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Preface

When I was a child in the 1970s, I always imagined that I went to school twice as long as the other children on my block. By the time I was a teenager, my school day extended from eight in the morning until five-thirty in the afternoon. In the harsh Chicago winters, I arrived in the dark and left in the dark.

Living in school, as my friends and I did, made a strange kind of sense because our private school was meant to educate us for life. In the morning, we prayed and spoke in Hebrew as we studied Torah, Mishnah, Midrash, Jewish law, and history. In the afternoon and into the early evening, we spoke English as we studied math, science, literature, and world history. This was our “double curriculum,” the fare of Jewish day school students across the United States. And the hope of parents and teachers: that a traditionally educated American Jewish child would come to see that she could live in both worlds—Jewish and secular—happily, healthily, without (much) compromise.

Yet as I turned sixteen or so and our daily household mail delivery became heavy with college brochures and applications, I recognized that the ever-extending school day, seemingly capacious enough for all things, would reach its limits. Parents and teachers could decide to extend school by an hour or even two but not by years, decades, or a lifetime. Soon we would leave home. Our training as young Jews, in home and school, would come to its end, and we would no longer come and go constrained, gifted by the demands and abundances of the “double curriculum.” Then the true test of our childhood educations would arrive as we left home to live in that world

for which we had been doubly prepared—that world with paradoxically fewer divisions but many more choices.

No one thought our educations would be complete at age eighteen. Both my parents had gone to yeshiva day school in the 1950s and then college and graduate school in the 1960s and 1970s; both my paternal grandparents had completed graduate degrees by the end of the first third of the twentieth century. Over two generations, my family had found itself in universities from New York to Boston to Michigan: CCNY, NYU, the Jewish Theological Seminary, and Columbia; BU, MIT, and Harvard; the University of Michigan, Eastern Michigan. Clearly I too would go to college. I hoped to study literature.

As graduation from yeshiva high school grew nearer, questions arose: for those of us who planned to attend a secular institution rather than a Jewish university such as Yeshiva University or Stern College for Women, how would we continue to build from both sides? Had all our mornings devoted to Hebrew, Torah, and Jewish thought and law been spent without a future of learning in mind? Was Jewish learning just a practice of childhood, to be left behind when one “grew up”?

In the late 1980s (as still today) common practice provided an answer. We, Orthodox high school graduates, boys and girls both, were encouraged to spend a year of study in intensive, single-sex yeshivas in Israel before returning to America to attend university. In these yeshivas Jewish texts would be both bread and water of life. In these houses of study there would be no afternoon periods of math, science, literature, or social studies. Instead, there would be Torah in all its many manifestations, in the widest sense of the term: Jewish learning from the span of centuries, a rich spectrum of rabbinic voices, morning to night, Sabbath to Sabbath, every season of the year. This school would never end.

When our parents and teachers evoked this world for us, in most cases it was not because they envisioned it as sufficient

for a lifetime—not our lifetimes in any case. The men and women who taught in such yeshivas, who lived in Israel, had made choices other than the ones we were to make. Most of them had never and would never spend four years at Columbia University or the University of Pennsylvania. Many had university degrees, but it was always remarkable, always worth mentioning, when those degrees came from secular institutions and were granted in fields thoroughly distinct from Jewish study. As I imagined it, we were to be one-year guests in other people's real lives, as though we were jumping on and off a merry-go-round that never stopped, ascending and alighting while it continued to move.

My parents left in my hands the choice to study in Israel, as they left to me the selection of university. But granting me this autonomy was not typical for our community and suggested that my parents were not wholly integrated members of the adult pack. And in truth my parents were distinct from others by virtue of having raised and schooled us—me, my brother, and my sister—in not only Orthodox schools and synagogues, but also in institutions belonging to the more liberal Conservative Jewish movement. Summer camp, elementary school, and my early life in synagogue were all lived among Conservative Jews.

While my parents were not typical Orthodox Jews, they were not typical Conservative Jews either. They themselves had grown up in Orthodox synagogues (a synagogue *meant* Orthodox in the 1940s and 1950s), Orthodox summer camps, and yeshiva day schools. They had attained fluency in modern Hebrew and classical Judaic texts. My siblings and I were consequently second-generation literate Jews, while most of my friends in Conservative schools were the first generations in their families to speak, read, write, study, sing, and pray conversantly in Hebrew.

I do not know precisely why my parents chose to move left into Conservative Judaism for the period of my childhood

and early adolescence. I do know that both my mother and father grew up in second-generation American families whose practice had veered away from the strictures observed by the previous immigrant generation so that the educations my parents received at home and at school were not wholly aligned. I know also that my parents became adults in major American cities and college towns in the late 1960s, not sites or an era known for fostering a commitment to traditional styles of living.

Today it seems to me that what Conservative Judaism had to recommend itself to young American parents in the 1970s was its egalitarianism. Where Orthodox institutions were dominantly structured by divisions of sex, Conservative Jewish leaders and rabbis were following more closely and more quickly the pulse of American life. The 1970s mania to give trucks to girls and dolls to boys—and all the serious implications of the women’s movement and the sexual revolution—challenged religious establishments to offer their adherents a way of educating children that would reflect a basic belief that boys and girls had equal and shared opportunities. In practice what this meant for me as a young girl in Conservative settings was that my brother and I could both stand before the congregation to lead it in the hymn that closed the Sabbath services. When we visited my mother’s parents’ Orthodox synagogue, I sat next to my mother and grandmother and leaned over the rim of the high balcony, watching the tiny men below as the Torah passed through their aisles but not ours.

Though my elementary education was in Conservative Jewish day schools, by the time I reached high school, my parents found themselves without choices to make *among* schools. In all Chicago there was no Conservative Jewish high school. If they wanted us in Jewish schools, the schools would have to be Orthodox. Like that of their parents before them, my parents’ commitment to Jewish education ran deep and strong. It would never have occurred to them to allow me or my siblings to skip

high school, to send us out into the world at fourteen to seek our fortunes. Why, then, would it be reasonable to assume that our Jewish educations were sufficient for life at age fourteen?

When I began to study in an Orthodox high school, my family's practice returned to the Orthodoxy neither branch of it had known comprehensively in three generations. But it was not an extreme "return," like that of the penitent *Baal T'shuvah* movement. It was a return that retained the cadences of childhood, of girlhood. It was a return in which I remembered standing on the *bimah* (raised platform) with my brother, singing and looking out at a congregation undivided by sex. It was a return that begged questions that motivate my writing here.

The Modern Orthodox school I attended took as its password, as its holy aim, "Torah U'Madda," the remarkable synthesis of Jewish learning and Western secular knowledge garnered from ancient times to modern. No wonder we were in school from morning to night.

What "Torah U'Madda" meant beyond the life of study was that a good Jew lived in the world, eyes open. A good Jewish life would be best shaped not only by the teachings of Torah, but also by the most valuable wisdom of non-Jews. Though this may sound unremarkable and unobjectionable, one did not have to look far to find those who objected and rejected vehemently. Ultra-Orthodox or Haredi Jews (the sort of antique Jews that many Americans imagine when they hear the term "Orthodox") were recognizable and distinct from Modern Orthodox Jews by virtue of their rejection of modernity: their eighteenth-century garb, their black hats and long coats, the men with long beards and the boys with curly *payes*, or side-locks; the tones of Yiddish in the stores, synagogues, and streets; the ritualized early marriages, often arranged; the abundance of modestly dressed and wigged young mothers and grandmothers; the short spans between generations working to safeguard against change.

Modern Orthodox as well as Conservative Jews rejected the rejectionism just as vociferously as the ultra-Orthodox scorned the blending or reconciliation of cultures. We Moderns prided ourselves on being able to “negotiate” the divides and the overlaps. “Tradition and modernity” was a phrase that rang in my ears in the years from fourteen to twenty-four.

As proud as the bearers of the “Torah U’Madda” slogan were, as the time approached for parents who had come of age in the 1960s to send their children off, not a few wondered if perhaps those ultra-Orthodox Jews who would not touch the fires of university with a ten-foot pole knew something after all. Could anything assure a child’s commitment to the past and his or her cognate commitment to the future in the absence of parents? Even those parents sending their children to Orthodox institutions knew that New York City lay right beyond the door.

Ostensibly the idea of studying in Israel before moving on to university was merely an extrapolation of the “Torah U’Madda” approach that made Torah a morning activity and Madda an afternoon one. Our time frame would be years now rather than days; our map would be countries rather than classrooms. But the combination suddenly carried a different charge. When our teachers and rabbis and some of our parents pressed us toward Torah study in Israel, they spoke of it as though it were its own good. But underneath that thought hovered the adult consideration, half spoken, half secret: perhaps a year of intensive Jewish study might succeed in blunting the future temptations and dangers of unadulterated secularity, the pleasures and risks that awaited us on American college campuses.

In dividing up what had seemed whole—Torah (in Israel), then *Madda* (in America)—our parents and teachers and rabbis acknowledged in practice what they had never precisely said aloud: the reconciliation of modernity and tradition was actually rather difficult and required what my bubbi (grand-

mother) would have called some “finagling” or crafty maneuvering. The key of anxiety alerted me to this as much as anything else.

What I would come quickly to discover as I moved from adolescence to adulthood was that traditional and secular ideas often posed serious problems for each other. At times it seemed they simply could not be sustained jointly. What you read in Aristotle or Faulkner what you absorbed of evolutionary biology or cosmogony threatened to split away—and perhaps to split you away—from the path of Torah. The modern values of self-expression and realization—“finding yourself”—would not always be compatible with Jewish teachings and strictures. And those personal, internal crises, forceful and frightening as they were, did not even skirt such public, political issues as abortion or homosexuality and what the appropriate response of contemporary religion might be.

By the time I began my university studies, I could see that the chief pattern of my childhood—the morning-afternoon divide between what we had called “Limudei Kodesh,” Holy Learning, and the banal, descriptionless “General Studies”—would no longer effectively be soldered by lunch and recess. The changing of the guard, when our Jewishly learned teachers left school and our “generally” learned teachers arrived, had not been an overlap but a thorough, gaping fissure. Perhaps I would not have come to see this so arrestingly and so quickly had I not been born a girl.

The story I tell in the pages to come begins in 1988, when I landed in Israel, eighteen years old and female. My cross-cultural education began with a lesson in language. The term “yeshiva” (seminary), I quickly learned, did not apply to girls or women. In America, our teachers had talked about our year of study in “yeshiva” without distinguishing between male and female students and institutions. But when I got to Israel, conversations in Hebrew came to a standstill when Jews, both

religious and secular, asked me why I'd come to Israel and I explained that I'd come to learn in "yeshiva." I'd used the wrong term, they explained. Girls and young women went to *mikhhlala* (women's college), not *yeshiva*.

It was what we might call a semantic difference; it didn't change what I'd come to do. But the existence of two terms for what I'd thought was one separate but equal endeavor alerted me to a new doubleness. This was not a division between "Torah U'Madda" but between men and women. *Mikhhlala* conjured images of young women of marriageable age sitting in rows of desks, an extension of high school, with a married religious woman teaching them material in what Americans would call a mode of "frontal education," the transmission of knowledge from the teacher's side of the desk to the student's. *Yeshiva* conjured rooms filled with long tables, men of all ages sitting on either sides of the tables, studying with each other, reading the Talmud aloud, debating its meanings, engaging in a lifetime practice that could be sustained without a teacher, though independent study alternated with *shiur*, rabbinic lessons about the material prepared. These were stereotypes to be sure, and stereotypes that would come to be violated regularly by girls, women, and *mikhhlalot* (women's colleges) in the years that followed. Nonetheless, when I arrived at Barnard College twelve months later, no one told me that "college" was not the term I was looking for.

Nearly twenty years have passed since I left my childhood family and home and made my first forays into the Beit Midrash and the university, the two "houses of study" I would inhabit independently as an adult. But any adult resolution I have achieved between these two worlds still yields frequently to my sense of deep conflict. For more than ten years conflict was so dominantly my experience that I assumed adulthood *meant* the force that pulled things apart.

There were two languages and literatures that I spoke and read, that I meant to keep speaking and reading. Quite literally my books were divided between two bookcases: Torah, which went from right to left, its titles in Hebrew and Aramaic, a rich collection of classical Judaic texts; and *Madda*, which went from left to right, its titles in English, an unending cascade of novels, essays, poetry, and drama spanning the fourteenth through twentieth centuries. But these two literatures could not easily be had in the same country, let alone the same school. They could not be taught by the same people (then why did we assume they could be *learned* by the same people?), and they could not address the same questions in the same fashion.

Just as bodies of knowledge were divided when a child became an adult, so too sex suddenly mattered as it never had before. A Jewish woman could not elude her body, could not slip out of it as the Jewish girl could. My body, suddenly meaningful, was also indivisible. I could be in only one place at one time, within one community, not another.

In the years of early adulthood, I clung to the single ideal unquestionably shared by Jewish tradition and secular wisdom. I believed that to learn was to live. To study and study and study was to become good, and possibly great, and, in any event, to do what one (what I) was born to do. Today I can see that this deeply held faith made me what I now am: both an avid learner of Jewish texts in the style and language of the Beit Midrash, and a professor of English literature and Judaic studies. But I could not become this before I contemplated what it would be like truly to divide up Torah and *Madda*, what it would be like to live closer to total Orthodoxy, what it would be like to live closer to autonomous secularity. I had to consider these questions because there was not enough room within the Beit Midrash that I knew, the Beit Midrash that existed when I was eighteen, nineteen, twenty, or twenty-five, for a young woman who wanted to learn and some day to teach.

Binah

ותן בלבנו להבין ולהשכיל לשמוע ללמוד וללמד

לשמור ולעשות ולקים את כל דברי תלמוד

תורתך באהבה

Grant in our hearts to understand and elucidate,
to listen, learn and teach,
To keep and to do and to fulfill
All the words of the teachings of Your Torah,
With love.

— *From the morning prayer service*

The path is a narrow one. Though we are free, we will travel it as if we have no choice. We will labor to become all that we have been taught to be, all that we are supposed to be. We will reach for heaven from this earth; we will be eighteen; we will be young and bright, earnest and pious, respectful of our elders, cautious in our speech, modest in our dress, restrained, thin, studious, hungry. Bending over books, imagining stars in black sky, how we will wear ourselves out in the struggle to be good. How we will spend days and nights searching for the path to forgiveness, the path to reward. . . .

.....

We went to Israel. We left our homes and families and traveled across the world. I thought we went looking for God. Looking for a land that had been ours before we ever knew it, had ever seen it. Looking for a people that counted us as still alive but missing in action, though we felt found, at the center of our universe. Looking for words written in black fire on top of white fire, words that would soar above us like birds pushing against the wind, and lead us to places we had never been. We tore ourselves away from everything we knew and went to a place where the streets were coarse with sand, where the sun set over the Judean desert and its mountains with the heavy, murky light of the day before creation and rose the next morning, scrubbed and smooth, like the body of a baby just born out of mess and blood, now clean and shining.

We went defenseless, not knowing we should be armed against the forces everywhere disguised as friends who were trying to persuade us that “Binah” was enough. Binah: that mysterious form of knowledge, never precisely defined, which

our ancient sources told us inhered in women. Binah, the ability to know one thing from out of another, *l'havin davar mitokh davar*, להבין דבר מתוך דבר. The way magicians pull endless colored scarves from one black hat, so women were supposed to know how to make little suffice, miraculously to stretch the soup, to add water yet somehow not just keep the flavor intact but enrich it. I imagine young girls and women in two long braids and pinafores, in shtetls all over Eastern Europe, being told as if it were a gift or a promise that they possessed Binah. This promise: an excuse not to teach them any more than what was absolutely necessary. We were supposed to be able to stretch our knowledge just like the soup. Binah: a war mentality. Do the best with what you have. Subsist.

But Binah was not just a myth made up by men to keep us quiet. Binah existed without them, preceded them, perplexed them, perhaps even scared them. They imagined us to be drawing ceaselessly and constantly on some well in ourselves, each woman upon her own well or upon a collective well of women's instinct. Drawing and drawing, yet never depleting it. Unlike the men, we didn't have to go anywhere to acquire our knowledge—not to yeshiva, not on a trip around the world, not even to the market. The knowledge that was destined for us, that we anticipated, was nothing outside of ourselves. It was right there beside us, the air itself seemed to whisper. In the house, in our handling of the broom, our quickness with the knife. We were to sit inside our homes, and there some angel would descend and deposit Binah inside us, perhaps without our even noticing. Unlike the men, we were never instructed to be *amelim ba'Torah*, עמלים בתורה, laboring in the study of Torah, to acquire our wisdom. We were supposed to labor bearing sons who would be *amelim ba'Torah*; we labored so that our husbands and brothers could be *amelim ba'Torah*.

However, it was our Binah and not their hard-earned wisdom that was truly necessary for survival. History had proven that it was Binah that sustained us and our families and the

Jewish people. Perhaps we acquired it mysteriously, perhaps even automatically; still we did not evade labor. The hard work came once we had acquired Binah. Binah: I heard the word and thought back to the women to whose husbands God spoke, the women with the visions, knifelike in their clarity, of what was to be done and what avoided. To Sarah, Rebecca, Esther. Women who weighed life and death in their hands as peddlers weighed fish in the market; who made fast judgments then carried out their plans; who risked their lives and their safety but never hesitated. God spoke to only one of them, spoke only once, yet to each it was as if she had heard a voice from inside and obeyed it, had seen a picture in her dreams and created it. Where Mordechai was powerless, Esther ruled a king; where Isaac was blind, Rebecca knew which son was destined to prevail; where Abraham was naive, Sarah detected real danger between his two sons. Each woman saw what had to be done; each one heard her call, unspoken though it might have been; heard it and heeded it.

I thought of those women with their visions that would not go away and imagined the heaviness of their lives. These women relied on no one, not even God Himself, to right the world, to make sure that history unfolded as planned. This responsibility for righting the world, keeping it on track: solely a woman's job. I imagined women over the centuries, down on their hands and knees in the hidden corners of the globe, on the edges of maps, scrubbing away at the world to make it the place they imagined it could be. Since they alone knew what it should look like, it became their job to change it.

I heard the echo of this word, "Binah," once more and saw myself and a circle of women standing around one well, perhaps the well at which Rebecca was found and given to Isaac, rewarded for her Binah, her knowledge of the well, with a man. I saw us standing there together, each one of us adding her own tears to the vast swell beneath us—tears of frustration, of desiring more. The mothers desiring that the reward for