

Authenticity, Autonomy, and Authority: Feminist Jewish Learning among Post-Soviet Women

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This article explores how a group of women in the Former Soviet Union grapple with questions of Jewish identity and Jewish “authenticity” as they participate in adult Jewish learning program that employs methods of feminist pedagogy and transformative learning. The study reflects on areas of dissonance between the transformational learning process and the tenacity of the women’s world assumptions that are shaped by background, history, and worldview. While the learning process seems to be prompting these women to seriously and critically reflect on and reframe their self-understanding as learners and as Jews, their limited content-knowledge combined with a tentative sense of personal authority about Jewish life seems to impede their ability to harmonize their learning with a clear sense of what constitutes authentic practice of Judaism.

INTRODUCTION

A group of 40 women ranging in age from 22 to 60 sit in a large circle at a retreat center about 50 kilometers outside of Moscow on a cold Friday night in November. They have gathered from across Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus for four days of Jewish learning and celebration. This evening, after self-conducted services and a festive Shabbat meal, they are exploring the question “What being Jewish means to me?” When the group leader first introduces the discussion topic, there is hesitation and nervous laughter.

Someone begins: “To be a Jew means to say you are unafraid.” Another says: “From early childhood, I knew who I was. I was teased and there were people who cursed me.” Yet, another woman remarks: “To be a Jew is

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to have Jewish blood.” Then someone says: “I was born in 1965. I never felt oppressed as a Jew.” Her comment evokes a lot of commotion in the room. A woman shouts out: “You’re lucky. We envy you!”

For several minutes, the women talk either about how anti-Semitism defines them as Jews or about how proud they are when their children are not afraid to say they are Jewish. Many continue along this line until one of the group leaders shifts the focus and says:

It’s a question inner harmony. I feel more comfortable being a Jew when I am in harmony with myself. Here in this circle, I feel safe and comfortable. At home, when I observe some Jewish tradition, that gives me comfort too. When I study Torah, I also feel myself a Jew. When my way of life coincides with my inner feeling of being a Jew, I feel like a fish in water. (Natasha, November 2005)

From here, the conversation shifts and the women begin to talk about how Jewish study has started to change the way they think about themselves. Someone says: “I used to feel the Jewish part of me was like a piece of mercury, floating in space. Now though, Beit Binah has helped me integrate myself. I no longer feel separate. I’m part of something bigger.” Another adds: “Like Natasha said, I was born a Jew. But my Judaism used to be all about ‘no.’ Now my Judaism is ‘yes!’ I’m deeply confident that to be a Jew is to feel harmony with yourself. To live your life, to help people, to work well, to trust your path, and to praise God for being who you are.”

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

The women exploring these complex questions about Jewish identity and identification are part of a Jewish educational program called Beit Binah (House of Wisdom), that employs methods of feminist pedagogy and transformative learning to engage in the study of Jewish texts. Beit Binah is one of several programs of Project Keshet, a grassroots women’s organization dedicated to revitalizing Jewish life and creating democratic communities throughout the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Like many of their adult Jewish learning counterparts in the West, many of the women in Beit Binah appear to be grappling with the question of what does it mean to be an “authentic” Jew? It is a complicated enough challenge to understand what people mean when they invoke the word “authentic” in a Western, free-market society where freedom of expression is a core value and understood as a basic human right. But, how does the quest for authenticity play out in a society where values of freedom and personal autonomy have long been suppressed? As we see in the comments above, for many of these post-Soviet women, the starting point is one of dissonance, forged out of

a fragmented if not ruptured history, and shaped by limited Jewish resources and role models to help them deliberate and make autonomous choices for their lives today.

This article explores these women's struggle with developing a sense of personal autonomy and authority in deciding what means to be an "authentic" Jew, and then acting on those meanings in terms of their choices of Jewish beliefs, practices, and connections. This struggle centers around a fundamental dichotomy between a feminist and transformative learning process that is designed to promote and encourage personal autonomy, and their historical/cultural context that prompts them to accept an imposed authority and seek validation from outside the self.

My interest in about how post-Soviet women grapple with questions of autonomy, authority, and authenticity around their Jewish identity and practice coalesced when I became an "accidental" teacher to a group of Beit Binah learners in Minsk, Belarus in May 2005. This was the third trip, my colleague Diane Tickton Schuster and I had taken to investigate the Beit Binah learning process. During our first trip in June 2004, we conducted in-depth interviews with eight Beit Binah Torah study group leaders, asking them to describe their Jewish background and the role Beit Binah has played in the shaping of their Jewish identity. We returned to Russia in March 2005 when training seminars were offered to two cohorts of Beit Binah leaders. We re-interviewed five of the eight women we had interviewed in June, 2004 and conducted first time interviews with another six women, for a total of eleven. We also interviewed two key faculty members from the Moscow-based Institute of Jewish Studies who have been involved with Beit Binah since its inception. Separate from our research, at the invitation of the Project Keshet leadership, we conducted workshops about adult learning theory and program evaluation. Throughout the four-day seminar, when we were not teaching, we observed classes and informal gatherings and took extensive fieldnotes.

During the interviews we were particularly mindful of how our worldview as American Jews shaped our perceptions of the Jewish experience in the CIS. We were cautious about ascribing American definitions of Jewish identity and community to what we observed, especially if we were to rely primarily on behavioral measures that emphasize Jewish observance. However, even in American circles there is considerable debate about what are key components of Jewish identity today (Horowitz, 2000; Mayer, Kosmin, & Keysar, 2002). Instead we found it helpful to pose open-ended questions about what it means to be a Jew and how various forms of Jewish expression give meaning to life among a group of women who previously had virtually no opportunities to engage in Jewish life or learning and now appear to be rapidly and passionately embracing Jewish study and communal activism. This careful detachment was challenged, however, when we embarked on site visits to the women in their home communities in May 2005.

At that time, we visited Tula, a mid-size Russian city 200 km south of Moscow, and Minsk, the capital of Belarus. The two communities differ in size and in terms of Jewish communal infrastructure. Tula has a population of 650,000 with an estimated Jewish population of about 1,300 (Tolts, 2004). Minsk has a much richer Jewish heritage and a larger population than Tula. The city's total population is 1.8 million with approximately 20,000 Jews (ncsj.org, n.d.). It was one of the major centers of Russian Jewry in the 19th century and had a lively mix of the many cultural institutions. The community was almost wiped out during World War II, though its main synagogue was allowed to function until 1959. After the break-up of the Soviet Union, Chabad, Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), and other organizations began to work in the city. Today, Minsk has resumed its role at the center of Jewish life in Belarus. There is a complex Jewish communal structure that includes three Jewish day schools, a variety of Sunday schools and youth programs, Jewish studies at the State University, Hillel-sponsored activities for college students, and a JDC-supported Jewish "campus" that houses a multifaceted community center.¹

Religious services are provided by several organizations, including Chabad, Aish HaTorah, The World Union for Progressive Judaism, and the Union of Religious Jewish Congregations.

We spent two full days in each community and observed four different Torah study groups facilitated by Beit Binah leaders. In each community, we conducted follow-up interviews with the facilitators and also met with local Jewish leaders to learn about their interactions with Project Keshet personnel and programs. In Minsk, we were accompanied by Olga Krasko, director of Beit Binah, with whom we conducted a formal interview and engaged in constant conversation.

It was at the second study group in Minsk where the boundary between research and practice was blurred when the women turned to me with questions. As that evening unfolded, I began to see areas of dissonance between the process of transformational learning and the tenacity of the women's assumptions that had been shaped by their backgrounds, their history, and their worldview. On the one hand, the women seemed to be embracing the feminist methods that celebrate multiple perspectives and personal autonomy and on the other hand, many seemed to be locked into a cultural framework that is based on clear answers and an imposed authority, something far from a model of informed choice.

Cranton and Roy (2003) point to an integral relationship between transformative learning and the quest for authenticity. They write: "When people

¹This stunning community facility offers a wide array of social and educational services including classes in Hebrew, Jewish cooking, dancing, aerobics, arts and crafts, chess, poetry writing and readings; Internet access; physical therapy, a fitness center, support groups and psychologists; a 38-member choir and theater troupes, and a small Jewish historical museum.

transform a habit of mind, surely they are engaged in becoming more authentic” (p. 95). As we shall see, the study reveals that the learning process seems to be prompting these women to seriously and critically reflect on and reframe their self-understanding as learners and as Jews. Yet, at the same time, their limited content-knowledge combined with a tentative sense of personal authority when it comes to Jewish life seems to impede their ability to determine what constitutes authentic practice for them. At times, it appears that the transformative learning process cannot quite overcome their history and the limited access to teachers they have to support and guide their learning.

Harmonizing the relationship between transformative learning and authenticity is a challenge for any contemporary educator of Jewish adults. A study of the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School, a two-year program of Jewish literacy, demonstrates that teachers of Jewish adults often find themselves negotiating the tension between educating for self-determination and simultaneously encouraging active, ongoing engagement with Jewish texts and tradition (Grant, Schuster, Woocher, & Cohen, 2004). This negotiation requires maintaining a delicate balance between accepting the individual’s authority as an autonomous decision-maker and encouraging the learner to see the possibility for finding richer meaning in life by increasing Jewish learning, deepening Jewish behaviors, and building active connections to Jewish community.

Such a balancing act can be understood as a process of developing an autonomous self in relationship with culture, history, and community (Taylor, 1991). This conception of relational autonomy (Glaser, 2005) is shaped by a Western worldview that understands education as a process that fosters autonomy so that individuals are able to deliberate and reflectively choose their own purposes and actions as a means to achieve them (Perry, 1950). It is an approach embraced by many liberal adult Jewish educators who are committed to pluralistic forms of Jewish expression and to an overarching sense of connection to the Jewish people. As the Melton study showed, achieving such a balance is challenging enough in a culture that accepts personal autonomy as a core value; how much more difficult it must be in a society where totalitarianism reigned for three generations, where individual interests and needs were disdained and suppressed.

This analysis is built around three separate flash points from the evening in Minsk that show how these women are struggling to create a harmonized Jewish self, that in the words of Eugene Borowitz (1991) can be described as “fully human, fully Jewish” (p. 182). The narrative account of what took place in the May, 2005 study session is enriched through interviews with Beit Binah participants conducted in June 2004 and March 2005. These data are further augmented through recordings from sessions and my fieldnotes from the November 2005 Beit Binah seminar, where I served as a member of the faculty.

Each of the three flash points focuses on a different aspect of selfhood. In each instance, we find evidence of dissonance as the women strive for harmony. In the first case, the women seem to be asking an existential question: "Am I a real a Jew?" The second case relates more to concerns of external validation or verification. This is prompted by a participant's question about Kabbalah. Here, the women seem to be questioning the limitations of their process of self-study and are seeking outside expertise to validate and enrich their learning. In the third instance, the women seem to be questioning the authenticity of their actions and beliefs. In essence they seem to be asking themselves: "Am I the right kind of Jew?" This is precipitated when one of the participants questions whether her Sabbath observance is "enough" to warrant considering herself a "good Jew."

THE BEIT BINAH TRAINING PROCESS

Before entering into the classroom so to speak, it is useful to contextualize the scene by offering a brief description of the Beit Binah learning process and how it fits with the literature on feminist pedagogy and transformational learning. Since 2002, almost 90 women have participated in this two-year program of intense Jewish study combined with facilitator training. Faculty includes a wide a range of teachers from the United States, Israel, and Russia representing various streams of Jewish thought and practice. However, the most consistent presence, outside of the Beit Binah leadership itself, is a Russian-born Chabad rabbi who is a warm and charismatic teacher who shares the women's language and history.

The women's Torah study groups generally range from 10 to 25 women of various ages and professions. Some groups include multiple generations of mothers and daughters. Some meet in private homes, others meet at local Jewish community centers. In 2006, close to 1,000 women participated in 69 different Torah study groups with Beit Binah trained facilitators. For many participants, these groups are their first serious encounter with Jewish learning.

The Beit Binah facilitator training process follows a carefully orchestrated, almost fixed plan of action. Traditional text study is at the center of the seminar sessions, but the instructors introduce diverse approaches to interpretation, such as role playing, mime, drawing, art projects, music, movement, and discussion. The approach appears to emanate directly out of classic principles of feminist pedagogy that emphasize empowerment, community-building, social activism, and reflexivity in learning (Shrewsbury, 1987). Feminist pedagogy builds on Paulo Freire's model of emancipatory learning that makes a direct link between individual transformation and social action and change (Tibbitts, 2005).

All of the methods modeled in the Beit Binah seminars are designed to be replicated by the facilitators in their local Torah study groups. These methods include:

1. setting the chairs in a circle to convey a sense of egalitarianism;
2. starting with ice-breaker exercises that create a warm and welcoming atmosphere;
3. promoting a spirit of respect and nonjudgment through continual verbal reinforcement that all opinions are valued;
4. breaking into small groups to ensure that each woman has an opportunity to express herself; and
5. using mixed modalities of instruction to accommodate diverse learning styles.

Beit Binah appears to fit the transformational learning model because its goals include both the acquisition of new knowledge, and learning how to use this new knowledge to become open to new ways of understanding oneself, and reframing how one makes meaning and acts in the world (Mezirow, 2000). In effect, the women are engaged in a process that is shaping not just *what* they know but also *how* they know (Kegan, 2000). In interviews conducted over three separate trips, I repeatedly heard program participants say that the most significant thing they have learned through Beit Binah is that they have the right to ask questions of the text; that there can be many different answers and sometimes there are no answers. For many, this learning experience is their first encounter with critical thinking and they embrace it wholeheartedly.

Beit Binah is also transformational because of its emphasis on dialogical learning. Its carefully crafted educational experiences afford opportunities for internal reflection on ideas and assumptions as well as for dialogue with others (Brookfield, 1986; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). Studies of feminist pedagogy (Belenky et al., 1986; Maher and Tetrault, 2001) show that women are particularly strengthened when they are helped by educators who use dialogue to help learners see how their lives and learning are interrelated. These reflective and relational forms of learning can lead to greater self-awareness and, ultimately to more independent decision-making (Taylor, Marienau, & Fiddler, 2000), which are essential elements of the process of transformation.

It is this relational aspect of transformative learning that supports the growth of authenticity in the sense of being true to oneself. Transformational learning is a form of educating for autonomy in that it follows a process where individuals learn to negotiate and act on their own purposes, meanings, and feelings rather than those that have been unknowingly absorbed from or imposed by others. When people have a strong sense of self-understanding and clarity of belief, they can then decide how to act on

those beliefs. Autonomy hence leads to self-actualization, and self-actualization is a prerequisite for determining whether one is acting authentically. Perhaps, this is what Natasha means when she speaks about the inner harmony she now finds in being Jewish. Indeed, helping these women find that harmony appears to be Beit Binah's intent. The three flash points from this class in Minsk provide a glimpse into how the Beit Binah process actually unfolds. The description and analysis of the evening based on my fieldnotes augmented by reflections both in-the-moment and later, reveal the challenges inherent in turning these ambitious goals for self-realization and Jewish identity development into reality.

ENTERING THE SCENE

The class takes place in a run-down, two-room flat in a typical Byelorussian quarter of Minsk—block after block of dilapidated five-story apartment flats, interspersed ever so often with a high-rise building. The flat looks like it hasn't been improved upon or renovated in over 50 years. It has faded, chipped linoleum floors, dark interiors, the barest of amenities in the kitchen. Yet, out of the basics, the table is laden with an assortment of fish, pancakes, biscuits, wine, tea, and other delicacies. The second room was slightly larger and Leya, our host proudly describes it as "my room." One wall is filled with glassed-in bookshelves jammed with books—the tools of her trade as a high school teacher of Russian literature. Strewn over a table in the corner and the top of the sofa against the other long wall, are her Jewish books—ready at hand for perusal and consultation.

Eleven women circle the table. They have been meeting together twice a month for the past three years, either in Leya's home or in the home of Luda her co-facilitator. As Leya opens the evening she explains the reason for the bountiful table, saying: "As on Pesach we ask why is this night different from all other nights? This night is different for us because we have guests from America visiting with us today." Indeed, our request to observe a typical class will not be the exact agenda that evening. While we came to observe the process of study, we also came to meet these women and learn what brought them to this study group. And so we begin with their lives and then move to Torah, a process well-suited to the goals and methods of Beit Binah.

FLASHPOINT ONE—AM I A REAL JEW?

As the women introduce themselves, it appears that two issues are at the heart of how they understand themselves as Jews: (1) memory, almost always fragmented, shrouded, and often painful; and (2) bloodlines. The class is meeting just a few days after Yom HaShoah, Catastrophe Day as it is

literally translated in Russian. The Jewish community of Minsk was nearly wiped out by the Nazis and virtually every woman around the table describes a searing memory of personal and collective losses during the years of war and Communist repression. Whereas, studies suggest that the Holocaust is not a major factor in shaping Russian Jewish identity (Nosenka, 2001), the opposite seems to hold for these Byelorussian women. Indeed, it appears that their painful history is a central factor driving their current quest for Jewish learning.

Between Soviet suppression and the Holocaust, none of these women have significant Jewish memories from their childhood. For instance, one says: “My father’s parents died before I started remembering things. My mother’s family perished in the ghetto.” Another remarks: “The only thing Jewish I remember from growing up was a few fragments of tunes.” And a third tells us:

During the Soviet time, everything was cloaked in mystery. All I knew was that my grandma brought matzah on Pesach but she never explained why we eat it. Even so, we felt more Jewish than Russian. As a child I also remember my grandma lighting Shabbat candles. I was curious and kept asking questions. But it took me many years to find the answers.

Many of the women also seem intent on providing their Jewish lineage. For example, Svetlana says that she comes from “purely” Jewish stock and hopes to perpetuate that for generations to come. Natasha says that even with a Russian father, she always felt more Jewish than Russian. And Anya remarks that she had a Jewish father and is married to a Russian man. Though her teenaged son is not halachically Jewish, he is strongly connected to the Jewish world. A few days prior to the class, he returned from a *March of the Living* trip to Poland and told his mother that he plans to begin to study for conversion. “I never expected this. I was totally unprepared.” While Anya expressed shock that her son wanted to convert, she also says that she has found comfort and wisdom in Torah study, perhaps reflecting some sense of ambivalence about the place of Judaism in her family’s life.

These introductions seem to focus on the question Jewish authenticity from an existential perspective. Under the Soviet system, Jewish identity was based on the concept of “nationality” which was almost totally devoid of religious connotation or behavior (Chlenov, 2000). For most of the twentieth century, being a Jew was an existential matter, having nothing whatsoever to do with how or whether you act as a Jew. Indeed, Jewish “blood” defined you—more often in a negative way than a positive. This form of definition still seems quite prevalent as shown during the “What being Jewish means to me” seminar in November 2005 when so many of the women described anti-Semitism, physical appearance, and Jewish blood as defining features of their identity.

Today, the issue of who is a Jew is complicated by several factors, including an intermarriage rate of almost 80% and minimal attraction to Jewish religious life. Even with the opening up of post-Soviet society in recent years, only tiny percentages of Russian and Ukrainian Jews believe that observing Shabbat or Kashrut, circumcising one's sons, attending synagogue, in-marrying, or believing in God are integral to Jewish identity (Gitelman, 2003). More striking are the results of a study that found that all Jews who converted to Christianity continued to identify themselves as Jews by ethnicity (Boris Wiener, as quoted in Tolts, 2004). In other words, a substantial percentage of Russian and Ukrainian Jews uncouple being Jewish from practicing Judaism.

Thus, the prevailing form of Jewish identification in the post-Soviet world is an ethnic one. Hence it should come as no surprise that these Beit Binah women wanted to assert their authenticity through their Jewish lineage. But, as we shall see in the next two scenes, now that they have begun to explore Jewish texts and the content of Jewish living, some of them also seem to be questioning just what does being a Jew mean in terms of beliefs and behaviors. The learning curve is steep and complex. In an interview conducted two months prior to this class, Leya remarked that when the study group first began, many of the women didn't even know if they were Christian or Jewish. She said:

When there was a Christian holiday, they would call me and ask what is it? Should we observe it or not? It took us many, many classes to explain the differences. Now, we almost never talk about Christianity. We talk more about Jewish traditions—kashrut, Jewish purity.

Though these women can now distinguish Jewish tradition from Christianity, they still are still much more certain about their ethnic connection to Judaism than they are to their religious one as we will see in the two scenarios that follow.

FLASHPOINT TWO—THE NEED FOR VALIDATION

After we complete the circle of introductions, Leya stands up and says, "Now it's time to have a drink!" With laughter in her voice she points to the wine on the table and says that it's "almost kosher," meaning it was homemade by Jewish women. After everyone has a glass of wine, Leya offers this toast: "Ten years ago, we could never have gathered here like this to study Torah. To unity, to our ability to be together to speak words of Torah. L'chaim!"

We have but a few moments to savor the significance of her words before diving right into our study. The class begins with Luda giving a brief

lecture about the Omer, the 49 days leading from the liberation from Egypt to the giving of Torah at Mount Sinai. At the end of her short presentation, Luda distributes a handout of a table of days of the Omer corresponding to the secular calendar, and the blessing that is traditionally recited each evening during this seven-week period. Luda instructs the group that they should be reciting this blessing at home. Leya then recites the blessing aloud.

The prescriptive mode of this segment of the lesson seems to run counter to Beit Binah's approach of allowing the women to make their own choices about whether and how to observe Jewish traditions. By telling the women that they "should" recite the blessing, Luda reveals what she understands to be normative Jewish behavior. This is one of several examples that occur throughout the evening where there appears to be dissonance between the open process that says there are no "wrong" answers and specific content-knowledge (in this case the blessing for counting the Omer) that is delivered as *the* answer.

Another example of dissonance between content and method comes a few moments later when Dina, one of the participants changes the subject by asking the American observers whether we study Kabbalah. To this question another woman retorts, "Let's first study Torah and then get to Kabbalah!" But someone else rejoins: "We have already read Torah twice in our group, with Rashi and Soncino commentary. We want to develop our knowledge! We are interested in Kabbalah."

This somewhat unexpected exchange makes me realize that the women aren't looking at me as researcher but as potential source of Jewish knowledge. Yet, I did not want to insert myself overmuch in the flow of conversation. I attempt to redirect the conversation back to the facilitator. But, Dina persists, asking: "Are women allowed to study Kabbalah? Again, someone tries to get the group back on topic by saying: "Let us first study Torah!"

At this point, a rather tense exchange ensues with a lot of side conversations between smaller groups of women at the table. After a minute or so, Leya interjects, saying: "They are all intertwined. When you start studying Torah, questions emerge. And you want to develop and develop. We want to develop the knowledge we already have. Maybe we don't have to get deeper into Kabbalah, but we want to know more!!"

In the moment, my reaction to this exchange is to wonder if even here in Minsk, word of Madonna and other celebrities' attraction to Kabbalah had piqued their curiosity. On later reflection, I began to see that a deeper question was in play as well. These women have minimal access to Jewish teachers and resource materials. The Beit Binah training process includes approximately 120 hours of classroom time and extensive ongoing support, but this hardly makes the facilitators Jewish studies experts. Indeed, the program's intent is to train them as facilitators of text study, not as scholars.

Group process and personal meaning-making are at the heart of the program. Yet, the women who have “already read Torah twice, with Rashi and Soncino commentary” want to go further than they perceive they can go on their own. While Beit Binah gives them critical thinking tools and creates an open and safe climate where they can explore *how* they know, they want more content. They are still not yet sure of *what* they know! Thus, when they are confronted with a decision about religious practice, they rely on the voice of tradition (as expressed through their teacher) to tell them what they should do.

In an interview two months before this class, Leya noted how the women in her group did not automatically take to the group process methods and dialogic base of study. She said:

At first our women wouldn't accept the methods. They wanted us to lecture them, and they would just listen, and that was it. But little by little, they understood that what is interesting is being able to participate in the discussions. And now they are fully engaged with all these methods and techniques.

While I certainly saw active participation of all group members, Leya may have been overstating the full engagement of her group with these techniques. They may be active participants in the process, but they also yearn for content knowledge and direction to help them validate their choices. Lacking greater Jewish literacy, they look to outside authorities to tell them what is right or wrong. They still seem quite hesitant to assert their own point of view when it comes to determining what is authentic Jewish behavior and what is not. Perhaps, this dialogical, facilitative form of study can only take them so far without further content enrichment.

FLASHPOINT THREE—AM I THE RIGHT KIND OF JEW?

After the exchange about Kabbalah, Leya reasserts herself as group facilitator and opened a discussion of Parshat Kedoshim, the chapter in the Book of Leviticus on holiness, by posing the following question to the group: “How do you understand holiness?”

True to the Beit Binah style of free exchange of opinions, each woman offers her interpretation and a list grows with no attempt to reach a consensus definition. When Leya again takes the floor she gives a brief lecture about the relationship between holiness and everyday behavior. She uses the example of the commandment “honor your father and mother” to illustrate her point. Here she compares the difference in the wording between the commandment as given at Mount Sinai in Exodus 20:12 and the instruction to “fear your mother and father” offered in Parshat Kedoshim,

Leviticus 19:3. She does not distribute copies of texts, pointing to the table laden with food as the reason. She speaks quickly and it isn't clear whether her points are grasped. No one asks for clarification or offers her thoughts on Leya's remarks. After the briefest of pauses, Leya says: "Now it's time for us to eat and allow our guests to ask more questions!"

An expectant silence hangs in the room. Quickly, I think to myself, since this is obviously an atypical evening, I should ask them to describe what a more typical class would entail. I do that and Leya explains that usually the group breaks into smaller "hevrutahs" (pairs or threes) to study for a significant portion of the class. I then ask: "It seems that this is not the first time you have studied the Ten Commandments. What are some of the ideas you've studied before about the Ten Commandments? And how do the ideas that you talk about affect your lives?"

In her answer, Leya asserts a claim as to what is normative and expected of her as a Jew as she responds in a matter-of-fact tone: "What ideas could they be? These are commandments we have to observe. These are laws." Then, she continued: "Actually, we've learned them by heart. When we learn them we start fulfilling those commandments, we start obeying them."

After Leya makes this definitive statement, Dina asks a question about observing Shabbat: "What can you do when you cannot observe everything? For example, if you have to work on Saturday? Is it possible to adapt Torah to modern life, when we can't keep Shabbat due to our busy lives?"

There is a tremor in Dina's voice when she poses her question. She looks at me point blank and seems to be begging for an answer. I am conflicted about what to do. I came to study their learning process, not to influence it. Yet, this is the third time the women have turned to me for counsel. So I gulp and jump into the fray, responding:

Yes. I believe that we must adapt Torah to our lives in order to keep Judaism alive. But it's a very difficult process, because the authority of Torah remains very powerful. We have to study deeply, as you do, and then made decisions based on our learning. That's a process of struggle. So your example of working on Shabbat is a good one. I think many people who become more and more serious about Judaism ask that question: what should I do about Saturday? At what point can a Saturday become Shabbat. How much can I add to my life to make Saturday into Shabbat? It's both adding and taking away. That may not be the answer you were looking for.

After a momentary pause, Leya remarks:

You know, the more that you study, the more concerned you are about the mistakes you make. When you started studying Shabbat, just lighting candles, you thought it was simple. And now, the more you know, the

harder it gets to observe. One of our teachers told us that if you can't observe all of Shabbat than you should observe none of it. Sometimes it's seems so difficult. You feel like just giving it all up.

This last remark is a jolt. Not long ago, Leya was a "silent knower" (Belenky et al., 1986) in terms of her Jewish learning, utterly reliant on outside authorities to tell her what was important to know. Over time, her learning experiences have given her the content and context for making meaning and she has begun to become a more active knower, in some instances translating her learning into deeds such as reciting the blessing for counting the Omer or saying in a matter of fact way: "The commandments are the laws we have to observe." Still, there seems to be a tentative quality to her knowledge. This lack of confidence may be exacerbated by two powerful external influences. First, is the cultural context that long inculcated the idea that authority comes from outside the self and second is the message being delivered by a respected teacher who seems to be saying she not a "good Jew" unless she takes on the full obligation of the mitzvot. This ambivalence reflects a common experience of adult learning that Stephen Brookfield (1994) describes as impostorship. As the learner grows in knowledge, she becomes increasingly aware of how much more there is to learn. Her old ways of understanding and being in the world no longer fit, but she does not yet feel authentic in taking on new perspectives.

I want to help Leya overcome this potential sense of despair but am also quite aware that my views about commandment and religious practice are shaped by a liberal religious and cultural bias that I do not want to impose on her, particularly since I am only a visitor. I hesitate, but then decided to attempt to offer her a perspective quite different from the all or nothing approach her teacher prescribed.

As you know, because you have studied Rashi and other commentaries, what's written in the Torah is only the beginning of the process. For many thousands of years the rabbis have been asking such questions of the text. They probably weren't sitting around such a beautiful table, but just as we are asking questions of the text, the rabbis of the Talmud and later generations, asked questions of the text. For example, you shall not murder. That seems very clear. But, it doesn't say you shall not kill. There's a difference between murder and killing. There are certain times when killing, unfortunately, is the right thing to do. So there are many pages of discussion by the rabbis on just that simple question: When is it permissible to kill?

And your question: When is it permissible and what are the limits of observing Shabbat? That's another question.

In response to my comment, several women offer their thoughts about the nuance and complication of interpreting these commandments. But once again, Dina inserts herself and tries to turn the conversation back to Kabbalah. She asked: “Doesn’t Kabbalah tell you what will happen in the future? What’s written there? How can you tie it to Torah?”

This time, I don’t hesitate in responding to this jarring claim.

Can you predict the future? If you get five rabbis at this table, you will get five different opinions on this topic. I would be suspicious of someone telling you Kabbalah has all the answers. But, I need to tell you that my view of Judaism is different from an Orthodox rabbi’s view of Judaism. It’s my view that our work must begin with what’s called *Tikkun atzmi*, the personal repair of our own selves. To make ourselves as good as we can be. And as each of us works on our own internal selves we begin to influence each other. And that brings about Tikkun Olam, which is a Kabbalistic idea. That the light that contained God’s power broke during the process of creation. And that caused all the imperfections and catastrophes and difficulties in our lives and in our world. So it’s each of our responsibility, first for ourselves, and then for our families, and then our communities and the world, to continually work on that repair. We do that in two ways. We do that through the mitzvot, the commandments between us and God. And we do that through the mitzvot between one another. That’s our work! That’s why we’re here.

A WORK IN PROGRESS

The class came to a close soon after my remarks, but months later, I am still trying to make sense of what took place that evening in May. My bias as a feminist and progressive American Jew certainly shapes how I read this particular evening of learning and the three subsequent encounters I have had with the Beit Binah women since that time. Indeed, that cultural bias and my minimal Russian language abilities limit just how far I can go in interpreting this process. Within that perspective, however, it seems to me that while the methods are transformative, the women are not yet transformed. On the one hand, their learning process is pushing them to think for themselves, to find their own voice in the text and define for themselves what it means to be a Jew in their world. On the other hand, many still seem to depend more on an external authority to tell them if they are “good” Jews or not.

This conflict may be further exacerbated by the fact that there are a mix of teachers who serve as Beit Binah faculty. For the most part, those who embrace a liberal philosophy of education and Judaism, are varied and come from outside the CIS. And, as we have seen the most consistent

teacher and perhaps most engaging is a native Russian Chabad rabbi who now lives in Israel but makes frequent trips back to the region to teach in a number of settings. He shares their cultural context. He knows them because he is one of them. The other teachers remain foreign and strange because of barriers of language, history, and values.

Today, by far the most prominent form of religious Judaism in the CIS is Chabad and to a lesser extent, other streams of Orthodox Judaism. The World Union of Progressive Judaism is an active force, but their resources in terms of funds and personnel are miniscule relative to Chabad, especially outside of the major centers of Moscow and St. Petersburg. Thus, the religious Judaism that most people see is a strain of Orthodoxy that dictates practices through clear answers and authoritative texts and teachers who assert that they represent the most authentic form of Judaism. Chabad also has deep historical roots in the region and frequently outright rejects all other forms of Jewish expression. The essentialist representation of Jewish authenticity that Chabad presents may have particular appeal to these Post-Soviet women both because its authoritative voice has cultural resonance and because it is built around a long-denied, idealized past, imagined as holding a rich and homogenous tradition (Charme, 2000).

Chabad's approach to Judaism subordinates personal meaning-making to the obligations of tradition, which is presented as monolithic and largely unchanging. Beit Binah's feminist methodology takes the completely opposite approach, inviting multiple paths for Jewish expression. This open learning process encourages an active dialogue between personal meaning-making and Jewish tradition, yet many of the women encounter cultural dissonance as they seek to integrate their developing sense of self with their tentative conceptions of what it means to be an authentic Jew.

From a contemporary perspective, authenticity is commonly understood as having a clear sense of purpose to your life; knowing who you are and what you stand for. It is both the blessing and the curse of modernity which grants us the freedom of self-determination but also runs the risk of devolving into narcissism and a loss of a communal context in which to develop a sense of shared higher purpose and meaning that is respectful of the authority of tradition. The opposite challenge may hold for these women in post-Soviet society, namely an overreliance on authority that is imposed from the outside. The key, as Charles Taylor (1991) cautions, is balance. As he notes, taking a "purely personal understanding of self-fulfillment" (p. 43) can both flatten and narrow our lives and distance us from others in community. And perhaps the obverse leads to diminishment of the self for the sake of authoritarian communal norms. We avoid this "slide to subjectivism" by applying what Taylor describes as the ethics of authenticity. This approach demands that individuation take place in dialogue with history, nature, and society. This dialogue also leads one to figuring out what he calls "horizons of significance," a vision of the good

life, of what truly matters. And the critical question for these women remains whether they feel they have the personal authority to determine the content of that vision of the good for themselves in negotiation with their community or whether their communities are still so fragmented that they must wholly depend on an outside source of wisdom to tell them what truly matters.

For Hanan Alexander (1997) developing this vision of the good is the overriding purpose of Jewish education. Alexander builds on Taylor's work as he explores the question of how to educate for authentic Jewish identity. He argues that we must move away from an overly instrumental focus on continuity and group survival that sees Jewish learning as a means of internalizing Jewish communal norms and practices, and teach for deeper meaning. For Alexander, Jewish education must go well beyond teaching *how* to be a Jew, but must also encompass the question of *why* to be a Jew. As he notes, "when we train a student to accept a complex belief or adopt a sophisticated practice without teaching them to understand the reasons for believing or practicing it, we take a step toward indoctrination" (p. 58). Placing the "why" be a Jew question at the forefront requires an educational process where individuals are given the freedom to engage in autonomous decision-making about how to be a Jew and at the same time see themselves inextricably "bound up in some way" with the Jewish people and Jewish tradition.

Beit Binah's educational approach implicitly focuses on the questions of why to be a Jew. Their vision of the "good life" seeks to empower women to act on their own resources to build engaged Jewish communities. Their shared commitment to Jewish community building binds them together, yet they seek to foster multiple pathways to Jewish living. As Beit Binah program director Olga Krasko says: "From the very first seminar, we try to ensure that women get to listen to the voices of many rabbis and teachers. We are trying to show in our groups that people belonging to different movements can interact." Women in our local groups belong to Chabad, Progressive communities, and others. This is why we say everyone has a legitimate point of view."

This open philosophy is antithetical to indoctrination, but it is a counter-trend in a world where indoctrination has long been the norm. In the course of my interviews with Russian women over the past three years, I have heard many echoes of this remark: "We were taught that the prime importance to our motherland was Party. Only at the tenth level did you think about yourself."

This is a lot to overcome. While Beit Binah may be teaching them *how* to think, they are still uncertain about *what* to think. Their Jewish identities are partial and fragmented, held together by fragile memories, minimal Jewish education, few positive Jewish role models and experiences. They also seem to be yearning to reclaim and recover an imagined and perhaps

idealized past. This image is reinforced by the predominant voice of religious Judaism in the region, Chabad.

TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING

Ultimately, the question at the heart of this exploration is whether this transformative educational process will win out over historical context and potentially indoctrinating influences. Will the women of Beit Binah, challenged and strengthened by their learning, reframe their lives and define a sense of authentic selfhood in relationship with Jewish history, tradition, and community? Will they harmonize the cultural and contextual dissonance in such a way as to feel whole—fully human and fully Jewish?

This evening in May provides an in-depth picture of a delicate balancing act between empowering the learner to be self-reflective, independent thinkers while binding them to Jewish tradition. The challenge is to ensure that their learning is both “thick” and also open to various forms of interpretation and expression. This is difficult work in any setting, and all the more so in the CIS where the obstacles of history are so high and communal resources for creating rich varied forms of Jewish expression, are so thin.

As we saw, these women are hungry for Jewish learning. They want and need to fill in the many gaps in their knowledge base. But, they need teachers who embody an orientation to education that is consistent with transformative learning methodologies, teachers who provide learners with the depth of content needed to fully engage with Jewish tradition and at the same time provide them with the tools to become critical thinkers and make their own choices. The goal of this form of education is to make “successive generations...aware of the widest range of possibilities...in order that men may choose with the utmost amplitude of freedom” (Perry, 1950).

Cranton and Roy (2003) note that the goal of transformative learning is “understanding how others are different from us without attempting to make them in our own image” (p. 94). Just as Taylor’s (1991) ethics of authenticity stipulate that an authentic self must be negotiated in relationship with history, nature, and society, so too Cranton and Roy point out, that the creation of an authentic self must occur in relationship to community. At this point, the Beit Binah learning process seems to be far more successful in teaching the women how to be in relationship with each other than in teaching them to be in relationship with Jewish history or tradition. Their learning is all about the conversation. But, the question remains as to whether they are really listening to each other and to their own inner voices, or whether they still turn to an outside voice of authority to validate their choices and tell them what is authentic. In its ideal sense, Beit Binah’s goals appear to resonate closely with what Parker Palmer (1998) describes as a “community of truth.” Such a community is defined and bounded by

a powerful sense of interconnection that still allows for multiple forms of expression. Here, questions are more important than prescribed answers; passionate discourse is valued over assertion of fact. It promotes and preserves open thinking, and encourages freedom of choice, all of which are essential to the formation of an authentic self that balances personal autonomy with tradition, a process that one would hope, would lead to the development of a self-determining Jewish community. Only time and further study will determine whether this ideal can be reconciled with these women's reality.

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