



Photo by Gideon Levin

# Leah Kohn

## teaching women

by **Devorah Goldman**

It's 9:20 in the morning, and the woman at the head of the long table means business. Dressed professionally in a refined though understated way, and with an authoritative, dignified aura, she surveys an assortment of books she has open before her, reviewing her handwritten notes.

About 35 women file in on this rainy morning, ranging in age from 20 to 60 and take their seats. They have a visible seriousness of intent and are prepared. Many bring notebooks as well as mini-tape recorders. The deep ruby red walls, beautiful antique furniture, overstuffed chairs and Oriental carpets lend the room a refinement, the perfect backdrop for this "CEO" to present her case.

Suddenly, the women fall silent, and all eyes fall on the woman at the head of the table.

"It's 9:30, so let's begin," says Leah Kohn, in her characteristic, heavy Israeli accent.

For the next 90 minutes, Mrs. Kohn—Rebbeztin to all who know and revere her, and co-founder (with her husband, Rabbi Chaim Kohn) of the Upper West Side's Jewish Renaissance Center—assumes control of the complex material before her. She easily sifts through dozens of Torah commentaries and opinions like a knife slicing through butter. She holds up a particular *posuk*, or Torah passage, and teases out of it the legal, moral, biblical, historical, spiritual and practical aspects of the words. As she pauses for a moment, she leaves the women riveted to their seats, nodding in recognition of personal truths, and immediately thirsting for more.

It's not a passive discussion. As soon as Mrs. Kohn pauses, the questions come fast and furious, and they are usually the two-ton variety: "Why does God cause good people to suffer? How do we know that Torah is true? Where is God during the bus bombings in Israel?"

Mrs. Kohn never flinches, and she never, ever evades a tough question.

“What makes life sacred and meaningful? We are told if a person wants to know what life after life will be like, she should look at her life now. The goal is constant growth. Good and difficult situations are both opportunities to achieve.”

“Of course we should be disturbed about what is happening in Israel right now,” she says emphatically. But she insists that tough times don’t give us permission to back down from belief. “Sometimes difficult times can actually bring us closer” to believing.

Cell phones ring, a baby gurgles—and all eyes are locked on Mrs. Kohn. The women in this particular class come from a range of Jewish backgrounds and secular professions. But one thing is perfectly clear: these women have hit the spiritual jackpot—their spiritual jackpot—and they know it. Mrs. Kohn has, in effect, deciphered their own spiritual traditions for them, traditions that they had either never learned in such depth or else regarded as antiquated, obtuse or worst of all, irrelevant.

Somehow, this 12th generation Jerusalemite, who did not speak English fluently until she was in her 30s, has found a way to bring meaning into her students’ busy, modern lives.

“Mrs. Kohn has the uncanny ability to understand and relate to the many different types of women that learn with her,” says Sorah Birnbaum, 53, a JRC student and senior vice president and investment adviser at Wachovia Securities. Mrs. Birnbaum, a Wall Street veteran for 25 years, did not grow up religious, and discovered Mrs. Kohn and the JRC in the late ’80s in a midtown *parsha* class. “Her understanding of Torah and its values, coupled with her own life experience, make her a valuable mentor.”

On any given day (or night) of the week, the peripatetic Mrs. Kohn (supported by a distinguished faculty) delivers classes on a vast array of Jewish subjects in Manhattan at her center

for women’s learning, as well as in private offices and homes in Midtown, in Brooklyn, and in Englewood, New Jersey. She also privately counsels any student that wishes to talk with her, and manages to find time to meet one-on-one with students who have questions that are outside the scope of a particular class. One gets the feeling that Mrs. Kohn doesn’t put too much stock in sleeping.

Mrs. Kohn is, simultaneously, by all measures, a scholar, well versed in the cultural and intellectual ways of the world at large, and a keen observer of human nature. She is also exquisitely humble. The request for an interview meets with reluctance and a shy, quizzical look that seems to ask, “But why would you want to interview me?”

Why, indeed: She has brought back hundreds of women to their Jewish roots, while setting new standards for Torah education for women. She has waved her hard-earned wand of scholarship and made ancient traditions and laws completely relevant to her students.

“Mrs. Kohn is the real thing, no glitter or schmaltz,” says Manhattan resident Robyn Barsky, 38, and SVP of the Jewish Funders Network, a global agency that provides strategic services to Jewish philanthropists. “Watching Mrs. Kohn in action inspired me to move into living a lifestyle guided by Torah.”

Barsky, who grew up in a Reform home in Lawrence, discovered Mrs. Kohn’s bible class in 1997 and became a regular at the JRC.

“She has an unbelievable, in-depth knowledge of Jewish teachings and a rare ability to present this knowledge in a way that is comprehensible and inspirational,” enthuses Barsky. “While she is brilliant, she is an incredibly modest and sensitive person. She truly cares about her students.”

Mrs. Kohn’s modest public stature is positively illuminating. A recent case in point: at last year’s JRC fundraising dinner, held annually in Manhattan, she personally greeted hundreds of guests. Then, while the honoree delivered remarks, she sat unobtrusively at the back of the room, never once climbing the dais to assume center stage. The message: Mrs. Kohn is palpably there, but she is not the point. She is just a vehicle for transmitting spiritual teachings to which her reverence and commitment is boundless and profound.

Her husband, Rabbi Chaim Kohn, is an internationally respected expert on *halachic* issues, specializing in business law, and a rabbinical judge in the community of Washington Heights, New York. The couple moved to Teaneck earlier this year, where Rabbi Kohn is also dean of a post-high school yeshiva. They have a daughter, Dina, 26, who lives on the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

The question is, how did a woman born and raised in the heart of Jerusalem end up in the heart of trendy, liberal Manhattan, teaching—and powerfully connecting—to women whose backgrounds and lives bear little surface resemblance to her own?

Apparently, there was little question that teaching was her calling. One of seven children, Mrs. Kohn recalls lining up the children of the neighborhood on the steps outside in order to teach them. She was only three. Eventually, she graduated from seminary and began teaching in various girls’ high schools in Israel.

The family grew up in a Jerusalem that no longer exists. The family of nine shared a one-and-a-half room apartment, the kitchen was outside in the courtyard, and there was no modern day bathroom plumbing—a stark contrast to the Kohn’s tasteful, art-filled residence in Teaneck.

While Mrs. Kohn was exploring the land of Israel on school trips, her future husband's family was facing an entirely different set of circumstances. Rabbi Kohn's parents survived the war in Budapest in hiding, while the rest of the family perished. Born after the war, Rabbi Kohn came to Israel at the age of 15, to study in Jerusalem. Introduced by a neighbor, he and Leah married when they turned 21.

Mrs. Kohn had absolutely no intention of ever founding a school or changing the lives of countless women. Then, Rabbi Ezriel Tauber, a Hungarian-born Holocaust survivor and businessman living in Monsey, New York met her husband in 1983.

At that time, Rabbi Tauber had offered to fund any *kollel* (a graduate school for yeshiva students) that would devote itself to studying the laws of business and monetary transactions. When Rabbi Tauber came to Israel, Rabbi Kohn inquired about the possibility of receiving funding. Instead of offering to fund a *kollel* run by Rabbi Kohn in Israel, however, Rabbi Tauber invited them to join a *kollel* halfway around the world in Monsey.

"He suggested that I should open a school with a dorm for women in Monsey," recalls Mrs. Kohn. "At that time, the only other place for women's learning was in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. I don't know why he asked me—I couldn't speak a single sentence of English, and I didn't know the American mentality. I thought it was a crazy idea."

When asked why he chose Mrs. Kohn to open a school, Rabbi Tauber answers immediately. "Sincerity. And [Mrs. Kohn] does everything *l'shaim shamayim* (for the sake of God's name)," he says. "The students didn't need someone with perfect language and polish. They needed someone they could look up to as a role model."

They came in the summer of 1983. Rabbi Tauber had bought a house for the school, named Netzach, and arranged for the Kohns to stay in a nearby apartment.

Mrs. Kohn laughs, but at the time she remembers crying. After a few false starts recruiting students, "I went back to Rabbi Tauber, and he made me realize that it was now my challenge," says Mrs. Kohn. "I came home crying but refused to give up."

Still, Mrs. Kohn ruefully recalls the time that she placed an ad in a Jewish newspaper advertising a weekend retreat for women. When the phone started to ring with prospective students, there was just one problem: she didn't speak enough English to book their reservations.



Addressing a recent audience.

Then there was the time she went to seek professional advice from a woman who was a leader in the field of Jewish education and outreach. "She told me, 'You are never going to succeed. You are an Israeli. You don't understand the American culture and mentality and your English is poor.' And you know, she was right. But I was determined to try."

Mrs. Kohn's English improved—and the students started to arrive. And after five years, the school had become a success. But, after having taught hundreds of students, the Kohns reevaluated and decided that Monsey was too remote a location to attract large numbers of women, many of whom had busy professional lives in Manhattan. And, few could take off large blocks of time to study full-time. At the end of 1988, the Kohns moved the school to Manhattan—first to the Young Israel on 91st Street and now in its current home

on West End Avenue and 83rd—and offered courses during lunch and most evenings. They also took up residence on the Upper West Side, frequently hosting students for Sabbath meals. They also decided to team up with a brilliant, dynamic teacher, Rabbi Yitzchak Kirzner, who had already founded a successful outreach organization in the city.

"We thought, we will combine forces," says Mrs. Kohn. "He would recruit students and teach in the school and I would teach as well. We were full partners.

He was a phenomenal teacher, and I learned so much from him. Unfortunately, he became ill and passed away at a very young age. It was a terrible loss."

In 1991, after Rabbi Kirzner's death, Mrs. Kohn had to once again create an approach to teaching. Her new recipe placed a special emphasis on courses that would specifically interest educated, professional women who wanted to learn more about Judaism. So she created an environment in which women could study in a serious manner

without social pressures.

What does Mrs. Kohn see now when she looks back over the years, from her first "classes" with the neighborhood kids perched on the steps of her Jerusalem apartment building to a recent day of women's learning produced by the JRC that has grown so large it was moved to the Javits Center last year?

She smiles with deep satisfaction, but refuses to take credit once more.

"I feel I have had a lot of help from Heaven. How did I succeed? I was granted energy and courage," she says. "I cannot explain it. I also believe that human beings have more potential than they realize. Even 120 years is a short life," she adds. "Time is running. What makes life sacred and meaningful? We are told if a person wants to know what life after life will be like, she should look at her life now. The goal is constant growth. Good and difficult situations are both opportunities to achieve." lifestyles

Photo courtesy Leah Kohn