

## **Yafes in the Tents of Shem**

By Leah Shollar

### **Abstract**

This study explores how Chabad girls' schools respond to the challenges posed by modernity. It begins by situating the rise of formal Jewish education for girls as a product of modernity as well as a response to it; as such, charedi girls' education has always occupied a position of tension between preserving tradition and engaging with change. Drawing on ethnographic surveys, document analysis and close readings of Chabad texts and letters, the research uncovers the ways in which charedi institutions resist as well as adapt to the secular world. While schools maintain a firm ideological boundary between Torah values and modernity, they often do so pragmatically, balancing career preparation with spiritual development. Chabad schools endorse distinct philosophies of engagement with contemporary society which vary from one institution to another. Findings suggest that Chabad girls' schools actively negotiate to enable religious identity to coexist with select aspects of modern life. The data also reveals that students often lack opportunities to fully develop a deep, internal religious connection and that existing incentive structures stagnate in extrinsic motivation. The study identifies a disconnect between the chassidic ideal of "driving out darkness with light" and the reality of education that too often emphasizes rejection over transformation. Drawing on the teachings of the Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, the study calls for a return to foundational Chabad principles of inner awakening and intrinsic growth. Such a renewal would empower young women to develop a mature, personal connection to Torah and chassidus, equipping them to inhabit both the *bas\_melech* and *eishes.chayil* identities in a world where Shem continues to battle the enticements of Yafes.

### **A brief statement about the research:**

I wanted to know how Chabad girls' schools respond to the challenges of living in the modern world. Charedi girls' education is both an outcome of and a response to modernity. Chabad's stance toward modernity is unique amongst other chassidic groups, and I was curious to see how that played into its approach toward girls' education.

In the course of my research I uncovered some little known women in Chabad history who were early pioneers of womens' empowerment and education. This included figures in the pre-history of Chabad, the wife of one of the Chabad rebbeim who served as head of the court after his passing, a group of young women in Latvia who studied and translated

chassidic works, and a Bais Yaakov girl from Vienna who was a revolutionary in chassidus and womens' education.

In terms of today's young women, it's clear that there is still room for growth into a mature and dynamic Judaism that is the rightful heritage of chassidic women.