

## **My Teacher, Nehama (Leibowitz): Empowered and Empowering**

### 1. Her Legacy to Teachers

Most of the current teachers of Torah in the world have been directly or indirectly trained by Nehama Leibowitz. She taught Pedagogy (“Tanach method”) as a discrete discipline from the 1950s and exemplified her theories in her own teaching.

Her educational principles included the following:

1. Learning is an active process – the activity of the teacher is not an indicator of the active learning of the student.
2. Teachers must be masters of the subject matter they are bringing to the students. They must be passionate about it. Otherwise, they will not succeed in inspiring and cannot teach.
3. Each lesson has to “surprise” the student. Nehama emphasised the importance of the lesson opening.
4. Use “tricks” to make the students read the text and glean important “pre-thinking” information.
5. Thought requires time. Give the students time to think.
6. There is mastery only when the details are noticed.
7. Ask the right question. Ensure that the question placed before students will lead them to a better understanding of the text.
8. Never leave the students in any doubt about whether or not they have answered correctly. Mark quickly, fairly and be honest.
9. In her specific subject-matter, the Tanach, Nehama had the following principles to add:
  - a. The text is sacred
  - b. There are “problems”/ difficulties in the text that require analysis.
  - c. All interpretations that respect the sanctity of the text (including Midrash) are valid – but the teacher and student may decide that some are more “loyal” to the text than others. There is a reason why Rashi is esteemed over other commentators.
  - d. The text is a Divine heritage that should be “owned” by all who love it. “Ownership” requires the sense of empowerment that one’s personal reading is a legitimate one. Teachers should inspire such confidence in their students.

## 2. Her Contribution to Scholarship

The field of Torah learning has been radically altered by the swelling of the ranks of Torah scholars by dozens of women of note, most of whom were directly influenced by Nehama.

There are several reasons why a woman's approach to the Torah text will differ from that of men.

1. Historical: There has been a tradition of Torah teaching and learning by and for men. They have come to accept and even value the limitations of that style and type of learning and come to view alternative methods as suspect. Women, having historically been deprived of such learning, are freer to develop their own approaches to the text.
2. Psychological: Women are different from men in their reading of texts. They are more likely to analyse the motives of characters, to seek levels of meaning pertinent to the human experience and to want to draw personal relevance – as opposed to legal rulings - from the text.
3. Literary: Women in the Orthodox world are often better educated secularly than their male counterparts. They are more likely to have read extensively in the literature of the secular culture and are more likely to draw comparisons between the Torah and other literature. They are also more likely to appreciate the inherent poetic qualities of the text when they are not required to read it in an unchanging chant.
4. Legal: I would describe the lack of legal authority of women in the religious world as liberating in terms of Torah scholarship. Men have been constrained in their interpretations by fear that they could be leading to unintended halachic implications. Ironically, women who have no such illusions or constraints, have been freer to revisit the text and to delve into new or dormant interpretations.