

A 21st-century beit midrash

One Daf Yomi class for women shows how natural Gemara studies can be for both sexes



(Photos by Ardon Bar-Hama)

• ALAN ROSENBAUM

On a cloudy Wednesday morning, inside a spacious home located on a quiet, tree-lined street in Ra'anana, a group of Talmud students is studying the daily page of Talmud, known as the *Daf Yomi*. They sit around the table listening attentively, as the teacher explains a difficult passage of text from Tractate *Bava Metzia*, gesticulating with a finger to clarify a point. Questions are asked and answered, diagrams and phrases are drawn on a small whiteboard, volumes of Talmud of all shapes and sizes are scattered about the room – it is a classic

description of a typical Daf Yomi class.

What makes this class notable is that the students and the teacher are all women.

Women's Talmud study is no longer considered unusual in the Modern Orthodox world, yet there are relatively few Daf Yomi classes for women. The Daf Yomi is a rigorous program, in which participants complete the entire Talmud in seven and a half years by studying one page of Talmud – two sides of a page – each day. The one-page-per-day regimen requires discipline, commitment and dedication on the part of the students as well as the teacher.

Michelle Farber, who leads the

women's Daf Yomi class in Ra'anana, has determination, energy and discipline to spare. Six days a week, Farber delivers the 45-minute class in her Ra'anana home. Afterwards, she uploads the recording to her website and podcast locations, where it is downloaded by listeners around the world.

Farber “fell in love with Gemara,” as she puts it, during her high school years at Brooklyn's Yeshiva of Flatbush, which was one of the first schools to offer Talmud study for girls. After high school, she continued her Talmud studies at Midreshet Lindenbaum in Jerusalem and made aliya during her college years, earning a degree in Talmud and Bible from Bar-Ilan >>



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University.

Farber pursued advanced Talmud studies at Lindenbaum and began teaching there. In the ensuing period, she taught Talmud at the Pelech Girls High School in Jerusalem and at Matan in Ra'anana, which offers in-depth Torah study programs for women.

Yet with all her vast experience, both in studying and teaching Talmud, Farber says that teaching the Daf Yomi has been one of her greatest challenges.

"Daf Yomi did not suit my style. I had never learned the Daf Yomi myself, and always thought it was superficial," she says.

Farber, who has lived in Ra'anana since 2002 with her husband and children, was looking for a group of women who were committed to studying Talmud on a regular basis. It was then that a friend suggested that she begin a women's Daf Yomi class. At first, she was skeptical, but after canvassing the neighborhood she soon found a group of women who were interested.

Some had studied Daf Yomi previously. Others had never studied Talmud before, but were willing to give it a try. A group was formed, and in September 2012 they began their study of the Daf Yomi. Since its inception, says Farber, they have had a steady group that numbers between 12 and 15 women. If a student misses a day, she can always listen online and make up what she has missed.

Unlike other women's Daf Yomi classes, in which teachers take turns lecturing, Farber is the sole teacher. She spends between two and five hours of each day preparing the next day's lecture. If she is waiting for a child at school, she will sneak in a few moments, reading the upcoming page on her iPhone. After she puts her youngest child to bed, she prepares the page in earnest and literally goes to sleep with the page every night. Early the next morning, after exercising, she puts the finishing touches to the lecture before the class begins.

Farber asserts that women approach the study of Talmud differently than men.

"Women look at the Talmud not only from a more practical perspective, but also from a much more emotional perspective," she opines. Farber's Daf Yomi class is for women only, because, as she says, women would be intimidated by the presence of men, particularly because most do not have as extensive a background as their male counterparts. Nevertheless, she says, there are men who follow online and download the audio version.

The women who attend her class appreciate how she makes a text that was studied exclusively by men for centuries more attractive and accessible to women. Ilana Kurshan, a Jerusalem resident who has been studying the Daf Yomi for 11 years, started listening online about a year ago.

She says Farber makes the class more

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interesting by using the names of women in the class in examples given in the Talmud.

"Michelle will say, 'If Sarah lends a cow to Ruth, but it dies under Donna's watch...' Rashi uses male names, such as 'Reuven' and 'Shimon,' and male rabbis use the names of men in their class. How refreshing to imagine women as actors in the Talmud's scenarios!"

After teaching the Daf Yomi for the past four years, Farber says that she has a greater appreciation for the breadth of material covered in the Talmud. "The rabbis gave advice about every aspect of one's life, which is why it is so meaningful and relevant. It is not just about Halacha – Jewish law. It is about psychology and the study of human behavior."

While many of Farber's students are newcomers to Talmud study, she says that there is no drop-off in the level of learning.

"The women add so much, and the conversation and level of intellect is so strong, that even if they can't always figure out what the Gemara is saying, they can decipher the underlying meaning of the text. The conversations and the insights that people have, for me, are really meaningful."

She adds that the students also bring their expertise from the outside world to the world of the Talmud. One woman, a historian and tour guide, provides historical information on segments of the Talmud. Another, an architect, gives her perspective on the structural nature of the succa.

Farber's students come to the class for different reasons. One woman began attending after completing the 11-month recital of kaddish in her father's memory. Studying the Talmud, she says, is a way of continuing to do something in memory of her father.

"You get hooked on this," she adds, smiling.

"I grew up in a house where my father loved to learn Gemara," another woman

adds. "As I am learning the Daf, I realize how much of my childhood revolved around the Talmud. My father would come to the dinner table and would exclaim, 'You've got to hear this piece of Gemara I learned today!' For me, it is a way of connecting with my father."

Another, more experienced Talmudist is studying the Daf for the second time. Previously, she had studied in a men's Talmud class. She contrasts her experience in the men's class with what goes on in Farber's class.

"I studied with the men for seven and a half years, and moved from behind the *mehitza* [partition between women's and men's sections] to sitting behind the men, and eventually to the *beit midrash*, where I sat at the corner of the table. When I completed the cycle with them, I really missed it. When Michelle started this class, I jumped in."

Farber's Talmud class, she says, "takes the *beit midrash* and moves it forward into the 21st century. It's a combination of the rich background of people who grew up learning Gemara, together with more academic ways of teaching."

Her reach extends far beyond those who attend the daily class to an additional 70 to 80 listeners around the world who download her class each day. Her Facebook page, "Daf Yomi 4 women," has an additional 400 followers, and she frequently posts relevant insights or controversial issues that appear in the day's page.

Farber's passion for Talmud extends beyond her daily class: She is determined to make Talmud study a basic element of girls' education. "To be a religious woman in this day and age and have little or no knowledge of Gemara makes it hard for people to continue their religion without really understanding what the Gemara is all about. It's very hard to have a sensitivity to the halachic mind-set without having learned Gemara. In general, I think it is just going to cause people to become less religious over time without feeling this connection to the texts."

She is saddened by attempts to minimize the importance of women's Talmud study.

"I believe that if these rabbis sat in my class and understood what Talmud study has done to the lives of the students, to their daughters, and the values that have they instilled in their children as a result, is that a bad thing?"

In 1923, when the Daf Yomi was first conceived by Rabbi Meir Shapiro of Lublin, the idea that women might ever participate in such an endeavor was remote and far-fetched. Yet close to a century later, women in increasing numbers are studying the Talmud in their own way, with unique understanding and sensitivity.

Says one of Farber's students, "There is something extraordinary about learning Gemara with a group of women... There is something wonderful and very comfortable."

Indeed, there is. ■