

Women Learn *Daf Yomi* from a Woman

By Michelle Cohen Farber

Six mornings a week, rain or shine, a diverse group of women in central Israel, aged thirty to fifty, gather together for forty-five minutes to study Talmud. Each of the participants brings her own unique perspective to the table. One member of the group is an interior designer who always finds the aesthetic beauty in a textual description. Another is an architect who is vocal when learning *sugyot* in *masekhet Sukkah* and other tractates dealing with structural or spatial issues. And a professor of law contributes her insights when discussing rabbinic legal analysis and innovation.

The conventional wisdom is that men and women have different approaches to texts—that men tend to focus on the theoretical, whereas women are much more practical-minded. In our class and in my experience in teaching women, this is only a half-truth. One woman in my class has a *Tosafot*-like approach, frequently identifying contradictions from other texts we have learned. Another shows a great interest in the reality of the lives of the scholars and questions the historical influences that shaped rabbinic writing. A third participant is interested in exploring whether the seemingly abstract discussions of the Talmudic sages are purely hypothetical or whether they reflect reality. The questions that the women in my class ask also reflect their particular attitudes. Texts referring to ghosts, *mezikin* (harmful spirits), dreams, or stories often prompt lively group discussions, as they relate to the most basic issues of the human psyche.

The Talmud deals with anything and everything—from health to eating habits to sex to human behavior. No topic was taboo for the rabbis. Recently, in our study of the tractate *Hagigah*, we discussed the reliability of a non-religious Jew. The general rule is that items belonging to someone not committed to *halakhah* (an *am ha'aretz*) are assumed to be impure, even if the *am ha'aretz* claims they are pure. However, regarding items brought to the Temple for sacrifices, an *am ha'aretz* is trusted to say that they are pure. The rationale for this ruling is that barring these people from bringing offerings to the Temple (due to reasons of impurity) will cause them to hold religious Jews in contempt and ultimately to create their own religion. Accordingly, what is halakhically problematic as a general matter becomes permissible. Our class noted the flexibility of *halakhah* in the interest of not ostracizing

people from the religious community and maintaining good relations among Jews. In this instance, as in many others, learning Talmud teaches us the flexibility of the halakhic system. The variety of opinions and the ability to constantly interpret and reinterpret earlier texts demonstrates how open-minded Jewish tradition is meant to be. The questions that are needed to be asked today, however, are different from the ones the Talmud was interested in. Today, these issues would be framed more in terms of human dignity.



Michelle Farber's *daf yomi shiur* engages in a lively discussion.

A Tradition Begins

What drew me to *daf yomi*? Teaching Talmud has been my passion for years. In my twenties and thirties, I taught in Jerusalem-based *batei midrash*. Since our family moved to central Israel, however, I have struggled to find a place in which to teach Talmud in a serious environment that involved more than one or two classes a

week. I approached several high schools to interest them in developing a serious *Gemara* curriculum, but they could not find more than a few hours a week in their schedules. It is very hard to progress in Talmud without the rigorous discipline of more consistent (ideally, a daily) time investment—especially for women who have had little, if any, exposure to Talmud study.

This search was taking place at the same time as the *daf yomi* cycle was about to begin again. *Daf yomi* is a system of learning that began in 1923 (initiated by Rabbi Meir Shapiro in Lublin) to learn a page (*daf*) of Talmud each day to complete the entire 2,711 pages of the Talmud in seven and a half years. Each *daf* is crammed with lots of information—a *daf* may contain ten different topics and sometimes one topic can be analyzed in great detail, spanning many pages. Studying *daf yomi* has become very popular in recent years and *shiurim* are given all over the world. More recently, the Internet has bred a completely new set of *daf yomi* options.

My husband suggested starting a *daf yomi* class, and at first I thought the idea was absurd. I have always taught in an in-depth manner—how could I teach an entire *daf* in 45 minutes? I always teach with *hevruta* (allowing the students to learn the text on their own with a study partner)—why would I want to teach by spoon-feeding the material? How would I ever attract a committed group of learners? How many women have 45 minutes a day to

dedicate to this? As I started thinking the matter over and started making some calls, though, I discovered that this approach really had appeal.

The Appeal of Daf Yomi

One appeal of *daf yomi* is that if you are going to dedicate time in your busy life to learning, the idea of being able to quantify what you are learning is very attractive. Women (and men, for that matter) who are balancing work and family life consider time very precious. If they want to dedicate time to learning Torah, they want to know that they will make the most of that time. By structuring their learning time around *daf yomi*, they know that they will study a prescribed body of knowledge and get through the entire Talmud (or, if they stay for just a year, a few tractates)—the text that stands as the basis for almost everything else in Jewish learning.

One of Rabbi Meir Shapiro's goals in initiating the idea of *daf yomi* was to unify world Jewry. If everyone is learning the same thing everywhere, he reasoned, when Jews get together, they can engage in shared discussion about what they are learning. I have experienced this many times at a *simhah* or even on the street. The moment someone studying the *daf* sees me, she comes over to me and starts discussing something that came up in the day's *daf*. Some of the women in my class have husbands who are learning and like the idea of doing likewise. In a different way, this sort of bonding was reflected at our first *siyum*, upon completion of our study of *Berakhot*. Two women mentioned that studying the *daf* held a special place for them, as each had a father or grandfather who had passed away who had always learned the *daf*, and they felt that through their learning they were better able to understand why the *daf* had played such a central role in their lives.

A Significant Statement about Women's Learning

The *shiur* makes a significant statement about women's learning. All the participants talk about the impact it has had on their families, particularly their daughters. Once, at the end of a class, a woman told me that her teenage daughter was having a crisis that morning. As she sat helping her through it, the daughter noticed the time and said to her mother, "I don't want you to miss the *daf*," and encouraged her to go. (Incidentally, a number of the participants' daughters also learn with me in an evening *shiur* that I conduct for girls.) Another class member has commented on the positive impact her learning has had on her sons: "They see me taking this seriously; they see my husband being completely supportive of my running out to *shiur*. They will know that they and their wives can someday learn together, another bond, another shared link in a long chain." When I went on vacation, one student, for whom daily learning was just such a fixed part of her routine, went to a local *shul* to ask if they would allow her to attend their class, to which one of the men replied, "There's a women's *daf yomi shiur*—why don't you join them?" Our class is affecting the broader community as well.

It should not come as a surprise that quite a few of the women in the class have careers, have large families, chair *hesed* projects, run marathons, and have many other familial and communal responsibilities. One morning, a woman at the table looked around at a number of women in their gym gear and said, "Am I the only normal one who just gets her kids out in the morning?" Notwithstanding their otherwise busy lives, however, each of the women in my class recognizes the importance of carving out time for serious study and values how rewarding it is to start the day with a religious, intellectual, and social experience.

The diversity in the class is part of what makes the experience unique. Friendships created through learning are very meaningful. I have witnessed close relationships develop between the women in the group. Even though there isn't much time for chitchat in a *daf yomi* class, there are always a few brief moments of interchange among the women. The consistency of the daily contact has only enhanced this aspect of the learning experience. Participants are always exchanging all sorts of messages on our WhatsApp group, whether it be *mazal tovs* or *hesed* opportunities.

I appreciate the fact that initially many women are daunted by the thought of committing to a daily regimen of learning. However, the ones who were willing to try realized in short order that it was not as great a challenge as they imagined. In fact, a class member who has already been through the cycle once has commented that she has no difficulty finding the time—it is just a part of her day, along with eating, *davening*, carpooling, and so on.

When I decided to teach the class, I discovered that there were hundreds of *daf yomi shiurim* available online, but none offered by a woman. From the start, it was my intention to record the class and upload it to the Internet. In this way, my *shiur* could reach women all over the world. It also meant that the women who attend the *shiur* would have a backup for the days they were unable to attend. Every day, an audio version of the *shiur* (in English) is uploaded, along with a study sheet that includes charts and other aids to help understand the often complicated structure of that page of Talmud. It can be found at www.dafyomi4women.org or the first entry on a Google search for "*daf yomi* women." The website also functions as a resource for women who want to study Talmud not necessarily at the pace of *daf yomi*. The convenience of the Internet allows for a learning experience that isn't dependent on a daily commitment. The listener can choose which *masekhet* to learn, and at what pace.

I have met people who have been following me online from around the world. One is studying to be a Reconstructionist rabbi in New York and is currently studying in Jerusalem for the year. I look forward to her upcoming stay with us in Ra'anana for a Shabbat. For our *siyum* of the tractate *Yoma* (which deals with the tasks that the High Priest performed in the Temple on Yom Kippur), our group went on a tour of the Temple Mount to visualize where the ceremonies had taken place. Imagine our

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surprise when one of the guides turned to me and said, “I just realized why your voice sounds so familiar. My wife listens to your *shiur* every day.”

For me personally, this has been a most rewarding step. I love teaching Talmud, as it encompasses so many significant themes—from *halakhah* to health, psychology, behavior, human nature, and the like. It is a book filled with diversity of opinions on every topic and fascinating conversations and deliberations. I enjoy being able to share my thoughts with others who are dedicated to learning and have excellent insights into the texts. I start my day with the Talmud; I fall asleep with the Talmud. (Managing a household with five young children means that I often don’t find time to prepare a *shiur* until everyone in the house has gone to bed!) I value the regularity of it, the stability it provides in my life. Not a day goes by that I haven’t studied. Every *daf* brings new ideas and new challenges.

Being part of the first women’s online *daf yomi shiur* on the one hand is ground breaking (albeit probably not what Rabbi Meir Shapiro had in mind). At the same time, though, it creates that link between ourselves and the covenant, carrying on the traditions and innovative nobility of the scholars of the Mishna and Talmud.

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Editor’s Note: *Michelle Farber is the daughter-in-law of Esther Farber, z”l, who was the creator and first editor of the JOFA Journal and a founding board member of JOFA.*