

Divrei Hokhmah for 5769 *Heart and Soul*

This is the fourth year of the new WLCJ *Divrei Hokhmah* initiative, designed to be used at the beginning of your sisterhood meetings and events as *divrei Torah*. There is no better way to involve your women in a meeting than to warm them up with a spirited discussion about issues of importance.

Each *Divrei Hokhmah: Heart and Soul* unit is designed as a brief, ten (or less – or more!) minute prelude to your meetings. We have provided prepared texts and study questions that will generate discussion and social interaction as an effective lead-in to the program. Additionally, women will be involved in the *mitzvah* of study, one of Judaism's most revered values.

New Format

- The format has been revamped so that anyone can lead the discussion.
- There are fewer questions, and they require *very little* prior preparation by the discussion leader.
- **It is imperative, however, that the leader photocopies enough of the participants' texts so that women can read along.**

Why Heart and Soul?

Heart and Soul is the programmatic theme for 2008-2009, which includes the Women's League Biennial Convention, November 9-12, 2008 in Detroit, as well as the Torah Fund campaign theme for this year. The relationship between heart and soul, body and spirit -- recognized two thousand years ago by the Rabbis -- has now moved to center stage in public conversations as clergy and health care professionals emphasize the sympathetic connection of our physical to our emotional beings.

Guidelines for the Divrei Hokhmah Initiative

- Order of study: with the exception of the Yom Kippur tekhine, all of the study-units are interchangeable.
- At the beginning of the calendar year, assign someone to lead each discussion or one person for the whole year.
- If you have a different leader for each meeting, give each a copy of the background material and guidelines.
- **Have enough photocopies so that every participant has her own text. Do not rely on having one copy read aloud. It is critical that each woman has the material in front of her.** Because some of these passages are long, especially the Yom Kippur tekhine, it is important that women can read them while discussing the issue.
- Save the material. You can use it in a variety of venues in the future.

Guidelines for the discussion leaders

- Read the lesson in advance and decide which questions you want to discuss.
- Keep your eye on the clock. Ten minutes goes very quickly!
- Ask that answers be kept short, and ask people not to repeat what has already been said.
- While we have provided answers, they are not the only ones or even the best ones.
- You are encouraged to think up additional questions.
- Encourage discussion. In text study, there is room for interpretation.
- Always thank everyone for their enthusiasm, insight and wisdom.

Thank you for your participation in this new and exciting project. We would love to hear your comments.

Cory Schneider
President

Faye Laveson
Program Advisory Committee Chair

Lisa Kogen
Education Chair

Yom Kippur
Tekhine said when fasting

Leader: *This tekhnine, an East European Yiddish prayer written for (and sometimes by) women, was recited on Yom Kippur. In it, the woman concentrates on the physical deprivation that comes from fasting in order to heighten her spiritual reward.*

What are some of the physical images she invokes, and what are the spiritual images?

On Yom Kippur, take this tekhnine with you and recite it during your day of prayer. Perhaps you might find a connection with women of the past.

May my tears wash away
My worst troubles,
And may my repentance
Strike away Your anger
When you judge me.

And let the sound
Of my weeping
Be the song
That the Levites sang,
At the offering.

Accept my table
As a substitute
For the holy sacrificial altar.

And let the taste of hunger
In my mouth
Be the scent
Of incense.

And let the pot
That I have not placed
On the coal fire
Be the fire
On the sacrificial altar.

And let the weakness
Of my limbs
Be a substitute
For the gasping
Of the sacrifice.

And let the listlessness
Of my blood through fasting,
Be the sacrificial blood
That was dashed on the horns
Of the altar.

And let my broken heart
Tear to shreds
All evil decrees,
And let my bath
That I avoid today
Represent the washing of the priests
In the Temple.

And let my shrinking flesh
Be the fat
That was poured
Onto the altar.

And in my turning to You
May you turn to me,
And to all Israel.
Amen.

Women's Intuition Revisited

Leader: *The conflict between intellect and intuition or emotion has been an ongoing discussion among feminists. Jewish tradition long held that women are more emotional: when read positively it means that women are more spiritual; when read negatively it means that women are more irrational.*

In this column, written in the early 1990s when there was only a small number of Conservative women rabbis and cantors, author Francine Klagsbrun asks about the parameters of both domains, and how women can transcend them.

To Walk With Confidence in the Garden

by Francine Klagsbrun (*Moment Magazine*, 1992)

In the religious sphere, feminists have delved into women's feelings and experiences as a way of countering patriarchal dominance. Jewishly that has meant rediscovering the feminine aspects of God, of prayer and of the Torah. And that has been a fine, enriching enterprise.

But what concerns me now is that so much importance has been placed on feminine spirituality that we run the danger of defining women's religiosity only in terms of feelings, mysticism, or intuition. We run the risk of stereotyping women as they were stereotyped for centuries as creatures of emotion and instinct while men continue to own the realms of reason and cognition. No. I want women to be learned in law and text as well as to be rich in spirit. I want them to combine spirituality with intellect, to be Rabbi Akiba and to walk with confidence in the garden, having first mastered the more mundane paths of the Torah.

Discussion Questions:

Do you think that our renewed focus on spirituality has been regressive or progressive?

Do you think of yourself as guided more by one aspect than the other?

Shema Yisrael New Interpretations

Leader's Questions: [Ask for responses]

- *What is the opening line of the Shema?*
- *What is its meaning?*

Leader: *Despite our familiarity with the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4), its precise meaning is uncertain and permits several possible readings. This ambiguity can be seen in the way it is translated.*

Let's look at two familiar translations:

Hear O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is one.
(Hertz Humash, Soncino Bible)

Hear O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.
(Etz Hayim, JPS Tanakh)

Discussion Questions:

What idea does the first, older translation of the Shema convey?

- That God is a single unity. The traditional understanding is that the Shema is a declaration of monotheism, that there is only one God.

What does the newer (JPS) translations suggest to you?

- The language, “the Lord **is our** God” implies a relationship – Israel’s acceptance of the Lord as *their only* God, rather than an absolute statement – that there is **only one God**.

Leader: *The second interpretation reflects a modern understanding of religion in ancient Israel. This is the scholarly recognition that other peoples in the ancient world – including Israel’s neighbors – worshipped various deities and things they considered divine, but that Israel is to accept the God of Israel **only**.*

*The term for this is **monolatry**, the allegiance to one god, while acknowledging the existence of other deities. Modern Bible scholars now accept this as a much more accurate understanding of religious belief in antiquity.*

Focus

Introduction: *The rabbis of the mishnah were concerned not only about the content of the mechanics of our prayers (what is recited and when), but also the appropriate demeanor during prayer.*

Thus they write about the recitation of the Tefillah (the rabbinic term for the Amidah):

Mishnah: Berakhot 5:1

None may stand up to say the Tefillah save in a sober mood. The pious men of old used to wait an hour before they said the Tefillah, that they might direct their heart toward God. Even if the king salutes a man he may not return the greeting; and even if a snake was twisted around his heel he may not interrupt his prayer.

Questions:

What is the mood that is required by the mishnah for the recitation of the Amidah?

- Those who pray should be sober, serious
- Time should elapse before the Amidah is recited to assure that the petitioner is in the proper mood and can “direct their heart toward God”.

What are the implications of disregarding “the snake twisted around the heel” or not returning the greeting of the king?

- Both scenarios represent situations of potential life-threatening danger from a poisonous creature or an irate king, whose greeting is not returned. Nothing, not even the fear of death, should interfere with prayer.

Discussion Questions:

Do you think that this was intended as a realistic standard?

How should we understand this kind of rabbinic dictum today?

Yehudah Halevi
His Heart Is in the East

Introduction: *Yehudah Halevi, a Jewish physician, poet and philosopher, was born in Spain, about 1085 and died about 1141. Many of his poems reflect his love for Israel and keep alive the love of Zion as a part of Jewish culture, rather than just a ritual to be expressed in prayer. At the end of his life he traveled to the Holy Land to settle there and fulfill his dream.*

In this poem, Halevi writes of the dissonance between his physical abode and his spiritual homeland.

“My Heart is in the East”
by Yehuda Halevi

My heart is in the East, and I am at the ends of the West;
How can I taste what I eat and how could it be pleasing to me?
How shall I render my vows and my bonds, while yet
Zion lies beneath the fetter of Edom, and I am in the chains of Arabia?
It would be easy for me to leave all the bounty of Spain --
As it is precious for me to behold the dust of the desolate sanctuary.

Discussion Question:

Yehudah Halevi expresses himself through imagery of opposites. What are they?

- Physical location (the West) vs. spiritual home (the East).
- The pleasure of eating (taste) vs. the bitterness of loss
- Praying and making promises (vows and bonds) vs. the reality of their not being realized (Zion in fetters, religious persecution under Islam)
- Living in Spain with plenty vs. the desolation of a ruined Jerusalem

What other metaphors of physical placement vs. spiritual longing can you suggest?

Hebrew Lesson

Lev veNefesh

Leader: *Hebrew idioms are often constructed of nouns, such as lev or nefesh, with a modifier. The translation can be literal, but often they construct a new idiom.*

Let's first look at idioms constructed from *lev*, which can mean heart, understanding, mind, thought, conscience, will, bosom.

Some idioms constructed with the word *lev* include:

Hebrew term	Literal meaning	idiom	
<i>lev even</i>	a heart of stone	cruelty	<i>even</i> =stone
<i>lev ehad</i>	of one mind	unanimous	<i>ehad</i> =one
<i>lev basar</i>	a heart of flesh	compassion	<i>basar</i> =flesh
<i>lev zahav</i>	a heart of gold	kind-heartedness	<i>zahav</i> =gold
<i>lev tahor</i>	purity of heart	sincerity, honesty	<i>tahor</i> =pure
<i>be-lev va-lev</i>	half-heartedly	insincerely	
<i>'ometz lev</i>	courage		<i>'ometz</i> =bravery, courage
<i>haser-lev</i>	without understanding	foolish, stupid	<i>haser</i> =deficient
<i>shinui levavot</i>	change of heart		<i>shinui</i> =change
<i>nedivot lev</i>	donations of the heart	generosity, philanthropy	<i>nedivot</i> =donations

Leader: *Now let's look at idioms constructed from nefesh, which can mean soul, life, spirit, breath, creature, self, human being*

Following the same formula, idioms are often constructed of a noun, such as nefesh, with a modifier. The translation is not rendered literally, but together they construct a new idiom.

Hebrew term	Literal meaning	idiom	
<i>lenafsho</i>		alone	
<i>ba'al nefesh</i>	a man of feeling	soulful	
<i>dinei nefashot</i>		capital offenses	<i>dinei</i> = laws of
<i>heshbon hanefesh</i>		self-criticism, scrutiny	<i>heshbon</i> =reckoning
<i>yedid nefesh</i>		bosom, close, sincere friend	<i>yedid</i> =beloved
<i>mapah nefesh</i>		disappointment, despair	<i>mapah</i> =despair
<i>mar nefesh</i>		angry, frustrated, embittered	<i>mar</i> =bitter
<i>pikuah nefesh</i>		matter of life and death	<i>pikuah</i> =inspection, control

A Meal of Jewish Proverbs

Leader: *What do the following proverbs have in common?* [This could take three hours!]

- *A heavy heart talks a lot.*
- *After a good cry, your heart is lighter.*
- *Not every heart that laughs is really cheerful.*
- *The heart and the eye are the two agents of sin. (Hebrew)*
- *When the heart is bitter, sugar won't help.*
- *When the heart is full, the eyes overflow.*
- *What soap is to the body, tears are to the soul.*

**Resilience:
Soul in the Service of Heart**

Introduction: *This poem, from The Torah: A Women's Commentary underscores the relationship between heart and soul as it is played out in the dramatic competition between Leah and Rachel.*

From Leah to Her Sister
by Sherry Blumberg

My eyes are weak
But my body is strong
I'm not afraid to work
I have worked and will work
And someday we bear children

My eyes are weak
but my resolve is strong
I shall have my due
First to be married
First to bear children
Yet I'll not be as loved as you

My eyes are weak
But my love is strong
For I have loved you
You shall become a legend
I will always be second
Even in memory and prayer

Discussion Questions:

In this competition between sisters, we see competition between the physical and the emotional. What must Leah overcome?

What does Leah describe as "weak"?

- Her weak eyes are a symbol for physical disability

What is strong?

- When she says "my body is strong, I'm not afraid to work" does she mean her physical body, or might she mean the psychic ability to overcome distress so that she can physically function (i.e., work)?
- her resolve
- her love

[All suggest that the strength of her spirit/soul can combat physical impairment]

Discussion Question: *Is Leah's model realistic? Is it useful?*

Mishnah Berakhot 9:2
**Does prayer come from the heart, or is it a
response to the world around us?**

Leader: *This mishnah instills a sensitivity to the wonder of material existence, and links that sense of awe to Jewish prayer. The stimulus to prayer is not simply physical beauty or the emotion of gratitude. Rather, the mishnah includes terrifying spectacles and horrifying news as cause for prayer, reflecting the sentiment expressed by Job to his wife, "Shall we accept the good from God, and not the bad?"(2:10)*

Berakhot 9:2

One who sees shooting stars, **earthquakes, lightening, thunder or storm-winds** says, "Blessed is the One whose might fills the world." One who sees mountains, hills, seas, rivers or deserts says, "Blessed is the One Who creates material existence." Rabbi Judah says, "One who sees the great sea (i.e. the ocean) says, 'Blessed is the One Who creates the great sea.' This is when he has not seen it for some time." Regarding rainfall and good tidings one says "Blessed is the One Who is good and does good." Regarding bad tidings one says, "Blessed is the true judge."

Discussion Question: *While we can see the benefit to blessing God for majesty, why should we bless something that is terrifying?*

The Golem Demands Her Soul

Introduction: *Response*, a Jewish counter-culture journal of the 1970s, offered one of the pioneering collections of writings about Jewish feminism, then in its infancy. Rachel Adler's seminal essay, "The Jew Who Wasn't There: Halachah and the Jewish Woman," articulated a challenge to women – one now taken for granted – that they should participate in the halachic process.

From "The Jew Who Wasn't There: Halachah and the Jewish Woman"
by Rachel Adler
in *Response: The Jewish Woman: An Anthology*, Summer 1973

The halachic scholars must examine our problem anew, right now, with open minds and empathy. They must make it possible for women to claim their share in the Torah and begin to do the things a Jew was created to do. If necessary we must agitate until the scholars are willing to see us as Jewish souls in distress rather than as tools with which men do mitzvot. If they continue to turn a deaf ear to us, the most learned and halachically committed among us must make halachic decisions for the rest. ...But to paraphrase Hillel, in a place where there are no *menschen*, we may have to generate our own *menschlichkeit*. There is no time to waste. For too many centuries, the Jewish woman has been a golem, created by Jewish society. She cooked and bore and did her master's will, and when her tasks were done, the Divine Name was removed from her mouth. It is time for the golem to demand a soul.

Discussing Questions:

When Adler was writing in the early 1970s, she characterized the Jewish woman as a golem. Why does she use this term?

What might Adler say today about Jewish women?

