Traditional Education of East European Jewish Women: 
The Generations before the First World War

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Before we deal with the details of Jewish women’s traditional education in Eastern Europe, we should review the heritage that Jews who settled in this region brought with them from the medieval diaspora. A quick glance at the earliest periods of Jewish history indicates that the Bible presents two types of women: on the one hand, women were deemed subordinate to men (Gen. 3:16) but on the other, women served as leaders, prophets, and judges. Miriam and Deborah are the best examples of women who played the latter role. Deborah’s status as a judge caused at least one rabbi to ponder why Maimonides, the greatest rabbinic authority of the Middle Ages, ruled that a woman could not serve as a judge.¹

It is generally accepted that in Talmudic times (through the year 500 CE), women’s status declined in comparison with the biblical period. The Talmudic world was ruled intellectually and to some extent politically by the Sages (hakhamim), whose academies (yeshivas) did not train women. Even today, when as a result of the feminist movement we have women’s yeshivas, they are called by another name. It is true that beginning with Bruria in the second century, there were a number of learned Jewish women, but they were the exception proving the rule that a woman could not achieve the highest levels of Jewish learning.²

Talmudic tradition shows several attitudes toward elementary education for women. A Talmudic legend says that in the time of Hezekiah, king of Judah, the entire population—men and women, boys and girls—were versed in the laws of impurity and purity, among the most complicated laws in the code.³ But elsewhere women are said to be ‘light-minded’, unable to understand the intricacies of halakhic discussion.⁴ These points of view are best illustrated by a dispute between two sages in the second century. One, Ben Azzai, stated that ‘a father must teach his daughter Torah’, while his opponent, Eliezer ben Horkenos, believed the opposite: ‘He who teaches his daughter Torah teaches her foolishness’.⁵ Maimonides (12th century) in his Code ruled in favour of Eliezer, though his ruling was not free of ambiguity. A woman should not be taught Torah, but if she were, she should be taught only the Written Law (the Books of Moses) because the Oral Law (Talmud) was beyond the understanding of ‘most women’. She could, however, study on her own, though she was free from the obligation incumbent on every male Jew to study Torah to the limit of his time and ability.⁶

Maimonides’ ruling was copied almost verbatim in Joseph Caro’s Shulḥan arukh, the sixteenth-century code of Jewish law that became authoritative for nearly all Jewish communities.⁷ For many generations, the ruling presented a distinct obstacle those who wished to educate girls in traditional texts. One device for overcoming the restriction was a favourite technique of Talmudic dialectic: limiting the applicability of the ruling to specific situations. A frequently cited example is the suggestion by the sixteenth-century Italian scholar Shmuel Archevolti that a father should not on his own initiative instruct his little girl in Torah, but if she herself showed an inclination in that direction, then helping her study was the proper thing.
to do. It seems, in any case, that the Italian community was most liberal on the issue of educating girls; only there did communal schools accept them. With time views changed. The Haskalah, which began in Germany in the eighteenth century, had a strong impact. Even within the rabbinic world, an outstanding Russian authority, Israel Meir Kagan (d. 1933), said that the times had brought changing needs, and that if girls were not taught Torah, they would spend their time reading harmful material. However, some rabbis in turn attempted to limit the applicability of Rabbi Kagan’s dictum, most notably the late rebbe of the Satmar Hasidim, Yoel Teitelbaum. Teitelbaum, known inter alia for his stands against Zionism, adopted a strict interpretation of Maimonides: girls should not even be taught biblical texts. His ruling has been followed by a number of Hasidic groups, though not Lubavitch: the late Lubavitch rebbe, Menahem Mendel Schneerson, came out strongly in favour of teaching women the Written and Oral Law. One thing that, to the best of our knowledge, is conceded by all groups now is the need to educate girls as well as boys in schools.

The halakhic heritage of Polish and Russian Jews leaves room for differing approaches toward women’s education, though those who read only the basic codes of Maimonides and Caro would naturally conclude that girls would best be left at home to be instructed minimally by their mothers and to learn by example. In Eastern Europe, this meant that at an early age they would be married off by their parents to a person they did not know and begin the difficult life of rearing many children and—in the stereotypical situation where the husband was an impecunious Torah scholar—also earning a livelihood for the growing family.

The outstanding Hebrew poet of his generation, Yehuda Leib Gordon, lamented the fate of the Jewish female in a famous poem published in 1875. One of many memoir writers, Shlomo Salzman wrote that most of the women in his town of Selets (near Pruzhan, Grodno province) were illiterate and dependent on the zogerin (woman reader-guide) in the synagogue. Some well-off fathers hired teachers for their daughters, and these instructors taught only the mechanical reading of Hebrew (ivre) for prayers, and Yiddish writing for corresponding with a bridegroom, done with the help of model letters found in the guidebook (brivnshteler). He thought this was quite typical of the Lithuanian shtetl of his childhood in the 1870s.

Even the pessimistic Salzman admitted, however, that in his last years in the shtetl, the years before 1885, things had changed for the better. He saw in this the influence of shadkhonim (marriage brokers) who encouraged parents to give their daughters an education to increase the chances of making a good match. Private teachers became more numerous. A number of girls could now pray without the help of the zogerin, could read religious texts in Yiddish, and could correspond without using a brivnshteler.

At the other extreme of what Salzman describes as a complete lack of systematic instruction were the girls’ schools, which had actually been in existence for a long time in cities. A private school for girls opened in Warsaw in 1819, followed by a state-run school in 1824, though these are described as secular, as they offered no or next to no religious instruction. In Odessa the first school for girls was established in 1835, after an unsuccessful attempt by the Orthodox to prevent its
In this community famed for liberalism, the number of Jewish girls’ schools grew to six by 1902. To what extent there was religious instruction is a question dealt with later in this article.

Between no outside instruction at all and modern schooling, there were various methods for teaching girls the rudiments of their faith. A popular pattern made use of a *shrayber*, who went from house to house to teach writing (hence his name), mechanical reading of Hebrew, and basic prayers. In some cases the children came to him. Since the heder did not normally teach writing, boys, too, were sometimes taught by a *shrayber*. It seems that this instructor was held in even lower esteem than the *melamed* (heder teacher), since the knowledge he needed to ply his trade was minimal. Some private elementary instruction (*urokn* in contemporary Yiddish) was also taught by women who had a little bit of learning, presumably in their homes. From the memoirs of one woman, it appears that some instruction was done by *belfers* (assistants to heder teachers) who needed additional income.

Many girls also received some sort of heder instruction. Heders were classes taught by men (*melamdim*) in their homes. Beginning with *ivre* (basic reading), they would teach the Torah (Five Books of Moses) and they, or their more learned colleagues, would lead the pupils into the Talmud. Boys with talent, if their families could afford the fees, would go on to advanced Talmud study with more learned *melamdim*, and a number would end up in yeshivas.

With the mentality then dominant in Eastern Europe, girls were generally not encouraged to participate in such programmes. It is thus surprising to find that it was not uncommon to find girls in heders. How widespread the phenomenon was is hard to say, even though some statistics exist. Much anecdotal evidence comes from memoirs, especially memoirs of Jewish women, and from the memorial volumes of destroyed communities. I have gathered a certain amount of material in a study of girls’ heders and of girls in mixed heders, but by no means have I found it all.

The heder proved to be a convenient means for some parents to impart a modicum of religious knowledge to their daughters. In one report we hear of fathers who would send a son to a heder along with a little sister, for whom he would add a small sum to the *melamed*’s fee; the *melamed* would be loath to protest because of stiff competition. While coeducation was prohibited in Russia, it seems the authorities did not care to enforce this rule when young children were involved. It was impossible to enforce the many unlicensed heders. As a general rule, girls in boys’ heders did not progress beyond the elementary stage of reading and reciting a few prayers. There were occasional exceptions for bright girls, who were treated like boys. In Austrian-ruled Galicia, where education was compulsory, mixed heders were common.

The girls’ heders present a complicated story. A growing interest in girls’ education led to attempts by both men and women to open such schools, but it seems that petitions for them were only rarely granted. Technically, the authorities insisted that in the 1893 law regulating heders, *melamdim* meant men and pupils boys. In one instance a petitioner was even referred to halakhah, which supposedly proscribes religious education for girls. It is hard to say why the government cared so much about this ostensibly minor point. Our guess is that a combination of bureaucratic
obtuseness and a reactionary educational policy caused them to encourage the old-fashioned heder.

In quality, the girls’ heder ranged from Yehudiah in Warsaw, the pride and joy of Zionist-sponsored education of women, to heder of very low quality such as those reported in Mglina, a shtetl in Chernigov province. In Poland such heder were legal, as they seem to have been in Russia after 1905. But their questionable legality in Russia for most of the period under discussion in all probability led to an underreporting of girls’ heder education in statistical reports.

No statistical summary exists for girls’ heder, to be distinguished from the boys’ heder that girls attended at the lower level, probably a more common practice. It seems that girls’ heder, and the girls’ schools with which we shall deal later, were partly a function of the spirit of progress in a town, if not an entire area. It may be assumed that Poland was more modern than conservative Lithuania, and that Novorossia (New Russia), which did not have Jewish communities before 1800, was much more so. At this stage detailed socio-geographic studies are lacking. But a few examples will illustrate the trend.

Two men from Lithuanian towns report that their sisters were sent to a boys’ heder, an unusual practice. Another Lithuanian reported that no girls attended heder in the pre-1914 period. In White Russia the relatively modern-minded city of Bobruiisk had more girls’ heder and many more ‘reformed heder’ (hadarim metukanim) than the much larger community of Minsk.

Besides the many reports of female heder education by participants and observers, there do exist a few statistical studies. The last of these, OPE’s 1912 survey Sovremenii heder (The Contemporary Heder) is cited below, in note 18. It was preceded in 1894 by a general survey of elementary school education in the Russian Empire, a report that included heder. The percentage of girls in heder of all types was about 5.2 per cent, with 10,459 students out of a total of 201,964. The survey was conducted by the Vol’no-ekonomicheskoe obschestvo (Free Economic Society). Heder statistics depended on the reports of official rabbis, who had reason not to report what was in Russia against the law; the actual number was probably somewhat higher. But even the stated number, about 10,000 female heder students, is not insignificant and should lay to rest the perception that girls did not study in heder. The Israeli scholar Shaul Stampfer argues that since girls spent on average many fewer years than the boys in heder, the female percentage is higher than a one-time survey would indicate.

There is some evidence that the percentage of girls with heder education rose over the years. The OPE survey published in 1912 is based on a sample of cities and towns in Poland, Belarus (here called Lithuania), and South Russia. In spite of the differences in the Jewish populations in the areas surveyed, the percentage of girls in heder is surprisingly similar, ranging from 6.5 to 8 per cent, with an average of 7 per cent.

Boys from poor homes, whose parents could not afford to pay for a melamed, could attend a communal school called Talmud Torah. Instruction there was usually on the same low level as in the heder, although with time and more modern-minded elements coming to the fore, this changed for the better.
Since girls were not considered obligated to study the Torah, their education was not considered a communal responsibility. I have not found any evidence that girls studied in the Talmud Torah. However, Semion Kraiz, in his doctoral dissertation on Russian-language Jewish schools in tsarist Russia, did find that in Orsha, a town in Mogilev province, girls were at the Talmud Torah in 1904, in a separate set-up (*smena* in Russian). One woman mentions having attended a private co-educational school for the poor in Kiev in the 1890s. It was maintained as a private charity and the teachers were excellent. Among the relatively well-off were the occasional parents who hired a teacher for private instruction in Torah studies, including the father of Puah Rakowski, a woman who seems to have passed through all the levels of Jewish education available. As one of the few women in Poland who knew Hebrew and Hebrew literature well, she used her skills to direct the first Hebrew school in Łomża and, shortly afterward (1891), the Zionist girl’s heder (later a school) in Warsaw. According to her memoirs, Rakowski was the only woman in Russian Poland who had a license to teach and the requisite knowledge of Hebrew.

In some instances women were taught by their fathers, who were rabbis that lacked qualms about passing Talmudic knowledge to their daughters. One was the Hebrew writer Dvora Baron (b. 1887), whose father Shabtai was rabbi in Uzda, Minsk province. One of her contemporaries, Ester Rubinstein (1883–1924), was so famous for her Talmudic knowledge it has been suggested that her name be added to the standard lists of learned Jewish women. Rubinstein was the daughter of the rabbi of Shaki (Lithuania), and in addition to Talmudic scholarship was also well versed in modern Hebrew literature. After her marriage to a rabbi she became active in Jewish education and communal work in Vilna, and also fought for women’s rights in the Mizrahi (Religious Zionist) movement. The Vilna community honoured her with a memorial volume.

A final topic to consider is the role of girls’ schools in terms of religious education. There was, as we would expect, constant growth in the number of Jewish girls attending Russian and Polish schools; for many parents these curricula presented less of a problem than religious education. In Galicia, where primary education was compulsory, it was said that girls were sent to schools as a ploy to keep boys in the heders and yeshivas. In Russia and Russian Poland, by contrast, parents seemed more concerned about their daughters and the girls were concerned about themselves. At schools in the latter areas, religious instruction was minimal, and conversely there was considerable incentive to adopt the surrounding culture in addition to the language. Toward the end of the nineteenth century Jewish publicists worried about girls ‘imitating Gentile ways like monkeys’. They feared that these girls would be alienated from their own people. Indeed, reports reached Russia of numerous conversions among Jewish girls in Galicia. One well-known writer-publicist, Yehuda Leib Katzenelson (known as Buki ben Yogli), even asked qualified women to organize high-level girls’ heders in order to stem the trend. He made light of the fact that such institutions were prohibited in Russia.

Women with teaching licenses were far more likely to start private schools for Jewish girls. These private schools did not have the pedagogic disadvantages of the old-fashioned heder, nor were they perceived as a quick road to assimilation. In fact
the differences between a ‘reformed heder’ and a Jewish school with a strong ethnic emphasis were not major; one difference was that the ‘reformed heder’ would still teach in Yiddish and in a few instances in Hebrew, while Russian was the language of instruction in the schools. Also, a school had to emphasize a general curriculum in order to prepare its pupils for the gymnasium. The ‘reformed heder’, with its dedication to Jewish subjects, failed in the long run in a society increasingly concerned with takhles, or ‘what was best’ for the future of the child. In one illustrative example, a girl from Białystok enjoyed attending mixed ‘reformed heder’, but had to leave at the age of nine to prepare for her entrance examination to the gymnasium.

In any case the growth of Jewish private schools in Russia in the last decades of the nineteenth century was considerable, for girls as well as boys. Their numbers grew from 63 in 1883 to 372 in 1899, with more than half of the pupils female (9,886 out of 17,604). As we know also from women’s autobiographies, it was not unusual for a young woman to appear in town and announce that she was opening a school for Jewish girls; suddenly girls whose parents could afford the fee and could spare them from the household had the opportunity to get an education.

The Jewish content of these schools varied considerably but in general increased over time as the Zionist movement became a dominant factor in replacing the assimilatory mentality of the pre-1881 period. In the girls’ schools of the 1860s and 1870s (the equivalent of the elementary heder), ivre and a few prayers were taught in the scant hours a week allotted to religion. But an OPE report of 1910 for a number of cities showed that a number of girls’ schools had added Torah, other biblical books, and Hebrew grammar to their curricula. In one case the weekly hours of instruction for Jewish subjects reached twelve, which is what Jewish nationalists demanded; the usual number of hours was six or seven. Some schools still taught the minimal level of two or three hours.

It seems that at least in some places it was illegal to add to the state-approved curriculum. Rose Pesotta, who later assumed a position of leadership in the American labour movement, reported that at a private girls’ school in her birthplace, Derashnia (Podolia province), Hebrew and Jewish history were taught scrumptiously, and the girls had Russian textbooks ready to open if an inspector showed up.

As a reaction against secular schools at the end of the period under discussion, a religious school for girls in Galicia was founded by Sarah Schenirer, a seamstress who had managed with considerable effort to get an education, and who enlisted the support of such luminaries as Rabbi Kagan and the powerful rebbe of the Belz Hasidim. In 1917 she founded the first Bais Yaakov (House of Jacob) school for girls in Kraków. Her school system spread rapidly in Poland and became the official girls’ schools and seminaries of Agudat Israel. In Russia, however, the Bolshevik Revolution precluded similar programmes.

In sum, the opportunities for education of East European Jewish girls in their tradition were not propelled by the social compulsion and the hierarchy of learning that existed for boys, but progressed over time from minimal home instruction through the heder to the school, although many were inevitably left behind.
Notes
2. There are various such lists. A recent one in English is in Sylvia B. Fishman, *A Breath of Life: Feminism in the American Jewish Community* (Hanover, N.H. and London, 1993), 185–86. A critical look at some of these traditions is taken by Dan Rabinowitz, ‘Rayna Batya and other Learned Women’, *Tradition* 35, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 55–69.
3. Sanhedrin 94b.
4. Shabat 33b and Kidushin 80b.
5. Sotah 20a–21b. It should be noted that the outstanding commentator on the Talmud, Rashi (11th century), translates *tiflut* not as foolishness but as ‘unchastity’--meaning that women through their cunning would misuse this knowledge for sexual license. We feel that Maimonides’ explanation is closer to the normal sense of the word, but we also point out that this is not another instance of Maimonides’ well-known disrespect for women’s intelligence. An American rabbi known for his feminist views has told me that in terms of the Talmudic discussion Maimonides could not rule otherwise.
7. *Shulhan arukh*, *Yoreh deah*, 246:6. Isserles in his note on the passage comments that women should study the laws that apply to them. His notes are considered authoritative for Ashkenazi Jews.
8. Shmuel Archevolti, *Mayan ganim*, as cited in Fishman, 187. According to Shoshana P. Zolty, ‘And All Your Children Shall Be Learned’: *Women and the Study of Torah in Jewish Law and History* (Northvale, N.J. and London, 1993), 167, there was a Talmud Torah (communal school) for girls in Rome in 1745, the earliest indication of a Jewish school for girls she has found.
10. Ibid., 44. On the influence of Teitelbaum’s ruling in Brooklyn to this day see Gershon Kranzler, *Hasidic Williamsburg: A Contemporary Hasidic Community* (Northvale, N.J. and London, 1995), 177.
11. Fishman, 193.
15. Sabina Levin, *Perakim betoldot hahinukh hayehudi bePolin bameah hatesha esreh uvereshit hameah haesrim* (Tel Aviv, 1997), 37–40. In her opinion Jewish studies, ‘as is known, were not meant for women’. Yet it seems doubtful that there was no religious instruction at all, since in Russia--and presumably in Poland as well--it was required by law.
17. Ibid., 381–82. These were in addition to girls’ trade schools, girls studying in general gymnasia, and other examples.

18. The educator Puah Rakowski (b. 1865 in Białystok) learned from such a shrayber. See Puah Rakowski, Zikhroyynes fun a Yidisher revolutsionerin (Buenos Aires, 1952), 16. On the shraybers see, at length, H. Sh. Kazdan, Fun kheder un shkoles biz ‘Tsisho’ (Mexico City, 1956) 76–108. In 1912 the Society for the Promotion of Enlightenment among the Jews of Russia, known in Russian as OPE, noted in its study of the heder that the ‘shrayber business’ (shraiberstvo) had gone out of fashion—Sovremennyi kheder (St. Petersburg, 1912), 10.

19. Kazdan, Fun kheder, 89, 94 and elsewhere. Rakowski (see previous note) was taught together with boys both by the shrayber and in the heder.


24. Sovremennyi kheder, 73.

25. Haya Weizman-Lichtenstein, Betzel poratenu (Tel Aviv, 1948), 56. The author is a sister of Israel’s first president. A list of relevant women’s memoirs can be found in Paula E. Hyman, Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: The Roles and Representations of Women (Seattle and London, 1995), 64–65. Hyman’s book also appeared in Hebrew.

26. David Cohen, in his book on his birthplace of Shpole, notes that no girl in the town attained sufficient knowledge to read the Bible commentator Rashi, who wrote in simple Hebrew; see Shpole, masekhet hayim yehudiyyim baayarah (Haifa, 1965), 93.

27. Weizman-Lichtenstein, 19. She was sent to heder against local custom because there was no money to pay a teacher to come to the house.

28. B. Pappenheim and S. Rabinowitsch, Zur Lage der jüdischen Bevölkerung in Galizien (Frankfurt, 1904), 36.

29. See the OPE publication Spravochnaia kniga po voprosam obrazovanii evreev (St. Petersburg, 1901), 97.
30. On Warsaw’s Yehudiah see Rakowski, *Zikhroynes*, 70–71. Mgline, a typical shtetl, had four girls’ hederı̂s in 1914, taught by women who knew very little themselves; see *Vestnik OPE* 27 (January 1914), 25–30.

31. Jewish Colonization Association (ICA), *Sbornik materialov ob ekonomicheskom položenii evreev v Rossii* (St. Petersburg, 1904), 2:303. The ICA study appeared also in French.

32. The towns are Serei and Shvincian. For Serei, see M. Shulzinger, *The Tale of a Litvak* (New York, 1985), 22; for Shvincian, see Mordecai M. Kaplan, *Sefer zikaron leesrim usheloshah kehilot beezer Shivintsian*, ed. Shimon Kantz (Tel Aviv, 1965), 70. For Kaplan, the later founder of the Reconstructionist movement, the mere fact that his sister attended heder is a sign of the progressive spirit in the town.

33. Troyb, 92–93.

34. *Sovremennyi kheder*, 60. The ‘reformed hederı̂s’ taught Hebrew as a language, and had improved pedagogy and a more modern curriculum. They almost always had a Zionist orientation.


36. Ibid.

37. Extrapolated from the statistics in *Sovremennyi kheder*.

38. Semion Kraiz, ‘Bate sefer yehudiyim basafah harusit beRusiyah hatsarit’ (Ph.D. dissertation, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1994), 153. We should point out that even separate instruction of girls in a boys’ hederı̂ was illegal.


40. Rakowski, 60.


43. Rabi Binyamin, *MiZborov ad Kineret* (Haifa, 1975), 275; Pappenheim and Rabinowitsch, 12, 14.


45. Report from Kraków in *Hamagid*, 1897:48, as cited by Iris Parush, *Nashim kor’ot*: *yitronah shel shuliu bahevrah hayehudit beMizrah Eropah bameah hatesha esreh* (Tel Aviv, 2001), 200. Parush emphasizes the ‘advantage of marginality’, i.e., that women, unlike men, could read what they wanted. A flaw in her important study is her militantly feminist stance, offered in her theory that the rabbinic establishment conspired to keep women and ordinary people in ignorance.

47. This would be true of hederı̂s employing the so-called natural method of teaching *ivrit beivrit* (Hebrew in Hebrew).


49. Kraiz, 286.

50. Ibid., 291, 295.