

## An equal opportunity for women to study

To Rabbi David Silber, women's prayer groups are of secondary importance in the Jewish women's revolution. What's really needed, says the founder of the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education, is change in what is taught to Jewish girls, starting in day schools.

"Personally, I believe that boys and girls should be exposed to the breadth of our tradition," says Silber. "They should be given the tools to study text, so when they leave high school they can continue their Jewish education."

The Drisha Institute — a school for women — is Silber's way of making this dream into reality. Since he founded it in 1979, he has added several programs, all designed to offer women of high school age and over the chance to study biblical, Talmudic and post-Talmudic texts. The school does not have a home of its own — courses are taught in synagogues in the metropolitan area.

A Yeshiva University graduate, Silber was aware that few women were even given a chance to learn what he had been required to study from an early age. "There weren't sufficient programs for women to study Jewish texts intensively," he says, "and there was a market out there, a need."

Since 1984, the Drisha Fellowship Program has provided scholarships to about 12 women for a year or two of full-time study. Afternoon, evening and summer classes are available, and a new high school summer program was initiated last year. Its four students will be joined by another 14 this summer.

Drisha has two main purposes, says Silber: To "identify young women as leaders in Jewish education and to provide equal access to Jewish texts for women. Our goal is to give those women considering careers in education an opportunity to strengthen their skills."

"People who think that women have equal opportunity to study are mistaken," he continues. "Many schools are not teaching Talmud to women, and the main basis for this philosophy is halachic sources — which can be disputed — and a tradition of women not studying. The whole idea of women studying is a 20th century

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idea."

And, though the 21st century is almost upon us, that "20th century idea" is only now catching on. It is still difficult to get funding for Drisha because, says Silber, "the feeling still is that for a girl or a woman, it's not as important. If you value education you are willing to pay for it, and the Jewish community is not willing at this point to

pay for top quality education for women."

But, says Silber, "things will change gradually. There's a revolution taking place — the idea of women studying is becoming accepted.

"Old divisions of labor don't exist any more. Women have entered into general society and the idea that as far as religious matters go we should keep them back is ridiculous."

—Toby Axelrod

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