*Arevot* – Sephardic Women for Change

Recently two fascinating processes have been taking shape side by side in Israel and the Jewish world. First, the emergence of women’s Batei Midrash and the growing trend of women studying Torah and halacha. Second, the revival among the second and third generation of Mizrahi Jews, with a desire to become familiar with our Sephardic and Mizrahi roots. These two processes underly the establishment of the women’s Beit Midrash *Arevot* last year, under the auspices of the Sephardic Educational Center.

Beit Midrash *Arevot* is centered around the Sephardic-Mizrahi tradition and the connection between our eternal Torah and the changing times we live in. Our objective is to influence contemporary social issues in the public sphere and promote a new female leadership by combining study and action.

*Baruch Hashem*, the world of women’s Batei Midrash is expanding. But among all the institutions existing today there is virtually no place where women can study the Torah of recent Sephardic sages. A whole generation of women have grown up who are alienated from the traditions of their ancestors. The combination of Torah study with the study of Sephardic-Mizrahi roots and a connection to these disappearing traditions is revolutionary. Beit Midrash *Arevot* is totally committed to it.

The establishment of Beit Midrash *Arevot* was preceded by three years of meetings and study by a group of women, following on from Memizrach Shemesh’s “*Tidreshi*” program. During these three years we made the connection with Rabbi Daniel Bouskila, who opened the door for us to the world of Sephardic halacha and thought. Last year, Beit Midrash *Arevot* was founded with the support of the Sephardic Educational Center.

This year *Arevot* has been meeting on a weekly basis, alternating between study sessions in the Beit Midrash and online classes with Rabbi Bouskila. The heart of *Arevot* is the Beit Midrash, attended by a committed core group of eighteen women from a wide range of ages and backgrounds – religious traditional, and even secular; Mizrahi and Ashkenazi. A number of study sessions each year, as well as the online classes, are open to a wider circle of *Arevot* – a group of like-minded women.

Most of the study at the Beit Midrash is led by different members in rotation, alongside classes by guest lecturers, and Talmud classes by *Arevot* member Meira Welt-Maarek. A day in the Beit Midrash opens with a *Devar Torah* on *Parashat Hashavua* from a female viewpoint, based on the commentaries of Sephardic sages. The unit on Sephardic and Mizrahi sages from the last generations was preceded by introductory classes by Rabbi Yitzhak Chouraqui and Prof. Zvi Zohar. In the course of the year we touched on the Torah of Rabbi Haim David Halevi, the innovative halachic rulings of Rabbi Yosef Messas, Rabbi Uzziel’s approach to law and justice, the unity of the Jewish people and the role of contemporary leaders in halachic innovation. We studied the personality and Torah of the Ben Ish Hai in depth, through his letters and responsa over the years. We encountered issues such as social justice, education, and Judaism and democracy, and concluded with a fascinating series of classes by Rabbi Bouskila on biblical criticism in Rabbinic literature.

Naturally, a large proportion of the study was concerned with women’s issues and traditional Sephardic-Mizrahi identity and the connection between the two. We dealt with complex women’s issues that occupy us in our daily life: the role of women in public life; in the cycle of the year and Jewish rituals; and in halachic discussion by men of women’s issues such as Torah study by women, and women being called to the Torah and reading from the megilla. A central issue we dealt with was the concept of *kiddushin* as sanctification, which we connected to the painful problem of get denial. We had an illuminating meeting with a representative of the Mavoi Satum organization, which acts within the rabbinical courts on behalf of women denied a get. This exposed us to the world of the rabbinical courts and the complex relationship between religion and state in Israel. We also studied and researched Sephardic women who were important figures in their own communities. We studied piyyutim by Freha Bat Yosef from Morocco, which have been set to music by Ziva Atar, a musician and paytanit who is a member of *Arevot*. We read the correspondence of Farha Flora Sassoon and Asenat Barzani (see below), and learned through them something of the spirit of their times, the status of women, and their position in their communities. Dr. Vered Madar introduced us to Yemenite women’s oral poetry, and with sociologist Professor Henriette Dahan-Kalev we came to the conclusion that the traditional-Sephardic-Mizrachi feminist voice is not heard enough, and resolved to act towards making this voice heard in Israel and throughout the Jewish world.

The syllabus of the Beit Midrash also featured a personal dimension. Members brought something from their own world into the Beit Midrash – one of the women exhibited her artwork on *tevila*; another shared with us the group study that she performed during the year of mourning for her father, which acted as a force of healing for family and community. One woman, who grew up in Spain, shared her experience as a Sephardic Jew in the Diaspora; and another shared fascinating stories from her thesis on holy Jewish women in the Islamic world.

*Arevot* is centered on Sephardic-Mizrahi Jewish values: social justice, moderation, inclusion, and a strong emphasis on the concept of “*Kelal Yisrael*”. We believe in the power of Sephardic tradition as a basis for social change and a means to overcome the polarization between different groups within society. Through the combination of study and action, Arevot aims to present a different channel of thought and discourse in the Jewish world, based on the traditions and thinking of the Jews of Islamic countries and the Torah of our mothers, which has passed down through the generations as oral tradition from mother to daughter. We believe in the power of this age-old wisdom to make change.

In order to initiate actions that will bring about change, we need comprehensive and in-depth study. We need to create a new language. The study process will enable a conceptualization of the feminine perspective and the sphere of activity of traditional and Mizrahi women in the wider community. The traditional and Mizrahi female voice is unique in the Jewish world, and aims to draw from the living vibrant tradition a new kind of feminism based on tradition and continuity. The different approaches of members of the group to Jewish identity, their different positions on the religious-to-secular spectrum, and their different roots from every Jewish community, Sephardi and Ashkenazi, give the group its power and enable a connection to different strata of society. As far as we know, Beit Midrash *Arevot* is the only one of its kind.

Outside the Beit Midrash, members of *Arevot* are active in a wide range of fields of social activity in different areas of life: education, society, law, culture, and welfare. The members of the group include teachers, psychologists, social workers, lawyers, organizational consultants, managers of non-profits, ordained rabbis, Jewish sociology researchers, an artist and a musician. Recently, for the first time in history, a woman was appointed as legal advisor to the Rabbinic Courts of Israel: Adv. Shira Ben Eli, a member of the Beit Midrash and *Arevot*’s board of directors. Another member, Haggit Molgan, is a candidate in Jerusalem’s upcoming municipal elections, and the musician Ziva Atar, director of the women’s Andalusian choir, Nuba, was recently granted a prize for her work.

One of the fascinating female figures that we have examined this year is Rabbanit Asenat Barzani, who lived in Kurdistan in the 15th-16th centuries. Her father was head of the Yeshiva in Mosul and Asenat was his only daughter. When her husband and father died, she became head of the Yeshiva. One of Rabbanit Asenat's letters that survived, intended to raise funds for the Yeshiva and her community, is written in a style that interweaves biblical verses with Rabbinical language – an eloquent witness to the high level of her scholarship. She describes the community’s grinding poverty and the Yeshiva’s difficulty in surviving under the hard conditions. In the Beit Midrash we studied her writings and discussed her situation as a woman leading a community, deciding halacha and living in such difficult conditions that she was forced to request donations from contributors outside Kurdistan. Issues of feminism and identity came up during the discussion, making it into a kind of microcosm of the study throughout the year.

Another program run by Arevot in parallel to the Beit Midrash is “*Metaksot*”. In this program we guide women through transitional life events and help them design ceremonies that assist them in dealing with these events, for example before giving birth or in periods of mourning. These ceremonies are inspired by Sephardic-Mizrahi tradition as passed on to us from our mothers and grandmothers, but we imbue them with new content and forms derived from the particular circumstances of women in our generation. The development of the ritual contains a process of inter-generational restoration, reconnection to the chain of our mothers’ generation, a natural, living, active, and individual reweaving, a kind of Oral Law. At the moment we are working on constructing a ritual for feminine empowerment, based on the Algerian and Libyan communities’ traditional “*Eid al-Banat*” ceremony, held by women on *Rosh Hodesh Tevet*. This is intended to create a space of feminine solidarity and sisterhood based on Jewish tradition. We hope to celebrate this ritual with groups of women through Israel, and hopefully also in the Diaspora.

The second year of *Arevot* will begin in the New Year of 5779 after Sukkot. In our mind’s eye we see the Beit Midrash expanding and nurturing a new generation of female scholars that will disseminate its approach to the world outside. We see new study groups opening in the periphery and the center, and Sephardic women in Israel and abroad enrolling in study programs which will incorporate the values of Sephardic Judaism: moderation, and attention to the needs of the individual, the community and the world of today.

Wishing everybody a year of happiness and blessings and a *gemar hatima tova*.

*Arevot*, Sephardic Women for Change, Sephardic Educational Center, Jerusalem.