JUDITH HAUPTMAN

by FRANCESA LUNZER KRITZ

On the wall of Rabbi Judith Hauptman's office at New York's Jewish Theological Seminary, just to the right of her desk, is a monotype that at first glance seems to be a series of brushstrokes, at once beautiful and puzzling.

Hauptman, a Talmud scholar in her sixties, recalls how the piece came to hang in her office. She was in London for a conference a few years ago, sitting and reviewing a page of Talmud in preparation to speak, when she looked up and saw the lithograph, one of several pieces of art for sale. It took her a moment to realize that it was an abstract rendering of a Talmud page.

"At first, the drawing makes no sense, but come closer and you see what it's trying to be. That's what it's like when studying or teaching Talmud. Come closer and it becomes clearer," says Hauptman. "I bought it immediately."

The Talmud has been a focus of Hauptman's life since her college days. Today Hauptman is the E. Billi Ivry Professor of Talmud and Rabbinic Culture at the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS). The first woman to receive a PhD in Talmud, she is a prolific writer and popular lecturer on Talmud and women according to Jewish law. Although she has enjoyed a fulfilling and celebrated scholarly career, she recently broadened her focus by becoming ordained as a rabbi, while continuing to teach at JTS.

Why the Talmud? "Because I love it. It's as if I had no choice," says Hauptman. "It's as though the voices in the stories in the Talmud pulled me in. I could not have chosen any other job, because I am just addicted [to the study of Talmud]."

Hauptman began her studies at JTS as an undergraduate, in 1960, majoring in Talmud while also majoring in economics at Barnard College. She started teaching at the Conservative seminary after her college graduation in 1964, beginning as an instructor at the seminary's Prozdor High School. "I was lucky," Hauptman says. "When I graduated, the seminary offered me a part-time job teaching at the high school, which I did for six years. And then it was the feminist revolution, and they put me on the regular faculty as an instructor of Talmud in 1973."

Hauptman's commitment to teaching and enjoyment of it are strong, even after more than forty years. "Currently, I'm teaching Talmud level one and doctoral students. I love doing both but I have to say that the joy and satisfaction of taking people who can barely navigate a page is special. And leading them to where they are today, to being able to navigate a page, that's extremely satisfying," she says.

"I love being in the classroom. I can look at a page of Talmud and explain it to you, regardless of your background. People tell me I have a gift of being able to explain it in ways that you might have not understood it before."

Hauptman brings a novel style to teaching Talmud. "The traditional route of most *yeshivot* has been to study the *Halacha* (law) rather than the *aggadah* (lore). But I teach a course in which we study the aggadah because I want my students to see aggadah is a

very loose term," she says. "Halacha on Shabbat tells you the principal labors you must not perform on Shabbat, but it does not tell you about Oneg Shabbat – celebrating the Sabbath. The *Mishnah* tells you how many meals to take out of your house if, for example, it's going up in flames on Shabbat and the aggadah has incredible material on meals on Shabbat, and about men and women being required to be engaged in hands-on preparation for Shabbat. And there are fifteen examples of rabbis who assisted their wives for Shabbat. I always like to point that out because we always think it's [only] a woman's responsibility. If a man wanted to take responsibility for Shabbat by taking on the candles that was permissible for him to do. It's not enough to have the halacha of Shabbat, you have to have the aggadah of Shabbat to understand it well."

Hauptman repeatedly gives credit to her early studies and her teachers in shaping the scholar and teacher she is today, adding that her college major in economics helped develop the analytical thinking style needed for Talmud study. "In theory," says Hauptman, "I could have gone into chemistry, or into mathematics. All of those would have been nice, but when it comes down to it, I can do all of those by studying the Talmud – analytic, projecting future models, and unraveling the past, with the added dimension of being Jewish."

That dimension, Hauptman says, "gives me a lens through which I look at the world, and the way I live my life. All of the aspects of my life are nice: teacher, mother, human being, but the more lenses through which you view the work, the richer your experience is."

That richness is due in large part to her immediate family, including her husband, Milton Adesnik, a professor in the Department of Cell Biology at New York University Medical School, and her three grown sons. They "continue to ask me detailed questions about my work and my writing, and, like my students in the classroom, challenge my thought process and conclusions in ways that make me think once, and then again, about my arguments," she says.

Students say Hauptman is adept at presenting complicated premises, is surefooted and receptive in class, and encourages them to question everything. "Rabbi Hauptman is able to open a class in

a way few teachers do," says Rabbi Elie Kaunfer, executive director of Mechon Hedar, a New York City-based organization that provides educational and *minyan* (prayer quorum) resources for young Jews, and a former student of Hauptman's at JTS. "She doesn't shy away from presenting complex topics, and teaches to a very high level, but she [also] is incredibly open to hearing original ideas from students, even when they conflict with her own well-researched positions. On multiple occasions, I saw her change her mind as a result of what a student said in class. This takes a rare level of self-confidence to afford your students the opportunity – in the middle of class! – to cause you to reconsider long-held beliefs."

Hauptman's ultimate goal with students, Kaunfer says, is not "to teach us the strict sentences," but "to have us think with her, as though we were among the writers of the Talmud and can see their reasoning about what was included and why. That is a very powerful way to learn."

Hauptman is the author of scores of articles and the books, *Development of the Talmudic Sugya: Relationship Between Tannaitic and Amoraic Sources* (1987), *Rereading the Rabbis: A Woman's Voice* (1998) and *Rereading the Mishnah: A New Approach to Ancient Jewish Texts* (2005).

Her work over the years has explored two main subjects. As she explains, she has been most interested in "how the text of the Talmud evolved, how so many different statements, chronologically and geographically diverse, coalesced into a single, discursive text, and how the rabbis viewed women themselves, their status and their religious role."

Her work on how the Talmud evolved has been a major factor in understanding the intended meaning of many Talmudic texts. "I have demonstrated that Tannaitic texts, those from the earlier part of the Rabbinic period, lie at the base of many later units of discussion," she explains. "The Talmud was not written in a linear fashion, going from line one at the top of the page to line fifty at the bottom. Rather, a snippet embedded in the middle of the discussion may actually be the earliest element of the discussion, with later comments

appended both after and even before it," a possibility that had been overlooked in the past, Hauptman says.

Her scholarship has also affected understanding of how the core document of the Talmud, the Mishnah, developed. She argues that the Tosefta, a companion volume to the Mishnah, from the same period of time and featuring roughly the same spokesmen, is not a later commentary on the Mishnah, as so many thought, but precedes the Mishnah and often serves as its basis. This theory, which is becoming widely accepted, means that many passages in the Mishnah can be understood with greater precision, she says.

In her book on women, Hauptman shows that even though Rabbinic society was configured in a patriarchal manner, men recognized that women deserved to have higher status than they had had in the past. For instance, Talmudic rabbis decided that a woman's consent be sought before she was married, that a *ketubah* (marriage contract) guarantee that upon divorce or widowhood she receive a lump payment from her husband's estate, and that her father give her a generous dowry, as she was not able to inherit from him.

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Hauptman was born in 1943 and raised in Borough Park, Brooklyn. Currently a homogeneous, right-wing Orthodox neighborhood, it has changed considerably from the diverse community Hauptman knew as she was growing up. She describes her parents as staunch Conservative Jews. Her connection to Judaism consciously began at the age of two or three when she was taken to visit an aunt who served her meat with butter, and she recoiled.

"Here I was so young and Jewish living was already so much a part of who I was," says Hauptman, who credits her parents with instilling in her the love of Jewish rituals. "As I went into the world, I was a person formed by Judaism."

Hauptman was also formed by attending Camp Ramah, a flagship enterprise of the Conservative movement, in the Poconos and in Canada, where she spent seven years as a camper, three years as a counselor, three years as a division head, and later, three years as

a professor. "Ramah determined the course of my life," she says. Although her home was kosher and her parents took her to synagogue every Shabbat, the camp offered something more.

"At Camp Ramah, I discovered *Shabbos*. No lights, no talking on the telephone, no travel, and I just fell in love with the whole thing. It was a beautiful setting in the country, cold nights, sunny days. Summer camp itself was wonderful, and then superimpose on that the whole Jewish thing," she says.

When Hauptman was in graduate school at JTS, she was asked to help a newly formed group, *Ezrat Nashim* (Women's Court), go through passages of the Talmud. The group was formed in 1971 to discuss the status of women in Judaism. It was through this invitation that Hauptman's advocacy on behalf of women began, work which has ultimately helped transform women's roles in the Conservative movement by identifying Talmud sources for re-crafting women's roles and by advocating for a more egalitarian environment. "It was my job to bring to the group sections of Talmud to conduct this inquiry into how Judaism treats women," says Hauptman. "I could translate what the Talmud was saying about women; show that the seeds of change were planted in the Talmud. This was one of the most meaningful experiences of my life."

Hauptman's work with the group led her to begin speaking on these issues and championing the idea of women rabbis. "A lot of us became public speakers, and synagogues across the country were extremely open to us. Feminism in the 1960s sensitized a lot of women, so there was receptivity to accepting women by the time we came on the scene. After studying the texts, the group went to the Rabbinical Assembly of Conservative Judaism and asked for changes, and within a year, the rabbis took up our cause…Women, for example, could be counted in a minyan." Hauptman says it is one of the smartest things the Rabbinical Assembly ever did. "Without women there would often not be a morning minyan at many synagogues," she says.

Hauptman's contribution to the Conservative movement in terms of changing women's roles was transformational, according to movement leaders. The author and movement elder Francine

Klagsbrun says of Hauptman, "The fact that she taught Talmud at the seminary at a time when few women were studying texts at her level was an enormous boost. It said that a woman scholar was being taken seriously…she blazed the way for other women scholars. But she also blazed the way for all women in the movement by putting her emphasis on Talmud and texts and not on some vague 'spirituality.' Judy showed that true spirituality comes from study and a willingness to engage our texts. Judy engaged the texts in the tradition of the Conservative movement. She worked from within…Change comes about by reexamining traditional sources and showing how they can be interpreted to have meaning for our lives today."

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Twenty-four years after earning her PhD, Hauptman graduated from rabbinical school. Why become a rabbi, when her career as a scholar was so full and rewarding? Actually, she wasn't entirely sure, except it was something she had thought about since JTS began ordaining women in 1983, and because in some ways she felt what she did was already quite close to being a rabbi. "In my own head, I have been a rabbi all my life. I think the way I function with students is rabbinical. I just wanted to be recognized for what I had been doing," she says. But although she had thought about it over the years, with a full teaching and research load and three young sons at home, earlier she felt she didn't have time for the coursework.

She attended the non-denominational Academy for Jewish Religion (AJR), graduating in 2003. Her studies there included pastoral counseling training and have lent another dimension to what she terms "my role in Judaism." Rabbinical school, she says, "forced me to be open to the more spiritual side of things. There was a part of me that I wasn't always in touch with that wanted to be with people, ministering to their spiritual needs and not just teaching them Talmud. I think somehow it bubbled up finally. I didn't know, when I went to AJR, that I was going to fall in love with the soft side of Judaism."

Hauptman currently serves at the volunteer Jewish chaplain for the Cabrini Home for Nursing and Rehabilitation, a Catholic

nursing home in lower Manhattan. The people she works with at the nursing home would likely be shocked by Hauptman's own surprise at her affinity for this work. "Rabbi Hauptman is a people person," says Sister Doris Pagano, director of Pastoral Care at the Cabrini Home. Prior to Hauptman's arrival, the needs of the Jewish residents, from holiday services to funerals, were taken care of by rabbis of nearby synagogues when they were available. Now, Hauptman comes every other week to lead services and visit with the home's Jewish residents.

"What comes across," says Sister Pagano, "is that Rabbi Hauptman is empathetic, sympathetic, and a very caring person." Sister Pagano recalls a particular Saturday morning when she attended one of Hauptman's Shabbat services. A staff member came to tell the Sister that one of the residents had died. "Even though the person wasn't Jewish, Rabbi Hauptman insisted on coming with me to see if she could help make things easier for the family and say prayers."

Perhaps not surprisingly, Sister Pagano says some of the older men try to challenge the woman rabbi on her Talmud knowledge. "She comes right up with the answer," says Sister Pagano with a chuckle. "Rabbi Hauptman is always so well prepared, and has these wonderful stories to share from the Talmud."

Since she became a rabbi, Hauptman has become increasingly known for the free services she leads in Greenwich Village during the High Holidays as well as the low-cost Passover Seder she runs, which attract hundreds of people. This work was spurred by a chance encounter. One Yom Kippur as she was leaving the synagogue she attends regularly, the Town and Village Synagogue in downtown Manhattan, a young couple approached her and asked where they might go for services, having been turned away from the synagogue because they had no tickets. "I can do better," Hauptman thought. Since 2004 she has offered the services through a program she named Ohel Ayalah in memory of her mother. Hauptman's services are "for people in flux. Something within our attendees says they want to reconnect for the High Holidays, and what is stopping them may be the barrier of paying for the ticket. If we hold onto them now and give them

these free services and try to keep them Jewish, some of them will remain within the Jewish community," she says.

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What comes next? Hauptman's current research is about women's lives in rabbinic times, about how Jewish women lived their lives 1,800 years ago. "Having looked at laws about women, I am now trying to look at their lives. Just because men occupied the public roles in Judaism, serving as rabbis and prayer leaders and Torah readers, it is incorrect to conclude that women played no religious role at all. Rather, in the home, which was a semi-public space, women were given key religious roles to fulfill for themselves and for men," she says.

Clearly, while her responsibilities as a ministering rabbi bring Hauptman great joy, this new focus has not diminished her love for studying and teaching Talmud. The Talmud, says Hauptman, is paramount for all Jews, including those who don't realize it or are non-observant.

"The Talmud is a huge text and the text that most defines you as a Jew," she explains. "We live our lives by the Talmud. You can take a Reform Jew who says, 'I have personal autonomy, I can choose to be kosher or not kosher, but they are defining themselves against tradition, against the Talmud…If somebody came from Mars today and wanted to be Jewish, reading the Bible wouldn't make them Jewish, but living by the Talmud would."