

Article

A Haredi Myth of Female Leadership: Rebbetzin Batsheva Kanievsky

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Abstract: Rebbetzin Batsheva Kanievsky (1932–2011) served as a spiritual guide for many; her prominence and influence were a unique phenomenon in the Haredi (Jewish ultra-Orthodox) community in which she grew up, where women, lacking Talmudic knowledge or other sources of authority, are generally found only at the margins of the public sphere. Her multi-faceted activity was focused on offering blessings and advice. She also innovated a few segulot (magical techniques) and religious rituals. Her leadership is characterized, on the one hand, by the preservation and even strengthening of the existing Lithuanian Haredi ethos, particularly in the context of the wife's complete self-abnegation for her husband's Torah study. On the other hand, it fostered emotional and experiential elements that are closer to the ethos of the Hasidic and Sephardi communities and are associated with folk piety and a quasi-magical orientation. Rebbetzin Kanievsky thus created a type of female religious leadership that can be characterized as anti-leadership, in which she embodied the Haredi conception of ideal womanhood. Consequently, she was not perceived as a threat to Haredi values but rather as their promoter. However, this model of leadership enabled her to break, almost despite herself, the limitations of the gender hierarchy of the Haredi community and serve as an almost singular female role model in that community's pantheon.

Keywords: ultra-Orthodox Judaism; female religious leadership; Haredism



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We fail to grasp the essence of leadership that is relevant to the modern age
(Burns 1978)

1. Introduction: The Feminine Myth of Rebbetzin Kanievsky

In the Haredi (often named ultra-Orthodox) world, only renowned Torah scholars (*gedolim*) and Hasidic spiritual leaders (*rebbe*s), and certainly not women, receive large funerals. The eulogies at women's funerals are generally limited because women are not numbered among the individuals admired in Haredi society. Haredi hagiographic literature often dedicates entire books to stories about *gedolim* and Hasidic *rebbe*s, while hagiography of other role models is relatively unusual. Rebbetzin¹ Batsheva Kanievsky (1932–2011) broke these conventions. She passed away on the intermediate Sabbath of the Sukkot Holiday (15 October 2011), and her funeral procession took place on a Saturday night at the same time when members of the community were holding the traditional celebrations of that week (*Simhat Beit Hashoeva*). Nevertheless, masses of people attended her funeral, which reached a scale close to that of the funerals of renowned rabbis. According to police estimates, over 50,000 men and women attended the funeral, filling up many streets in the ultra-Orthodox city of Bnei Brak.² During the week of mourning (*shiva*), thousands of women and men came to comfort the family (Malka 2011a, p. 154). Even before the tombstone was placed, dozens of notes and candies were buried in the sand around her grave. In death as in life, she was a source of support for many women (Malka 2011a, pp. 98–99). Over the traditional thirty-day mourning period (*shloshim*), dozens of eulogies were given in her memory,³ all glorifying her greatness, some excessively. During this period, dozens of Torah lectures were dedicated to her memory, over ten Torah scrolls

were written “to elevate her soul” and songs were written about her (see, e.g.: Attias 2012, p. 127; Malka 2011a, pp. 13–16, 38–43; Tzivion 2021, pp. 646–49). Bnei Brak’s municipal charity fund was renamed for her and both boys’ and girls’ schools were named after her.⁴ Even a play was written about her.⁵

As of this writing (2022), over ten adults’ and children’s books have been written about Rebbetzin Kanievsky,⁶ including two books that were originally written for adults and then adapted for children.⁷ An additional book was written in Hebrew and also translated to English. The books contain self-descriptions taking pride in the fact that they recount stories that actually happened (Leon 2012). In some of them, the author bolsters his or her credibility by citing names, dates, and the specific locations of events (For example in Tzivion 2021; Weinberger et al. 2012a).

The “Rebbetzin Kanievsky phenomenon” (as her son called it in one of his eulogies) is undoubtedly unique in the world in which it appeared. If “leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth”, as one of the greatest scholars of the field, J.M. Burns (1978, p. 2) wrote, this is true especially in the case of female leadership in Haredi society, a society in which women are at the margins of the public sphere, with no source of formal authority and presumably no special knowledge.

In traditional Jewish society and the Haredi society that seeks to continue it, and in particular, in its Lithuanian sector, the great Torah knowledge is prototypically linked with spiritual leadership. As a person becomes more knowledgeable, he rises in the hierarchy, at the pinnacle of which is the *gedol hador* (the greatest [authority] of the generation). The *gedol hador* is a person who is regarded as having the broadest or deepest Torah knowledge combined with leadership ability (Cohen 2006, pp. 252–53). Throughout Jewish history, religious leadership was male, except for a small number of women who broke through the glass ceiling.⁸ The exclusion of women from leadership in general and religious leadership in particular is characteristic of a fundamentally patriarchal and androcentric Haredi society that explicitly excludes women from the public sphere and the sources of Torah knowledge upon which cultural prestige is based. Among the reasons for this is the prohibition of women’s Torah study which appears in traditional Jewish law.⁹ Even after the prohibition of women’s Torah study was breached in the Haredi world with the opening of the Bais Yaakov girls’ schools in the twentieth century, the most important and prestigious areas of Torah study, i.e., in-depth study of Talmud and Jewish law, remained a male monopoly in both the public and personal spheres. This knowledge remained inaccessible and forbidden to women (Brown (Hoizman) (2013)). How, then, did Rebbetzin Kanievsky become a leader in Haredi society and an admired public figure with whom many sought to consult? Can she even be defined as a Haredi leader, and if so, of what type? In this article, I will present both the real and the mythological images of Kanievsky, as well as her work and her values, and discuss her character as a female leader in Haredi society. Her leadership can undoubtedly be examined from a variety of perspectives, including theories of gender; however, since this article, which is the first to present Kanievsky’s character in academic scholarship, will be limited to those perspectives that relate to the study of Haredi society in Israel (with the hope that other aspects of her character and social significance will receive scholarly attention in the future), the analysis will focus on her leadership. My central assertion shall be that Kanievsky created a model of female spiritual leadership that, to a great degree, represented anti-leadership and that in her personality she embodied the ideal values of Haredi femininity. She was thus not seen as a threat but rather as a source of strengthening to these values. It was this model that enabled her to break through, almost against her will, some of the limitations of gender hierarchy in Haredi society and serve as almost the only female exemplar in Haredi society’s pantheon.

The historical figure of Rebbetzin Kanievsky still requires systematic biographical research, but her social standing sparks interest no less than her life story. Below I will offer a biographical sketch of the Rebbetzin and point out the characteristics attributed to her by her many admirers and in the many texts written about her, i.e., characteristics that enabled her to receive an exalted status in Haredi society both inside and outside Israel.

2. A Biographical Sketch of Rebbetzin Kanievsky

Batsheva Esther Kanievsky was born in Jerusalem in February 1932, the second of twelve children (two of whom, a boy and a girl, died in childhood), to a family of distinguished lineage on both sides. Her father, Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashiv (1910–2012), who later became the *gedol hador* of the Lithuanian Haredi community, was the grandson of the Kabbalist Rabbi Shlomo Elyashiv (1926–1841), author of the book *Leshem Shevo Veahlama*,¹⁰ and her mother, Shayna Chaya (1910–1994), was the daughter of Rabbi Aryeh Levin (1885–1969), dubbed the “prisoners’ Rabbi”, who was known in Jerusalem as a man who dedicated his life to lovingkindness and helping others.

In her youth, Batsheva studied at the Altschuler girls’ school, which was known for its strict education style and high level of study, and was considered an outstanding student. It was said that she was a popular girl in her class yet also connected with the less popular girls and helped those who needed help in their studies (Malka 2011a, p. 26). As the eldest daughter, she helped her mother greatly in taking care of her siblings. After finishing elementary school, she did not attend high school but studied bookkeeping privately with a rabbi teacher, who would visit her family’s home for this purpose. After finishing her studies, she started teaching at a non-Haredi school. According to the stories about her, in order to avoid any foreign influence, she made sure to wake up early to pray and recite Psalms (Malka 2011a, p. 29; Weinberger et al. 2012a, pp. 74–75). She gave her entire salary to her parents, except for a small amount she maintained to buy surprises for her siblings when they behaved well (Weinberger et al. 2012a, p. 75). During the years 1946–1948, she helped her father after her return from work to copy the writings of his grandfather into clearer handwriting so that they could be published.¹¹

In December 1951, Batsheva wed Rabbi Hayim Kanievsky (1928–2022) at the urging of Rabbi Avraham Yesha’yahu Karelitz, known as the Hazon Ish (1878–1953), who was the *gedol hador* at the time and the groom’s uncle (Weinberger et al. 2012a, pp. 103–4, 109; Tzivion 2021, p. 244). Rabbi Hayim is the son of Rabbi Ya’akov Yisrael Kanievsky, known as the “Steipler” (1899–1985), one of the *gedolim* of the Haredi community, who was later also considered a miracle worker (see, e.g., Tzivion 2021, pp. 225–26). The couple lived in several places before establishing their permanent residence in 1957 on Rashbam Street in the “Hazon Ish neighborhood” of Bnei Brak, in apartments meant for young married yeshiva students, where they lived simply until her death in 2011 (Tzivion 2021, pp. 251–68).

Many accounts relate that Batsheva Kanievsky and her husband Rabbi Hayim developed a relationship that was noteworthy for its intimacy and mutual respect and their daily life was one of collaboration. They would recite the morning blessings together, eat meals together, and take a short walk together in the evening (Malka 2011a, pp. 36–37; Weinberger et al. 2012a, pp. 137–38, 361). At a later stage, this tranquil life changed, apparently when Rebbetzin Kanievsky began to rise in prominence. She gradually became a public figure, a leader, “the mother of the *Klal Yisrael* (the entire Jewish people)”¹², and began to enter public life. Some believe this change started because her father-in-law the Steipler and her husband would not grant audiences to women, and after the Steipler saw her dedicated treatment of a childless neighbor who had been widowed, he made it known that she was a person from whom it was worthwhile to ask for blessings and those blessings would be realized (Snir 2011, pp. 31–35; Tzivion 2021, p. 294; Malka 2011a, p. 105; Ben David 2012, pp. 104–6, 194; Edelstein 2011, p. XII). This phenomenon gradually expanded, apparently intensifying after the death of the Steipler in 1985.¹³ According to her daughter, “women who came once, came back to her several times [. . .] a friend brought a friend, and the population of visitors grew until it reached giant proportions” (Tzivion 2021, p. 497). Kanievsky never refused anyone and did not even agree to set receiving hours.¹⁴ Her home was full throughout the day with women and groups awaiting her attention.¹⁵

The peak of Rebbetzin Kanievsky’s public activity was during the first decade of the twenty-first century, the last decade of her life. She was active in a wide range of fields:

charitable works,¹⁶ Jewish outreach,¹⁷ strengthening Jewish observance in general and of the values of modesty in particular (Yated Ne’eman 2000; Hamodia 2007b, p. 4; Malka 2011a, p. 209), strengthening the observance of prohibitions on gossip (Hamodia 2004, 2011a, 2011b), a campaign against abortions,¹⁸ mental health in the Haredi population (Hamodia 2006a, 2007a), providing women tools for proper economic management of the family budget (Hamodia 2009b), and more. It often appears that her advocacy of various religious and educational initiatives served to certify their religious legitimacy and even to promote them in the eyes of the public. For example, advertisements for a play performed on Hannukah mentioned that she recommended it in a manner similar to the widespread practice of enlisting rabbinic recommendations. In a fundraising campaign for the Bnei Brak municipal charity fund, alongside the announcement that one could listen to great Jewish scholars on the telephone regarding the importance of contributing to the city fund, there was also a phone number one could call to hear Rebbetzin Kanievsky’s recorded voice (the separation between the phone numbers stemmed presumably from the desire not to “imperil” those who strictly avoid hearing women’s voices) (Hamodia 2006b). Similarly, in a campaign to support the telephone homilies of the youth group “Bais Yaakov Basya Girls”, a newspaper printed that one could hear words of religious inspiration from Kanievsky (Hamodia 2009a). In an additional instance, Rebbetzin Kanievsky’s name appeared alongside the letters of approval by prominent rabbis from Israel and the United States for a new informal education program dedicated to strengthening the value of modesty (Sarah Rivkah 2009). Alongside these activities, to which she was invited by those who initiated them, many organized groups came to consult with her during this period.

The main component of the rebbetzin’s activity was her receiving the public (Attias 2012, pp. 128–30). Once she became a public figure and a leader, her schedule became exceptionally full, lasting from the early morning hours until late at night. Her visitors included women from all sections of the Jewish population in Israel, i.e., Haredi (both Lithuanian and Hasidic), Orthodox, “traditional” (*masorti*), and secular, and from all the ethnicities, i.e., Ashkenazi (of European origin) and Sephardi (of oriental origin).¹⁹ The women who came to her ranged from those who sought “spiritual strengthening” in their process of “coming closer to religion” to those who asked for blessing, comfort, or just a “good word”. Women described the encounter with her as an uplifting experience in which they experienced intimacy both on the emotional level in her expressions of identification and acceptance, and on the physical level, expressed by touch, hugging, and kissing. They describe how they felt as if they had received extraordinary treatment from the rebbetzin towards them, as a sort of only child, although they knew all the other women who met her felt the same way.²⁰ Her dedication to every trouble and problem of each woman who visited her made her renowned.²¹ Her identification with the needs of the women and their suffering was not limited to listening and advice but was practical as well. She supported needy women economically (Ben David 2012, pp. 77, 85–87; Tzivion 2021, pp. 530–33); visited physically and emotionally ailing women at hospitals; and assisted in enrollment in schools, including in cases of ethnic discrimination.²² She also provided advice, blessings, and *segulot* (magical or semi-magical rituals said to bring a positive outcome, often on a specific topic), and prayed for the women who visited her.

After her children grew up, the rebbetzin attended synagogue and prayed *vatikin* (with the sunrise) morning prayers, arriving at the synagogue half an hour before prayers. She also prayed afternoon and evening services with a prayer quorum.²³ In the last decade of her life, additional women joined her for the early prayer service (Weinberger et al. 2012a, pp. 298–99).

Rebbetzin Batsheva Kanievsky passed away on the intermediate Sabbath of Sukkot of 2011. She died suddenly in her home after returning from afternoon prayers, a book of Psalms in her hand. As mentioned, her funeral took place Saturday night. Tens of thousands accompanied her body on her final journey.

3. Source of Authority (A): Magical Capabilities

Kanievsky was greatly admired, not only by the women who came to seek her help, hear her advice, and receive blessings from her, but also by the men who surrounded her, who were among the most important in the Haredi world, above all her father, Rabbi Elyashiv, who became the *posek hador*, “halakhic authority of the generation”, from the mid-1990s; her father-in-law, the Steipler; and her husband, who became *gedol hador* after Rabbi Elyashiv’s death. These three figures valued her greatly and believed that her blessings had the power to influence reality (see below). It appears that this admiration led to the creation of a myth, unprecedented in the Lithuanian Haredi community, of a female sage.

The Haredi world is divided into three groups: The Hasidim, the Lithuanians (*Litvaks*), and the Sephardim. While the Hasidim and Sephardim have long traditions of admiring saintly figures and attributing magic powers to spiritual leaders,²⁴ in the Lithuanian community (whose members are defined by not adhering to Hasidism, and are called such not because all its members hail from Lithuania but because the opposition to Hasidism originally centered in that country), this tradition is relatively new, and even though it existed in the community in previous centuries, it certainly did not reach the intensity it reached in the other two communities.²⁵ Because the Lithuanians set Torah study at the top of their hierarchy of values, they attributed supernatural powers to great Torah scholars and believed that these powers stem from the power of the Torah they studied. The mythic figures of the community were always great Torah scholars; to them, wondrous stories were attributed. Because, in the Haredi view, women are not obligated to study Torah and in-depth Talmud study is forbidden to them, it is very difficult to find female sages, leaders and miracle workers in the Lithuanian community, while the phenomenon exists, to a limited extent, in the Hasidic and Sephardi communities.²⁶ Women who became venerable role models throughout the Haredi world and received a similar status even among the Lithuanians, such as the founder of the Beit Yaakov school network Sarah Schenirer (1883–1935; see [Seidman 2019](#); [Shaul 2020](#)) and Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis (1936–2016; see [Seltzer 2020](#)) in the United States, reached their status due to their educational and social leadership and their practical work to strengthen Orthodox identity, but not from having supernatural powers. Kanievsky then created an important precedent in terms of the way the society treated her during her rise to prominence. In understanding the myth of Kanievsky, it is important to examine the stories that are at the foundation of this myth and which reflect the public attitude to her, without reference to the question of their historical veracity.²⁷

Many stories relate how Kanievsky’s prayers and blessings led to beneficial results for many people²⁸, as recognized by *gedolei hador* (great authorities of the generation), i.e., her father and father-in-law ([Weinberger et al. 2012a](#), pp. 123–24; [Ben David 2012](#), pp. 51–52, 105–6, 110; [Tzivion 2021](#), p. 593). It is told that the Steipler, who was himself known as a miracle worker, blessed her because of his great admiration for her “that her blessings will have an effect in heaven”. Once, when she felt ill and people came to ask for the Steipler’s blessing for her recovery, he wondered about the request, saying, “She needs my blessing? Her blessings have a greater effect in heaven! She does what I cannot” ([Tzivion 2021](#), pp. 294, 351; [Malka 2011a](#), p. 190).²⁹ Moreover, he would send people to her to receive a blessing ([Ben David 2012](#), p. 194). Her husband, Rabbi Hayim Kanievsky, would also ask her to bless him on various occasions. Before going to study in the synagogue on Shavuot night, he asked her to bless him not to fall asleep ([Tzivion 2021](#), p. 346, based on the testimony of her daughter Tzivia). Before baking matzah on Passover eve, he asked her to bless him so that he would succeed in baking matzah in accordance with the most stringent standards, and once when a question of Jewish law arose regarding the kosher status of the matzah he baked, he blamed it on his not having sought her blessing ([Tzivion 2021](#), p. 294, 344; [Weinberger et al. 2012a](#), pp. 226–27). Various stories indicate that Rabbi Kanievsky attributed great importance to the rebbetzin’s blessings and prayers, and even believed that her blessings and prayers were more effective than his ([Malka 2011a](#), p. 171). According to one account, when asked why this was so, he answered that it was because she performs acts of lovingkindness and prays with all her heart and with deep focus; furthermore, since

women are not obligated in Torah study, her energy surrounding prayers and mystical intentions does not involve the sin of avoidance of Torah study (Weinberger et al. 2012a, pp. 430–31; Tzivion 2021, p. 594). Thus, in this way, an element of her feminine “inferiority” became a source of her power!

Kanievsky’s supernatural powers were expressed primarily through her blessings, yet she also practiced several *segulot* which she shared with her primarily women believers. These included sitting on the Steipler’s chair;³⁰ drinking from *siyum* wine, that is, the wine Rabbi Kanievsky drank from at the celebration the completion of a tractate of the Talmud (*siyum*) (Malka 2011a, p. 183; Weinberger et al. 2012a, pp. 448–49); eating citron jam made from the citrons Torah scholars had used on Sukkot and recited a blessing over (especially as a *segulah* for an easy birth);³¹ public separation of *hallah* (the sacred portion of bread dough);³² ceremonial public recitations of amen;³³ and more. Some of these *segulot* are not previously known in the Jewish magical tradition and can be considered her innovations. As such, they are worthy of a separate discussion,³⁴ yet it is important to note already here that the ability to “legislate” these sorts of *segulot*, as well as customs built upon them, points to her both male and female adherents’ fervent belief in her powers.

The myth of Rebbetzin Kanievsky is built then from an unexpected mix of foundations. She drew her power from her association with great Torah scholars, even while she was not a scholar herself, and her approach was unequivocally conservative, yet she allowed herself to innovate *segulot* and customs. Furthermore, part of her aura of prestige stemmed from her role within the scholarly aristocracy of the Lithuanian community, but her activity can be characterized as magical, appealing to more folk populations. I shall return to these aspects in the concluding section. Beforehand, it is worth clarifying another aspect of the Kanievsky myth, which pertains to the values she represented.

4. Source of Authority (B): Embodiment of Basic Haredi Values

Kanievsky did not put forward any philosophical innovations, and any attempt to present her as having a particular theological approach is bound to fail. Even her most ardent adherents did not claim that she was scholarly. She did not give sermons or homilies; she mainly offered blessings and especially told stories to groups of women. The fact that she did not have a theological or ideological approach stems primarily from her personality, but it also integrates into the dominant ideal of Haredi Judaism, including the Lithuanian community, starting in the nineteenth century: the ideal of simple, non-theological faith (Brown 2017). This ideal became one of the central values of Haredi Judaism (Brown 2017, p. 188), and, as mentioned, Kanievsky embodied it in her personality. The fact that she represented this ideal does not arise from a theological treatise but rather primarily from her stories and the stories about her.

In examining the characteristics, she both encouraged and represented the faithful, i.e., the characteristics that constructed her mythical image and strengthened the values of Haredi society. Thus, we find a series of values, all of which, without exception, belong to the broadest and most basic Haredi consensus. There are some themes in the spectrum of Haredi values that she especially emphasized, both in word and action. In the following, I shall examine three values: patriarchy (founded on gender essentialism); the supreme importance of Torah study (in this context, by Haredi men); and modesty (primarily in dress).

Essentialist Patriarchy: Kanievsky embraced patriarchal values from a deeply essentialist perspective in which the roles of women and men are distinct and clear. The woman’s subordination to her husband is the first cornerstone on which the Jewish home is an established and irreversible aspect of reality. After Eve sinned, she was punished with two punishments: “in sadness shall you birth children”, and “and he [your husband] shall rule over you” (Gen. 3:15). As the curse of “in sadness shall you birth children” is unavoidable, so is the reality of “he shall rule over you”. Therefore, in the view of Kanievsky, the attempt to create equality between the sexes is a recipe for disaster. From the moment the woman equates herself to her husband, she stops exemplifying the verse

“[one who has] found a woman has found good” (Proverbs 18:22) and instead exemplifies the verse “And I find more bitter than death the woman” (Ecclesiastes 7:26), as life with her becomes “more bitter than death”.³⁵ The Rebbetzin explained that this is an unchangeable decree, and its meaning includes that a woman must accept her husband’s authority with love (Honigsberg 2012, p. 94).

The Rebbetzin advised women to recognize that their husband is the leader in the home, to treat him like a king, to encourage and compliment him, and do his will, even when they disagree with him, in accordance with the midrashic statement³⁶ that “a proper woman does her husband’s will” (Weinberger et al. 2012a, p. 350; Tzivion 2021, pp. 546–49, from the notes of attendees). It is the woman’s role to work hard to maintain harmony in the home and strengthen her husband’s authority. Accordingly, if the couple’s relationship encounters difficulties despite the wife’s efforts, this must be accepted lovingly as a divine decree, a derivative of the ancient punishment “and he shall rule over you” (Honigsberg, p. 94). In her words, “this is the battlefield where she has been placed, and it is not wise to flee it, while her great reward is saved for her in the world in which all is good” (Tzivion 2021, p. 547; Honigsberg 2012, p. 95). The Kanievsky myth constructs her character as one who implemented these values in her life in a clear and ideal manner. According to the stories about her, she made sure to compliment her husband privately and sometimes publicly as well.³⁷ Haredi hagiographies recount her self-deprecation and submission to her husband to an exaggerated degree. For example, she asked her husband’s permission about everything, even minor matters; never argued with him or disobeyed him (Tzivion 2021, p. 359); and never disagreed with him (Ben David 2012, p. 187; Tzivion 2021, pp. 348–50).

It is apparent that Kanievsky’s character as a model of female submission was constructed in the context of resistance to feminist trends widespread worldwide and in Israel; she represents the Haredi counterculture, which refuses to submit to modern values of gender equality and women’s independence. As we shall see below, a wife’s submission to her husband is not only the result of Eve’s sin, which has already become part of “human nature”, it also is a means to the realization of the most exalted value—her husband’s Torah study. Another statement attributed to her is that “the entire purpose of woman’s creation was to enable her husband to study Torah” (Tzivion 2021, p. 358). This applies, in her opinion, whether her husband is the *gedol hador* (greatest Torah scholar of the generation) or a plain learner.

The Supreme Importance of Torah Study. Kanievsky’s daughter, Ruth Tzivion, wrote: “Mother’s home was first and foremost a home of Torah! Before it was a home of acts of kindness, before it was a home of prayer, [. . .] before everything—Torah [study]” (Tzivion 2021, pp. 357–58). Elsewhere it is recounted: “We never heard from mother lectures about the importance of Torah study in general or father’s study in particular. We simply lived it. [. . .] It wasn’t an educational method; it was a way of life!”³⁸

Kanievsky did not make do with setting a personal example and a “way of life” but rather sought to promote this way of life to the public, employing, among other things, inspirational talks and stories. It is told that there was a yearly practice of bringing to her girls from a girls’ school from a place abroad where girls sought a husband who could financially support the family rather than a Torah scholar. After their visit, the vast majority aspired to marry a Torah scholar.³⁹

The mutual dependence between the husband’s Torah study and the wife’s earthly efforts is already mentioned in the Talmud. Tractate Berakhot (17a) presents a description of the great reward women earn for their part in making possible their husbands’ and sons’ Torah study. The Talmud details the woman’s actions for which she earns this reward: she brings the boys to study scripture in the synagogue, sends her husband to study Torah in the study hall, and waits for him until he returns.⁴⁰ This well-known Talmudic text was certainly on the Kanievsky’s mind, yet she chose to cite a different “midrash”, apparently one she invented, according to which, after the parting of the Red Sea, the women were sad that the merit of Torah study had been denied them, and only the men had merited it and would be rewarded for it. Miriam answered them at the Song on the Sea; just like

the horse serves as a helper to its rider and brings the rider to its chosen destination, and therefore, “in the punishment of the Egyptians the horse also drowned”, so too “regarding the woman’s merit in the holy Torah her husband studies. Without women—the husband cannot study Torah at ease as is necessary!”⁴¹

The rabbinic midrash gives significance to the woman’s support of her husband’s Torah study but does not emphasize the latter’s dependence upon the former. In the Rebbetzin’s “midrash”, the *dependence* of the husband’s Torah study on his wife is emphasized. The choice of this parable of the horse and its rider leaves no room for doubt about the hierarchy between the two, i.e., the wife’s subservience to her husband, alongside the husband’s dependence on his wife for his Torah study. It is the wife’s toil that makes possible the husband’s Torah study. If in the past, the message was that a woman was worthy of spiritual reward and admiration for assisting her husband; therefore, now, the message is that it is she who is the enabler of his Torah study (in the terminology of [Berman 1973](#)). This status greatly increases her responsibility; on the one hand, it increases her reward in the world to come ([Attias 2012](#), p. 33), and, on the other hand, it also increases her obligation in this world to free up her husband’s time. To a great degree, the wife also becomes responsible for his avoidance of Torah study. This role becomes the mission of the woman in this world: “The woman’s role is to enable her husband to study in calmness and serenity, and this is her mission in the world, an obligation that is a privilege!” ([Attias 2012](#), p. 40). Torah study is presented as the supreme value that overrides all other values and interests.

Kanievsky employed stories she told about her mother and herself to promote this message. As many of her admirers who were interviewed for this study told me, this way of spreading her message was very dear to her.⁴² Many of the stories about her mother are similar or identical to the stories about her. The stories express the ideal of, on the one hand, the complete liberation of the Torah-studying husband from dealing with the practical exigencies of life, and on the other hand, the woman’s total obligation to enable him to do so, in both the smallest and the largest of matters.⁴³ Her father, Rabbi Elyashiv, and her husband, Rabbi Hayim Kanievsky, are described with great pride as doing absolutely nothing in the home, of not even knowing how to do anything, for others or themselves, including pouring themselves a cup of tea or changing a lightbulb.⁴⁴ They are regarded as distant from and unfamiliar with worldly matters ([Weinberger et al. 2012a](#), pp. 143, 362). The rabbis are described as liberated from bearing the economic burden of the household and from dealing with financial matters in the home ([Tzivion 2021](#), p. 362; [Weinberger et al. 2012a](#), pp. 131–32). In contrast, Rebbetzin Elyashiv and Rebbetzin Kanievsky are described as concerning themselves not only with the needs of the home but also with all of their husband’s needs, far beyond his basic needs.⁴⁵ For example, there is a description of how Rabbi Hayim Kanievsky would never wait for a meal; the food would be exactly at the right temperature so that he would not need to wait for it to cool down or heat up.⁴⁶ The food was prepared and served by his wife personally even when that required waking up before sunrise to serve her husband tea.⁴⁷ To ensure that the rabbis would not be disturbed in their studies, the wives avoided sharing their everyday worries with them, including children’s illnesses, even those that involved surgical interventions, and the like.⁴⁸ The two women would save money throughout the year to enable their husbands to go to a hotel before Passover so that they would not be disturbed from their studies by the intensive preparations for the holiday.⁴⁹ The stories emphasize the degree to which the women concerned themselves with their husbands’ sleep, sometimes at great sacrifice. For example, Rebbetzin Elyashiv tells that, on the night before her death, she crawled to the porch to cough and avoided coughing in their room so as not to wake her husband.⁵⁰

In her talks, Kanievsky sought to inculcate in her listeners the message that everyone must do as much as possible to help her husband learn Torah whether he is the *gedol hador*, a regular yeshiva student, or a man working for a living who studies Torah regularly ([Tzivion 2021](#), p. 361). Her dedication to this goal merits a woman with the reward for

fulfilling a commandment, and it is not measured by the greatness of the person studying (Ben David 2012, p. 52; Tzivion 2021, pp. 358, 360; Attias 2012, p. 38).

Kanievsky did not attempt to minimize the size of the effort and sacrifice involved in such a life. When asked once by a group of girls whether it is not difficult to be the wife of a Torah scholar, she replied, “it is certainly difficult! What do you want, both a Torah scholar for a husband and having it involve no difficulties and come easily?!” (Tzivion 2021, p. 359). Even when she became a public figure in her own right and many women consulted with her, the rabbi’s needs and the concern for his Torah study remained at the top of her priorities. For example, she rarely left home, leaving only for short periods, because her husband told her that he studied Torah better when she was at home (Tzivion 2021, p. 359). She never compromised on this matter (see, e.g., Ben David 2012, p. 58). Various aspects of her personality are related in the eulogies given for her, but the emphasis on her sacrifice for and dedication to the value of her husband’s Torah study is prominent in all of them (*Misped Gadol*, throughout the booklet).

Modesty. In the second half of the twentieth century, the value of modesty became a foundational ideal of Haredi Judaism and the supreme expression of female religiosity in that community (see Bloch 2021; Regev 2021). The stories and literature about Rebbetzin Kanievsky describe her as someone who emphasized the value of modesty to an extreme degree.⁵¹ According to several accounts, Kanievsky said that immodesty was the thing that pained her the most (Zilberstein 2011, p. 14; Weinberger et al. 2012a, p. 393; Snir 2011, pp. 31–35). She was careful to wear long sleeves that went up to her wrists (Koldetzky 2011, p. 49), and if she feared that a piece of clothing was insufficiently modest, she returned home to change (Kol Halashon 2011). Her daughter recalls that her parents made sure the daughters would not stray from modesty in matters of dress and her father even made sure that their hair would be braided (Tzivion 2021, p. 320). However, even if sometimes the immodesty of the women who visited her bothered her greatly, she accepted her warmly in order to “bring them close” to Judaism (Kluft 2011, p. 32; Koldetzky 2011, p. 47, both using harsh expressions, i.e., “revulsion” or “disgust”, to describe her feelings regarding immodestly dressed women).

According to the literature written about her, the Kanievsky believed that women’s modesty had a direct effect on what happens in the world. Its absence can lead to disasters and remove the divine spirit from the Jewish people, and its implementation can prevent harsh decrees and disasters that would have been liable to occur if Jewish women had not strictly observed modesty (see, e.g., Weinberger et al. 2012a, pp. 392–94; Attias 2012, pp. 100–9; Tzivion 2021, p. 452; Koldetzky 2011, p. 47; Ben David 2012, pp. 143–49). One of the books about her relates that she told her brother-in-law, Rabbi Isaac Zilberstein, “women’s short clothing shortens the lives of Jews in the world” (Weinberger et al. 2012a, pp. 392–93, according to a conversation with her brother-in-law, Rabbi Yitzhak Zilberstein). In the religious women’s Facebook group, “Nashim Lev”, one of the members, who had become religious and recalled how the Rebbetzin helped her divorce and remarry, recalled that she began dressing modestly due to the Rebbetzin. “She told me with love and with many hugs and kisses that because of me there are tragedies among the Jewish people because I am not modest. On that day I went home and threw out all my immodest clothes”.⁵² Like in her statements about men’s Torah study, one can note the glorification of the woman’s responsibility, a glorification that brings with it a glorification of her reward in the world to come and her importance, but also an intensification of her guilt if the desired value is not realized. An additional parallel between Kanievsky’s discourse about supporting Torah study and her statements about modesty lies in her invocation of the concept of self-sacrifice in both contexts.⁵³ She explained that if a person wants something from God, he must make a sacrifice for that purpose. In her words, “when we ask for health, livelihood, satisfaction, and success, we must know that to attain all this we must make a sacrifice to God. And what is the sacrifice God demands of us women? To strengthen our observance of modesty!” (Malka 2011a, p. 209). The message that arises from her talks is simple: the size of the reward is proportional to the size of the sacrifice.

To convince those listening to her, the Rebbetzin often shared with them stories of salvation that occurred as a result of the “sacrifice of modesty”. The stories have a fixed pattern: a woman used to dress immodestly; a tragedy befell her, generally a serious illness; sacrifice/renunciation of her immodest clothing; and the happy ending, i.e., the woman’s salvation. Sometimes, when women would come to her with medical problems, she would tell them to cover the affected body part, the head, hand, or legs to save them (Weinberger et al. 2012a, pp. 398–400; Malka 2011a, pp. 144–45; Tzivion 2021, pp. 452–53).⁵⁴

An examination of these stories raises several important characteristics of Rebbetzin Kanievsky’s leadership style, including empathy towards the women and willingness to “bring them close” (to Jewish observance), even when they do not act properly in her view, as well as strong faith and optimism. In contrast, the stories’ threatening message is clear, despite its happy ending. Thus, disasters are liable to occur if women do not practice modesty.

It seems that Kanievsky’s pattern of behavior and her recurring stories, at least those of them related to the issue of modesty, are similar to the pattern that appears among popular preachers, most notably of the “repentance movement”. This pattern includes, on the one hand, an attempt to bring the audience closer by showing affection for them, and, on the other hand, an attempt to “scare” them and keep him away from sin. This phenomenon also appears in the rhetoric of female preachers, mostly of Sephardi circles. Tamar El-or suggests that this is a double-faced trend of containment and marking: “On the one hand, containment is exercised, bringing all the attendants into the Holy Congregation of the Israelites, while on the other hand marking is exercised in pointing out those who have already accepted the religious way of life” (El-Or 2009, p. 129). This dual movement allows everyone to feel part of the normative community, but at the same time, it marks within the community the “more normative” ones (ibid). However, with Kanievsky, the aspect of the containment is stronger; in the field of modesty, it seems that there is an expression, in her words and in those of her associates, of the aspect of marking.

Modesty is often presented as the Rebbetzin’s heritage, as her living will to her generation (see, e.g., Steinman 2011, p. 7, in the name of Rabbi Moshe Yehudah Schneider; Auerbach 2011, p. 19; Kluft 2011, p. 34; Kanievsky 2011, p. 46; Koldetzky 2011, pp. 47–51). Her family actively participates in this. Her son, Rabbi Shlomo Kanievsky, head of the Kiryat Melekh Yeshiva, at the public assembly at the end of her *shiva*, said in the name of his father Rabbi Kanievsky because the value of modesty was so important and the rebbetzin was so committed to it: “it is certainly a great matter and it will exalt her pure soul to strengthen our observance of this matter” (Kanievsky 2011, p. 46). He praised those who had already begun as a result to learn the laws of modesty in schools. Her daughter, Leah Koldetzky, who continues her mother’s mission at her father’s direction, recounted at the memorial event marking thirty days since her death that they had received letters over the past month from women who had committed to “strengthen” their observance of modesty.⁵⁵ Her husband, Rabbi Yitzhak Koldetzky, gave a eulogy where he asked, in the name of his late mother-in-law, to strengthen the observance of the value of modesty and “to burn all the modern clothes, the modern wigs, the modern dresses” (Koldetzky 2011, p. 51). This would lead to a situation in which “mother is here and she says she will be an advocate for everyone who will come from this strengthening and wear holy clothes, she will certainly be an advocate and may there be many salvations, God willing!” (Ibid).

The three values mentioned—patriarchy, Torah study, and modesty—are among the foundational ideals of Haredi society throughout its different communities and sects. Even in recent years, when there has been a reduction in the prominence of all three values, they remain core values to which almost every Haredi Jew (except for some at the “modern” margins) is committed. To a certain degree, they comply with David Sorotzkin’s recent characterization of Haredism as “founded on ascetic behavioral practices and on voluntary ritual expansion of the function of the sacred in daily life, at the expense of the function of the secular” (Sorotzkin 2022, p. 3).

Of no less interest than the values in the list above are the values that are not in the list. In contrast to most of the stories about great Torah scholars and Hasidic rebbes, the stories of Kanievsky lack descriptions of pugnacity, even regarding religious matters. Even her strident opposition to feminism was never formulated as an ideological manifesto criticizing its mistaken advocates; it was rather expressed as a “positive” message about the “correct” values. She was not “a warrior in God’s wars”, nor did she fight against those “throwing off the yoke”; she did not criticize the Zionists, the state, or any other entity representing “heresy”. It is also hard to find stories in which she preached distancing oneself from secular people or the like. It seems that the absence of militancy also indicates that the Rebbetzin wished to contain the entire public who turned to her, and much less to create a hierarchy between the “more normative” and the “less normal” followers.

5. Summary and Perspective: A New Type of Female Leadership?

The leadership of Rebbetzin Batsheva Kanievsky was the result of her personality and actions, her lineage, and the power of the myth constructed on these foundations. She excelled in her activities on behalf of others, in strengthening women in difficult situations and crises, in providing *segulot* and in developing rituals,⁵⁶ and in preaching and promulgating the core values of Haredi society. In parallel, her image was constructed through stories and testimonies as an ideal example of complete self-subjugation to the patriarchy, to men’s Torah study, and to women’s modesty, but also as a supportive and loving “mother” for every woman who visited her or asked for help. All these provided her with the power to inspire others to action and an audience of excited admirers. Given all the above, the question with which I began arises again: How did Rebbetzin Kanievsky become a leader in Haredi society, an admired public figure whom so many consulted? Can she be defined as a Haredi leader, and if so, of which type?

At first glance, one can say that Kanievsky was not a leader and was even possibly an “anti-leader”. This is because she was not one of the *gedolim* (the great Torah scholars) or Hasidic rebbes. Moreover, she herself preached women’s “anti-leadership”; she demanded that women fully obey their husbands and devote all their energies to enabling their husbands’ Torah study. She was a living example of everything she preached. Nevertheless, these facts are an uncertain basis for refraining from regarding her as a leader. Leadership is a social fact not measured by titles or formal membership in the leadership elite. It can often be found in people without official status and title. Although the *gedolim* are the supreme leaders of Haredi society, this does not remove the possibility of the growth of leadership at lower levels. The fact that Kanievsky preached in favor of the patriarchy also does not force us to disregard her status as a leader. In Western history, there are several known cases of women who took on leadership positions specifically in movements that sanctified the patriarchal order. Mary Augusta Ward (1851–1920) led the Women’s National Anti-Suffrage League in Britain, and Minnie Bronson (1863–1927) was the most prominent female leader of the National Association Opposed to Women Suffrage in the United States. There are many other examples (see [Howard 1982](#)). Whatever one thinks about these women’s ideologies and activities, it is very difficult to doubt their leadership.

The study of leadership has undergone many changes over the years. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, leadership was understood primarily in terms of authority, control, and power ([Weber 1978](#), vol. II, pp. 212–99; [Moore 1927](#), pp. 124–28). In this context, Max Weber presented the classic distinction between charismatic, traditional, and rational leadership ([Weber 1978](#), vol. II, pp. 215–16). From the 1930s and onwards, leadership began to be seen in broader terms—including not only authority and force but also the capability to influence others and cause people to act in a certain way willingly. This model focused less on the leader’s characteristics and more on the situations in which leadership arises and the conduct that embodies it in those situations (e.g., [Hemphill 1949](#); [Hersey and Blanchard 1969](#) and the studies detailed in [Northouse 2013](#), pp. 99–136). Further developments of this approach included definitions of leadership as conduct that can cause people to adopt shared goals and values (see the studies detailed in [Northouse 2013](#), p. 3). At a later stage,

James McGregor Burns made the distinction between transactional leadership, in which the leader promises his followers certain benefits that make following him worthwhile, and transforming (or, sometimes, transformational) leadership that creates deep and significant changes in followers, raising their motivation to act and improving their moral virtue (Burns 1978, pp. 141–254). This characterization created a concept that comes close, to a certain degree, to Weber’s concept of charisma, but neutralizes it from its supernatural dimension and presents the charismatic leader as one who earns his followers’ trust and is seen as capable, by the force of his personality, to overcome crises and obstacles. This approach was developed and expanded even more by House (House 1976, pp. 189–207), and following him, additional studies were made that restored charisma to the center of the research discussion.

In general, while early sociology tended to conceptualize leadership through an emphasis on authority, the study of leadership in the twentieth century put increasing focus on analyzing models of “soft” leadership and sometimes even understood the leadership more common in modern societies as connective leadership characterized by the erasure of the hierarchical ladder, sharing power with followers, developing a personal relationship of trust, and a view of the leader as a mentor and guide (Cohen 2006, p. 461). This leadership is sometimes described as feminine leadership, which emphasizes joint action and interpersonal relations.⁵⁷

Using these broad definitions and some elements of the narrower, older definitions, we can analyze Kanievsky’s leadership as it arose from the myth built around her.

Rebbetzin Kanievsky, according to the descriptions of her, was undoubtedly a transformational leader. Barnes, who created the model of such leadership, cited intellectual leadership, reform leadership, revolutionary leadership, and leadership by heroes and ideologues as clear examples of it (Ibid). All of these are remote from the character of Kanievsky’s leadership, but this point only indicates the poverty of Barnes’s examples rather than the inappropriateness of his definition to the Rebbetzin’s leadership.

In light of Weber’s terminology, was Kanievsky’s leadership charismatic or traditional? On the one hand, her family was at the center the traditional leadership and she cultivated its values and promoted its goals; on the other hand, part of her myth was constructed, as we have seen, on interpersonal relationships with the women who visited her and her capability to develop new *segulot*, which have a supernatural influence on reality. Her blessings were also seen as having magical power, not only by her admirers but also by her father and husband, who were among the most important leaders of the traditional elite. It seems she demonstrated both forms of leadership.

In addition to her supernatural Weberian charisma, it appears that Kanievsky, at least according to the myth built around her, also fits the model of charismatic leadership set out by the more recent sociologists, who sought to neutralize the supernatural aspects of the concept. It can be said that Kanievsky almost completely fits House’s description of charismatic leadership (House 1976): (1) she was a role model for the beliefs and values she demanded of her followers; (2) she was seen as having special capabilities; (3) she presented ideological goals with moral dimensions; (4) she expressed her high expectations of them to her followers and expressed trust in their abilities; and (5) she inspired her followers to task-oriented action based on group belonging, power, or a sense of honor. As mentioned, this is “natural” charisma befitting a secularized world; although Kanievsky’s world was characterized by a rich and powerful faith, the type of charisma she exhibited cannot be limited to religious supernatural charisma, even while it involved such supernatural charisma in some ways.

The model of servant leadership developed by Robert K. Greenleaf (Greenleaf 1970; Greenleaf 1977) also matches Kanievsky’s leadership in some ways. According to this model, a person is a leader because he serves his people, and he serves his people because he is a leader. According to her admirers’ understanding of the Rebbetzin, she strongly fits this role. We should, however, point out that she did not see herself only as serving her

audience, but to a great degree, she saw herself and her audience as serving God, the Torah, and the Jewish people.

Rebbetzin Kanievsky can be said to have integrated several leadership models, including some that entail tensions or contradictions between them, as her leadership included elements of supernatural charismatic leadership, natural (“secularized”) charismatic leadership, and traditional leadership (in some aspects), insofar as her leadership served to fortify existing traditional authority. Although she promised compensation to her followers, it was not worldly compensation but primarily spiritual compensation, and thus her leadership was transformational rather than transactional. She was an example of servant leadership; she not only served her followers but also encouraged them to serve—not to serve her, but rather to serve the core values of Haredi society.

As we have seen, a large part of the Rebbetzin’s myth stemmed from her being a living embodiment of the conservative ideals of Haredi society. The three main elements of her “approach”—patriarchy, the supremacy of Torah study, and modesty—are, in fact, three of the cornerstones of Haredi society in Israel and are important elements of the traditional social order that sanctifies Torah study and enlists the entire society on behalf of this value. Foremost among these are the women, who directly assist and enable its existence. Additionally, as I mentioned, Haredi society glorifies simple faith, and the rebbetzin represented and promoted this ideal as well. This naïve faith was expressed both in content, through the presentation of reward and punishment as central motivators of correct behavior, and in form, using homilies, miracle and salvation stories, and practical advice. The fact she transmitted her messages through stories about herself and her mother, among other means, should be understood as part of the effort to strengthen her followers’ naïve faith and conservative values, giving them credibility and vibrancy. Despite her strong, sometimes extreme conservatism, the innovation of the Rebbetzin Kanievsky phenomenon cannot be ignored. It is a phenomenon that reflects the ability of a traditionalist society to innovate its means of entrenching and conserving its way of life. In this case, this is accomplished through female leadership that is very distant from any hint of feminism. At the end of the day, it remains an instance of female leadership in a patriarchal society.

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Notes

- ¹ The title indicates that her husband is a rabbi.
- ² Her daughter, Rebbetzin Ruth Tzivion, estimates there were about 100,000 people at the funeral: (Tzivion 2021, p. 462).
- ³ Some of them were collected into an anthology published separately: (Misped Gadol 2011).
- ⁴ For example, a school in the Bais Yaakov network: (Hamodia 2012, p. 32), a new wing in another school (Leizerovitch 2019), an employment center for the mentally disabled (Hamodia 2015), and a mother-and-child clinic (Swisa Ben Ami 2019).
- ⁵ An advertisement in the newspaper *Hamodia* about the play *Urahav Levavha—Tziunei Derekh Behaye Harabanit Batsheva Kanievsky* (And Your Heart Shall Broaden—Milestones in the Life of Rebbetzin Batsheva Kanievsky) held at a religious revival conference on the anniversary of matriarch Rachel’s death at the Ramada Hotel in Jerusalem: (Hamodia 2011c).
- ⁶ The first book was published soon after her death: Attias 2012. A comprehensive book was also published in English shortly after her death: (Weinberger et al. 2012a).
- ⁷ The book by Malka (2011a) was adapted by the author into a children’s book: (Malka 2011b). The book written by Weinberger et al. (2012a) was also adapted into a book for “young readers”: (Weinberger et al. 2012b).
- ⁸ Most well-known are Rabbanit Osnat Barazani (in the seventeenth century) and the Maid of Ludmir, Hannah Rachel Verbermacher (1805–1888): Cohen (2006, pp. 253–54), and in n. 58 below.
- ⁹ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Torah Study 1:13; *Shulhan Arukh* Yoreh De’ah 241:5.

- Regarding Rabbi Elyashiv: (Brown (Hoizman) (2016)).
- This was a kabbalistic book by her grandfather. Because the handwriting was difficult to read, it could not be published and first needed to be copied over and proofread. She sat with her father to do this every day. The writings were published in 1948 (Malka 2011a, p. 30; Weinberger et al. 2012a, p. 76).
- See the section in the book by her daughter, Ruth Tzivion (Tzivion 2021, p. 467).
- Some say that to a certain degree she filled the void created with his death because he had been seen by the public as a “miracle maker”: Tzivion, *Beit Imi*, p. 469; Rabbi Abrahavam Yesha’yahu Kanievsky (the rebbetzin’s son), “Em Kol Hai” (Mother of all the living), in: (Ben David 2012, p. 12).
- Although there were several attempts to schedule visiting hours, Kanievsky opposed this and agreed to it only after it was made clear to her that otherwise there would be a problem of modesty, yet even these arrangements were not completely effective. See (Tzivion 2021, p. 498; Weinberger et al. 2012a, pp. 420–21).
- (Tzivion 2021, pp. 504–5); Testimonies from the Facebook group “Nashim Lev,” from 2018 through 2020.
- A fundraising video for “Kupat Ha’ir” (the city charity fund), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hEBpgUlvudY> (accessed on 15 March 2022); (Hamevaser 2011).
- (Weinberger et al. 2012a, p. 283); A letter of support from the rebbetzin to girls volunteering in the Ayelet Hashahar organization working in Jewish outreach was read during the memorial gathering marking thirty days since her death (Kol Halashon 2011).
- (Kanievsky 2011, p. 45); See also the testimony by Efrat Barzel (Barzel 2011).
- (Rath 2009; Weinberger et al. 2012a, pp. 381–82); Testimonies from the Facebook group “Nashim Lev” by graduates of the Or Hahayim girls’ school in Bnei Brak (A Bais Yaakov school for girls from a Mizrahi background), 1017–2019.
- Interviews with followers: Ms. A. (2021), Ms. N. (2021), and Ms. Y. (2021); “Nashim Lev” Facebook group, 2017–2021; Kluft (2011, (Head of the Kehilot Ya’akov Yeshiva), p. 31); Also in the gathering marking thirty days since Rebbetzin Kanievsky’s death (Kol Halashon 2011); (Tzivion 2021, p. 571 and more; Shkedi 2011).
- We lack space to provide all the sources describing the rebbetzin as identifying with her visitors, empathizing with their pain, and helping them. For a small amount of examples: (Kluft 2011, pp. 31–32; Braverman 2011, (the rebbetzin’s son-in-law), p. 49). Regarding school enrollment see (Tzivion 2021, pp. 581–82).
- Weinberger et al. (2012a, pp. 272–78); Ms. N. (2021); Ben David (2012, p. 133); Tzivion (2021, pp. 441–43, 581–82). Her letters on this matter: *ibid.*, pp. 581–660, 663.
- Regarding her busy schedule: (Tzivion 2021, pp. 507–14), where she describes “a regular day for mother” from her personal familiarity.
- Regarding the Tzaddik in Hasidism: (Green 1994); regarding the admiration of saints in Mizrahi religious culture in Israel: (Bilu 2010; Leon 2013).
- For an example of a modern-time Lithuanian rabbi’s cautious attitude to magic see: (Fishbane 2016, pp. 162–210, (note also his concise summary there of magic in the halakhic culture, at pp. 164–82)).
- Only one story is known in Hasidism of a woman who was recognized as *tzaddik* (in the Hasidic sense), the Maid of Ludmir, Hannah Rachel Verbermacher, and she too gave up her status and had a tragic end: (Rapoport-Albert 1988). However, there were several women in the history of Hasidism who came close to this status, such as Rebbetzin Alta Faige Teitelbaum (1912–2001) and the wife of the current head of the Belz Hasidism, Rebbetzin Sarah Rokeah (b. 1946). In Sephardic-Haredi Judaism, the phenomenon of women leaders is better known, especially in the circles of Jewish outreach, where the controversial leadership of Ronit Barash (b. 1977) is a salient example, but also in more mainstream circles, where Yemimah Mizrahi (b. 1967) is salient a prominent example, and among the lower classes, where Bruria Zvuluni (b. 1958) is notable. It is noteworthy that the younger female leaders such as Barash and Mizrahi are known as exciting preachers who attract large audiences, a characteristic standing in contrast to Kanievsky’s one-to-one approach and poor rhetoric. (On female leaders in the Sephardic-Haredi sector see Feldman 2005; Leon and Lavie 2014). In Lithuanian Haredi Judaism, there have been additional women figures of the style of Rebbetzin Kanievsky, but they belong to the generation that followed her, and to a great degree developed based on her inspiration. These include her daughter Leah Koledetzky (b. 1957) and her niece Leah Kook (b. 1959).
- Like in many cases, it should be assumed that some of the stories told about her are fabricated, imprecise, or have a true core with imaginary embellishments. However, we should not as a result disqualify the entire corpus of stories but rather treat it like historians treat Hasidic stories about saints and other hagiographic sources.
- See, e.g., (Tzivion 2021, pp. 406, 594, 596–610; Koldetzky 2011, p. 59; Zicherman 2011, pp. 39–40). For a broader discussion of the sense by those around her that her prayers and blessings indeed were effective, see: (Malka 2011a, pp. 171–179; Weinberger et al. 2012a, pp. 306–7; stories from the Facebook group “Nashim Lev” from 2019 through 2021).
- It is said that the Steipler offered to bless her with a very long life or that her blessings would come true, and she immediately chose the second option. See: Editors’ Note, in: *Misped Gadol*, p. XII.
- See, for example, (Edelstein 2011, p. 12; Tzivion 2021, p. 330; Malka 2011a, pp. 188–91); Many testimonies from “Nashim Lev,” 2017–2021.

(Malka 2011a, pp. 180–181) and additional locations.

(Malka 2011a, pp. 75–78; Attias 2012, pp. 90–91), and additional locations.

Regarding the importance of saying Amen, see: (Attias 2012, pp. 47–50). Regarding the ceremony itself, see: (Tzivion 2021, pp. 392–94).

I am currently working on a separate study on this topic.

(Weinberger et al. 2012a, p. 346). Regarding a possible source of this exegesis, see: (Honigsberg 2012, p. 97).

Tanna Devei Eliyahu Rabbah, chp. 9.

(Weinberger et al. 2012a, p. 139), in the name of Rabbi Zvi Yabrov and Rabbi Yitzhak Zilberstein (brother-in-law of Rabbi Hayim Kanievsky), who studied with him as *havruta* one-on-one.

(Ben David 2012, p. 43), according to her son Rabbi Shlomo Kanievsky (head of the Kiryat Melekh Yeshiva). Her daughter Ruth Tzivion also says similar things: (Tzivion 2021, p. 358).

Editor’s note, in: *Misped Gadol*, p. XLVI.

In Talmud Bavli Sotah (21a), it is said that due to the merit of this, they are saved from calamities.

(Attias 2012, pp. 32–33); see the same midrash as well in (Honigsberg 2012, pp. 83–84; Malka 2011a, pp. 54–55).

Interviews with her followers: Ms. A. (2021), Ms. N. (2021) and Ms. Y. (2021).

In the name of Rabbi Gedaliah Honigsberg (one of her grandsons). It is said that she would often say she like helping her husband Rabbi Hayim with everything and if only she could have helped him with his studies, writing his books, answering letters he received, but she lacked the skills and capabilities for this: (Weinberger et al. 2012a, pp. 141–42).

Regarding the Kanievsky couple, see: (Weinberger et al. 2012a, p. 142): The rebbetzin cared for all his needs and he did nothing to care for his needs, from opening the fridge to pouring water for himself, and she even told him the blessing to say for each food item so he would not waste time thinking about it (ibid., pp. 131, 143). See also (Tzivion 2021, pp. 361–62; Koldetzky 2011, p. 52).

A recording of Kanievsky talking about her mother’s dedication to the Torah study of her father, Rabbi Elyashiv, was broadcast at the gathering marking thirty days since her death (Kol Halashon 2011).

Regarding Rebbetzin Elyashiv see, e.g.,: (Honigsberg 2012, p. 82); regarding Rebbetzin Kanievsky, see: (Malka 2011a, p. 53, about her six-year-old son who lay in a hospital bed for weeks and she was alongside him by herself).

Regarding Rebbetzin Elyashiv, see, e.g., (Honigsberg 2012, p. 82; Malka 2011a, p. 32).

Regarding Rebbetzin Elyashiv, see, e.g.,: (Ben David 2012, pp. 23–24; Attias 2012, pp. 42–43; Malka 2011a, p. 31). Regarding Rebbetzin Kanievsky, see, e.g., (Ben David 2012, pp. 50–41; Weinberger et al. 2012a, pp. 122–23).

Regarding Rebbetzin Elyashiv—Rebbetzin Kanievsky herself was recorded talking about this in a movie posted on the internet: (Yesha’ayahu 2011; Attias 2012, p. 21; Ben David 2012, pp. 25–26). Regarding Rebbetzin Kanievsky, see: (Honigsberg 2012, p. 82).

In the video that appears in the article mentioned in the previous note.

E.g.,: (Kanievsky 2011, p. 45). In this context I am referring to modesty of dress. In her view, the virtue of modesty had an additional dimension, of making do with little and distancing oneself from luxuries: see, e.g., (Braverman 2011, pp. 46–47; Tzivion 2021, pp. 376–88; Ben David 2012, pp. 217–24; Malka 2011a, pp. 47–49; Weinberger et al. 2012a, pp. 167–78).

“Nashim Lev” group, Facebook, 2018. An additional testimony recalls that when an immodest woman would visit the rebbetzin, the latter would wrap her with a handkerchief that she would not feel or put a piece of clothing on her shoulders so gently that she would not be insulted (ibid.).

She would sometimes use the word “sacrifice” (*hakravah*) regarding other topics as well, yet she generally used it in the context of modesty. (Attias 2012, pp. 106–9).

See also in the words said during the gathering marking thirty days since her death, supra, n. 17.

The words of Rebbetzin Leah Koldetzky at the gathering marking thirty days since her mother’s death (Kol Halashon 2011).

I will discuss this aspect at length in an additional study.

However, it is worth noting that some criticize the distinction that sees task-oriented leadership as “masculine” and person-oriented leadership as “feminine” and believe this distinction is based on common stereotypes but not anchored in data. E.g.,: (Hoyt 2013, pp. 350–52).

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