

Halachic power-couple

While Rabbi Seth Farber focuses on conversion,
Rabbanit Michelle Farber teaches 'Daf Yomi'

Seth and Michelle Farber at their home in Ra'anana.

By Linda Gradstein

ON ONE of their first dates more than 25 years ago, Rabbi Seth Farber asked his future wife, Michelle, where she was going to shul for Simhat Torah, the joyful holiday that celebrates the end of the reading of the entire Torah and the beginning of the cycle again. She responded that she was tired of standing on the sidelines and watching the men dance with the Torah and planned to skip shul that year.

"I'll make a shul where you can dance with the Torah," he promised her.

And so he did. Today the shul they founded in Ra'anana has 120 families, and women not only dance with the Torah, but they also read the Torah in a women's Torah reading for a bat mitzvah. Women also give sermons to the entire congregation.

This halachic power-couple are doing all they can to connect Jews to Judaism in differ-

ent ways. For Michelle, it is through women learning Talmud. Michelle is on her second round of teaching "*Daf Yomi*," the daily page of Talmud learned each day. It enables the participant to finish the entire Talmud in seven and a half years.

"Most women don't even understand that they should have access to these texts, and that's one of the things I'm trying to change," she told *The Jerusalem Report*. "This book (the Talmud) is critical to you to be a part of the Jewish culture, community and tradition."

Anyone who has studied Talmud knows it's not easy. A fair amount of the text is in Aramaic. Different commentators from different centuries all chime in with interpretations. Some of the subjects the texts deal with seem outdated or irrelevant. Some of the rabbis' statements about women such as

"He who teaches his daughter Torah teaches her foolishness" can sound misogynistic to modern ears, although there are various interpretations of what exactly this means and why he said it.

Michelle started her Daf Yomi classes around her dining room table with a small group of dedicated women. Each class is 45 minutes, and even before corona hit, she started recording them and putting them on a podcast as well as YouTube and Facebook. These days she teaches entirely online.

Now on her second round of teaching the Talmud, Michelle says that more than 2,000 women download the class in either Hebrew or English every day. She teaches it twice, once in each language, at 6:20 a.m. in Hebrew and at 7:15 a.m. in English, Israel time.

The women studying, some in far-flung places around the world, have formed a



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Michelle Farber, founder of Hadran, and the 'Daf Yomi' classes for women.

Seth Farber, founder of ITIM – the Jewish Life Advocacy Center.

community with several active WhatsApp groups. Women who don't know each other are connected through their learning and celebrate life-cycle events together. If someone is sitting shiva, they collect money virtually and send food.

Rabbi Seth Farber is supportive of his wife. "There are people who want to listen to Michelle live so they come on the middle of the night from the West Coast or even Australia," he said proudly.

Michelle moved to Israel at age 20, in the middle of college in the US, and never looked back. She taught for five years at the Pelech girls' school in Jerusalem, before deciding to focus on teaching adult women once a week.

But then Michelle found that she "didn't want to be teaching once a week anymore – I was looking for something more meaty. It was around the time the previous cycle (of Daf Yomi) was starting. And I thought it would be nice to get people on a daily basis rather than a weekly basis."

She says it was a challenge at first, as she was used to teaching Talmud in-depth, with commentaries and analysis. In her former yearlong class they would get through eight pages of Talmud, along with the commentaries. Now she needed to do a page a day. But she has enjoyed the challenge, and plans to continue. Her students are thrilled.

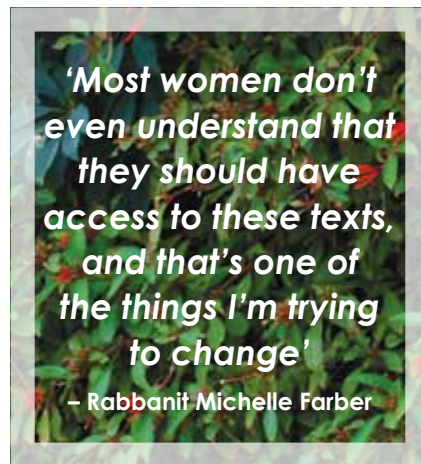
"My husband and I learn Daf Yomi every

evening after work," said Paula Gottlieb, a New York psychotherapist. "We listen to Rabbanit Michelle Farber's Hadran podcast and follow along in the Talmud. Michelle's vast scope of knowledge, excellent teaching style and delightful personality make learning the Daf something we eagerly look forward to, and anchors our day in a meaningful way."

FOR SHARI Mendes, head of the Lemonade Fund that helps people with breast cancer, and who completed the first Talmud cycle that Michelle taught, said that she began learning when she finished saying kaddish for her father.

"She suggested joining her small Daf Yomi group that met at her house in Ra'anana each morning," Mendes said. "I decided to try, and with my translated volumes, I dived deeply into a whole new world, culminating seven and a half years later in a Siyum HaShas, the completion of all of the books of the Talmud.

"This never would have been possible without the clear, patient pedagogy of a teacher like Rabbanit Michelle Farber. She fostered an atmosphere of openness and



questioning, and comfortable space for a growing group of women to grapple with the topics that absorbed men of ancient times. *Kol hakavod* (kudos) to what she has built around the world."

At the same time, Seth Farber was facing challenges of his own.

Seth is the founder of ITIM, an advocacy organization that helps people receive official recognition as Jews or convert to Judaism.

A recent case is that of Yevgeny Kogan, a nurse who immigrated to Israel as a child from the former Soviet Union. He met and

fell in love with a co-worker, Marianna, who was not Jewish. They married in Cyprus in 2021 in a civil ceremony that is recognized by the Israeli government.

This is where things get complicated: Marianna decided she wanted to convert to Judaism so they could also have a Jewish wedding in Israel. When they applied to the local Orthodox rabbinic authorities, they said they first had to confirm Yevgeny's Jewishness. He supplied all of his documents and the Rabbinate accepted them. So far so good.

But his last name, Kogan, is a name traditionally associated with kohanim, a member of the priestly line of Israel who served as priests in the Temple in Jerusalem. Today, of course, there is no Temple, but kohanim are not allowed to marry a widow, a divorcée or a convert.

Yevgeny said he is a secular Jew and had no way of knowing whether he was a kohen. Until that was clarified, the Rabbinate would not proceed with Marianna's conversion. A mutual friend introduced Yevgeny to Seth Farber, who managed to obtain the right documents to prove that Yevgeny is not a kohen, and Marianna's conversion can proceed.

"I even promised them that once her conversion goes through, I would marry them according to Jewish law," Farber said. And that's exactly what happened: a wedding in the Farber's backyard a few months ago.



HADRAN



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As Rabbanit Michelle Farber speaks, her image is projected to the crowd.

Rabbi Seth Farber in his ITIM office.



HADRAN

Women recite the Hadran prayer on stage in Jerusalem, marking their completion of a tractate of Talmud.

“It was very emotional, and I am so grateful to Rabbi Farber,” Yevgeny told the Report. “I am so glad there is an organization like ITIM that can help people in our situation. A lot of people have issues with the Rabbinate and ITIM is able to help them.”

While there is no civil marriage in Israel, civil marriages performed abroad like Yevgeny’s are recognized by the state. Conversion is a more complicated issue. Farber has repeatedly challenged the Rabbinate in Israel’s Supreme Court, forcing them to accept conversions done in Israel or abroad. He says that more Israelis oppose religious coercion.

“They don’t want anyone telling them who is a Jew,” he said. “The rise of haredi power has led to suspicion of anyone who is not from Israel, especially the Russians, but now more and more the Americans as well. They say that every Russian for sure is not Jewish, is lying, and has forged his papers.”

That attitude, says Farber, is leading to a deep alienation between much of the Israeli public and the religious authorities. He says he supports civil marriage in Israel, but also supports alternative forms of Jewish marriage.

Farber said there was a unique opportunity in the past year when the haredi parties were not part of the government for the first time in many years. ITIM worked hard to pass a new conversion law allowing municipal rabbis to perform conversions, and while the law did not pass, Farber says he continues to work for it. The official Rabbinate is very slow to do conversions, and there are currently almost half a million Israelis, most of them citizens of the former Soviet Union, who would like to convert.

Anyone with one Jewish grandparent can obtain Israeli citizenship, but only someone with a Jewish mother or who underwent an Orthodox conversion by a body recognized by the Rabbinate is Jewish according to Jewish law.

Farber wants every Jew in Israel to feel connected to his Judaism, describing himself as “a watchdog for Jewish life in Israel.”

Farber, who grew up in Riverdale, New York, received rabbinic ordination from Yeshiva University, and later received a PhD in Jewish history from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He says he is committed to helping anyone who is Jewish, whatever their level of observance, or anyone who wants to join the Jewish people, to do so.

“The Rabbinate is wiping off the map millions and millions of Jews who are immigrants or potential immigrants or Jews in the



HADRAN

Participants sing at Hadran’s Siyum HaShas in Jerusalem.



HADRAN

A woman holds her baby as she sings at the Siyum.

Diaspora by saying that they’re not Jewish,” said Farber. “The Rabbinate should not have the keys to personal status or Jewish life. They don’t own it.”

In 2015, Rabbi Seth Farber was one of the recipients of the Bonei Zion Prize, which honors English-speaking immigrants to Israel who have made a contribution to Israeli society. Now he has just received a new appointment from Health Minister Nitzan Horowitz and Finance Minister Avigdor Lieberman to be the voice of Jewish ethics on the committee

that decides which medicines are included in the Israeli health basket.

“Four years ago, when I was honored by the government for my contribution to Israeli society I was both surprised and gratified,” he said. “But receiving a prize is a formality with little responsibility associated with it. This appointment comes with enormous *ah-rayut* (responsibility) and I am humbled that the cabinet sees me as someone whose voice should be at the table. I hope and pray I can contribute meaningfully.” ■