



Golden Age of Women's Gemara Learning or the End of an Era? Rabba Sara Hurwitz

On April 5, 2023, Stern College announced they would be shutting down their beginner and intermediate Talmud classes, citing “lack of enrollment.” I was very disappointed, and I joined the community reaction, signing my name to a petition along with 1,500 other concerned signatories. On the list were Stern graduates, Drisha graduates, and people without any connection to Stern, joining the cause to advocate for young women studying Talmud. There was even an impressive number of high school students who signed. The petition urged Yeshiva University to reinstate the classes, citing a concern of destroying the pipeline to serious gemara study.

The story has a good ending, and whether due to pressure or sudden interest in the classes, YU announced that they would offer Talmud for Stern students at the beginner and intermediate levels.

The class's cancellation and reinstatement left me thinking about the state of women's Talmud in general. Is it true that there really wasn't interest in the class? And if that *is* true, why aren't women gravitating to gemara classes? Is learning gemara no longer relevant? Is there a systemic problem here, an issue of supply or demand?

Personal and Professional

These questions resonate for me both personally and professionally.

On a personal level, mastering gemara was a key part of my journey to the rabbinate. When I arrived at Midreshet Lindenbaum for my gap year in 1994, I barely knew how to read Rashi script, let alone a page of Talmud. I had never even seen the inside of a Gemara. The admissions committee took a chance on me, a public school student, recognizing my passion to dive into serious Torah learning.

Although I did not attend Stern for my undergraduate studies, I would have been a candidate for their beginner or immediate shiur. During college, I went on to learn at Drisha, where I gained the confidence to keep learning and found my pathway towards the rabbinate.

Professionally, gemara is the language of our tradition. Learning the pages of any tractate is a spiritual experience in that it puts us in conversation with our past: with Rabbi Yossi ha Gleli, with Rav and Shmuel, and even Yalta and Bruriah. More than that, learning gemara unlocks a seat at the communal table. Mastery of gemara is the currency that is required to be seen as an authority and communal leader.

***Halakhic* Limitations on Women's Gemara Learning**



The advent of educating girls in Jewish studies is still relatively new. Women did not have access to Jewish texts until the 20th century. There are at least two *halakhic* issues that contributed to the systemic limitations of women learning gemara. The first is whether women are allowed to learn gemara in the first place. Rambam perpetuated this notion teaching that: “Anyone who teaches his daughter Torah, it is as if he taught her *tiflut* (silliness, licentiousness) (Talmud Torah 1:13). Then, even for the commentators who say that women can learn Talmud, parameters are placed on that learning. Learning Talmud Torah is a time bound obligation (*mitzvah she’hazman grama*), and since women are exempt from time bound activity, they are not obligated. According to this understanding of *halakha*, men have an obligation, a *chiyuv*, to learn gemara, whereas women can learn Talmud if they want (they have a *reshut* to learn), but they are not obligated.

Diagnosing Some of the Issues

The *halakhic* limitations of Rambam’s *tiflut*, that girls’ learning of Talmud is somehow tainted, and the idea of *chiyuv*, that they are not obligated—still reverberate in profound ways. In an attempt to try to understand the state of Talmud for girls and women, I spoke to a handful of high school students and administrators. Through their responses, I will attempt to diagnose the variety of complex issues that are at play.

Here five ways that the *halakhic* and historical limitations placed on women’s learning have impacted the quality of Talmud learning for girls and women today:

1. The principle that women are not allowed to learn still pervades some communities. The more right leaning the community, the less likely it is that gemara is taught in schools. Even in co-ed modern schools where boys and girls are taught gemara at the same level, there has been a slight shift to the right, leaving girls feeling more culturally connected to a yeshivish mentality and opting out of taking gemara seriously. This limits the number of girls who are graduating high school with a passion to learn gemara seriously.
2. The lack of obligation (*chiyuv*) for girls to learn gemara should not impact their desire to learn, however, the mere knowledge that there is no religious requirement influences girls to prioritize other classes and secular academics, while putting less focus on their Talmud studies. The fact that Talmud is not obligated impacts the curriculum in gap year programs as well. Many of the traditional male gap year programs are gemara-intensive, but the female programs are gemara-light, if offered at all. When I went to Midreset Lindenbaum for my gap year, there was no Tanakh track. We were tracked based on our ability to learn Talmud. Today, to attract young women, many gap year programs offer a Tanakh track, which is far more popular. In effect, there are simply fewer options for women to choose from, creating a cycle of lower supply, lower



demand.

3. The lack of opportunities for learning high level gemara also means that there is no kollel culture for these girls and women, where they can be present and study for many years. Although kollel culture may not be a communal priority for men or women, the consequence of not having a kollel is that there are few female rebbes. The traditional rebbe, the male figure who looms large and inspires young men with their commitment to learn and encourages others to continue learning, exists far less for women. There are, of course, wonderful teachers in high schools and at yeshivot, but students tend to get more excited by learning opportunities that are offered outside of their school gemara classes.
4. The Gemara itself is a text written in a male voice. Women's experiences tend to be objectified and the subject of debate. While some women may be able to contextualize these debates and add our voices and perspectives, women still have to work hard to find our own experiences and ideas within the text.
5. We, as a community, can demonstrate value and importance by paying our Torah scholars fairly and encouraging our children to pursue careers in *limudei kodesh*. Yet, the demands of a Modern Orthodox lifestyle are expensive and hard to sustain on rabbinic salaries. The result is that families may not explicitly encourage their girls to pursue serious Talmud study.

These are just some of the many challenges I discovered in my conversations. I am not sure that we can solve the deeply embedded systemic issues laid out above, but by unpacking the pervading issues, we can begin to offer solutions.

A Path Towards Solutions

What if learning gemara was actually a *chiyuv*, an obligation? Just like all students must take history, math, and science, gemara would also simply be obligatory. Then, more younger women would be exposed to and become excited about gemara from a young age. Some would continue to pursue studying seriously.

We could incentivize more young women to pursue careers in education to model serious Torah learning. We should invest in the institutions that provide serious Torah scholarships, such as learning opportunities outside of school like Drisha's middle and high school programs and gap year programs that prioritize gemara. We must also secure positions in more high schools for women to teach gemara and invest in higher salaries for teachers.

Maharat encourages gemara learning by recognizing and rewarding it. The [Emerging Scholars Award](#) supports four promising high school graduates with a scholarship towards their gap year in Israel. We offer another [fellowship for learning, community,](#)





[and leadership for young women on their gap year in Israel](#). Additionally, this fall, we will launch a Maharat College Gemara Fellowship for women with advanced learning skills to study in a weekly gemara shiur with Maharat's exceptional faculty.

Women and the field of gemara study is indeed a systemic issue. Maharat, high schools, and supplementary learning opportunities have the opportunity to create more demand and ensure proper supply. Together we must invest in women's learning and the institutions that will nurture their growth.

Tikkun on Shavuot

Shavuot is the celebration of learning Torah. We commemorate Matan Torah, the Revelation at Sinai, by staying up all night to study. The tradition began in 1533 when Rabbi Yosef Caro, author of the Shulchan Aruch, invited a few friends, his Kabbalistic colleagues, to hold a study vigil on Shavuot night. Rabbi Avraham Gombiner, the 17th-century author of Magen Avraham, a commentary on the Shulchan Aruch, traces the all night vigil to a midrashic tradition about the Israelites oversleeping on the morning they were scheduled to receive the Torah:

ר' חנינא אומר, בחדש השלישי היום כפול בלילה וישנו ישראל עד שתי שעות ביום ששינת יום העצרת עריבה והלילה קצרה

“Rabbi Chaninai says: On the third month the day is twice as long as the night, and Israel slept two hours into the day, for the sleeping in the daytime in this season is sweet, and the night is short.”

Although Bnei Yisrael had been preparing for revelation for days, they succumbed to sweet slumber, perhaps revealing their hesitation and fear of the Torah and all that it mandates. The midrash continues:

ויצא משה ובא למחנה ישראל והיה מעורר ישראל משינתם ואמ' להם עימדו משינתכם שהרי אלהיכם מבקש ליתן לכם את התורה, כבר החתן מבקש להביא את הכלה להכניס לחופה כדי ליתן לכם את התורה.

“And Moses went into the camp of Israel, and woke Israel up from sleep. He said to them, ‘Wake up sleepyheads! The groom has already arrived, and is asking for the bride and is waiting for her, that he may usher her into the bridal canopy, to give you the Torah.’ (Pirkey DeRebbi Eliezer 41)

Bnei Yisrael had to be woken up, shaken from their slumber to embark on their new journey of pursuing a life of Torah, a life of God, a life of justice.

In response, rather than be caught sleeping, like their ancestors at the foot of Sinai, the Kabbalists established Tikkun Leil Shavuot, a process of “rectifying’ our forebears’ lack of vigilance. While they slept, keeping the Torah and its code of ethics waiting for them, we spend the night absorbed in learning its core messages. While they dozed through





that warm summer night and on into the morning, we deprive ourselves of sleep until after daybreak. While they had to be woken to hear God's voice from Sinai, we wait eagerly through the night to re-enact it by reading the Ten Commandments, our code of law and ethics.

Tikkun, in this context, is an opportunity to correct past mistakes. It is a call to wake up, arouse our souls, take stock of our imperfect world, and commit to repair the brokenness—be it poverty, hunger, abuse or discrimination—the many plagues that mar the world's beauty.

Let us all awaken our souls to the possibilities of fixing that which is broken.

I am grateful for all the teachers, role models, and institutions who nurtured my Torah learning journey. If we as a community are invested in equal education for women and want to support women having the same opportunities of leadership, then we have to make sure that our girls have a clear and supported pathway to help them gain the necessary expertise in gemara.

May the opportunities flourish from here!

