
Dr. Ruth Calderon (1961-) is Co-Founder of Elul, the first Israeli secular and egalitarian Beit Midrash and Founder of Alma, a Tel Aviv institution which seeks to acquaint secular Israelis with Hebrew culture. She served as Knesset Member for the Yesh Atid Party from 2013 to 2015.

I am convinced that studying the great works of Hebrew and Jewish culture are crucial to construct a new Hebrew culture for Israel. It is impossible to stride toward the future without knowing where we came from and who we are, without knowing, intimately and in every particular, the sublime as well as the outrageous and the ridiculous. The Torah is not the property of one movement or another. It is a gift that every one of us received, and we have all been granted the opportunity to meditate upon it [as] we create the realities of our lives. Nobody took the Talmud and rabbinic literature from us. We gave it away, with our own hands, when it seemed that another task was more important and urgent: building a state, raising an army, developing agriculture and industry, etc. The time has come to reappropriate what is ours, to delight in the cultural riches that wait for us, for our eyes, our imaginations, our creativity....

I long for the day when the state's resources are distributed fairly and equally to every Torah scholar, man or woman, based on the quality of their study, not their communal affiliation, when secular and pluralistic yeshivot, *batei midrash*, and organizations win fair and equal support in comparison to Orthodox and Haredi *batei midrash*. Through scholarly envy and healthy competition, the Torah will be magnified and glorified.

**COMMENTARY BY YOSSI KLEIN HALEVI**

It is February 2, 2013, the opening session of the 19th Knesset, and Ruth Calderon, newly elected parliamentarian on the centrist Yesh Atid (There

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1 Translated from the Hebrew by Eli Fischer.
is a Future) list, ascends the podium to deliver her inaugural address. She is carrying a volume of Talmud. Better known as an educator than as a politician, she is a founder of a movement to empower secular Israelis in reclaiming traditional Jewish study without necessarily taking on religious observance. And she is here today not so much to declare that cultural revolution as to embody its maturation.

"This book that is in my hands changed my life, and it is to a great extent the reason why I am here today," she begins in a soft, slightly hoarse voice. She presents her life story as her fust text. She is, she says, every Israeli: daughter of refugees-right-wing Sephardi father from Bulgaria, left-wing Ashkenazi mother from Germany. They created a home imbued with faith of refugees and the reason they had come here. She presents her the Talmud from my grandfather," she says. Her state education in Germany. They created a home imbued with faith-not with religion but with the secular faith of Zionist rebirth. "I did not inherit a set of Talmud from my grandfather," she says. Her state education began with the heroic figures of the Bible, ignored the irrelevant and vaguely shameful centuries of exile, and leaped to the heroic figures of the Zionist revolution - "from the Tanach to the Palmach. ... I was not acquainted with th Mishnah, the Talmud, Kabbalah or Hasidism:"

As a teenager, she began to sense the absence of two thousand years of Jewish civilization. "I missed depth. The new Hebrew, created by educators from the country's founding generation, realized their dream and became a courageous, practical, and suntanned soldier: Her irony is affectionate: Even in her disaffection, she is a loyal daughter of secular Zionism. "But for me, this contained- I contained-a void. I did not know how to fill that void. But when I first encountered the Talmud and became completely enamored with its language, its humor, its profound thinking, its modes of discussion, and the practicality, humanity and maturity that emerge from its lines, I sensed that I had found the love of my life, what I had been lacking:"

There is a past, says the MK from Yesh Atid, and it belongs not only to the Orthodox but to me, too. "The Torah is not the property of one movement or another. It is a gift that every one of us received, and we have been granted the opportunity to meditate upon it as we create the realities of our lives. Nobody took the Talmud and rabbinc literature from us. We gave it away, with our own hands, when it seemed that another task was more important and urgent: building a state, raising an army, developing agriculture and industry and so on. ... The time has come to appropriate what ours, to delight in the cultural riches that await us:"

Her first reckoning, then, is with the secular Zionist establishment that ignored the Jewish bookshelf; as Israelis call the body of traditional literature. But there is a second reckoning: with the Orthodox establishment that claims exclusive right to it. MK Calderon proceeds to challenge that hegemony by doing what no one has ever done before on this podium: open a volume of Talmud and teach. "I will read it once in Aramaic, for the music, and then in Hebrew:"

She chooses a disturbing Talmudic story. She has, after all, come here to disturb the status quo, the second-class status of women in Israeli Judaism. The story tells of a rabbi named Rehumei who was so devoted to his own rabbi, the renowned Rava, that he would remain with him throughout the year, returning home only for Yom Kippur. One Yom Kippur he forgot to come home altogether. His wife "shed a tear. He was sitting on a roof. The roof collapsed under him and he died:"

In this place and time, it is a loaded metaphor, implicitly aimed at Charedi men who study Torah full-time and have separated themselves from "home"-the national home. But Calderon hasn't come only to disturb and rebuke; she has come to study, to engage ideological rivals, rather than humiliate and defeat them.

"Rehumei in Aramaic means 'love:' she explains. "Rehumei is derived from the word rehem, womb, someone who knows how to include, how to completely accept, just as a woman's womb contains the baby. This choice of word for 'love' is quite beautiful. We know that the Greek word for 'womb' gives us the word 'hysteria': The Aramaic choice to take the womb and turn it into love is a feminist gesture by the Sages."

Presiding over the session is Yitzhak Vaknin of the ultra-Orthodox Shas party. Whatever skepticism he may have had about this woman with a Talmud has vanished. The word rehem, he tells Calderon, is the numerological equivalent of 248, the same number as positive mitzvot, commandments.

"Fasher koach!" says a delighted Calderon, "May you have strength:"

"I think the idea she is saying is wonderful: the MK from Shas tells the Knesset.

Suddenly this place of divisiveness and cynicism and bombast has turned into a study hall. And the incongruously warm exchange between ideological rivals-Yesh Atid, after all, represents a backlash against ultra-Orthodox power and military exemptions-becomes part of the "oral tradition" of Calderon's speech.

"What can we learn from the story of Rabbi Rehumei?" asks Calderon. "First, I learn that one who forgets that he is sitting on another's shoulders"-whether those of a neglected wife or of IDF soldiers"-will fall. Righteousness is not adherence to the Torah at the expense of sensitivity to human beings:"

"Talmudic choice to take the word rehem, womb, someone who knows how to include, how to completely accept, just as a woman's womb contains the baby. This choice of word for 'love' is quite beautiful. We know that the Greek word for 'womb' gives us the word 'hysteria': The Aramaic choice to take the womb and turn it into love is a feminist gesture by the Sages."
But then, abruptly, she softens again. "I learn that often, in a dispute, both
sides are right ... that both my disputant and I, both the woman and Rabbi
Rehumei, feel that they are doing the right thing and are responsible for the
home! The metaphor becomes explicit: "Sometimes we [non-Charedim] feel
like the woman, waiting, serving in the army, doing all the work while others
sit on the roof and study Torah; sometimes those others feel that they bear the
entire weight of tradition, Torah, and our culture while we got to the beach
and have a great time. Both I and my disputant feel solely responsible for
the [Jewish people's] home. Until I understand this, I will not perceive the problem
properly and will not be able to find a solution:'

This is her challenge to the Knesset, to the people of Israel: Can we replace
a zero-sum discourse with the dialectic of Talmud, in which argument sustains
rather than threatens relationship?

Calderon's own dialectic is balancing outreach to rivals with asserting her
truth. And she turns now to her agenda as an MK: "I aspire to bring about a
situation in which Torah study is the heritage of all Israel, in which the Torah
is accessible to all who wish to study it, in which all young citizens of Israel
take part in Torah study as well as military and civil service: Torah study and
military service aren't mutually exclusive but complementary expressions of cit­
izenship in the people of Israel.

"I long for the day when the state's resources are distributed fairly and
equally to every Torah scholar, man or woman, based on the quality of their
study, not their communal affiliation, when secular and pluralistic yeshivot,
houses of study and organizations win fair and equal support in comparison to
Orthodox and haredi study halls. Through scholarly envy and healthy competi­
tion, the Torah will be magnified and glorified."

MK Calderon is declaring an end to the culture war of Israel's early years.
That war was fought between the "Israelis"-those who saw their new country
as a break with the Jewish past-and the "Jews; those who saw Israel as the na­
Turical continuity of an unruptured story. The war between the "Israelis" and the
"Jews" is over, Calderon is saying, and the Jewswon. Jewish identity and Jewish
texts are no longer peripheral to Israeliness.

But even as she is laying to rest the old culture war, she is implicitly
announcing a new one: a struggle within Israeli Judaism. What kind of Judaism
will prevail here: a Judaism imported wholly from the ghetto, developed under
the most extreme conditions of insecurity and insularity; or new, more open
forms of Judaism reflecting a self-confident people's return to sovereignty? Who
are the rightful conversation partners with the Sages: only the Orthodox or any
Jew, "secular" or "religious," male or female, drawn to the discourse? Who owns
Judaism?

MK Calderon ends by reciting an improvised-and egalitarian-prayer to
"the God of our fathers and mothers"-for success in her work as a public serv­
ant, for keeping "my integrity and innocence intact: MK Vaknin loudly says,
'Amen.' It is a stunning affirmation to Calderon's dare: that religious pluralism
in Israel will happen not through protests and recrimination but with generosity
and self-confidence, holding a volume of Talmud and claiming ownership to a
shared tradition.