

## FIRST PERSON

# Torah From the Heavens

BY ILANA KURSHAN

Special to the *World Jewish Digest*

As I entered the airport for my flight from the London Book Fair back to my home in Jerusalem, I spotted the El Al counter right away. I don't know Heathrow well, but I immediately noticed the flocks of Hasidim dressed in black and white who were flapping their garment bags in a frenzy of nervous pre-flight excitement.

I was dragging a bulky suitcase full of the book catalogues and pre-publication galleys that I had amassed at the fair. As I'd wandered from stand to stand meeting with publishers and agents, I'd collected free pens, notepads and promotional material about forthcoming books by favorite authors, so my luggage was considerably heavier than it was on the way over. Still, it was nothing compared with what I saw all around me. Families with four or five young children were accompanied by caravans of old-fashioned leather suitcases, overstuffed duffel bags, hat boxes, baby strollers and diaper bags. Everywhere I



yeshiva where I study. Although these activities compete for my time, they do not exist in tension with one another. I am an editor, and the Talmud is the ultimate editorial marvel. The Babylonian Talmud I study is a multi-volume work created over centuries as a dialogue between rabbis of different generations who debate, dismiss and discuss with one another the finer points of Jewish law—everything from how to deliver a divorce document to how to deal with a spell of dry weather. It is filled with excisions, interpolated passages, cross-references and intricately wrought chiasms, and although it at first appears unwieldy and overwhelming, it shows signs of careful and deliberate editing and re-editing, much like the manuscripts I work on in my professional life.

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*Chagigah*, the volume of Talmud that I, too, was in the middle of learning.

About three years ago, I left my job at Random House in New York to study Talmud at a yeshiva in Jerusalem. Thus began a love affair with rabbinic literature that has continued to this day.

Although I still work in publishing, I have chosen to do so in Jerusalem, a city filled with opportunities to learn Torah and a city in which learning Torah is considered by many to be the supreme value. Most of my days are split between the literary agency where I work and the

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Along with many of the men at the El Al counter, I am participating in Daf Yomi, a program that consists of learning one page of Talmud a day so as to complete the entire corpus over a period of seven-and-a-half years. I usually learn every morning, but during my week at the book fair, I fell a bit behind. When I see the men around me and notice what page they are on, I feel compelled to study too. I pull my Talmud out of my carry-on bag and, while waiting in line to check my luggage, I delve into the

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# ARTS & CULTURE

## Kurshan

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second chapter of the tractate of Talmud called *Chagigah*, which begins with a mystical discussion of forms of prohibited knowledge that need to be carefully guarded and studied only in particular contexts.

*It is forbidden to expound upon the laws of forbidden sexual relations among [more than] three people;*

*And the story of creation among two people;*

*And the incident of the chariot among one person —*

*Unless he is a wise person and he understands beyond his knowledge.*

*All who look into four matters are deserving of never having been born:*

*What is above;*

*What is below;*

*What is in front;*

*And what is behind.*

(Babylonian Talmud, Chagigah 11b)

As I stand there with my head in the book, I ought to notice the flurry of attention among the men in front of and



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behind me. I ought to notice their eyes peering over the tops of their books and looking over in my direction. If I looked up, I would see them tapping one another and gesturing in my direction, and nodding to their wives to turn the children's heads in the other direction. If I

thought a little, I might realize how I must appear to them—an independent professional woman older than many of their wives, dressed in a button-down shirt and pants suit, and traveling with a volume of Talmud. But what can I say? I am absorbed—perhaps too absorbed—in those matters which are wondrous and concealed and hidden. The laws of forbidden sexual relations, the miracle of creation, the mystery of Ezekiel's chariot. On the very pages I am reading, the Talmud teaches that these matters are

“Excuse me, miss. Did you pack your bags yourself?” I look up from my Gemara to find a tall, uniformed Israeli man with a dark ponytail standing in front of me for the routine security check. He asks all the usual questions and gets all the unusual answers: why are you going to Israel? You have family in Israel? No family? Family in London? What? You are American? Why do you know Hebrew? You learn Talmud? But you wear pants!

“I am sort of an undercover religious person,” I offer in an attempt at self-categorization, but the poor clerk looks utterly bewildered. I explain to him that all my Talmud knowledge comes from The Conservative Yeshiva where I study. There I do not stand out at all—I am one among many women sporting long pants and uncovered hair who carry volumes of Talmud around in their backpacks. No one looks askance when I sit down to learn with my study partner of two years, a 40-year-old male Conservative rabbi. I am so comfortable at my yeshiva that I forget that I am such an anomaly in other settings, like the El Al terminal where I am eager to board the plane and lift off into the clear blue sky.

*Resh Lakish said: There are seven layers to the heavens, and these are them:*

*Vilon—Where morning enters and evening exits, and creation is renewed.*

*Rakia—Where the sun and moon are.*

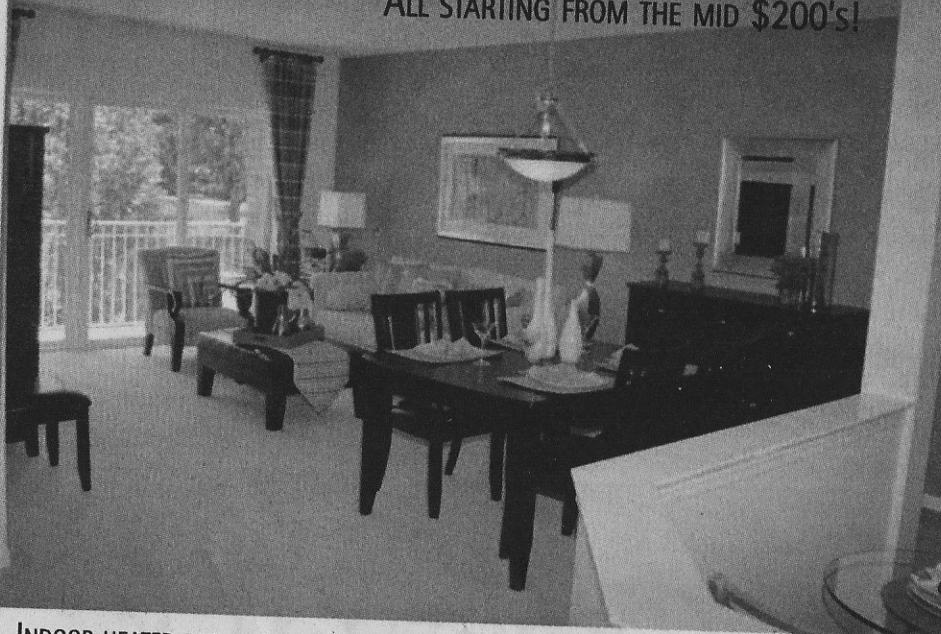
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shirt and pants suit, and traveling with a volume of Talmud. But what can I say? I am absorbed—perhaps too absorbed—in those matters which are wondrous and concealed and hidden. The laws of forbidden sexual relations, the miracle of creation, the mystery of Ezekiel's chariot. On the very pages I am reading, the Talmud teaches that these matters are not fit for study by all people at all times. As far as the Hasidim are concerned, they are never fit for study by a woman. But when I see what follows in the text, I know I have to read on.

*Anyone who breaks from the study of Torah and engages in conversation—he will be fed the burning coals of the Rotem plant.*

(Chagigah 12b)

I am such an anomaly in other settings, like the El Al terminal where I am eager to board the plane and lift off into the clear blue sky.

*Resh Lakish said: There are seven layers to the heavens, and these are them:*

*Vilon—Where morning enters and evening exits, and creation is renewed.*

*Rakia—Where the sun and moon and stars are fixed.*

*Shchakim—Where the millstones stand and grind out manna for the righteous.*

*Z'vul—Where Jerusalem and the Temple rest.*

*Ma'on—Where the ministering angels sing songs by night and are silent by day.*

*Machon—Where the stores of snow and hail are kept.*

*Aravot—Where sit righteousness, justice, and charity, and the souls of the righteous.*



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*and the spirits and souls that are yet to be created, and the dew that in the future God will use to revive the dead.*

(Chagigah 12b)

The flight takes off into the seven-layered heaven very soon after I find my seat. During takeoff, the cabin lights must be shut off, so as the plane rises higher and higher in the sky, I learn Torah by flashlight. It is past midnight. When I walk back a few rows to the bathroom, I see rows of men slumped over their books in exhaustion. *All who learn Torah at night—the Holy One Blessed be He affixes to him a thread of lovingkindness by day.* (Chagigah 12b)

I am determined to catch up on the pages I have missed. Lacking a dictionary or any study aids, my margins rain down with question-marked passages that I will have to inquire into upon my return. I only hope I can read my handwriting because the flight is quite turbulent and hence my pencil marks are jagged and messy.

*“And the earth was unformed and void” (Genesis 1:2): Given that the heavens were created first, why is the earth described first in this verse? Rabbi Yishmael taught: This may be likened to the king who said to his servants, “Wake up early and come to me tomorrow.” Both the men (who were used to waking up early) and the women (who were not) woke up early and came. Whom did the king praise? Those who were not used to waking up early (i.e., the women).*

(Chagigah 12b)

A light tap on my arm arouses me from my reverie. I

where I work, so we are even.) By the time the flight attendants serve us breakfast, I have learned all about her correspondence course in biology and her struggles balancing motherhood and academic study; and I have met Yechiel and Tuvia Dovid, who are 18 and three months old. I feel the thread of lovingkindness creating yet another connection in the world.

*As I gazed on the creatures, I saw one wheel on the ground next to each of the four-faced creatures ... Wherever the spirit impelled them, the wheels were borne alongside them, for the spirit of the creatures was in the wheels. When these moved, these moved; and when those were born above the earth, the wheels were borne alongside them.*

(Ezekiel 1:15-20)

The plane is still at cruising altitudes when the Talmud, after enumerating those matters that are not to be studied, proceeds (quite ironically) to examine in great depth the most mystical matter of all: the chariot of Ezekiel, which rose to the heavens with wings and wheels. *These are the things that one may not expound upon*, I tell myself, keenly aware of the disapproval around me. But in addition to disapproval, I feel something else. As Chana Gittl leans over my shoulder, I suddenly feel light-headed. Was there a dip in cabin pressure? What is it that drove to this encounter in the clouds? I look out through the window to the endless expanse of sky and the outstretched wings of the plane

with wheels tucked in beneath them. The page of Gemara dances before our eyes, and I relish the lonely impulse of delight that I feel each time I learn. I am comfortable with who I am and with what I am learning, and “*These are the things that one may not expound upon*”—unless, that is, one happens to be suspended in seventh heaven inside a soaring aircraft. **WJD**

Ilana Kurshan works as a literary agent and editor in Jerusalem. She studies Talmud at The Conservative Yeshiva.

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standing over me in the aisle, her hair concealed beneath an elaborate white scarf. She is cloaked in a long white dress with pearly buttons down the front; I might have mistaken her for an angel if not for the cloth diaper that is slung over one shoulder. "Excuse me," she says. "Can I ask you a question?" I nod. "I couldn't help notice what you are studying. My husband and father learn the Daf Yomi." She looks around in all four directions to make sure that no one is listening and then leans closer. "I wanted to know, if you wouldn't mind telling me: do you ever understand anything you read?"

For a moment, I am horrified. Then I try to put myself in this woman's place. I suspect that on some level, she is impressed by my seriousness. And so I want her to know that I am impressed by her as well, my well-honed feminist sensibilities notwithstanding. I could never imagine taking care of a baby or managing a family at her age, let alone at mine—my single-minded devotion to my work and studies leaves little time for cooking or cleaning or restoring smiles to teary faces. I doubt I could do what she does—but I have no doubt that she could do what I do, and I am a little sad that she does not. And so I balance all, bring all to mind and answer her question by pointing to the page with my pencil: "Here, let me show you what I am learning." As the sun that has begun to rise through the cabin windows casts a halo over our heads, we share words of Torah in the sky.

Ten minutes later, I have a new friend named Chana Gittl, as well as an open invitation to Shabbat dinner in a part of Jerusalem I never even knew existed. (In all fairness, Chana Gittl had never heard of Emek Refaim,

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