



THE BLOGS

Yochi Rappeport

The Torah was given to women at Sinai – and taken from them many times since



Women of the Wall praying at the Western Wall. (Daniel Shitreet)

My first memory connected to the Torah sends me back over twenty years to Simchat Torah celebrations when I was a young girl. I joined my cousin at the synagogue in the Old City in Safed to dance and rejoice with the Torah scrolls, per the custom of the holiday. While we expected to hear voices in song, already from the edge of the street a piercing burst of cries reached our ears. As we approached more closely we saw chaos: men and women, girls and boys, all clearly in distress. People sat on the steps of the synagogue with bleeding wounds on their arms, and around them were shattered windows, shards of glass covering every surface.

My cousin, who is twenty years older than I, quickly removed me from the area with caution. Later the situation became clearer, and somehow more painful: further down the road is an ultra-Orthodox synagogue, and when they heard that the neighboring synagogue allows women to dance with the Torah, they decided to take measures into their own hands. They rushed to our synagogue, forcibly snatched the Torah scroll from the dancing crowd of women, and caused great violence, deflating the joy of the holiday.

Two decades have passed and not much has changed. Not long ago I found myself in a similar situation, when I arrived for the Rosh Hodesh Heshvan prayer service with Women of the Wall. After years of trying to “sneak” in a Torah scroll, the group decided to march formally into the Western Wall Plaza with fourteen Torah scrolls, visible to all eyes. To great surprise, the security officers allowed the scrolls; but then chaos began. Attendants from the Western Wall Heritage Foundation, together with zealous ultra-Orthodox men, tried to grab the Torah scrolls from the women’s hands. They pushed, struck, cursed, and disgraced G-d’s name – all, as it were, for the sake of the Torah. At the time, I was two months pregnant and not telling anyone yet. I tried to move away from the violent crowd, fearing for the fetus growing inside me. When I learned I was having a baby girl, I knew my work for Women of the Wall would be dedicated to her future, her chance to live freely as a Jewish woman. I became

determined to work toward a future in which contact with the Torah would be a natural facet of my daughter's life.

When I was a girl and we experienced as a community the degradation of having the Torah taken with force, I did not understand why there are those who want to take away this right from us. The answer "because you're a woman" already did not sit well with me.

There are those who claim that a woman is forbidden from reading from the Torah due to her "impurity." These accusers seem to forget that after years of study, searching, and self-exploration in Judaism, I know that a Torah scroll carries sanctity and purity on its own. Maimonides' ruling (Tractate Keilim) establishes that a Torah scroll does not absorb impurity since it is not considered a container.

Despite this, for most of my life I have had to watch from afar, as a spectator, as the Torah is removed from the Ark, accompanied with song and embrace. The men would rejoice at this moment, and the girls and women remained detached from the very thing that is most precious to our hearts and the history of our people. After all, was the Torah not given to all of us, men, women, and children, at Sinai? "So you shall say to the House of Jacob, and tell the House of Israel" (Exodus 19:3). The commentators explain this seeming repetition as referring to both the men and the women.

If in my youth I became accustomed to my frustration with this injustice, with excluding women from having direct contact with the Torah, today I know there is another way. I can choose a synagogue, including many Orthodox synagogues, where women take part in the prayer service and Torah reading, where the Torah scroll travels through the women's section instead of being sent wishes of affection from afar. Possibilities abound and continue to open, and yet the battle continues.

Even after thirty years of steadfast advocacy for equal prayer rights for women at the Western Wall, Women of the Wall cannot consistently read from a Torah scroll as an integral part of our prayer service. While Women of the Wall has succeeded in securing rights for women to pray with tefilin and tallit, Rabbi Rabinowitz, the Western Wall rabbi, refuses to allow reading from a Torah scroll, in opposition to Jewish Law and to the court's ruling.

Many do not understand the essence of this battle, and I too wonder: is it possible that in the Jewish State, Jewish women would be prevented from holding a prayer service with a Torah scroll? What would the response be if Jews were prevented from reading from the Torah in any other country? When I accompany groups of Jewish women visiting from abroad who join us to pray on Rosh Hodesh, they struggle to comprehend how Jewish women are forced to “smuggle” in a Torah scroll month after month, and how the hundreds of Torah scrolls available on the men's side of the Wall are not permitted for women's use.

In her poem “I Will Not Float in Space,” Zelda write: “I have no existence besides the lightning and voices I heard at Sinai.” There are women for whom studying and chanting from the Torah comprises an inseparable piece of their identities. Shavuot marks the blossoming of a covenant, a right given to women as well to be equal partners in the tremendous and formative encounter of receiving the Torah. How then, can we justify a festive ceremony of connecting with the Torah for a thirteen year-old boy, and preventing this very bond for a twelve year-old girl? The matter has no sound basis. The Torah was given to all of us, to study, explore, chant aloud, and embrace in joyful song and dance.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yochi Rapoport is the executive director of Women of the Wall. She was born and raised in the Orthodox environment of the Safed Old City. Upon turning 18, Yochi joined the IDF and served as a commander in a course for Judaism and Zionism for soldiers who aren't Jewish and new immigrants. Following her service, she studied Political Science and Middle Eastern studies at Bar Ilan University, and then served as an executive assistant at an Israeli news agency. Realizing she wanted to be a