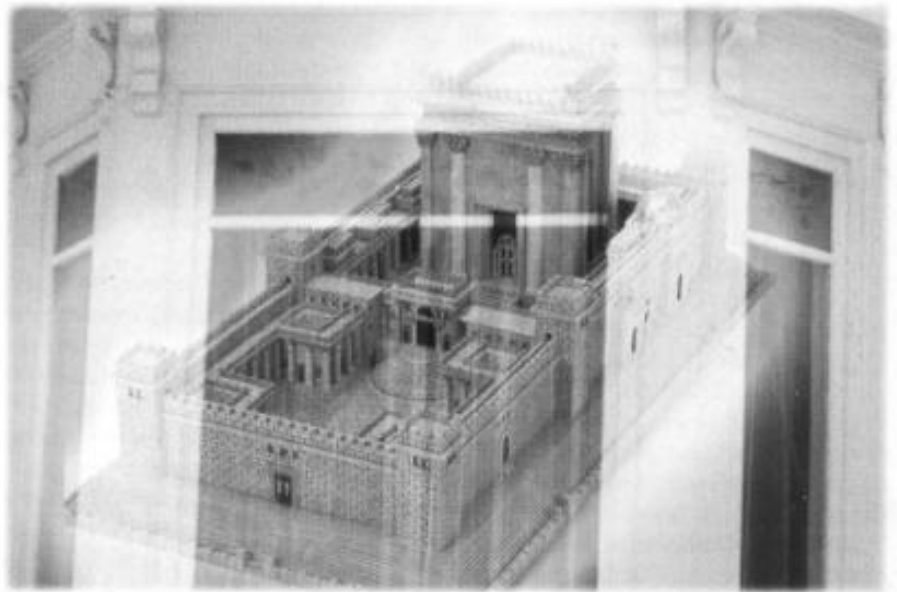


DAUGHTERS OF THE KING

by Leah Kothes



Our home needs to parallel the Beis HaMikdash, which is described in *Shir HaShirim* as a place whose exterior was of gold and whose interior pulsed love.

Shira Smiles rushes in, loaded down with sefarim. "Where are you coming from?" I ask. "Teaching in Bayit Vegan," she replies, breathlessly. After a few moments of silence, she begins to talk, and it's soon clear that Shira Smiles is one of those people who are always on the move, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually, as well as physically. Her perpetual motion, inspired by her love of Hashem, makes her a fascinating person with whom to talk.

Shira overflows with inspiring and thought-provoking teachings, ideas, and stories. Her learning projects, initiated with the help of her husband and her friends, are teaching women practical ways to serve Hashem. She has a crowded weekly schedule of teaching commitments, and a mushrooming agenda of study programs. And all this has its impetus in her genuine desire to share the beauty and wisdom of our Torah with as many women as possible.

Shira Smiles is a woman of action for the sake of Heaven — nothing more, nothing less. Professional titles, labels, descriptions, and superlatives don't interest her. What does interest her is only the opportunity to touch another woman's life and to bring her closer to the truth of our

holy Torah. This aspiration keeps her busy enough.

The Smiles family made aliyah two years ago, on the Nefesh B'Nefesh program, from the Fairfax area of Los Angeles where they'd lived for twelve years. "I was involved in Jewish adult-education. I also taught in a high school. My husband created the 613.org website that provides audio *shiurim* to Jews the world over. He has made over 600 tapes available through his site. We're both focused on spreading Torah to as many Jews as possible.

"It was my husband's idea to come and live in Eretz Yisrael. We've settled in Ramat Beit Shemesh. Before we came, I accepted two teaching jobs in seminaries here. The rest of the time, I teach women in groups in Ramat Beit Shemesh, Jerusalem, Modiin, Rechovot, and via satellite. We want to make Torah accessible."

While Shira was living in Los Angeles, she experienced many opportunities for personal growth and self-awareness.

"For her fiftieth birthday, a *baalas teshuvah* student of mine invited me and two other women to her private celebration. 'You are all my spiritual mentors,' she told us. 'That's why I invited you to my party. Thank you for the influence you're

Leah Kotkes talks with Shira Smiles

having on my life.' She then asked each of us who our spiritual mentors were. I thought this was a great question. I had to think carefully about her answer. Who made me who I am? Who was influencing my life in a positive way? Everyone goes through challenges in life. I feel that tests are gifts from Hashem to help us grow; opportunities to enrich and elevate our *avodas Hashem* and our relationship with Hashem, with others, and with ourselves.

"After much thought, I was able to answer her question: Infertility was my spiritual mentor. We experienced infertility for the first ten years of our marriage. Years that helped me to embrace Hashem. Years that helped me to see Hashem's Presence in my life more clearly. Years that helped me to reach a more exalted connection with the reality of our lives."

During those ten long years, Shira placed her trust in Hashem and focused her energy into a deeply personal relationship with Him. This, in turn, fueled her with more energy, which she then channeled into teaching. "Hashem clearly gave me a gift. Ten years to learn and teach Torah. I am still living off those ten years today. I have a library of all my lessons, which is my resource now. I was also able to write three teachers' guides for the study of *Navi* in high school, that are being used by teachers around the world today. In the midst of our challenge, my husband and I feel that we managed to achieve a G-d consciousness, where we felt Hashem's Presence in our lives.

"In Los Angeles, my husband and I learned how to have a G-dly life in the midst of *galus*. Today, we live in Eretz Yisrael. But I know now that a person can create Eretz Yisrael in her life, wherever she is in the world. If a person learns to appreciate that there's nothing else in the world but Hashem, then she'll see the hand of Hashem through the *Hashgachah pratis* evident in every moment of her life. A person who has *yiras Shamayim* will experience this wherever she is — Los Angeles, Jerusalem, really anywhere.

"A *Yid* is sent down to this world with a purpose to develop in the best way possible. A *Yid* must aim for greatness. Parents must assume this aspiration. Children mirror their parents; a child sees himself in his parents' reflection. Parents have to work extra hard to try and get their *avodah* on the right track. Their *avodah* influences their children, the future of *Am Yisrael*."

Shira's twenty years of teaching experience have given her an accurate perspective and insight into the state of today's family homes, and helped her to formulate some solutions to the challenges faced in our generation.

"This is obviously a very extensive subject," Shira says, "but one thing I will say is that parents are not home enough and not giving their children enough personal attention. This lack of care and at-

I know now that a
person can create Eretz
Yisrael in her life,
wherever she is in
the world

tention is affecting thousands of children throughout the world. A student in the seminary where I'm teaching related her experience on her seventeenth birthday. She asked that her parents take her out for dinner to a restaurant, by themselves, without their cell phones! This student is one of the healthier ones. She was able to articulate her need and ask for what she wanted. But what a request!"

After ten years of sincere davening, the Smiles merited to have two children, *bli ayin hara*. "*Baruch Hashem*, the kindness of Hashem is awesome. Having my own children definitely helped me to affirm my priorities. Teaching is still vitally important in my life, but our girls come way above that."

While they were dating, the Smiles talked about making aliyah at some point

Name: Shira Smiles

Birthplace: Dayton, Ohio

Age: Late thirties

Profession: Wife, mother, and teacher

Husband's Birthplace: Pascagoula, Mississippi

His Profession: Founder of 613.org, a website of audio Torah *shiurim*

Residence: Ramat Beit Shemesh

Children: Two, *bli ayin hara*

in the future. This was always at the forefront of her husband's mind and was often expressed. But after their daughters were born, Shira felt less urgency about moving to Jerusalem. The security situation in Eretz Yisrael was her main concern.

Then one of their daughters was hit by a car. Miraculously, she came out with only minor injuries. Shira's husband took this opportunity to express his feelings about vulnerability and about the protecting hand of Hashem wherever we are in the world. His words were enough to help Shira make the commitment to move to Eretz Yisrael.

Ramat Beit Shemesh was their chosen community. "We have family here. My mother was *niftarah* four years ago and my father, who lives in Jerusalem, is now remarried. My sister and her family also live nearby. It took us a while to acclimatize but now we've settled in."

In a new English-speaking community like Ramat Beit Shemesh, there are many opportunities for gifted people to make a contribution. Shira does this by sharing her love of Torah. She gives a *parshah shiur* on *Shabbos Mevarchim* to over 150 women, in a shul near her home. One of her major initiatives is group learning. She currently teaches five groups of about fifteen women each, in the Beit Shemesh and Ramat Beit Shemesh area. They meet weekly to study Chumash.

"We learn the text in depth and detail, and then look for the practical and inspirational lessons that we can glean. The learning is focused on stimulating the mind and soul. The goal is to take what we learn and apply it to our daily lives."

Mishpacha

"From my experience, many women are afraid, or simply don't know how, to look within to access their Divine potential and G-d-given attributes and skills. I see that when a woman becomes more intimate with the Chumash — or any source text, for that matter — this opens doors in her life, internally and externally. In these learning sessions that I facilitate, I've seen tremendous growth in the women's lives."

A favorite sefer of hers is *Ohel Miriam* by Rabbi Shimshon Pincus, *ztz"l*. Shira explains: "This sefer is vital for anyone who wants to understand *chinuch* for our children. A woman must realize that her home has to be a place of love. Our home needs to parallel the Beis HaMikdash, which is described in *Shir HaShirim* as a place whose exterior was of gold, and whose interior pulsated love. A mother's whole life is dedicated to giving. Every moment of a woman's life is an opportunity to develop a relationship with Hashem and her family.

"To strengthen herself and to ensure that her *kavanos* are on the right path, it's important for a woman to learn from the sources. Learning from the text enriches our lives and shows us how to live in the Torah way, bringing us closer to ourselves and so, in turn, closer to Hashem. Learning provides a special opportunity for a woman to develop her love relationship with Hashem. She is thereby able to infuse her home with this special quality."

Shira's current project is a monthly live satellite-link between Los Angeles and Jerusalem. "I wanted to keep in touch with my students in L.A., as well as to nurture and share my new relationships here. This live linkup will mean that the women can hear and see me giving a *shiur*, and they'll be able to interact and ask questions."

She's using the facilities of Aish HaTorah to actualize this exciting initiative. A monthly live satellite-link with Torah Communication Network is also broadcast to many different communities throughout North America, including Los Angeles, Chicago, Atlanta, New York, and Toronto.

Another key project is a campaign stressing the halachos of Shabbos. Shira

and her group of committed activist friends have organized women to learn *b'chavrusa* from the sefer *Mishnas HaShabbos*, by R. Zander. They've inspired communities in Eretz Yisrael and abroad to join them in this important endeavor. Multiple-choice tests are sent, twice a month, to help the women review the material and to check for comprehension. They're also organizing *shiurim* by prominent *rabbanim*, on the *hashkafah* of Shabbos.

"I got the inspiration for this idea from a Gerrer chassidic woman in Boro Park who's been organizing this learning campaign for the last few years. She's directing and supervising this entire *Mishnas HaShabbos* project. People are looking for structured learning, where they can focus their *kavanah* and their efforts. *Yidden* all over the world are yearning to learn and to do the right thing in the eyes of Hashem.

"Every Jew has an opportunity to touch another Jew's life with a taste of Torah."

During the week, one will find Shira in Bayit Vegan, dashing between Darchei Binah and Afikei Torah seminars, where she teaches eighteen- and nineteen-year-old girls. "All my stu-

dents are seekers. They're searching to find themselves and their place in the world. They're seeking a relationship with Hashem and a more intimate relationship with themselves. They're looking for an anchor to secure themselves in this confusing world. Really, all my students are like you and me — *Yidden* with open ears, ready to fill themselves up with Torah and mitzvos."

Shira Smiles can't imagine doing anything else with her life but teaching and sharing Hashem's Torah — except, of course, being a wife and mother, our *avodas Hashem* in the fullest sense of the word.

But for an injection of Torah inspiration and practical instruction that can only strengthen our observance, we need women like Shira Smiles.

Shira wants all women to know that they're capable of making a contribution and helping Torah to flourish.

All it takes is one small step in the right direction, with the right *kavanah*, and you're on your way. ■

Every Jew has an opportunity to touch another Jew's life with a taste of Torah