

The Hanukah candles were still burning at the Stockers' and, his stomach comfortably full of Sharon's excellent latkes, Nathan leaned across the small table to address Benny. "Are you ready to discuss the legality of teaching a woman Talmud?"

Benny, grinning, looked eager for their dispute. "Since Sharon has expressed interest in the subject, I suggest we quote our sources rather than just name them."

Nathan smiled back. Benny had a photographic memory, which gave him an encyclopedic knowledge of not only the Talmud but also all the codes that came later. While this would normally give Benny an insurmountable advantage, he probably hadn't studied the laws of women studying Torah in years. Now, with so many women attending college and entering professions, there were new rulings, ones Benny might not be familiar with. And it was the most recent rulings that mattered most.

"I think we can concur that the disagreement starts in how the Talmud interprets Deuteronomy 11:19, 'And you shall teach them diligently to your sons—*beneichem*'—which Rashi informs us means *not* teaching your daughters," Nathan began.

Benny nodded and proceeded to sum up the pertinent texts from the Talmud. "In Kiddushin we learn that in regard to girls, since the father has no obligation to teach her Torah, she is not obligated to learn Torah either. And in Sotah, while Ben Azzai says a father should teach his daughter Torah, Rav Eliezer protests that it would be teaching her *tiflut*." He turned to Sharon. "Which can be translated as 'lechery' or 'frivolity,' but in either case, it is a bad thing."

"Rashi and Maimonides agree that women are not commanded to study Torah but are free to do so if they wish," Nathan countered. "The BaCH commenting on the RoSh declares that while there is no obligation to teach women Torah, there is no prohibition either. Furthermore, RaShaSh holds that since the Talmud informs us that, because there is no requirement to teach women, it can be inferred that a woman is obligated to study and teach herself."

Sharon nodded in agreement, but Benny shook his head. "The Birkei Yosef explains that Jewish Law codes are unanimous that in this controversy

between Ben Azzai and Rabbi Eliezer, accept the opinion of Rabbi Eliezer as binding.” He then began quoting from the *Shulchan Aruch* as if the page were in front of him. “Yoreh Deah 246:6 says that a woman who studies Torah receives a reward, but not like that of a man, because she fulfills the mitzvah while not obligated. And though she does earn a reward, our rabbis have commanded that one should not teach his daughter Torah, because the majority of women are not intellectually prepared to be taught, due to their minds’ limitations.”

Sharon scowled, but Benny kept reciting. “The rabbis said: One who teaches his daughter Torah is as if he taught her tiflut. With what is this stated? With regards to the Oral Torah. However, in regard to the Written Torah one should preferably not teach her, but if he did so it is not tiflut.”

Nathan was well aware that the *Shulchan Aruch*, though written in the sixteenth century, was still the legal authority for Orthodox Jews. But some later scholars found ways to get around its medieval edicts. “*Igrot Ha-Reiyah* says the prohibition only applies to teaching, but she may learn by herself by listening to others. *Tuv Ayyin* tells us that Bruriah was taught because it was recognized that her heart was firmly set on study and because of her remarkable intelligence,” he shot back. “*Torah Temimah* restricts the proscription to teaching a young daughter, whereas an older daughter who takes the initiative in Torah study may be taught by others.”

“I will grant you that in certain cases it is permitted to teach women Torah,” Benny acquiesced. “But Samson Raphael Hirsch says that women should not pursue advanced Torah learning and scientific study of halacha since such scholarship is the function of men.” He frowned and locked eyes with Nathan. “Which is probably what you are teaching your student.”

Nathan couldn’t deny Benny’s accusation, but he had two other twentieth-century scholars who disagreed with Hirsch. “Chafetz Chayim tells us that nowadays, when we find that young women regularly study secular subjects, it is certainly a mitzvah to teach them Bible and rabbinic ethics as in the Tractate Avot and so on. Otherwise they may stray from God’s path and transgress.”

“I am familiar with that argument,” Benny said, clearly not convinced.

Nathan played his final card, an opinion so recent Benny hopefully didn't know it. "Malka in *Responsa Mikveh ha-Mayim* points out that modern women play a significant role in society: managing offices and businesses, filling the universities, conducting scientific research, participating in government and political affairs." He smiled at Benny and concluded. "He says that surely Rabbi Eliezer would now waive his ban on teaching women even the Oral Law so they might carefully observe all Torah laws affecting their activities and employment."

While Benny paused to consider this, Nathan congratulated himself for finding a text that stopped his friend in his tracks.