

# Reva Mann

## Solidarity or separatism?

It is ten o'clock in the morning and the wailing siren has just sounded. I am at my desk at home working at the computer. I get up and walk to the balcony where I stand to attention remembering the Jews who died in the holocaust. I glance down to the street below. Traffic has come to a standstill and drivers stand next to their cars, pedestrians freeze and shoppers focus inwards as we, the Jewish nation, give a minute of our time in solidarity with our ancestors who died the most torturous deaths. My mind flashes back in time to my yeshiva days. I am sitting in class at the Neve Yerushalayim yeshiva for girls in Bayit Vegan. My classroom is symbolically at the top of the building, as we girls on the highest level of learning in the Shalhevet program are studying the commentaries on the Torah, Midrash and most interesting of all, hashkafah, philosophical outlook on life.

Rabbi R. the son of a famous Dayan, headed the program in my day. He was my hero, my idol, my rebbe. I lapped up every word of Torah that fell from his mouth. Every day he would meander into our classroom, flick a lock of hair off his forehead, flap his long suit coat from under him, and sit. Then he would begin a class on morality, a Musar shmooze, elucidating the different streams in the Mussar movement, the self hating Novardik followers and the self-loving Slabodkas who saw themselves fashioned in the image of God

It was exactly ten o'clock in the morning on Holocaust Remembrance day, during one of those infamous Mussar shmoozes that the siren began to wail. I immediately put down my holy book. My chair scraped against the ceramic tiled floor as I rose to my feet. As is common to these moments of introspection, I closed my eyes. Instead of the silence that usually accompanies this standing tradition, my dear and revered Rabbi R. continued giving his class in a mix of English spiced with yeshivishe loshon, telling the famous story of how Novardik yeshiva students would go to a pharmacy and ask for a hammer and nails in order to leash the pharmacist's wrath and subsequently their humility. I opened my eyes. The entire student body was seated. When the siren waned and droned to a close, Rabbi R. looked straight at me and said, "Standing for a siren is a goyishe way of mourning. In the merit of us learning Torah, the souls of the dead will be elevated."

I said nothing but made for the door and fled the premises. I ran down the main thoroughfare of the Bayit Vegan neighbourhood in a state of confusion as I had always been taught by my father and grandfather that taking oneself out of the Clal, away from the majority within Israel, is a negative act. It's not that I didn't ultimately agree that learning Torah has a greater effect than standing up, but the togetherness of the whole nation standing simultaneously for an entire minute is a powerful and meaningful event.

I am brought back to the here and now of the day as the siren is whirling to an end. Drivers get back into their cars and slowly drive off. Pedestrians continue on their way. Shoppers pick up their purchases.

It must be over twenty years since I sat in Rabbi R's class, but that day, when I stood and he sat, was the pivotal point of my realization that I belong to the people of Israel as a whole and not just to an elitist group who believe they have a monopoly on what is considered fit behaviour for Jewish living.