Rites of Passage

Published by Purdue University Press

Rites of Passage: How Today's Jews Celebrate, Commemorate, and Commiserate. Purdue University Press, 2010.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/109533.
In the 1975 yearbook of an Orthodox girls’ high school, students included an illustration that outlined the life cycle of Orthodox Jewish girls. The drawing identified what these high school–aged girls viewed as the stages of their lives and their progress into adulthood. The two-page spread included images of birth, childhood, school days, graduation, marriage, motherhood, and old age. The girls’ vision of their future lives can be traced to both the influences of their school and their experiences as students in a single-sex Orthodox high school.

This essay is part of a dissertation on Orthodox girls’ education in the 1960s through 1980s. It focuses on Bais Yaakov high schools. Bais Yaakov, founded in Poland in 1917, was the first widespread school system for Orthodox girls, and it remains the dominant model of Orthodox girls’ schools in America. Every major Orthodox community has at least one Bais Yaakov school. Bais Yaakov typically attracts the daughters of Yeshivish families, families whose brothers and fathers connected themselves to yeshivot [institutions of high Jewish learning for men] and their leaders, rather than Chasidic rebbes or Modern Orthodox pulpit rabbis. The most fundamental and defining difference between Yeshivish Orthodoxy and Modern Orthodoxy lies in the attitude toward secular American culture and knowledge, with the Yeshivish community being more restrictive and insular.

This essay discusses four schools located in New York. The first, Beth Jacob High School of America (BJHS), located in Brooklyn, was considered a particularly right-wing Yeshivish school. The second school, Bais Yaakov Esther Schoenfeld (BYES), located on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, was a more moderate Bais Yaakov. The third school, Bais Yaakov Academy (BYA), also located in Brooklyn, started as a branch of BYES. BYA eventually grew larger and outlasted its mother institution. It shared BYES’s reputation as a moderate Bais Yaakov. The fourth school, Yeshiva University’s Girls’ High School, was commonly known as Central. Central, which also had branches in Manhattan and Brooklyn, was a Modern Orthodox school and contrasts with the more fundamentalist Bais Yaakov schools.

When looking at schools and students, it is important to remember that prescriptive materials from schools are not necessarily descriptive of the actual
behavior of students. School yearbooks and newspapers, whether quoting the Bible or the Beatles, reveal girls' attitudes toward the cultural ideals they encountered in school, the Jewish community, and the outside world. Together with the New York State Education Department archive, school archives, and oral histories, these sources present both student and school perspectives. They illuminate the rites of passage schools presented; how students related to the messages the schools presented; and the alternative culture, with its own rites of passage, that girls' created, with school influence, for themselves.

Traditional Judaism, as alluded to in the Bible and clearly expressed in the Talmud and rabbinic writings, held essentialist views on men and women. Men and women had clear, defined, and different roles that suited what Judaism considered their different emotional make-ups. The woman's primary role in Judaism is centered in the home. Biblical and rabbinic sources referred to her as the akaret HaBayit, understood as the foundation of the home, a role that included maintaining the physical and spiritual aspects of the home. Traditional Judaism imbibed the work of housekeeping, cooking, and child-rearing with a higher, holier purpose, and it expected women to set the religious tone in the home and raise children with good Jewish values.

Traditional Judaism also stressed the role of women as enablers. The Talmud in Tractate Berachot 17A asked how women accrued merit in this world. The assumption behind the question is that men received merit through fulfilling the command to study the Torah. But women, because they needed to devote themselves to family and home responsibilities, had no obligation to study. The Talmud answered that women accrued merit through their husbands and children, by enabling their husbands and children (though ostensibly it referred only to sons) to learn Torah. The ideal form of life in nineteenth and twentieth century Europe, which became even more popular in postwar America, had men studying Torah full time in a Kollel, a study program for married men, while their wives shouldered the primary responsibility as the breadwinners of the family.

In twentieth century Orthodox society, these views manifested themselves in the strict separate spheres of men and women. The private sphere, the home, belonged to women. The public sphere, which included all public expressions of religious worship in the synagogue, belonged to men. Jewish law, as defined by Orthodoxy, allowed only men to be counted among the ten required for a minyan, the religious quorum required for public prayer services. Women also remained ineligible to lead services, serve as a chazzan [cantor], and participate in the reading of the Torah. Men served in all the leadership roles associated with the synagogue and organized Jewish life.
For boys and men, Orthodox culture had a very obvious rite of passage, the Bar Mitzvah. Celebrated at age thirteen, the Bar Mitzvah inducted a boy into adulthood and into synagogue life, where he could now count toward a minyan along with other adult men and be called up to the Torah. While other Jewish denominations instituted a Bat Mitzvah, with girls reading from the Torah, Orthodoxy continued to believe that the practice of women leading prayer services transgressed Jewish law.

As traditional Orthodoxy maintained strictly separate spheres for men and women, this major rite of passage could only apply to men. For women, whose role in Judaism centered on the home, their only rite of passage would be marriage. With marriage, a woman entered adulthood. She took on her new role as keeper of the Jewish home and future mother to Jewish children. She took on new legal obligations, such as lighting Sabbath candles and keeping the laws of family purity. For much of Jewish history, even up until the early twentieth century, marriage commonly took place around the same age as the Bar Mitzvah.

In the twentieth century, with the common age of marriage rising and the promulgation of compulsory school laws, Orthodox girls spent the years preceding marriageable age in high schools. Accordingly, the leaders of Orthodox girls’ schools directed and prepared girls for marriage and for that rite of passage into their definition of Jewish womanhood. School leaders espoused the message that this role had immense value and responsibility and strongly encouraged girls toward this life choice.

In 1966, Rabbi Uri Shraga Hellman, one of the principals of BJHS, began his letter to students by quoting the Tractate Berachot passage. Printed in the yearbook, the letter went on to describe the purpose of a Jewish girl’s life and the purpose of a Bais Yaakov education as intellectually internalizing the value that learning Torah is of paramount importance in Judaism. Hellman instructed students to put that value into action by sending their children and husbands to learn. In an allusion to a famous Talmudic story, he quipped, “This is all the Torah of Bais Yaakov on one foot, and the rest is commentary.” If one had to sum up the entire purpose and ideology of Bais Yaakov in one sentence, what the school viewed as most important, it would consist of telling students to get married and encourage your husband to learn Torah. This is how Hellman explained to students the purpose of their education, not something academic or intellectual in nature or even directly related to their own development. Hellman ended his letter by telling students that while schools customarily give diplomas upon graduation from school, the students will get their true diploma only when they fulfill the words of this Talmud passage.
In the 1967 yearbook, Rebbetzin Vichna Kaplan, the head of BJHS, discussed what the ideal Bais Yaakov graduate would be like. Kaplan defined her as someone who chooses to marry a man learning Torah full time in Kollel because, “I hope that in the years that you spent in Bais Yaakov, you learned the hashkafa [religious outlook] that a woman can receive her share in Torah only through encouraging and strengthening her husband toward learning, and by guiding her children in the ways of torah.” A student’s marriage, not anything related to her academic development, determined a graduate’s measure of success.

The message of becoming wives and mothers appeared in BYA as well. In a letter to one of the first graduating classes in 1968, BYA principal Rabbi Ephraim Oratz charged students with the responsibility of forging the image that would forever form the seal of BYA. But what Oratz hoped to be the image of a graduate of his school centered on becoming a wife and mother, not on any academic or professional goal. Playing on the name Bais Yaakov, he wrote, “Are you, Bat Yaakov [daughter of Jacob], prepared to assume your beautiful and lofty role in life and to establish your own Bais Yaakov, your home, which is not merely the glitter of furnishings, but the sanctuary that is illuminated with G-dly splendor.”

Schools measured the success of students by their adherence to traditional values. For these school leaders, Bais Yaakov high school served as a prelude to and preparation for marriage. Accordingly, they tried to ensure that students continued on to this rite of passage into Jewish womanhood.

In the 1979 BJHS yearbook, a single teacher, herself an alumna, wrote a poem comparing the experience of graduating with the ultimately more important and more meaningful experience of getting married:

The beautiful gold ring you wear and promise never to remove will give way to another ring—shinier and brighter—that you will never take off. That blue gown you marched in with such pride will be replaced by another gown that you will also march in with pride. And that piece of paper with the pink ribbon tied around it that was presented to you and which you cherish so is only the forbearer of another piece of paper that will also be presented to you but which you will cherish more.

The teacher trumpeted the importance of the wedding ring, gown, and ketubah [Jewish marriage contract] over the class ring, graduation gown, and diploma. The school did not present graduating as a rite of passage; rather, it placed paramount importance on marriage. It encouraged students to keep marriage as their ultimate, defining goal.

Even at Modern Orthodox Central, which strongly encouraged students...
to continue on to college and pursue their education, school leaders emphasized
the importance of marriage. In 1966, a member of Central’s administration
instructed students that they had two purposes in life. The first was to learn
in order to keep the commandments. The second was to prepare themselves
to be future mothers in Israel. The male administrator stated that he hoped
Central’s education had provided them with a Jewish education and prepared
them to be “true mothers in Israel.”  

While right-wing and moderate Bais Yaakov schools differed in their
approaches regarding secular education and school rules, both models of Bais
Yaakov schools equally encouraged students toward marriage. Even Modern
Orthodox Central, which sharply contrasted with Bais Yaakov schools in its
advocacy for secular higher learning and more lax rules, likewise encouraged
students toward marriage. Within the Orthodox community, marriage was
such an essential part of the structure of society and fundamental rite of
passage for girls entering womanhood that schools from across the spectrum
equally pushed marriage as an essential life choice.

Students wrote about their roles and futures as well. From their writings
and from interviews, it seemed that they internalized the values their schools
presented. Student writings displayed an enthusiastic embrace of traditional
domicity. A student essay in the 1964 BJHS yearbook showed students’
acceptance of their role as Jewish mothers in accordance with how it was
deﬁned by the school: “Who is responsible for educating the next generation?
Who is responsible for the future of am yisroel [nation of Israel]? . . . This high
task was given into the hands of the Jewish mother. . . . she should feel the
holy obligation.”  

In 1965, Central students rejected external messages they heard about
pursuing careers and reaffirmed the message their teachers and administrators
advanced:

How many times, in years gone by, have we been lulled to sleep by
stirring orations beginning: “The Youth of today are the leaders of
tomorrow”? Now, for a senior, these rather trite words take on an
ominous meaning. “Me?”—you say, cringing slightly—“the leader of
tomorrow?” I just want to get married and raise a family.” Think for
a moment, dear senior. Even if you do not become a doctor, lawyer,
nurse, psychologist, or artist, you will still have a very important task
to fulﬁll. In raising a family, you will be instilling into your children the
values that will remain with them for the rest of their lives. Even if
you are not a leader of THIS generation, you will be a molder of the
leaders of the NEXT generation. So, senior, whatever you become,
don’t take your tasks lightly, for YOU are . . . Tomorrow.
This sentiment did not change over time. Decades later, in the 1982 BJHS yearbook, the members of the senior class reaffirmed their commitment to their role as Jewish women: “This yearbook symbolized our graduation and our crossing over from being the next generation to creating it. And so, we dedicate ourselves to being future mothers of Israel.”

While Bais Yaakov schools pushed their students into the private sphere, with marriage as their only potential rite of passage, Bais Yaakov also provided students with the means to generate their own rites of passage. Whereas in centuries past girls went straight from the private sphere of their parents’ home to their married home, in the twentieth century girls left their homes and went to school. As students in Bais Yaakov schools, girls found themselves inhabiting a public sphere similar to that of their brothers in yeshiva.

For example, at Bais Yaakov, students also had the opportunity, to a small extent, to replicate male prayer services. Every morning, girls prayed together as a group, with one student serving as the chazzanit [literally, a female cantor] and leading the prayers. In the activities pages of the BYA yearbook, a picture of the “Chazaniyos” appeared alongside other club pictures, which displayed members of the school band, newspaper staff, honor society, and student council. Within the total female environment of Bais Yaakov schools, girls ran all aspects of communal life. Girls served as class presidents, headed religious education and community service committees, and occupied various other leadership roles not available to women in the Yeshivish Orthodox community.

With schools creating their own religious society and small public sphere, schools gave students plenty of alternative rites of passage. Students turned school rituals, color wars, theatrical productions, and school ceremonies into rites of passage. Students in both schools devoted pages to that year’s color war. Student writing indicates that they became very involved in each year’s color war and that winning was a momentous occasion. Additionally, schools put on a musical production each year. Yearbooks contained pages covering the production as well. Being the chair of one of the many committees involved in putting on the production earned a student a place and a picture in the yearbook.

Even those rituals designed to lead to homemaking, such as learning how to make a chicken Kosher during senior year, became schoolhouse rites of passage. Students wrote about that class session as one of the defining events of being a senior.

Additionally, while faculty might not have considered graduation as a rite of passage, students certainly did. In the page of images representing the life
cycle, students attributed importance to school days and graduation, which would have been approaching as the students drew this picture. Students viewed school life and graduation, both phenomena new to Orthodox Jewish life in the twentieth century, as important steps on the road to adulthood. Interestingly, students did not include college or career, two stages of life Bais Yaakov school leaders discouraged, in their life cycle.

While at first glance Orthodox girls’ schools seemed to have been restricting girls’ rites of passage narrowly to marriage and adopting the role of wife and mother, at the same time the schools served to create a new stage of life and a whole other set of rites of passage, generated by girls themselves, for becoming Bais Yaakov graduates and twentieth century Orthodox women.

NOTES

1 Beth Jacob is the anglicized version of the term Bais Yaakov.
2 The source of the term is Psalms 113:9. There are countless sources on women in home and family. See, for example, Mishna Yuma 1:1, Tractate Ketuboth, Tractate Sanhedrin 110a, Commentaries on Proverbs 14:1.
4 Tractate Berachot 17a.
5 See, for example, Moshe Meiselman, Jewish Woman in Jewish Law (New York: Ktav and Yeshiva University Press, 1978).
6 M’gama, Beth Jacob High School of America yearbook (1966), 15.
7 M’gama (1967), 8-9.
8 Hamaayan, Bais Yaakov Academy yearbook (1968), 5.
9 Hamaayan (1968), 5.
10 M’gama (1973), n.p.
13 Elchanet, Yeshiva University High School for Girls of Brooklyn yearbook (1965), n.p.
15 See, for example, Hamaayan (1972-1978), n.p.; and Hamaayan (1983), n.p.
16 See, for example, Elchanet (1970), n.p.; Elchanet (1963), 56; and Beth Jacob Teachers Seminary and High School Alumnae Bulletin, June 1979, 2, Beth Jacob Teachers Seminary of America Archive.