

Abstract

Background

The National-Religious Education Stream (N.R.E.S.) is still looking for the right balance between national - modern values and religious - traditional values. Dagan (5747) mentions that the leaders of the N.R.E.S. are dealing with questions such as: the attitude to Jewish independence, settling all parts of the land of Israel, their responsibility towards both the secular and religious Israeli public, carrying the public yoke of the state and the physical existence of the Jewish people both in the Diaspora and in Israel. Taub (2007) adds that internally there are conflicts emerging as a result of the changing of institutions from traditional religious schools to national religious institutions.

The centrality of the Oral Torah in the N.R.E.S. in general, and in the Yeshivot and the Ulpanot (girl's high schools) in particular, requires a rethinking of the attitude or attitudes towards the teaching of this subject matter and its syllabus. What goals and emphasis should be placed on teaching this subject? Who should deal with specific difficulties and problems that the teaching of the Oral Torah presents to educators?

In light of this, my initial research objective was to examine and analyze the different processes and changes that the teaching of the Oral Law is experiencing in institutions that combine the teaching of Judaism with other secular subjects.

The theoretical framework

The theoretical fields that this study deals with are: the knowledge of the subject- the Oral Torah, the Mizrachi stream - N.R.E.S., the renewal of the syllabus, changes to the matriculation examinations and gender related questions regarding the teaching and studying of the subject.

Previous studies on the teaching of Talmud in Yeshivot and Ulpanot, in which the subject is extensively taught, examined the students' opinion of the subject or the syllabus over the years. (Eisenberg, 1988; Amid, 5760; Bar Lev & Vayzer, 2000; Brandes, 2000; Ganot, 2001; Dagan, 5766; Yismach, 5746; Lifshitz, 2010; Shwartz, 2002; Segal, 2001; Gribetz, 1995). These studies were done using questionnaires ,or

by analyzing the written syllabus. As a result, there remains place for an in-depth study into the professional narratives of the teachers in the profession, who lead the profession and have experienced it over the years.

Traditional Jewish studies within the educational framework for females demanded a change and required a solution from a situation in which there was almost no institutionalized education for girls (Gurock, 1988). Studying together with boys in Yeshiva high schools is totally out of question, by the very definition of a Yeshiva; therefore a need emerged to establish religious institutions for girls – the Ulpana. The Ulpana is the educational framework for girls paralleling the Yeshivot (which are intended only for boys) in the religious- Zionist educational system (Avnion, 1997).

The first Yeshiva High School, 'Yeshivat Hayeshuv Hachadash' in Tel-Aviv, was founded towards the end of the 1930s (Katz 1999). This framework developed and became more sophisticated in subsequent years, and today there are tens of Yeshiva High Schools in Israel. These Yeshivot serve as the main stream of education for national religious boys of high school age (Bar-Lev, 5747; Hertz, 1997).

The first attempt at establishing an Ulpana for girls was in 1942 in the Ein Ganim neighborhood of Petach Tikva. According to Rosenberg-Friedman (2004) this attempt failed due to a lack of interest and because of the lack of an educational leadership to drive the new venture. In 1960 the first successful Ulpana was established at Kfar Pines. Today there are tens of Ulpanot spread out throughout the country, which like the Yeshiva High Schools for boys, serve as the main stream of education for national religious women of high school age. (Gross, 2002; Sheshar, 1997; El-Or, 1998). Within these two frameworks different and varied fields of study are undertaken as in other high schools, but a strong emphasis is placed on Jewish Studies.

Existing literature also touches on the school curriculum, starting with the Tachkemoni Program (1924), of the Tachkemoni School in Jerusalem (Zeliger, 5690), through the Mizrachi plan in 5692 (1932) (Berman & Angel, 5692), prior to the establishment of the state of Israel, and focuses on changes made in these programs, as well as dealing with the role of the state in education since the legislating of the National Education Law in 5713 (1953) (Eisenberg, 1988; Shwartz 2002).

Goal of the research

The goal of the research is to identify and understand the internal world of the teachers who are responsible for the processes connected to the teaching of the Oral Torah (Talmud) in the Yeshiva High Schools and Ulpanot. The research will focus on the attempt to understand, amongst the various narratives, the character of the changes which have taken place in the syllabus, the explanations the teachers give for these changes and their attitudes towards them.

Research Questions

1. How do the teacher's understand the character of the **teaching process** (traditional or renewable) of Oral Torah? Does a comparative perspective between general education, as known to us in the literature, and the unique teaching of Talmud arise? What can we learn by comparing the process of teaching Talmud in the past and the present?
2. What are the characteristics and meanings of the changes which have taken place in the **matriculation examinations** in the eyes of the teachers?
3. Is there a place for a modern **gender orientated outlook** in studying Oral Torah amongst the participants of the study?

Methodology

In my research I used semi structured interviews with existing and open questions, thereby allowing interviewees to express their personal attitude and behavior in practice. The selection of an interview whose starting point is the "sailing question" (Sabar Ben Yehoshua, 1997), grew out of a desire to get to the bottom of things, and to try to understand what the interviewees feel and think. In an interview like this I thought that I could get the information about the 'professional life' (Conle, 2000) of the interviewee in an in-depth manner, compared to cold data which is usually expressed in a questionnaire or in a closed interview.

The research is based on the qualitative approach, (Sabar - Ben Yehoshua, 2001), which helps to understand a social or educational phenomenon, its nature and to understand its meaning. This is done by penetrating the everyday world of the

subjects, while attempting to recognize the individual perspective of the various subjects and how they understand the phenomenon being researched.

Twenty five teachers of Oral Law (Talmud) from eight Yeshivot and Ulpanot participated in this study. In each school I tried to interview three teachers of different seniority (over 30 years, 20 years and 10 years of seniority). A third of the teachers are also examiners in the matriculation examinations (males only). A further third are teachers in Ulpanot. This allows me to investigate the changes in the matriculation examinations and the results achieved for each gender for the subject. The diversity of institutions and teachers helped to validate the results. The given population is ideal for finding unique distinctions and common denominators beyond the specific case of the study (Yosifon, 2001).

Findings

The process of education is made up of a number of components including, organized syllabi, the teacher and his personal identity, teaching aids and others. We have seen that the teacher's attitude to the changing syllabi and means of teaching is ambivalent. On the one hand, there exists an understanding and even the wish to modernize, while on the other hand the standing tradition, and the will to preserve the character of the Yeshiva and the character of the learning causes any attempt to modernize to be rejected. This not only influences the content of the learning material but also the make up of the staff and students and causes the exclusion of women and girls and retards the equality between men and women in the field.

Most of the participants in the study, expressed their willingness and intention to uphold the importance of the subject and the professional tradition of teaching it as it was practiced for many generations. This situation causes the teachers to be the leaders in the practical instruction and for the supervisors and establishment to guide the syllabus. The unique professional authority, of the studied subject, in regards to religion and tradition like the teaching of Talmud for example, is held in the hands of the Rosh Yeshiva and Rabbis because of their esteemed standing within the religious community. From the interviews it arises that the teachers find themselves on the continuum between the Yeshiva and between the high school. While some see themselves as Rabbis in traditional Yeshivot others see themselves as high school teachers preparing their students for matriculation examinations. The majority of

teachers see themselves as falling somewhere between the two extremes. Some of the teachers understand their professional identity as being emissaries of the religious – principled mitzvah of studying Torah. They instill in the pupils basic content of the subject and defined knowledge which will assist him in the future to study Torah. Some of the teachers see the main goal of their teaching and the learning of Talmud as a means to further the 'official' goals of matriculation and academia even if through doing so the student gains other values of the Yeshiva style of learning.

Matriculation examinations:

The matriculation examinations are central to the story of the teachers who teach Talmud and prepare the pupils for the examination. During the research I also heard the stories of the examiners and appraisers of the examinations, who I managed to reach despite difficulties in identifying them and getting their agreement to participate in the research. I learnt that subjects without an examination are not highly regarded in all types of high schools. As such the matriculation examination is the locomotive that leads the subject matter. On the importance of the matter, the fact that the first substantial change made by the new supervisor from the Ministry of Education was to publicize the contents of the examination for eleventh grade in 5771, will testify.

The examinations are derived from the existing programs, from which it is impossible to determine what the character of the Yeshiva student, who has spent many hours of study for eight years should be. It has not been clarified as to whether in addition to the religious principled mitzvah of studying Talmud the student is to be equipped with basic content of the subject and defined knowledge which will assist him in the future as an adult in the society within which he lives. The matriculation examination includes chapters from different tractates of the Babylonian Talmud but it is not clear if the student has acquired knowledge from other fields of the Oral Torah and if so how. It seems that the main emphasis is placed on the output of the number of pages of Talmud so that the pupil can achieve a fitting and worthy grade and not necessarily on the laying of the foundation for further learning which should form the basis of the lifestyle of the religious man. What about the women? Will the examinations be made suitable for them?

The gender question:

The educational and professional leaders need to carefully consider and find a solution to these problems. There exists a wide gap in knowledge, between boys and girls, whether resulting from social perceptions or from long standing traditions that shape their world of values. We must determine whether in a modern nation state, there is still room for the great difference which exists between the Yeshivot and the Ulpanot in teaching the Oral Torah. Most of the teachers who participated in the study, including female teachers (the minority) still have reservations about equating teaching and content and even have doubts about teaching Talmud in the Ulpanot. There is no doubt that the existing equality in the secular world and academic education has influenced women's Torah study in secondary institutions. These influences will eventually seep into the Ulpanot as has happened in the Orthodox institutions that lead the orthodox feminist revolution in the United States to which Tamar Alaur alludes in her books.

Conclusions and research contribution

The importance of this study is in understanding the processes and changes, that the teaching of Oral Torah is undergoing, as representative of Jewish education, balancing the desire to maintain traditional continuity with the desire for innovative teaching. The various programs that deal with teaching Oral Torah invested enormous efforts in the light of various surveys about the state of the profession. As a teacher I found myself exposed to and participated in such programs, each built on a detailed reasoned rationale. I have not found any orderly research which delves the depth of the problem, because of the complexity of the three way discourse between parents, teachers and students in the N.R.E.S.. Through understanding the teaching of Oral Torah, more widespread phenomena among a sector trying to advance, as the rest of the world, without losing its traditional religious characteristics can also be understood.