



From Red Square to the Kosel Plaza

AS THE BATTLE FOR THE SANCTITY OF THE KOSEL CONTINUES TO RAGE, LEAH AHARON'S INNER BATTLE TO DEFINE AUTHENTIC JEWISH FEMINISM HAS PITTED HER AGAINST THE AGENDA OF THOSE SEEKING TO "LIBERATE THE WALL"



LEAH GEBBER

Growing up in Communist Russia, Leah Aharoni daily crossed the threshold of their front door and looked up at the faint groove in the wooden doorframe. Deep inside, a mezuzah was buried, painted over with whitewash.

For Leah, it was a symbol of the double life she and her family led. “Outside, one had to be a good Communist. But at home I was taught to analyze the rhetoric and biased history we were taught in school and in our youth group. And then to search for the truth.”

Leah Aharoni was primed for the interrogation that could take place any moment; Communist doctrine spouted easily from her lips. However, the Soviet Union wasn’t just a place of dreaded interrogations and the constant threat of Siberia. It was also the capital of egalitarian values. Whether borne of economic necessity or socialist ideals, women were an intrinsic part of the Soviet workforce. In fact, during the ’60s and ’70s, women comprised a full 50 percent of the country’s educated specialists. Leah’s family was no exception: her mother — and grandmother — were prominent lawyers. Her aunts were chemists.

Women’s lib met Communist utopia. The result? According to Leah: “A mangled society of miserable women, emasculated men, and neglected children. A society with dismal marriage rates and the highest divorce rate in the world.”

Although her family conformed to Soviet egalitarian ideals, they opposed Communism. Around the dinner table, Leah’s parents were vocal critics of the human rights crimes, repression, and misguided and corrupt economics. And in their proud Jewish identity, they danced with danger. “We knew about the Jewish holidays and Shabbos, a special day although we didn’t observe it traditionally. We obtained matzos each Pesach and conducted a Seder, at which my cousins and I searched for the *afikomen*. We even kept halachos I dismissed as superstition, such as washing hands after leaving a cemetery.”

For all the egalitarian polemics, anti-Semitism was alive and kicking. Leah attended an exclusive school geared to children of government officials and leading academics. In third grade, one girl began ranting: “Jews, Ukrainians, and Georgians — we’re going to rule over you.” That evening, Leah told over the day’s events to her parents. Horrified, Leah’s father marched to school the next morning and upbraided them on this shocking deviation from Communist ideals. It was a decisive moment in Leah’s life: both the experience of raw hatred and seeing how her father could make use of Soviet hypocrisy to protect his daughter.

THE LAND OF THE FREE (MAN)

When Leah was 12, the Iron Curtain finally lifted. Her parents made plans to emigrate to the US. Shortly before they left, a *shaliach* brought a stack of siddurim and Chumashim to Russia, and Leah received a set. The pages were photocopies from a siddur dating from the 1880s — the Hebrew was translated into Old Church Slavonic, a Russian dialect. “I started reading through and something clicked inside me. I learned from the siddur and Chumash and decided I would commit myself to the truth I found within the ancient script.”

In the United States, her parents initially enrolled her in an exclusive non-Jewish private school, but Leah was determined to get a Jewish education. She opened a phone book, found the entry

for Jewish schools, and called the first one on the list. Rabbi Menachem Meier of Frisch invited her for an interview, and Leah took the bus to New Jersey right away. Alone. Rabbi Meier was flabbergasted. "Don't you have parents?" he asked her. He accepted Leah on the spot — with a full scholarship. Not only that, he set up a special program to fast-track new Russian students through their Jewish education, from *alef-beis* to Rashi script and everything in between.

Although Leah's English was good and her academic achievements enviable, she never felt truly integrated with her peers. When she learned about the mitzvah to live in Eretz Yisrael, she thought, *That's a mitzvah I'm going to do*. Even before she went to seminary in Eretz Yisrael, she decided she'd make Israel her home.

During her year in seminary, Leah grappled head-on with many underlying principles that were part of her upbringing. "We don't live the way our grandmothers lived. Our whole society works differently and our thinking is different. We look at the world through tinted prisms. Becoming aware of that color can give us the self-knowledge to recognize our underlying attitudes and strive for our inner truth."

One of the underlying attitudes Leah put her finger on was feminism. The Russia of her youth, after all, if not a worker's paradise, was a feminist utopia. In seminary, the woman's role in Judaism was a huge issue that she excavated extensively. Although many of us automatically regard feminism as *treif*, all of us would protest if a male coworker earned a higher wage simply because of his gender. And whether we love or hate to work, the opportunities women have to practice a profession or open a business is largely thanks to the feminist movement.

The big news of feminism is that both men and women have intrinsic value. That's old news in Judaism. The problem with feminism is that it sets up women with an agenda of proving that whatever men can do, women can do better. "But Yiddishkeit doesn't come in two flavors — male and female," explains Leah. "Rather, it comes in 600,000 flavors, as every individual serves HaKadosh Baruch Hu with his — or her — uniqueness."

Leah likes to compare this idea to an ice cream sundae. Give everyone a bowl of vanilla ice cream, and they'll be happy. But let them enhance it with chunks of chocolate, syrup, cherries, and cookies, and it turns into something unforgettable. The basis of our lives is Torah and mitzvos; every mother has the general mission of bringing up her children and being a good wife. We may be spending most of our days caring for our family. But once we're connected with our specific mission, we're energized and vibrant, and can use our unique skill set to make Hashem's greatness known in the world — we've added the extra touches and can savor the special flavor.

Leah's *rabbanim* in seminary provided formidable models of *avodas Hashem*. She saw families where the husband and wife took turns attending shul on Shabbos — the husband went for the *vasikin* minyan and the wife attended minyan when her husband returned. At first, Leah adopted similar standards, judging her *avodas Hashem* by whether it measured up to male standards. "I had certain expectations of myself. Shacharis must take at least 40 minutes; learning must be done from primary sources only — a book without footnotes wasn't serious."

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SUPERMOM SYNDROME

Becoming a mother gives birth to some of the deepest tectonic shifts in personality a woman can experience. For Leah, it was also a time when life and its demands challenged closely held ideals. In the Russia of Leah's childhood, there was basically one parenting dynamic: parent commands, child obeys. An only child, she also missed out on observing other children being parented. Over the years, Leah invested many years into learning and working on parenting skills.

These challenges of motherhood were compounded by spiritual uncertainty. One year, in her early 20s, her three-year-old threw a tantrum just as they were about to leave for Megillah reading. "I grew frustrated and angry because I'd miss part of the Megillah." In the intellectual, egalitarian Yiddishkeit Leah had absorbed, raising happy kids and living a vibrant Jewish life were uneasy bedfellows — if Mom is to be left intact.

Leah tells of a regular Shabbos morning, where she struggled to concentrate on Shema and Shemoneh Esrei. Her toddler was using her as a jungle gym and her nine-year-old was frantically scouring the room for a lost earring. Wondering whether to turn to her siddur, her daughter, or her toddler, she reached an epiphany: "I always thought women should adopt a religious experience that is, within halachic limitations, as close as possible to traditional male observance. Ironically, the traditional approach to women's observance, which is much more experiential, is so much more in tune with women's lives."

Not only is the "experiential approach" closer to a family's rhythm, it also liberates women from supermom syndrome. "A mom's daily routine can look something like: wake up, diaper change, pack lunches, tantrum, carpool, commute to work, meeting, report, boss, commute, homework, play date, mad dinner rush, bedtime story, housework, grocery shopping, crash into bed. No, there's no time or mental energy for a leisurely Minchah or a learning session. Should such a woman feel subpar or invalidated?"

"My main struggle remains striving for

balance. There's a streak of perfectionism in me. Women tend to set up an agenda of being superwomen — top-notch professional, davening every morning, being wonderful mommies, great cooks. There's no end. And yet, we're so overwhelmed with everything on our plates. There's a reason why we don't have to perform certain mitzvos: Hashem doesn't need us to be supermoms. Paradoxically, I can imagine situations where, although you're performing a mitzvah, you're missing the important things in life."

Because Leah is by nature and upbringing more intellectually inclined, she goes out of her way to bring "experiential Yiddishkeit" into her home. She bakes *schlissel challah* — as much for the *segulah* as to create colorful memories for her children. On Pesach, they hold the Seder in the living room, reclining on richly draped couches with props and costumes.

AUTHENTIC FEMINITY

While mothering her six children, Leah opened a successful translation business. Around a year ago, she shifted into business coaching and began mentoring small businesses. Leah teaches women how to run a business without risking money and time they can't afford, how to find resources, deal with unexpected circumstances, and build clientele.

The impetus for her change in career direction was a trip to the States to visit her parents. The week Leah arrived, there "just happened" to be an American Express-sponsored workshop for female entrepreneurs in New York, led by one of the foremost entrepreneurship experts in the country. The *Hasbagachah* was clear. "The clincher was when I saw some of these ideas discussed in books of Chassidus. It's like Divine wisdom is trickling down into the world these days in ways even non-Jews can appreciate and understand."

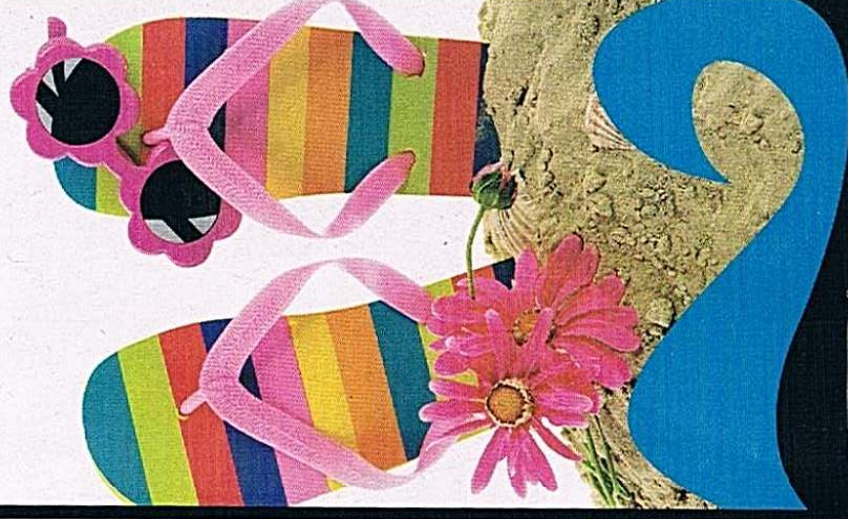
Overcoming self-doubt and lack of self-appreciation are hurdles that face all business owners — Jews and non-Jews. To counter these nagging negativities, Leah gives the example of a contractor who wouldn't send an

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“If we view everything that comes from Hashem as a gift of love for us as individuals, it will be so much easier to pass our tests”

electrician, plumber, or builder to a construction site without the wires, pipes, or bricks he needs for the job. So too, Hashem wouldn't send us into the world without the tools we need — even if we haven't yet made use of them.

Leah is passionate about her conclusion: “Don't let your dreams get squelched just because you think you can't do something. If this is what Hashem wants you to do here, He'll find a way to help you overcome the technical difficulties.”

One of Leah's first clients was a woman on the verge of closing her kosher gym. “I taught her to look at her business through her clients' eyes. What are they coming for? Get into your clients' heads; discover what makes them tick, and what they're really looking for. Then you can make changes, talk to them in their own language, appeal to their wants and needs.” Using Leah's tools, the gym owner changed her entire approach to the business. Within a month, she had 40 new clients.

This invaluable skill of looking at a situation from another perspective has also helped Leah in her parenting; it has made her gentler and more accepting toward her children. “Today when my three-year-old throws a tantrum, I understand it's a developmental stage. Looking at it through the child's perspective makes it much easier to handle the situation calmly.”

In fact, a mother's unconditional love toward her children is one of the unique gifts a woman can apply to her *avodas Hashem*. “If we view everything that comes from Hashem as a gift of love for us as individuals — not just as part of the grand scheme of things — it will be so much easier to pass our tests. Hashem creates each of our circumstances specifically with our personal development in mind.” One of Leah's personal challenges has been parenting a child with ADHD. Leah recalls sitting in the yard one day when this child was around two, looking at her, and making a firm decision in her heart to love her no matter what.

Leah reflects: “Being a parent of this child is one of the most challenging things I've have done and there's a long way to go. I've made lots of mistakes on the way, but I know there's absolutely no way I could've gotten to the understandings I have today without traveling the journey I've traveled. I'm slowly reaching a point where I can let go of my own vision and connect to the future this child has in store for her based on the divine mission Hashem has charged her with.”

One of the other unique gifts of Jewish femininity is a deep inner understanding that spiritual growth — any growth — is a process, not an event. Sometimes, when events or our own character growth — or our children's levels of *ruchniyus* — do not match our vision, we can get discouraged. “But I have 120 years to become the best me I can,” Leah says. “As I look back at the person I was 15, ten, or even five years ago, I'm happy to notice the progress — which was the result of many, many baby steps and failing plenty of times along the way.”

BATTLING FOR THE WALL

Involved as Leah is in helping women develop their unique feminine gifts and potential, it's not surprising that when her neighbor Ronit Peskin took up the issue of the sanctity of the Kosel and set up Women for the Wall (as opposed to Women of the Wall, who use the Kosel to promote their beliefs in feminist, nondenominational prayer and society), Leah became heavily involved.

"I saw one of the members of Women of the Wall give an interview to the BBC. She portrayed Israel as a kind of Saudi Arabia that tramples upon women's rights and represses women. In their eagerness to push their political agenda, WoW stooped to blackening Israel to the world."

Leah was furious. "In ten years of business dealings with non-Jews and secular Jews, I have gone out of my way to prevent *chillul Hashem*. Sometimes that meant paying vendors out of pocket before being paid myself or absorbing the cost of misunderstandings that occasionally occur. Seeing someone do the opposite for political gain was unfathomable."

More fundamentally, Leah objects to the beliefs WoW sends to other women. "The message they're sending is that the only way to be empowered is to be like men. They're undermining the female experience. Everyone has his own life mission — which has nothing to do with tallis and tefillin."

Feminists, Leah explains, believe that women and men are exactly the same. But that's patently false on every level. Women are different and their spiritual experience is different — and that's the way it should be.

As women, there's lots of space in our lives for differences. Leah talks with admiration of her next-door neighbor who, with 12 children at home, still cooks for families in need. Each Friday, she sends Leah home-baked pita. There are two choices when faced with a supermarket next door: to beat ourselves up for not being on her level of *chesed* (or *tefillah*, or mothering, or... just fill in the blank), or to gain inspiration from her, while recognizing that what she does is beyond me, and that's okay. Only when we're comfortable with ourselves can we really unite with other Jewish women, one of the most important outgrowths of the W4W campaign.

Rabbanim across the national-religious and chareidi spectrum endorsed their organization and the peaceful prayer gathering that took place on Rosh Chodesh Sivan, when thousands of women and seminary students flocked to the Kosel.

Anyone present at the Kosel that Rosh Chodesh couldn't help but be moved by the sight of thousands of women and girls, swaying in silent devotion, providing models of vibrant, yet deeply private, connections with HaKadosh Baruch Hu. Uniquely feminine models of connection.

It all comes down to the lessons Leah learned in Moscow, as she crossed the threshold of their home and passed the hidden mezuzah: "It's looking beyond the veneer of what we see, and arriving at the truth that lies beneath it all." ■

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