RUTH CALDERON

by SIMONA FUMA

In Israel, there was a popular song on the radio in 2007, "Hinei Ani Ba," about a young man torn between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Jerusalem, the city of two thousand years of Jewish longing, is too intense for him. There is too much Israeli-Arab tension, too many ultra-Orthodox, and his secular friends are moving away. This city of stones, with its rigid conservative lifestyle, is downright boring. The young man picks up and moves to Tel Aviv, where at first he is enchanted by the openness, the liberalism, the scantily clad women. In Israel's city-that-never-sleeps, he spends his time frequenting nightclubs and befriending the in-crowd. But after two years of revelry, he begins to feel that the culture of Tel Aviv is shallow. He longs for a more substantial, authentic existence, so he returns to Jerusalem.

The immense popularity of this song is testament to the fact that in Israel these two cities are not just places, but polarities of

the Israeli soul. Jerusalem is tradition, Tel Aviv modernity. Jerusalem is religion, community, learning and conservatism. Tel Aviv is secularism, dynamism, progress, creativity and change. Depending on where you fall on the religious-secular spectrum, you may love one city and find the other insufferable. For a staunchly religious Israeli, Tel Aviv evokes the image of shameless hedonists who care only about shopping and going out, who live in a "bubble" divorced from the realities of the Middle East, who lack patriotism and are ignorant of the deeper wellsprings of their past. For many secular liberals, Jerusalem is the city of the Orthodox minority, where black-hatted yeshiva boys pore over their Talmud tomes; women (both Jewish and Arab) cover themselves in modest clothing; politics are right wing; poverty is rampant, and the cafes rarely update their menus. While not all Israelis see the other in such black-and-white terms, the divide between the secular and religious is deep and, according to many, has created a serious and damaging rift in Israeli society.

And that's what makes Ruth Calderon so unusual. Based in Tel Aviv, yet immersed in the world of classical Jewish texts, the renowned Talmud scholar, who has founded two major institutions of Jewish study – Elul in 1989 and Alma, which she has directed since 1996 – has forged a career of making the classical Jewish texts accessible to the secular community.

She arrives for an interview in Tel Aviv's Ramat Aviv Gimmel neighborhood on her Vespa, clad in jeans and a black turtleneck. As she describes it, her work is to "reclaim classic Jewish texts and Jewish thought, not just the culture, but the whole legacy. I am saying to my community, the secular community, that we belong to it and it belongs to us and we can't go forward if we don't know where we came from."

Calderon, who's in her mid-forties, was raised in Tel Aviv, in "the non-affiliated community," she explains over an espresso at an outdoor cafe, and she is a huge fan of the city. "[This] is the center of Jewish and Israeli culture and creativity in music, the written word, TV, film, and the arts. I *love* it."

And yet, even as a child, she longed for something more. She

felt that the ideals of Israeli secular culture were somehow lacking. "From a very early age, I felt, it is *not enough*. I felt a need for something deeper, richer," she says. "I appreciated my parents' values, I wanted to stay in my community, but I wanted to be learned in the classic texts."

Today Calderon spends the bulk of each day immersed in the world of first- through fifth-century rabbis. Dubbed the "high priestess" of secular Jewish learning by *Maariv* newspaper, she, together with Elul co-founder Moti Bar-Or, won the prestigious Avi Chai Prize in 1997, a $50,000 grant awarded to Israeli leaders who increase mutual understanding between the secular and religious. Her first book, *The Market, the Home, the Heart* (2001), quickly became a classic of the Jewish feminist bookshelf in Israel. She also hosted an innovative weekly television show in Israel, *Haheder* (The Room), in 2001 in which she brought together diverse Israelis for on-air *chavruta* (paired) study. Though not a prime-time show, it received great reviews and is currently broadcast in reruns.

One of Calderon's unique gifts is her ability to get people to fall in love with Talmud. "I see myself as a *meturgeman* (interpreter), translating complicated things into stories or things that can be understood in a popular way, without losing their heart," she explains.

Esteban Gottfried, forty-two, is a playwright and screenwriter who met Calderon several years ago when she conducted a *beit midrash* (study group) for television and film writers. "Even before I studied [with Calderon] I had a desire to connect my work with Jewish sources. It's part of our culture," he says. He found Calderon to be an excellent teacher who treats students with respect and has "a lot of passion for what she teaches. The characters in the Talmud are like her extended family. It's contagious."

While on sabbatical in the U.S. with her husband and three children from 2002 to 2005, Calderon established Alma New York, through which she initiated an annual *Tikkun Leil Shavuot* (Shavuot night learning) at New York University based on Alma Tel Aviv's Tikkun. Subsequently the venue moved to the JCC in Manhattan, and most recently drew over three thousand twenty- and thirty-

somethings. The Tikkun in Tel Aviv, which takes place at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, is Alma's flagship event. Its success has led to the development of the annual Alma *Regalim* – four mega events celebrating the Jewish calendar – Selichot, Sukkot, Tu Bishvat and Tikkun.

"Ruth has unique gifts of creativity and laser-sharp analytical skills that invite diverse people into her questions about being Jewish in the modern world," says Alisa Rubin Kurshan, vice chair of strategic planning with New York's United Jewish Appeal, who met Calderon during her sabbatical. "She makes the world of the rabbis come alive for her students and makes it real to our everyday lives. To spend an hour with Ruth is to be changed."

Despite her commitment to the texts and her goals to "make more Israelis knowledgeable about our beautiful, powerful legacy, and to make Israel an interesting, spiritual center of Judaism," you're unlikely to bump into Calderon in a traditional synagogue. "I don't pray by the book, except for very special prayers," she says.

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Calderon's primary focus these days is Alma, a non-accredited institution whose goal is to create an "educated Israeli Jew knowledgeable in his culture's classics," by teaching secular Israelis Talmud and traditional Jewish texts alongside Western and Israeli classics.

Alma is located in a two-story historic building in the heart of Tel Aviv, an area recently proclaimed a World Heritage Site by UNESCO for its architecture. Multicolored flowers spill out of planters on the balconies and window ledges, and the interior is bright and airy.

Calderon seems not to dominate Alma so much as infuse it with her elegant touch. Visiting the college and meeting Calderon, you are struck by her graciousness. She is relaxed and affable as she describes the school's approach and instructs students.

The beit midrash, the epicenter of the institution's activity and the embodiment of its philosophy, seats about thirty around long wooden tables arranged in a circle. In Calderon's view, "The

beit midrash as an institution relaxes the frontal style. Teachers do not stand and lecture…they are members of the study group."

The room's walls are lined with books, including the Bible, Talmud, and works of *midrash*, commentary on traditional texts through stories. But the room differs from a traditional beit midrash in that it also contains "secular" books: modern Hebrew classics by Y.H. Brenner and Ahad Ha'am as well as the works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Sigmund Freud. The aim, Calderon says, is to produce "Jewish scholars who will be well-rounded and integrated." Students at Alma spend eight to ten hours a week in the beit midrash and are also required to study philosophy, literature, history and art as part of the school's mission to study general culture along with Jewish culture. "We try to integrate, to open the curriculum so it is not only Jewish culture. Our aim is to let the books socialize with each other," Calderon says.

While the books represent a range of fields and traditions, the style of teaching is all Jewish, honed through thousands of years of yeshiva study: *chavrutot*, followed by a teacher-led group discussion, in which the text is not merely academic, but informs students' lives.

Students study in *chavruta*, groups of two to four, puzzling over a text, talking it out, and offering their interpretations before the entire class regroups. The students are not your average group of Israelis, not even for Tel Aviv. On a Wednesday morning in December, one circle consists of a young man with a rope-like goatee and hipster clothing and two middle-aged women: Kobi Oz is the lead singer of Tea Packs, one of Israel's most popular rock bands, Pazit Rosenboim is a sculptress, and Yael Mishali is a novelist and columnist for Israel's highest circulation newspaper. Many of the other students are actors, professors and people whose funky dress hints at a creative life outside the study hall. In other words, they are Israel's cultural elite.

Calderon estimates that about thirty percent of Alma's student body of about two hundred are artists, and feels that it is important to target this group as students. "Artists are agents of change in

our culture. They paint and write music, poetry and television series. In teaching them, we can perhaps affect culture," she says. As for the students' motivation, Calderon says that many creative people feel a hunger for something deeper and richer from their heritage that they can own and use in their work.

At Alma, students learn *sugyot*, passages from the Talmud, which Calderon and her co-teachers organize according to themes. The theme for this year has been the idea of home – what constitutes a home in the rabbinic view? On this day, students discuss spaces that are not home, but which rabbis suggest ought to require a prayer before Jews enter and after they leave: the study hall, a foreign city, the bathhouse and a toilet. What do these four places have in common?

As the students attempt to decode the ancient text, with its puns and cross-references and subtle humor, they become increasingly engrossed. Their sense of time falls away as they experience a taste of what every yeshiva *bocher* must know – learning Talmud is absorbing and even addictive. Calderon moves from havruta to havruta, offering help with a difficult Aramaic passage or tricky logical step.

The large-group discussion that follows differs from a traditional yeshiva only in that here it's perfectly acceptable to question or criticize traditional Judaism. "The rabbis were too paranoid," says a twenty-something man. "Saying prayers before going to the bathroom is overdoing it. I'm not sure that such a paranoid religion speaks to me."

"You're wrong," counters another man. "A person can't control their anxieties. Saying the prayer is actually a tool to help relieve your fears."

The discussion next veers onto the topic of the bathhouse. Someone suggests that the danger described as "falling into the fire" in a bathhouse is actually a thinly disguised reference to homosexuality. This is the kind of risqué comment you would not make in a traditional beit midrash. But Calderon is one step ahead of her students. She mentions that the eleventh-century rabbi Rashi, biblical

commentator and paragon of piety, was actually wise to this possibility. "The rabbis acknowledged homosexual attraction," Calderon explains with a smile, "It was acting on it that they considered a sin."

Calderon's approach involves reading the rabbis carefully, without the baggage of preconceptions. "An important part of my translating work involves the maxim: Don't judge [the text] from where you are, from the outside, but let's judge it from the inside, let's get inside. Once we understand it, we'll see where we can go with it," she explained in a 2001 interview.

In her book, *The Market, the Home, the Heart*, Calderon's achievement is to make Talmudic passages accessible and psychologically compelling to the contemporary reader. She takes a sparsely worded Talmudic legend, or *aggadah*, and fills in the gaps, describing the atmosphere, the motives and the inner lives of its protagonists, in a modem twist on the tradition called midrash.

Is it anachronistic to attribute such rich inner lives to those living in an age that did not emphasize the primacy of the individual? Calderon explains, "I am doing it because I need to. I want Torah to touch our lives and in order to do so I need to understand the psychological aspect of the characters."

Calderon is also adept at describing the sights and sounds and smells of everyday life in Amoraitic times. At one point in the book, Calderon even describes how a rabbi's wife removed hair from her legs with lime. "[I am interested in] how they slept, what they did, when they went to bed, what their houses looked like," she says.

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Calderon was born in 1961 and grew up in the Tel Aviv neighborhood of Maoz Aviv, the youngest child of three, and the only daughter. Her secular family was nevertheless "very Jewish" and observed certain traditions like lighting candles on Friday night and reciting Kiddush. "My father was a Ladino-speaking Sephardic Jew, and my mother, Margot Kasten [an immigrant from Germany], was an elegant European lady who was always reading books in foreign languages."

Calderon's family was unusual in their Tel Aviv neighborhood where the predominant ethos was that of the Spartan, khaki-wearing "new Jew," secular soldier-pioneers, ardent Zionists who spoke only Hebrew and turned away from their Diaspora roots. The gap between the culture of her home and the ideology she observed at school and in her neighborhood, "is the gap where Elul and Alma originated," she explains. Even as a child of eleven, the early Zionist *Palmachnik* (the *Palmach* was the early Israeli military) ethos of practicality and militarism as opposed to intellectual pursuits did not sit well with her. Calderon sought out books and information on the Jewish past. In fact, she was attracted to the Talmud and other traditional Jewish texts as far back as she can remember. "We are not just heroes on the mountains," she says. "We are the People of the Book."

Calderon missed the refinement and introspection, the *luftmensch* quality or preoccupation with books and the imagination, that she identified with the world of Diaspora Jews and which the new Israeli elite was trying to root out. She set out to recapture this through the study of Talmud. After serving in the army, in 1982 she enrolled at Midreshet Oranim in the Galilee where she spent five years and received a bachelor's degree, followed by another five years at the unaccredited Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem.

Despite being a trailblazer as a secular woman studying Talmud in those days, Calderon was not alone in her attraction to the past. In the period following the Six Day War, a small group of secular Israeli intellectuals decided to reclaim traditional Jewish texts for secular Jews. From this movement – dubbed the Back to the Jewish Bookshelf movement – were born both Midreshet Oranim and the Hartman Institute, new and innovative institutions that were linked to this trend in Israeli society.

In the mid-1980s, Calderon pursued a master's degree in Talmud at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. During this time she also studied at the Hartman Institute, a modern Orthodox establishment that welcomed secular students. Calderon, while enjoying her studies, felt the need for an egalitarian institution run by both Orthodox and secular management, an institution that would promote

a pluralistic approach to Jewish education that would bring together religious and secular men and women. That perceived need led her to cofound the Jerusalem-based Elul in 1989 with Orthodox rabbi, Motti Bar-Or.

Elul attracted both religious and secular young adults who engaged in dialogue over the relevance and meaning of texts. "In order to find a place where I felt at home, I needed to establish it," Calderon explains. "I was always a bit of an outsider: a city girl with the *kibbutznikim*. I was secular in the Talmud department. I was a Tel Avivi in Jerusalem."

She explains that with Elul, "It took a long time for people to understand the concept. It was like every new idea. Secular people thought we were giving ourselves over to religion, religious people questioned the validity of our approach, particularly the idea of broadening the bookshelf, to not have only the classic canon but be open to other great literature."

Calderon left Elul in 1995, in part because, as she explained to *The Jerusalem Post*, "I felt that the gap we tried to bridge at Elul was greater than me, greater than my efforts." Plus, after Yitzhak Rabin was murdered, she felt alienated in Jerusalem and longed to return to Tel Aviv, the city where she most belonged. In 1996, she founded Alma.

In addition to her current work at Alma, Calderon travels the world promoting beit midrash style Jewish text learning among the unaffiliated and spawning Alma offshoots in places such as Haifa, New York City and Warsaw. Recently, in 2007, she received her PhD in Talmud from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

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Calderon's major contribution is "allowing a whole segment of Israelis who were removed from their Jewish past to own it as theirs, without feeling they have to either apologize for not being religious or become Orthodox," according to Moshe Halbertal, a professor of Jewish thought and philosophy at the Hebrew University and the Hartman Institute, and one of Calderon's former professors.

Halbertal believes that this work, which today is much more accepted than when Calderon began her career, has the potential to alter both the notion of Jewish identity in Israel and the nature of Israel as a society by addressing the religious-secular ideological divide. It is "too early to see if the rifts are being healed, but it's a movement in an important direction," he says.

Calderon's work is part of a larger trend, one that she has played a pivotal role in spearheading. Today there are more than twenty egalitarian or secular batei midrash in Israel, many of which have more than one site – there are about one hundred study communities in all, Calderon says.

Clearly, there is a thirst for tradition that places like Alma have tapped into. It is, ultimately, "an identity project," Calderon says. It is this search for identity, this need for meaning, that drives many students to attend Alma. They are groping for an anchor, she says, and clearly, she teaches not only in the classroom but through her example. "Being Jewish gives meaning to my life. For me, the thought of being just another person in the world feels like a missed opportunity," she says.