Nishmat, the Jerusalem Center for Advanced Study for Women. This nine-year-old program prepares women for the responsibility of answering complicated questions on family purity - *taharat hamishpaha*, the *mikve*-centered traditional Jewish system that sets the parameters of times of intimacy for married couples. Before the program opened, rabbis were the only ones educated to answer these urgent questions. In the article, the head of a well-known yeshiva had criticized the women's program.

As it happened, a representative of that very yeshiva showed up at Shapiro's door that evening to ask for a donation. She and husband Irv politely but firmly turned him down, explaining why supporting the yeshiva would be a conflict for them. Not only did Shapiro, a mother and grandmother, know that many women would prefer discussing such delicate and private issues with another woman rather than with a rabbi, but their own yeshiva-educated, Ivy League-graduate daughter Rocky Brody lived in Jerusalem and was a student in the Nishmat program.

Women taking on practices and leadership roles that our legendary grandmothers either eschewed or for which they didn't have the opportunity always raises hackles in the Orthodox world, although real grandmothers were certainly feistier than they are romantically portrayed.

COGNIZANT OF possible backlash, Nishmat's founding headmistress Rabbanit Chana Henkin has gone to extraordinary lengths to defuse opposition. Her personal style doesn't include crashing through ramparts, but quietly and effectively removing barriers.

From the beginning in 1997 when the 1,000-hour Keren Ariel Yoatzot Halacha course opened, Nishmat accepted only devout, irreproachable candidates who were already well-educated in Judaism. The graduates never called themselves *poskot* (deciders), but stuck with *yoatzot* (advisers), and stressed that they deferred to the wisdom of supervisory rabbis. Although there are Orthodox authorities who are worried that the *yoatzot* are halfway to becoming women rabbis, in Israel most potential opposition has been thwarted by the acknowledgment of how much they were needed.

These days women aren't running to the rabbi either to examine a chicken or - despite the imperative to do so - to discuss aberrant excretions. Uncomfortable and embarrassed, too many women are acting as their own *poskot*, often unnecessarily postponing going to the *mikve* for days, weeks or even months for fear of violating religious law.

There's nothing sugar-coated about the two-year course which covers stringent and complex halachic issues from primary sources, anatomy, women's medicine and counseling skills. This is one field where you'd better be a good listener.

By this summer, a cadre of some 40 women will be official advisers. Who are their clients? Jewish women from around the world, from every ethnic group and from those not fully observant to the ultra-Orthodox, although most callers are what's called modern Orthodox, or *dati leumi*.

The *yoatzot* Web site gets eight to 15 questions about religious law each day, but even more popular is the Golda Koschitzky Women's Halachic Hotline.

When *The Jerusalem Post* published the phone number of the first two graduates of the course in 1999, the women were swamped with phone calls. Consequently, a hot line was inaugurated.

Graduates take daily calls (including Fridays), and Saturdays after Shabbat.

The flexible hours allow women all over the world to call in. And they do - from North and South America, Europe, South Africa, Australia and Israel. Questions cover not only fine points of family observance, but also questions about fertility treatment and even sex education for teenagers. More than 50,000 calls have been logged so far.

According to Rabbanit Henkin, religious authorities in Israel accepted the advisers more readily than those in the US. "Particularly in the beginning, they weren't sure what to make of it," she said. "Some were worried that it would replace rabbis. They wondered if it would strengthen or weaken Torah observance."

ROCKY BRODY completed the course, and now teaches brides and answers questions. Her day job is in computers. Her mother, Lynn Shapiro, received a follow-up call from the yeshiva and then mail. The letter explained that women weren't considered less intelligent - in fact women had more wisdom (*bina*) than men. However, according to the yeshiva spokesperson, Judaism had long realized what Harvard professor Carol Gilligan had only now expressed, that "women's mode of thought is contextual and narrative, while men's is formal, linear and abstract."

The latter was necessary for halachic conclusions, while contextual and narrative thought resulted in distorted rulings. Hence, training women to be involved in the halachic process was "fraught with danger."

Shapiro was impressed with the personal attention, but the yeshiva should have stopped while it was ahead.

"There was an odd analogy tacked on," said Shapiro. "The letter continued about how those whose hands quiver wanting to be brain surgeons would be a 'boon for the status of the handicapped,' but that it would be a tragedy for those who would rely on their services! Examples of two fields that would require the abstract reasoning comparable to halachic decision-making were theoretical philosophy and pure math."

Lynn Shapiro is a college math professor.

The *yoatzot* Web site is www.yoatzot.org



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