

# Empowering religious women in the workplace

The 6th annual Temech conference takes Jerusalem

• By MIRIAM KRESH

**T**emech, an initiative created to promote employment opportunities for religious women, held its sixth annual business conference in Jerusalem earlier this month.

The Ramada's lobby was flooded with women in modest skirts and hair coverings, a few pushing strollers. Here and there a plainly secular woman could be seen moving comfortably among the crowd; no special notice was taken.

Some women were stacking their business cards and brochures on a table set up for display; others circulated among booths advertising goods and services. Everyone was drinking coffee or munching on snacks provided by the hotel, yet the palpable charge in the air wasn't owed to caffeine – but to the excitement of women expecting to feast their minds on new, possibly life-changing ideas.

The Temech program booklet opened with a tribute to a board member's memory of her grandmother, perhaps to set the tone and provide an example of an *eshet chayil* – the biblical woman of valor. The following five pages offered a mix of inspirational thoughts and basic information for the woman eager to work but still hesitating on the line between the demands of home and the employment market.

"Show up with business cards, a strategy and goals," suggested one writer. "Ask yourself if your interfaces with the outside world [business cards, brochures, website] are telling your desired story," advised another.

"Never say yes because you hate to say no," was good advice for women trained since birth to conciliate and smooth things over. "Make smart choices in marketing to people most likely to listen and take an interest," noted another writer.

The women's garb crossed the spectrum of modesty, indicating traditional, hassidic and national-religious attitudes. Not surprisingly, the more traditionally dressed seemed to be seeking basic information on "getting out there." One business coach in attendance told me that she saw her mission as convincing women in haredi communities, who accept poverty as a way of life, that the workplace is a real



A speaker addresses participants at the Temech conference. (Courtesy)

option for them.

However, seasoned workers already comfortable with marketing strategy, social media and making business decisions confessed that they attend the conference less to attend lectures and more to network.

Either way, there was plenty to see and hear, with two halls for lectures in Hebrew and English. After opening remarks and an ethics talk by Rabbi Dovid Kaplan on the power of good and evil speech, Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat spoke briefly at each hall, praising the entrepreneurial spirit in the audience.

The conference focused on the art of storytelling; selling your service or product via well-designed stories, that is. Rabbi Nachman Seltzer told tales of how Heaven picks up the threads of those who persevere until the last possible effort has been made.

Actress and storytelling coach Idit Neuderfer engaged the audience with a warm-up involving shaking the hands while saying "Brrr!" Loosened up and feeling friendly, participants enjoyed her talk on delivering a well-focused presentation that gets the audience to ask questions. Include a personal story to rouse emotion and make the audience identify with you, she instructed. Record yourself giving your presentation and play it back, noticing any monotones that would put your potential client to sleep.

A fun feature that split the lectures up and gave the audience a chance to move around was the Chinese auction. A display of about 100 services and products were laid out on tables, each

with a box where the women could drop up to five business cards, or use ID cards provided with the program booklet. Lucky winners were notified by phone in the following days.

The Temech conference always includes a huge spread at the hotel's dairy restaurant. This writer noticed that creamy starches and big salads made up the bulk of the meal, with fish and cheese coming in second, and plenty of gooey desserts. I lunched with two ladies, one an elegant woman in her early 30s who complained that as a convert, matchmakers give her little chance of finding a normal husband. The other, an older woman with a headscarf, happened to be an experienced matchmaker herself; she promptly pulled up a mental file on a man she knows well, whose description sounded quite attractive.

I sat with my mouth open as the two excitedly took each other's phone numbers. All kinds of networking was apparently happening at the Temech conference.

As with other breaks from lectures, lunchtime provided an opportunity for participants to talk freely with other interesting-looking women, reading each other's names and professions off name tags. From what I observed, a large number represented businesses like financial coaching, tax counseling, public relations, business loans, event planning, a fund-raising course, website development and business consultation services, insurance, books for the religious public, and sales and business management courses. There were at least

four life coaches and a representative from an emotional therapy center; I saw at least five doulas and childbirth educators, as well as a clutch of alternative health practitioners and a couple of time managers/workplace organizers.

There were a number of writers and designers, and a video production company for women only. I saw a few brochures advertising artwork and clothing, but there were fewer caterers and people offering food than I expected. There were vendors of personal products like wigs, jewelry and handmade soaps, but again, fewer than I expected for a gathering of women.

All in all, it was heartening to see the force of women entrepreneurs.

Most of the afternoon was devoted to a choice of inspirational talks on nitty-gritty business planning. Speakers were Rabbi Issamar Ginzberg (CEO of It's All From Above) on the little-known secret of why people buy; Eli Shine (CEO of Let Your Business Shine) on three ways to boost your business by boosting yourself; Laura Ben-David (pro-Israel social media activist) on rewriting your story; Hilary Faverman (content marketing and social media expert) on how to make people listen online; and Debra Kodish (owner of Keshed Advisers) on creating and measuring success in small businesses.

I was particularly intrigued by speakers giving woman-to-woman guidance, as financial coach Debbie Sassen did in regard to valuing one's work: "As women in business, the woman side of us that desires to help others often leads our fee negotiations in a way that is self-defeating and leads to under-earning. Feeling *rachmanut* [pity] for the person who wants to work with us and needs our services, and since we really and truly desire to help them and know we can do it, we give discounts easily – too easily sometimes.

"As business owners, we have to hold strong boundaries around the fees we set and make sure we get paid. We need to develop confidence to step into our power and our value."

Sassen then gave an example of a manipulative woman's attempt to extract a discount from her, and her polite but assertive answer.

After a break with more rivers of coffee on offer, participants enjoyed a speed-panel on working with colleagues. To wind the day up, two surprise speakers appeared to bestow appreciation and honor on the audience: United Torah Judaism MK Moshe Gafni and Shas MK Arye Deri.