

Women's Study of Torah

Rambam, Mishnah Torah, Hilchos Talmud Torah, Perek I

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Halacha XIII

“A woman who studies Torah receives a reward, but not one as great as that of a man, because she is not commanded (in the mitzvah of Torah study)...and even though she receives reward (for studying) the Rabbis instructed a man not teach his daughter Torah...the Rabbis taught anyone who teaches his daughter Torah it is as if he is teaching her *tiflus*. The above is true regarding the Oral Law, but regarding the Written Law, he should not teach his daughter, but if he did it is not considered that he taught her *tiflus*.”

A number of questions come to mind regarding this passage from the Rambam:

*We certainly encourage the study of Torah by women in our society. How is this practice to be reconciled with the above quotation from the Rambam?

*Why would it be anything but wonderful for a woman to study Torah? Do we not believe the Torah is our core as a People?

*What is even meant by the term *tiflus*?

*Why the distinction between the Oral and Written Laws?

The Rambam's statement is based on a mishna in the third chapter of Meseches Sotah (20a). The mishna discusses a certain law relating to the woman who drinks the Sotah waters. Ben Azai teaches that the value of the individual being aware of such a law informs us that a father is obligated to teach his daughter Torah. Rebbe Eliezer disagrees, and teaches that a father who teaches his daughter Torah is comparable to one who teaches her *tiflus*. What is the meaning of the term *tiflus*? Rashi (Sotah, 21b,¹ d"h Ke'ilu) seems to understand it as meaning dishonesty. Once his daughter knows the laws and their details, perhaps she will utilize that knowledge as a means of ensuring that she can sin and not risk any consequences, being that she understands the nature of the system. The Rambam (in pairush hamishnayos) defines *tiflus* as *divrei hava'iy*, fanciful things. This understanding is born out by his words in Mishnah Torah, in which he explains that most women will not appreciate the intricacies and detail of Torah study and therefore will dilute its words to fanciful words lacking meaning.

It is difficult to relate to the comment of Rebbe Eliezer, regardless of the exact meaning of his words. A number of authorities point out that the context of Rebbe Eliezer's quote regards a father teaching his daughter. This specific scenario might imply that the father is deciding the course of study his daughter will follow, regardless of personal strengths or bent. Such an approach is being judged as mistaken. However, it could very well be wise and encouraged to teach Torah to a woman who proves herself to be inclined towards such a pursuit¹. It is worthwhile to note that when the Rambam discusses their disinclination towards the intricacy of Torah study, he speaks of a *majority* of women, as opposed to all of them. This would seem to support the concept that the problem with such teaching is when it is the standard format for each student. Exceptional students might have a different standard.

¹ See Perishah, s"v 15, for a fascinating distinction between a woman who is self-taught and one who learns from others.

The Shulchan Aruch (Yoreh Deah, 246, 6) cites the Rambam's position in Mishnah Torah. It is worthwhile to note the comment of the Rema, who clarifies that it is a woman's obligation to study the laws relevant to her practices as a Jew. The Bach writes that this obligation is the reason it is incumbent upon women to say birchos haTorah every day, as they clearly have an obligation to study so that they have the knowledge with which to observe halacha appropriately.

The Taz (s"v 4) addresses the distinction the authorities make between the Oral and Written Laws. He cites the mitzvah of Hakhel, when the men, women, and children of the Jewish people would gather to hear the King read from the Torah. Clearly it was appropriate for the women to hear the words of the Written Torah, as read by the King². We have no such source to encourage the women in studying the Oral Law. When one thinks of the difference in nature between the Oral and Written Laws, whether it be the practical nature of the laws or the intricate detail of the analysis, one can appreciate why there would be a distinction made between the two bodies of knowledge, according to either the view of Rashi or the Rambam.

Though we have addressed some of the technical issues relating to this topic, it remains difficult to understand the perspective of the gemora towards women studying Torah, and perplexing as to how we reconcile our current practice with the words of the early authorities. The Chafetz Chaim (d. 1933) has a fascinating note on this issue (Ikkutei Halachos, Sotah, 21b), loosely translated as follows:

“It appears that all of this (the discussion in Meseches Sotah) was specifically in earlier times when everyone lived in the same place as their parents and the tradition from previous generations was very strong, as it says in the verse “Ask your father and he will instruct you.” In such a context we were able to say that a woman should not study Torah and rely on the practices of her pious forebearers, but now, with our many sins, where tradition is very weak and people frequently don't live in the same place as their parents, and particularly there are individuals who study the languages of other nations it is certainly a great mitzvah to teach them Chumash, and also Navi and Kesuvim, in addition to inspirational Rabbinic works such as Pirkei Avos and Menoras Hamaor and the like so that they will see the truth of our Holy Faith. Without this it is likely they will completely leave the path of Hashem and violate all the foundations of our Faith, Heaven forbid.”

The Chafetz Chaim was one of the rabbinic leaders of the time who strongly encouraged Sarah Schenirer to begin the Bais Yaakov educational movement of organized religious instruction for young women. One can certainly understand his perspective on the needs of the time from reading the above quote. Over the decades since, as the Jewish family has become far less insular than in earlier times and women's general education has progressed greatly, it has been viewed as essential for women to be taught so much of our Holy Torah, not only laws relevant to them, but also, just as if not more important, appropriate inspiration and education regarding our Heritage and Worldview. Though not mentioned in the quote above, it has been generally accepted as essential that women be provided ample opportunity for intellectual stimulation in addition to emotional inspiration from our vast Torah.

We have seen from much earlier sources the importance of women studying Halacha. The Chafetz Chaim, along with other rabbinic leaders of his time, wrote of the importance of studying the Written Law and other inspirational works, including Pirkei Avos. Even to this day there is variation within the Orthodox community regarding women studying the Oral Law. On the one hand, there is a significant

2 See the Taz further for a discussion of why Hakhel wouldn't be used as a source to actively encourage women to study the Written Torah.

distinction in the original sources between teaching women the Oral and Written Laws. On the other hand, this is yet another area by which women can find meaningful stimulation.

It should be noted that the language in Meseches Sotah was not one of a prohibition to teach women Torah, rather that it was not a worthwhile pursuit. Surely the Chafetz Chaim and others were not arguing with the gemora's reasoning, rather pointing out the fundamental change in our community and its needs. We are so fortunate today to have numerous study opportunities for women so that they can connect to and be inspired by our Holy Torah.

It is certainly worthwhile to note that Morenu Harav Gedaliah Anemer, zt"l, in whose memory this learning project is being undertaken, expended great effort decades ago to found the Yeshiva of Greater Washington. The Girls Division was founded first, as the need for such an option for the young women of our community was apparent to him. So many young women who were raised in our community, some of whom remain here as adults, have fond memories of studying various sections of Torah from him. Until his last days, Rav Anemer would teach the Yeshiva's 12th grade girls Halacha class. So many alumni think of him often as they remind themselves what may and may not be done on Shabbos.