

What Is Your Daughter Reading These Days?

BY TOBY
BULMAN KATZ

Let's suppose you are squeezed between the demands of work, school, child care, your parents' needs, social obligations, laundry, cooking, exercise, diet and a pile of reading you need to keep up with. You are dissatisfied with your looks and clothes, worried about other people's opinions of you, ridden with guilt and anxiety.

What are you? A middle-aged mother of six with a husband and a full-time job?

Well, actually—you are a teenaged girl with piles of homework, peer pressure, a baby-sitting job, younger siblings to help and *chesed* commitments in your community.

What? Can a fourteen-year-old girl be as busy, pressured and tired as her forty-year-old mom? Apparently so, to judge by the contents of two magazines on the Orthodox market geared especially to middle school and high school girls.

But while the girls who are featured in these magazines seem very pressured, they also seem to be coping

Toby Bulman Katz teaches Judaic studies at Beth Jacob High School of Miami, as well as adult education classes. Her husband, Rabbi Michael Katz, has a Judaica store in Hollywood, Florida, and is active in kiruv. They have three children.

well—even thriving. They are mature, responsible and accomplished, aware that what they do is valued and important to their families and communities.

YALDAH, self-described as “A Magazine for Jewish Girls, by Jewish

YALDAH and Shoshanim somewhat resemble an Orthodox Good Housekeeping with baby-sitting tips, recipes, health and diet advice and clothing advertisements. The good thing is that the clothes featured are modest and affordable.

Girls,” is a quarterly whose editor, Leah Larson, started it when she was just thirteen! Frustrated with the lack of appropriate magazines for *frum* teenagers, Leah, who lives in Sharon, Massachusetts, decided to create one herself. It took her a year to get her first issue out, but Leah says, she kept her

eye on the goal and persisted, with the help of a very supportive family.

Most of the articles, poems, letters, photographs and original drawings are by young teens and pre-teens (aged eight to fourteen). The magazine is beautifully edited, attractively laid out, colorful and appealing. Leah, who is currently in tenth grade and is home-schooled, is a terrifically talented young lady.

Shoshanim is another quarterly for young teens, geared to a somewhat older demographic—I'd say twelve to seventeen. It calls itself “A Magazine for Jewish Teenage Girls.” It has a slightly Lubavitch flavor (several contributors named “Chaya Mushka,” for example; girls whose families are on *shelichut* in far-flung places, et cetera), but it is non-denominational Orthodox, wide-ranging and refreshingly non-judgmental about different kinds of Orthodoxy. Its editor, Sterna Citron, a former educator and author from Los Angeles, puts out a very professional, glossy and attractive magazine. Her husband, Rabbi Chaim Citron, writes the “Halacha for Teens” column in each issue.

Both of these magazines feature first-person true-life stories, fiction, original artwork and advice columns. They somewhat resemble an Orthodox

Good Housekeeping with baby-sitting tips, recipes, health and diet advice and clothing advertisements. The good thing is that the clothes featured are modest and affordable.

There is an unspoken assumption in both magazines that their readers want to be and will be mothers some day, and that the roles of men and women are different. In one issue of *YALDAH* (fall 2005), a letter from “an anonymous mother” reminds girls that they have no *chiyuv* (obligation) to go to shul on Yom Kippur.

Many girls want to spend the day in shul and daven but then so many men are not able to go, because they have wives at home, often pregnant, nursing, or both ... there are endless high school girls who are in shul all day rather than helping ... and meanwhile husbands that should be davening are changing diapers.

I happened to read that letter at the time that Betty Friedan died. I confess I wondered what that icon of feminism would have made of it.

Or what Friedan would have thought of an article in *Shoshanim* by Citron (a very moving piece, by the way, about her father, Rav Osher Freund, ז”ל) in which she describes her mother this way:

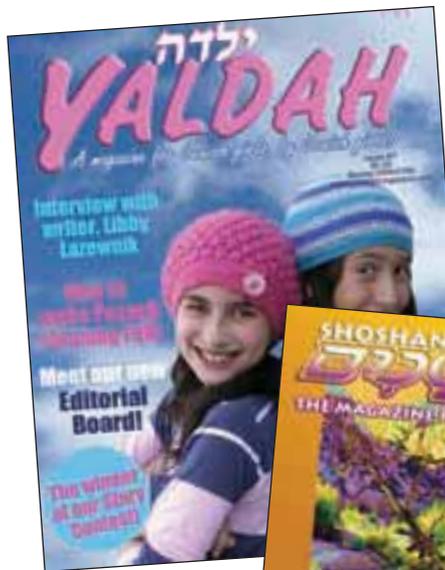
She was always doing mitzvos and kind deeds. She helped my father in his work. And she took care of the children. The house ran the way it did because of her wisdom and kind deeds.

Before I continue my imaginary dialogue with Friedan, let’s digress for a few moments.

For comparison’s sake, I perused a couple of girls’ magazines at the check-out counter of the supermarket, popular rags like *Seventeen* and *J-14* (which bills itself as “just for teens”). I was shocked to see what young teens are reading these days. If you read the innocent *Seventeen* of the sixties, as I did, you will not believe what it’s like today. It’s no wonder there is an epidemic of anorexia. These magazines typically have 125 glossy pages, of which one hundred are advertisements featuring impossibly

beautiful and skinny young models in the skimpiest and most vulgar outfits imaginable. The few articles have to do with fashion, makeup, hair, celebrities, boyfriends and birth control. What seemed so “off the *derech*” in my day—the Beatles’ “I Want to Hold Your Hand”—is unbelievably mild and innocent in comparison.

What struck me as I looked at these publications was what a colossal failure the feminist movement has been,



on its own terms. Not a single article even mentioned career aspirations, after-school jobs, volunteer work, younger siblings, academic pressures or responsibilities or ideals of any sort. Parents were the tiniest blip on the horizon.

In contrast, in *Shoshanim* and *YALDAH*, parents loom large in every article. True, they are the source of angst and pressure in many cases—insisting on good grades, needing help with the younger kids and so on—but they are very much a presence in their daughters’ lives. *Shoshanim* polled young readers all over the country, asking this question: “What special quality about your parents do you want to emulate when

you’re married?”—eliciting many charming and delightful answers. (“My parents are the most giving people. They are slow to anger and quick to forgive.” “My parents do a lot of *hachmosas orchim*, and I want to do that, too.” “My mother always has a feeling when something is bothering me. I want to have that special sense too.” “I like their no-hitting policy.”) I especially noted that in these magazines, not only mothers, but fathers too, express pride and affection for their daughters.

In many of the stories, girls are very busy with *chesed* activities—visiting nursing homes, tutoring younger students and being mothers’ helpers. Although the girls are mostly engaged in traditional feminine pursuits, they take school very seriously and are under intense pressure to do well academically.

In addition, many of the articles stress *musar*, or character development, sensitivity to others’ feelings, self-sacrifice, self-discipline and idealism. Two friends snub a new girl but then feel guilty and make it up to her. A girl thinks her brother’s *kallah* is too chubby but then realizes that her brother chose the young lady for her wonderful *middot*. A girl whose parents can’t afford to

buy her the dress she wants to wear to her brother’s wedding comes to realize, through her *chesed* activities, that others are worse off financially, and she begins to appreciate what she does have instead of pining for what she lacks. A girl is invited to the home of irreligious relatives, and wants to know how she can keep to her own standards of *kasbrut* without causing any hurt feelings. She feels close to these relatives despite their different standards, and wants to maintain that warm relationship.

To me, some of the stories seemed short on drama and a bit preachy, but when I tested these magazines on my own daughters (ages fifteen and thirteen) and on some other girls (aged eight to fourteen), I received no negative feedback. They all seemed to enjoy the magazines. They especially enjoyed the “Ask Rebbetzin Rochel” feature in *Shoshanim* (“My older sister is very bossy”), and a multiple-choice quiz (“What kind of friend are you?”) in *YALDAH*, reading the choices aloud to each other and discussing them animatedly. That quiz was written by an eleven-year-old girl!

Some of the stories deal—obliquely—with some of the same self-image issues you see in *Seventeen*, but in such a different way. For example, in the story about the chubby *kallah* mentioned before, the girl is initially dismayed when her brother becomes engaged to her teacher, even though she loves her teacher, because the young woman is not the classic beauty she had imagined her brother would want. Yet the story has a happy ending as the girl realizes that her brother has found exactly what he wanted.

This, by the way, is as close as any of the stories come to romance. There are many weddings in these magazines but no dating and no conversations between girls and boys. The pro-

tagonist of every story is a young girl whose older brother or sister is getting married, and all romance is strictly off-stage. However, weddings are very exciting for these girls and the implied romance to come when they are a bit older is (I think) the secret driving engine of the excitement.

A few of the stories deal with darker subjects, and these are handled with an impressive degree of candor and sensitivity. In one story featured in *Shoshanim*, a girl’s classmate is sitting shivah, and the girl can’t bring herself to go and be *menachem avel*. When she finally does go, her friend welcomes her warmly and they reminisce together about the little brother who died. Sadly, tragedy does strike in the lives of some young girls, and this is just the kind of thing that girls need in their data bank—how to behave in a shivah home, what to talk about.

In another story in the same issue, a girl is shattered by the angry arguments between her father and her older brother, and is heartbroken when her brother leaves home. When she sees him packing, she asks him why he didn’t put his tefillin in his suitcase, and cries when he says he

doesn’t need them anymore. This story does not have a sugar-coated ending, but leaves open the possibility that the girl’s love for her brother will some day influence him to return.

Most of the articles are much sunnier than these, of course, but altogether these magazines are wonderfully wholesome and even inspiring. It’s hard to imagine that there is any contemporary literature for adolescents in which girls are portrayed in a more positive light.

And that would be my answer to Friedan and her ilk: Our Orthodox youngsters are leading rich, full, useful, meaningful lives. We have much to be grateful for, and much to be proud of.

I only wish there were an equivalent magazine for boys.

P.S. When I read this article to my teenaged son and daughters, they all laughed at the very idea that a boy would be interested in stories about being friends with the nerdy new boy in town, or what to wear to his brother’s wedding. Oh well, scratch that.

These magazines are a bit more expensive than the supermarket magazines with all their ad pages, but well worth the subscription price. Shoshanim is more suited to high school age girls, YALDAH to pre-teens and young teens. Shoshanim can be reached at 723 North Orange Drive, Los Angeles, California 90038 or www.shoshanim.net, and costs \$18 per year. E-mail: editor@shoshanim.net. YALDAH can be reached at P.O. Box 215, Sharon, Massachusetts 02067 or www.yaldahmagazine.com, and costs \$24 per year. E-mail: yaldah@comcast.net. 

I perused a couple of girls’ magazines at the checkout counter. I was shocked to see what young teens are reading these days. Not a single article even mentioned career aspirations, volunteer work or responsibilities or ideals of any sort.

SHAIMOS L'GNIZAH

שמות לגניזה נקבר
כהלכה בהכשר רבנים

WHY WAIT?

We pick up your Shaimos (Sacred Books)
“all year round” and bury them halachically
for a nominal fee.

Good usable seforim picked up
FREE OF CHARGE

(718) 871-2260

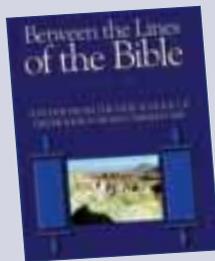
PINTER’S 4408 14th Ave., Brooklyn, NY 11219

TORAH & Science



The *Challenge of Creation: Judaism's Encounter with Science, Cosmology & Evolution* by **Rabbi Natan Slifkin** is a fascinating look at the profound topics of the nature of scientific laws, the age of the universe, and the evolution of life. The book discusses a range of approaches to Torah and science, and also presents its own unified approach to all these issues. It shows that Judaism can approach these topics in a sophisticated and honest manner, without being either dogmatic or apologetic. *The Challenge of Creation* is an essential read for every thinking Jew.

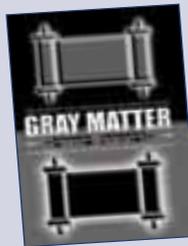
TORAH Commentary



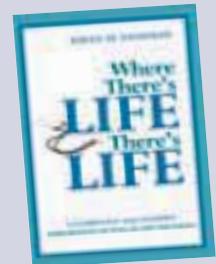
Discover new dimensions to Sefer Bereshit in *Between the Lines of the Bible*. **Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom** initiates readers into the world of the New School of Orthodox Torah commentary in a series of compelling studies. Over the past few decades, Orthodox Jewish scholars have carefully embraced many of the methodologies of modern Bible study. History, archeology, linguistics and many other disciplines—especially literary analysis—can serve to enhance our understanding of the Torah. In this book, Yitzchak Etshalom provides the first English introduction to the methodologies of the New School. In a number of popular essays, Etshalom analyzes the familiar stories of the Bible and demonstrates the powerful tools of modern Torah commentary. In the process, Etshalom undermines many of the arguments of biblical critics and defends the Torah, through literary and historical methodologies, against attacks.

HALACHA for Today

Learn about contemporary halachic discussion from leading rabbis throughout the broad spectrum of Orthodox Judaism. In *Gray Matter Volume 2*, **Rabbi Chaim Jachter** selects topics of relevance and interest to today's Jews and comprehensively surveys the issues and the varying views of contemporary scholars. Topics covered range from how and when to save lives on Shabbat including whether one may return from the hospital, the complex *Agunah* cases that emerged from the World Trade Center tragedy, when *halacha* causes infertility, the use of lawyers in a *Beit Din*, and much more.



Where There's LIFE, There's LIFE



This book was written for those struggling with the care of a sick or elderly loved one, or even the ill person himself. Inspiring readers from the vast Jewish tradition, **Rabbi David M. Feldman**—renowned expert on Jewish medical ethics—gives not only hope but meaning to those placed in such difficult circumstances. Combining a profound human sensitivity, extensive medical knowledge and mastery of *halakhah*, Rabbi Feldman shows how the Jewish tradition guides us through complex medical circumstances.



MAIMONIDES For Today

The Rambam's contributions to Judaism are not merely remnants of medieval scholarship but a vibrant legacy that gives compelling guidance in modern man's spiritual search. In *The Legacy of Maimonides: Religion, Reason and Community*, edited by **Rabbis Yamin Levy and Shalom Carmy**, leading scholars present surveys of Rambam's thinking and his impact on Judaism, and apply Rambam's approach to various issues of critical contemporary importance.



Your ladder to the world of Jewish thought

Ask for these books in
your local Judaica store

www.yasharbooks.com