



## **Rabba Rachel Kohl Finegold**

I didn't expect the passing of Rabbi Moshe Kahn to hit me this hard. I had not realized what an important role he played in my life. I was in his class for only one year, in my first year at the Drisha Scholars Circle, nearly twenty years ago. I had not been in touch with him since then. And yet, as I write about his passing, I find tears streaming down my cheeks.

What was so special about Rabbi Kahn? Why do I feel a personal loss today?

I went to the YU online Torah library, to find the audio recordings of his shiurim, just to listen. To listen to his voice, to hear him in class with his students, to see if I could remember what it felt like when I studied in his shiur, all those years ago.

On the recording, I hear him teaching, with a unique combination of softness and clarity. I hear the voices of young women all around him. They are answering his questions, talking with him, even being playful in their learning, and making jokes and comments. He is right there with them, enjoying the unpacking of a complex text, taking the subject matter seriously while also bringing levity and vitality to the conversation. That's it - he brought it all to life. The words of the Gemara, and then the classical Rishonim layered on top of it.... It all felt so vibrant and alive and essential to who we were.

He was all the things that a good teacher is: calm, kind, patient, and good-natured, while also being demanding and showing the highest expectations of his students. But for me, he was also something more. Something existential.

From time to time over the years, I read of the passing of a great Torah leader, a giant in the yeshiva world. I see throngs of students attending the funeral, a sea of black and white. And even within my more liberal-minded rabbinic community, I see my male colleagues posting threads, commenting and talking about how they got to be close with this rebbe, or how they sat in his shiur, or they davened at his minyan, or attended his tisch, or maybe even served with him on a beit din. I am ashamed to say it, but over the years I began to find myself reading these accounts with deep envy, with a sense that there was a mesorah (tradition) to which I never had access because of my gender. That beit midrash or that tisch or any number of deeply rooted and authentic experiences of our longstanding mesorah is not open to me. Even my most liberal colleagues and friends can "pass" and enter those worlds, as long as they are male. They can enter those spaces and have access to that learning, or that leader. I am not proud to say that I would read these accounts of Torah greats, and feel jealousy. To be sure, I have been fortunate to have had access to study halls and volumes of Talmud and incredible teachers, women, and men. But these were always only in spaces that were new, that were innovative, spaces that were founded in the last few decades by new generations of leaders and teachers who could bring Torah into the 21st century, to women. Even though I was learning the same historic texts, it can sometimes feel too new, like my Torah is arriving through an intermediary, a step apart from the historic walls of the beit midrash.





Learning with Rabbi Kahn was different. Sitting in his shiur, with the lilt of his voice, it felt like I was transported to the most elite and prestigious yeshiva in Eastern Europe. Sometimes he would spend an entire class with his laser focus on a single Tosfos, or we would spend several days just taking apart a Ran or a Shiltei. He would push us, and we would struggle, and he would make us read and reread the text. I was proud when I could read in class and proud to show when I understood. And he would say “Good. Say better.” Again and again and again. It was stark, unadorned, yeshiva learning. It felt direct from the study houses of Rashi and Rabeinu Tam.

Rabbi Kahn was my connection to that mesorah. He was my most potent access point to a world that otherwise felt out of reach to me.

I recall how, a few months into our class, he did a private check-in with each student. I was 24 years old, and it was the first time I was learning Torah full-time (except for my gap year in Israel, many years before, which had been a different kind of growth experience) With the naivete of youth, I told him that I could see my own progress. I could see that I was making headway in my learning, that after these few months, I was really beginning to grasp how to make my way through the Gemara and Rishonim. He looked at me, with warmth and kindness, smiled, and said, “It’s not in the months; it’s in the years.”

In that comment, Rabbi Kahn showed a humble firsthand understanding of what it truly takes to become a scholar. He couched it in warm encouragement, which also came with a hidden expectation; the implication was that I could spend years and years in Torah study if I wanted to. I never heard him speak directly about the importance of women learning Torah at the highest levels. He didn’t have to, because he spoke so loudly with his actions - hundreds and hundreds of women learned Torah with him for so many decades. Indeed, as he said to me, it’s in the years.

In time, my career turned toward community work and pulpit life. I left the walls of the Beit midrash and I have not truly put in those years. In some way, I feel like I let Rabbi Kahn down.

But perhaps if I add together my months plus the months of so many, many talmidot who learned and struggled their way through his classes... together these add up to many, many years, indeed, an eternity of Torah learning and Torah living. And today, the voices of women learning Torah, echoing in the Batei Midrash of women’s learning institutions around the world... these voices are all part of Rabbi Kahn’s legacy. Yehi zichro baruch.

