

# *Jewish studies for women* Drisha Institute gets high marks from students

By CAROL GOOTTER

Although he's an Orthodox rabbi, David Silber is a most unorthodox teacher. He is the founder of the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education, a Manhattan-based school dedicated to providing Jewish education for women.

The 34-year-old rabbi began the school in 1979, he explained, to correct an imbalance he perceived. "Men are raised in yeshivas," he said, "but women, after high school, go to secular universities like Barnard, Brooklyn College, Queens College, N.Y.U. and, on a graduate level, Columbia. This is why Drisha was formed. It's important to supplement women's learning with Jewish studies."

He added, "We want Drisha to create a situation where women will be in leadership positions in every framework. And it's going to happen."

Silber voiced confidence that women who take a serious approach to Jewish studies will, in turn, be taken seriously. "If I get sick, who do I call? The best doctor," he reasoned. "Or, if I need to, the best lawyer or the best therapist, whether it's a man or a woman. If those who know the answers are women, people will turn to them."

Although Silber doesn't see the Institute giving ordination to its students, he hopes eventually to award them with "some kind of teaching degree."

### *Different Types*

Silber's students include housewives, college students and career-oriented women. He estimated that about 65% of them are from traditional families.

Marilyn Englander, a mother of two who commutes to the rabbi's evening *Chumash* (Pentateuch) class from Fair Lawn, N.J., said she is impressed with Silber's dedication. "There are many rabbis who teach women in addition to teaching men. What's unique about Rabbi Silber is that he set up a whole school for women. It's a real commitment to do such a thing, for someone to show that he takes women that seriously," she explained.

That serious attitude seems to be reciprocated among his students. Susan Isserman, a Stern College student, stated, "Rabbi Silber is brilliant. He has a phenomenal understanding of written

and oral Torah. He's honest, clear and concise as a teacher. He's helped deepen my understanding of Torah in a very practical way."

### *Infectious Enthusiasm*

Sitting in on one of Silber's classes, it becomes clear that he is prepared with probing questions and incisive answers.

At one recent class he asked, "If the Children of Israel failed every test, why did God give them the Torah?"

His response: "They didn't fail the test. They did and they didn't. The point of a test is that you learn from the mistake. In life, we don't learn from successes. I've never met a man who learns from his successes. The great people learn from their mistakes."

He continued, "What the *Chumash* is concerned about is human limitation, not failure. The Christians look at the Garden of Eden as a fall from grace. But we, as Jews, see it as the limitation of humanity, and the potential for greatness is that we have the ability to make moral decisions. What we do with our will is up to us. A good test is something you learn from. If you don't do *teshuva* (repentance), you don't pass the test."

### *Success Story*

By any test, Silber's Institute seems to be flourishing. In Drisha's first year, 1979, there were 70 students. By contrast, this year 190 women are enrolled.

Silber encourages critical thinking among his students. For instance, when reviewing commentaries by such luminaries as Maimonides and Abarbanel, Silber avoids unbridled reverence. "I believe the Rambam (Maimonides) is using the text here to fit a long-held theory of his," he said during a recent class. "I believe his interpretation is forced. The interpretation of Abarbanel is more plausible, and I side with him here."

This kind of honest analysis is appreciated by his students. "Too often, women's classes are just the what-to-do, how-to-do type of classes filled with practical details and not intellectual," said Roselyn Bell, associate editor of *Hadassah* magazine. "That's why I don't find most women's study programs intellectually stimulating. This one is. I'd compare it to what a real *yeshiva* is."



Shira Isaacson (left) and Laurie Abraham, both students of Rabbi Silber. Says Abraham: "Rabbi Silber looks for things that are hidden. He presents things in an eye-opening way."

She added, "I feel that Rabbi Silber has the right approach to approach the text as a commentator. Respect shouldn't replace the careful, in-depth analysis of the text itself. This analysis is a kind of detached, intellectual interest in the major works of our religion. That's the freshness of Rabbi Silber's approach."

Laurie Abraham, past president of the New York region of the National Conference of Synagogue Youth, said that Silber's method takes some getting used to. "He gives the text a thorough going-over," Abraham, 17, said. "At first, it was hard for me, as I was used to a more traditional approach to *Chumash*. But now I like it. Rabbi Silber looks for things that are hidden. He presents things in an eye-opening way."

#### *Literary Approach*

Silber himself described his approach as "literary." "What I do," he added, "is to first look at the text and see what it says. I try to show the patterns and structures. Then I'll look at what the commentators say. I want the women to

think for themselves and not just to mouth what someone else said."

Silber is quick to point out that his is not the only approach used at Drisha. There are six other instructors at the Institute, teaching such topics as Talmud, *halacha* (Jewish law), Jewish philosophy and Jewish thought.

"There's room for more than one technique in studying Judaism — I don't care if it's to the 'right' or 'left.' I want the women to get the best education. That's what the word *drisha* means, investigation," he said.

Silber has more plans in store for Drisha. "We're hoping that in the future we can establish fellowship programs. We'd like 12 women a year to study intensively. We'd like to train them so that they will be able to go out and teach. It's a subject very close to my heart," he concluded. □

*Drisha Institute classes are held at the Westside Institutional Synagogue, 122 West 76 Street, Manhattan. For more information, call 212/595-0307.*