11/2/15
Sorensen Fellowship

The main sanctuary of the Chassidic Kaliver Synagogue in Mea She-arim is a vast, circular hall, with high ceilings and intricate wooden structures along the white walls. The pews are meant for men alone, who conduct prayer services in every capacity. In a small, dark room a floor above the sanctuary, I stood with the women in attendance. We peered through lattice-covered windows into the main hall as services progressed. Eventually, I noticed the room’s most remarkable feature: the bookshelves. Aside from prayer books and bibles, they contained countless volumes of the Talmud – the central text of Rabbinic Jewish law, which, in ultra-Orthodox communities like that of the Kaliver Synagogue, is forbidden for women to learn. It seemed the books were placed in the “women’s section” with the expectation that the women inside would not even think to approach the bookshelves, let alone open one of the sacred tomes.

At the time, I was studying Talmud intensively in Jerusalem at Midreshet Lindenbaum, an institution that pioneered advanced education for Jewish women, where I was spending a gap year. My friend Rena had brought me to the Kaliver synagogue, and she too was attending a Jewish women’s gap year program, but one much more conservative than my own, where she certainly did not learn Talmud. When she noticed me standing by the bookshelves, Rena made her way over, slid a volume down off the shelf and opened it to a random page. “Could you teach me?” she asked. I was startled, but quickly began to explain, in a hushed voice, the structure of the page – the original rabbinic text in the center column, the different medieval commentaries lining the margins. My chest tightened as I translated the Aramaic text. It was exhilarating and humbling to share the experience with
her, but I couldn’t help but feel dejected by our position: standing in the back of a dark, enclosed room, whispering words that the men in the sanctuary below believed us unfit to read. It felt like an act of rebellion, merely reading the sources of our own traditions.

My gap year in Israel was my first foray into any high-level Jewish study, and it was overwhelming to delve into that and simultaneously come to terms with the gender inequality inherent in the Orthodox Jewish education system, which reflects the gender inequality present in so much of our practice. I felt compelled to reassess the education I had received (which had never included Talmud until then), the institutions to which I was connected, and the beliefs I held dear. I came to realize how my deficient education had rendered me unaware of my subordinate position as a woman in Judaism – I had not only been excluded, but had also been kept blissfully ignorant of my own exclusion.

Repeatedly encountering situations like the one with Rena, I became acutely aware of both my own disadvantages as well as my relative privileges. Advanced Jewish study, particularly of Talmud, acts as a means of access to the vast, nuanced inner workings of Judaism. This access to information cultivates a sense of active awareness and involvement. It allows one to become an informed, active participant in religious practice, rather than a cog in a system that seems beyond comprehension – the role to which women are so often limited in Jewish life. Beyond this esoteric sense of empowerment through knowledge, education allows Jewish women to actually participate in the ongoing authoritative discussion and interpretation of these religious texts. When women are involved in these processes, our voices are added to the conversation, our experiences are taken into consideration, and the law is implemented in ways that create space for women’s involvement. It became increasingly clear to me how causative the relationship was
between women's education and women's empowerment. The more I saw women engaging in Jewish scholarship, the more I saw them in positions of leadership. I saw female Jewish educators and academics combating oppression, by either actively addressing those hierarchical structures, or simply by being powerful, vocal leaders in their communities. By learning and teaching, they strove forward. These women used the books on the shelves to shatter the windows that barred them from the main sanctuary.

Of course, these experiences and observations are examples of a much broader, universal trend. In countless communities, just like those all too common in Orthodox Judaism, women are conditioned with norms that prescribe their behavior, and instilled with complacency and a fear of pursuing more information, which reinforces those norms. When they are provided with that information though, knowledge can truly function as power, and can embolden women to rise above the expectations of a suppressive system.

Since my gap year in Israel, I have had several opportunities to take on leadership roles addressing these interests. When I arrived at Brandeis, I quickly got involved in the Brandeis Orthodox Organization, organizing learning events for the community, and eventually becoming education coordinator on the group's board. As education coordinator, I work with Jewish leadership on campus to shape the schedule for educational programming, from daily student-led text study to scholars in residence. I also became involved in the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA), and later received a grant from the organization to run an event on campus. This past summer, I studied and interned at the Drisha Institute in New York, another organization that has played an instrumental role in advancing Jewish scholarship for women, and for which I am still an intern. In addition, I have been involved with the Feminist Majority Leadership Alliance on
campus, and I am currently working with fellow students and faculty to create a formal student group to address the experiences and concerns of Jewish women in our community.

I am studying Sociology, Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, and Legal Studies, all of which have been significantly shaped by and continue to influence my devotion to women’s education and empowerment. I find these subjects meaningful because they explore phenomena lying beneath the surface of everyday experiences and behaviors. Classes like Sociology of Work and Gender and Feminisms: History, Theory, and Practice have challenged me to think more deeply and broadly about the world around me. They have provided me with invaluable tools with which I can better understand history, philosophy, and policy through lenses of feminism, intersectionality, and so on. These classes have cultivated my interest in women’s education, as they shed light on the impact of knowledge in our societies and cultures, especially in hierarchical systems.

The Sorensen Fellowship would allow me to expand the work I have done for women’s empowerment through education beyond the communities with which I am familiar. Exploring options for internships, I am drawn to organizations that provide adult women with education and resources necessary to overcome poverty in their families and communities. Women for Women International has a particularly exciting model: they work with marginalized women in areas affected by conflict, providing them with a safe space to form a community and cultivate skills for self-sufficiency and financial independence – from vocational training to education about their legal rights. These women are paid stipends while enrolled in the program, and the organization continues to assist them in the long term with guidance and connections as they navigate business and
finance. Women for Women operates in eight different countries, and it would be a privilege to intern in any of these locations, or in the Washington, DC headquarters, although those would clearly be very different experiences. Working with them in either capacity, I feel I would be able to contribute my experience in educating and cultivating communities of women to strengthen them as individuals and groups. Beyond what I could give, however, I know I would learn exceedingly valuable lessons and skills over the course of the summer. Surrounded by staff dedicated to this work and potentially the women enrolled in these programs, I would grow in my understanding of women’s education, the role that education plays in systems of poverty, women’s experiences in the workforce in different cultures, and more. Some organizations that do similar work, and with whom I would be equally honored to work, include Womyn’s Agenda for Change: Phnom Penh, as well as many of the initiatives spearheaded by Global Grassroots: Conscious Social Change for Women, which has opportunities overseas and in the US. Given the opportunity to engage in work with these groups, I would be able to witness and even help facilitate more women’s journeys to empowerment through education. This coming Spring, I will be taking Sociology of Education, which I believe will continue to profoundly inform and possibly prepare me for this internship.

Internships in social change always require one to be critical of the hierarchal positioning involved. There is obviously a precedent and potential for colonialist attitudes to become manifest in organizations that attempt to bridge privileged and marginalized populations. My hope is to work with organizations that do not impose elitist, whitewashed values, but rather uplift individuals within their own contexts and communities, providing access and empowerment that is relevant to them. As an Orthodox Jew, another concern of
mine is finding resources for religious observance, such as kosher food and minimal Shabbat accommodation. I would therefore be extremely grateful for the opportunity to intern for four weeks in the United States and four weeks in one of these overseas locations. This way, I would more likely be able to work hands-on in a distant location without religious accommodations. In addition, interning somewhere like the DC headquarters of Women for Women would be an invaluable experience, since I am interested in the legal aspect of social change movements.

As a Sorensen Fellow, I would have the incredible privilege to play a role in a movement that changes women's lives for the better. This is a role I plan to pursue in university and beyond, and the opportunity to engage in this work through the Sorensen Fellowship is one I know would enrich and inform my overall experience in this field in the long term. My hope is to have more interactions like the one I shared with Rena in the Kaliver synagogue, to help women along journeys to education and empowerment. After all, a few months later, Rena transferred to a different gap year program – one wear she learned Talmud regularly and truly engaged with Jewish texts. She surrounded herself with women on that same journey, and developed the skills necessary to begin to find strength in knowledge.