

Torah Talks: Women Learning Torah

A friend recently asked a powerful and heartfelt question:

“Why does the Rambam say that teaching Torah to one’s daughter is like teaching her *tiflut*? Isn’t that hurtful? Doesn’t that reflect a low view of women in halacha?”

Let’s talk about this honestly — because questions like this aren’t just intellectual; they’re emotional. And they deserve a thoughtful, respectful response.

1. The Rambam Was Quoting Chazal — Not Speaking for Himself

The Rambam in *Hilchot Talmud Torah* (1:13) writes that teaching one’s daughter Torah is like teaching her *tiflut*. But he’s not expressing his own opinion — he’s quoting directly from the *Gemara* in *Sotah* 20a.

So if this line troubles us, we’re engaging with the *Gemara* — with Chazal’s worldview — not just the Rambam. And that distinction matters when we explore how to understand it in context.

2. It Was About the Typical Reality — Not a Blanket Statement

Many commentaries explain that this teaching reflects the *typical* cultural reality of the time. In that era, most women were not educated in Torah, and when they did involve themselves

in advanced study, it often came from a place of social posturing or rebellion against religious norms — not spiritual growth.

That’s what the *Gemara* was concerned about: the *motivation* and context, not the capability of women.

It wasn’t meant as a universal indictment of all women — and certainly not as a ban on sincere Torah learning. On the contrary, Jewish history shows us that when women study Torah *lishmah*, with sincerity and *yirat Shamayim*, it is deeply respected — even celebrated.

3. So What Does *Tiflut* Actually Mean?

The term *tiflut* is often translated as “foolishness,” but some understand it more as “misapplication.” Torah is sacred — and studying it for the wrong reasons is a distortion, not a virtue.

And this critique isn’t limited to women. The *Gemara* in *Sanhedrin* (99b) warns that anyone who studies Torah “not for the sake of Heaven” is like someone who desecrates the word of God.

So the issue isn’t who’s learning — it’s *why* they’re learning.

4. What About Devorah the Prophetess?

If women aren’t meant to learn Torah, how do we explain Devorah?

Devorah HaNeviah wasn't just a prophetess or a symbolic figure — she was a halachic judge (*shofetet*) and national leader. *Shoftim* (4:5) tells us that “the Children of Israel came to her for judgment” — meaning they sought her guidance in Torah law.

That means she wasn't just educated — she was part of the *mesorah*, the living chain of Torah transmission. The people accepted her rulings, and she helped guide the spiritual direction of the nation. In fact, part of *our* mesorah — the very continuity of Torah in that generation — came *through her*.

If Torah learning by women was inherently invalid or inappropriate, then Devorah's leadership wouldn't be possible. But Chazal recognized her greatness, her sincerity, and her *yirat Shamayim*. She shows us what it looks like when a woman learns Torah *lishmah* — not for ego or rebellion, but for the sake of Am Yisrael and Hashem's will.

5. Rashi, Rav Moshe Feinstein, and Halacha's Responsiveness

Rashi (on *Sotah* 21b) clarifies that the concern was primarily about *Torah She'be'al Peh* — the Oral Law — because of its complexity and potential for misuse. But again, it's not a prohibition. It's a caution, rooted in sociological patterns of the time. And we know that Rashi's own daughters were learned, which shows he didn't apply this as an absolute rule.

And halacha *adapts* to spiritual reality. Rav Moshe Feinstein (*Igrot Moshe*, YD 3:87) writes that in today's world — where women are educated in secular fields and face philosophical challenges — it's a *mitzvah* to teach them Torah to strengthen their *emunah*.

This is the same reason the *Chafetz Chaim* supported Bais Yaakov — to preserve Torah values in a changing world.

6. Torah Study Is About Motivation — Not Gender

We all know that plenty of yeshiva boys study for all the wrong reasons — for intellectual showmanship, to win arguments, or just to sound clever. That's not Torah *lishmah* either. Torah LiShma is Lilmod, Ulelamed, Lishmor, Ve'Laasot, UliKayem. That means you study Torah in order to keep the Torah.

When a woman — or anyone — learns Torah with *yirat Shamayim*, humility, and a desire to connect with Hashem, that is the essence of Torah study. That's what Hashem wants from us.

7. So Can a Woman Be a Torah Leader?

Absolutely — and not just theoretically. Throughout Jewish history we've seen examples like Beruriah, who mastered halachic discourse, and many others over the generations.

A woman who devotes her life to Torah can be a *gadol* just like a man. There's no halachic ceiling on *yirat Shamayim* or wisdom.

Bottom Line:

- The Rambam is quoting a *Gemara*, not issuing a personal opinion.

- The concern was cultural and motivational, not ontological.
- The Torah tradition honors sincere learning — regardless of gender.
- Halachic leaders like Rashi, Rav Moshe, and the Chafetz Chaim all supported Torah study for women when it was spiritually necessary.
- Our *mesorah* was preserved in part through women like Devorah.
- Today, women *should* be learning Torah — and leading, teaching, and inspiring when they do.

When Torah is learned out of love for Hashem and a yearning for truth, it elevates us — man or woman. That's what makes Torah eternal.