

Sara Schenirer Speech
Devorah Cohn

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Bas Mitzvah girls

Hello,

My name is Devorah Cohn. I live here in Monsey. I was born in 1916. I am 91 years old.

Why did your school ask a 91 year old woman like myself to come meet with you?

I want to tell you the reason. You go to a wonderful school, and you get a terrific Jewish education in your school. But Jewish girls didn't always get a good solid Jewish education. People used to think that it was enough for a Jewish girl to learn about Yiddishkeit by watching her mother at home.

One woman changed all that. One woman made it possible for Jewish girls like yourselves to get a wonderful Jewish education in school. That woman was my teacher, Sarah Schenirer, the founder of the Beis Yaakov movement.

Sara Schenirer understood that girls needed formal Jewish education. They needed knowledge of *yiddishkeit* in order to remain religious. She herself had such a burning desire for Jewish knowledge that she studied on her own. She was a self taught woman and it bothered her to see that other girls grew up without that knowledge of Yiddishkeit. Sara Schenirer was the first and only one at the time who was willing to do something about it.

As a young woman, my teacher, Sarah Schenirer earned her living as a dressmaker in Krakow, a city. She would sew dresses made to order.

When mothers came to order dresses for their daughters, Sara Schenirer would say to them. "Why are you only interested in dresses to improve the physical appearance of your daughter? Why do you not show at least as much concern about the spiritual beauty of your daughter?" I myself heard Sara Schenirer say that she lost many customers due to her discussions with the mothers.

A turning point came during World War I in 1914. Sara Schenirer's family escaped from Krakow to Vienna, Austria to avoid the dangers of war. Her first Shabbos in Vienna she went to *shul* and listened to the fiery *Shabbos drasha* of Rabbi Flesh. It was *Shabbos Chanukah* and he spoke about Chana and her sons and about Yehudis, the daughter of *Mattisyahu*, who went on a dangerous mission and killed *Aliphornous*, the general of the Greek army and brought about the victory of the *chashtmonaim*.

When Sara Schenirer heard these words, they were the sparks that ignited the flame within Sara's soul. She could no longer contain her burning desire to educate Jewish girls.

She returned from Vienna after the war determined to start a Jewish school for girls. She tried to find support for her revolutionary idea, but met with strong opposition from from people. Her own brother Menachem asked why she would want to start a school when so

many people were against it. Menachem suggested that he would travel with her to the Belzer Rebbe. They went to the Rebbe and Sara wrote a *kvittel*. Her brother took the *kvittel* to the Rebbe and said, “*Mine shvester vill efenen a religiezech shuleh far maidlach.*” That means ‘my sister wants to open a religious school for girls.’ The Rebbe read the *kvittel* and said two words: “*Bracha v’abtzlacha.*”

Those two words were all that Sara Schenirer needed. All the way home, she was excited about her new venture.

Returning to Krakow in 1917 after the war, Sara Schenirer started Bais Yaakov as an afternoon school in her own three room apartment with seven students. The news spread quickly. Her former customers for whom she sewed dresses sent their daughters. Even in the limited time she had, she taught the girls the fundamentals of Judaism and *ahavas yisroel* and enthusiasm for *yiddishkeit*. A Jewish school for girls, Bais Yaakov, became a reality.

Sara Schenirer got moral support from the Gerer Rebbe, the Chortkover Rebbe and the Belzer Rebbe. Soon a *kol koreh*, an appeal, came from the Chofetz Chaim in support of the new girls school. This made a deep impression on Polish Jewry and parents from surrounding towns opened branches of Bais Yaakov. Each town paid for its own Bais Yaakov. Sara Schenirer sent her oldest students as teachers to these new schools. The teachers, inspired by Sara Schenirer, did a great job.

In the meantime, the world Agudath Israel organization in Krakow adopted Bais Yaakov. They became involved and gave Bais Yaakov financial support. More Bais Yaakov schools opened and Sara Schenirer was confronted with the problem of where to get teachers.

She dealt with this problem by opening the Bais Yaakov Teachers Seminary where I studied.

Dr. Judith Rosenbaum was sent to Krakow from Frankfurt by *Morainu Reb Yaakov Rosenheim*, the president of the World Aguda, and by Dr. Leo Deutchlander to put the Seminary on a solid educational foundation. She was a graduate of the Hirsch Girls School and of the University in Frankfurt. Fraulein Dr. Rosenbaum, as she was called, was so impressed with the enthusiasm and sincerity of Sara Schenirer that she stayed for several years and became one of the most influential teachers in the Seminary.

Dr. Leo Deutchlander, also a product of German Orthodoxy came to Poland to help the new Bais Yaakov Seminary. He was the president of *Keren Hatorah*, a fund to help *yeshivos* and *chadorim*. In addition to his financial administration, he was a guest lecturer. It was a big holiday when he taught us, in particular when he taught Tehillim.

I did not have the *z’chus* to have Fraulein Dr. Rosenbaum as my teacher. When I came to the Beis Yaakov seminary in 1933, she had left for Germany to marry Dayan Grunfeld. But I had the *z’chus* to enjoy and be inspired by the lessons of Dr. Deutchlander, and of course, to be a student of Sara Schenirer.

The Bais Yaakov Teachers Seminary developed into an excellent school that graduated hundreds of teachers. The young women came to Cracow from Poland, Germany, Romania, Israel and even from America. They became trained teachers who spread Sara Schenirer's ideals. 15 years after Bais Yaakov was founded, there were 250 schools in Poland. When World War II broke out, the Bais Yaakov movement had 40,000 students throughout Poland.

The Seminary had a staff of excellent devoted teachers. The last teacher who joined the staff was Harav Yehuda Leib Orlian. He was my teacher. He was a giant, one of the greatest *mechanchim*, an outstanding speaker. We called him *Herr Orlian*.

Herr Orlean taught us Jewish History and all the *haftorabs* and *Mishlei*. During the war, some Swiss Jews tried to get him out of Poland to save him. They almost succeeded, but he was caught and sent to a concentration camp. I still mourn him.

Now, how did I come to Bais Yaakov Seminary? In my hometown of Slonim, Poland, there was no Bais Yaakov. I attended a regular elementary school and then I went on to the Jewish high school. My teachers were not *frum*. I remember I had arguments with my *navi* teacher. I did not like his *pairushim*. It came to a point when my parents insisted that I had to leave *gymnasium*. I could not study in a secular school. I knew they were right. But I had a great desire for learning and wanted to go on.

My good luck came when I heard of the Bais Yaakov in Krakow. My father promised to send me there. I had to study to catch up. I started to plan. There were so many papers to fill out, so many recommendations to get. On the application form, we were notified that the Seminary reserved the right to send us home if we were not satisfactory in our *midos* and in our studies.

Between applying and getting accepted, my father was *nistar* and my mother now had great financial difficulties. I remember my older brother went to the Slonimer Rebbe. We were Slonimer *Chassidim*. He told the Rebbe, "My sister was accepted to the Bais Yaakov Seminary. Money is tight. What shall we do?" The Slonimer Rebbe said, "*Shiket ir.*" Send her. And this is how I got to Bais Yaakov.

It was not easy financially. My sister had a *kreml*, a store in Slonim and the proceeds from her business were earmarked to pay my tuition of 100 *zlotes* a month. Seventy years ago that was equivalent to \$100 a month. If tuition was not paid, we could not attend classes. Once when my tuition was late in arriving, Sara Schenirer took me aside and told me, "You can attend my class even when your tuition did not arrive on time."

My excitement was great. I was finally going to the school about which I was dreaming for so long.

The journey took about 16 hours. I had to change trains in Bialystok, in Warsaw.

Finally I arrived in Krakow, to Stanislaw 10, to the Bais Yaakov Seminary. The 5 story building was new. It was like going to a palace. It was so exciting to be there. I loved running up the 120 steps to the dormitory on the top floor. The dormitory was better than any American dormitories. It was modern, almost luxurious, in the early 1930's.

But let's start with the first floor. On the right as you entered the building there was an apartment for the non-Jewish caretaker, his wife and children. The dining room and kitchen were also on this floor.

The second floor had offices for the male administrators: And there were also living quarters for a teacher. There was always a teacher who lived on the premises with us. The second floor also housed the infirmary and some of the classrooms.

The third floor was all classrooms. The largest classroom had a *katedra*, a podium that was elevated 15" from the floor, which we used when we practiced public speaking. We *davened* in this room every morning.

The dormitory was on the fourth and fifth floors. The smaller rooms housed 10 girls and the larger ones had 15 to 16 girls. When we first came, we started out in the larger rooms. The second year, we lived in the smaller rooms with less roommates. Each girl had a bed and a night table. The beds were good with good mattresses, linens and blankets. It was very *balabatish*. We had showers, bathtubs, bathrooms, and hot running water. It was very luxurious. It was clean, neat and elegant.

Some years there were only 80 girls. When I attended from 1933 to December, 1935, we had 120 girls between the two grades.

The Seminary was a two year intensive program. In addition to studying *chumash, neviim, kesuvim, dikduk, historiah, Pirkei Avos, tefillo, and Tehillim*, we studied pedagogy, psychology, Polish and German languages, Polish and world history, and geography

The day started when we woke up at 7:00 o'clock. At 8:00 we *davened* together. Then we ate a hot, nourishing breakfast. Classes started at 9:00 and usually ended at 4:00 o'clock, sometimes later. Despite the homework, we were encouraged to go to sleep early, but almost never did before 11:00 o'clock.

On *rosh chodesh*, the day was shortened and we went on a trip to a local park or museum.

The most exhilarating experience was to meet Sara Schenirer. She hugged me and welcomed me. Her burning eyes are still watching me. She showered us with love. She sang and danced with us. She was very loving and friendly. She went with us on outings. She taught us *pairush tefillo*. *She davened* with such *kevana* you were inspired just by watching her.

We held Sara Schenirer in very high esteem. When she suggested something, we always followed her advice. You will notice in the pictures that we all wore our hair neatly tied back or in braids.

Shabbos was very special. A group of girls would escort Sara Schenirer to the Seminary every Friday night after *licht benching* to say *Shir Hashirim* with us. It still rings in my ears when she said, "*Mayim rabim lo yochloo l'chabos es ha'abava.*" And indeed no one could extinguish the fire of love for Torah that Sara Schenirer lit.

After saying *Shir Hashirim* we all went to a *chasidishe shtibel* to *daven kabbolas Shabbos*. Sara Schenirer lived nearby and a different group of girls would escort her home to eat the Shabbos *senda* with her husband, Herr Landau. During the week Sara Schenirer wore a hair *shaitel*. On Shabbos she wore one made of georgette and she wore a white ½ apron.

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The food was always nourishing, delicious and plentiful. We had an excellent cook and she prepared special Shabbos delicacies and baked goods for us. I still remember the taste of the Shabbos food. A teacher would eat with us. We sang and delivered *divrei Torah*. Shabbos afternoon we had a guest speaker who spoke about the *parsha*.

Sara Schenirer with her deep understanding and love for Jewish girls and her concern for them, was not satisfied with just educating them, but felt that their social needs should be satisfied also. She started a children's journal, *Frisbeh Bleemalach*, which she herself edited and for which she herself wrote the most charming stories, plays, and poems in beautiful language. For young adults she founded, edited and contributed articles to the Bais Yaakov Journal. Sara Schenirer also started the organizations Basya, Bnos and N'shei.

Think about this woman. Sara Schenirer engaged in so many activities for the *klal*, busy with administrating a Teachers Seminary, teaching classes, raising funds, a woman engaged in founding schools all over Poland and visiting and supervising all of them, a woman editing magazines and writing articles and plays. In other words, she was an energetic woman fulfilling so many jobs, each of which was a full time job.

How much time do you think such a woman can devote to any individual? Yet each of her hundreds of *talmidos* was near and very dear to her heart for years after they left her school. In fact, until her death in 1935, she corresponded with many of them. She guided them with their problems, comforted them in their troubles, and strengthened them in their undertakings. Whoever wrote to her, received a personal answer.

Her charity was beyond imagination. Out of her own pocket and from money which she collected from others, she supported many poor families, married off poor girls, took care of sick people and orphans. All this she did single handedly. She carried a big pocketbook and in it she had notebooks with *chesbonos* of all her *tzedaka* activities. On Purim she asked us girls to help her collect money. She paired us and sent us out.

We all know what she did for the *klal* is of such tremendous value it is almost immeasurable. Her influence spread all over the world.

For me personally, the most important aspect about Sara Schenirer was the example she set of utmost *yiras shomayim*, *ahavas habriyos*, of complete *bitachon* in Hashem and the *hislabavus* of serving Him.

Seminary changed my life. I came out a different person. Bais Yaakov gave me a different *oyskook*. I could never have gotten the *yiddishkeit* elsewhere, the *hashkofos*, the *bren*. To be a Bais Yaakov teacher was my ideal. I lived with that ideal all my life.

Sara Schenirer told us two things before we left Seminary. She told us to keep two things in mind now that we were becoming teachers. When we succeed, we should not be proud. If we do not succeed, we should not get discouraged.

Sara Schenirer died at the age of 52 in Adar, 1935. She did not have children, but we were her children.

Rashi says, “Yaakov Avinu lo mais.” Yaakov established the 12 *shivtai ka*. Sara Schenirer is living among us. She established the movement for Jewish schools for Jewish girls. Sara Schenirer saw her dreams come true. When I look around this room and see your shining faces, and see what a fine Jewish education you are receiving, I feel that you are the torchbearers of the light that Sarah Schenirer lit. May you always continue in the path of Torah and Yiddishkeit.

Thank you.