

Talmud study used to be exclusively for men; now growing numbers of Orthodox women undertake it

# Jewish Women's Scholarly Gain

By Ari L. Goldman

**I**magine reading a book without any commas periods or other punctuation marks imagine reading without capitalization or vowels that is what reading the talmud is like but also imagine that you have mastered the keys to this complex library of jewish knowledge with its own set of rules

Suddenly, things make sense. Suddenly you understand not only the words and the concepts but have joined an intellectual process that has shaped more than 2,000 years of Jewish spiritual life and religious law. You are not merely a reader, you are a player.

This type of intellectual awakening — a reflection of women's advances in secular education — is occurring for a growing number of Jewish women for whom the Talmud was virtually a closed book. For generations, rabbis and Jewish educators, with few exceptions, have discouraged women by telling them Talmud study was not for them or, more subtly, by denying them the language tools they needed.

While some opposition remains, Talmud study for women is gaining acceptance — particularly in the most traditional branch of Judaism, where the resistance has been the greatest: the Orthodox.

## Respect for a Process

Elisheva Septimus, an Orthodox 17-year-old from Brookline, Mass., who has just graduated from high school, is spending this summer learning Talmud at the Drisha Institute, a school of Jewish studies for women on Manhattan's West Side. The experience, she said, is at once exciting and maddening.

"Women have been spoon-fed the Bible and the laws for so long, but haven't had access to the process," she said. "We've lost all the excitement of how the laws developed."

Another Drisha student, Rose G. Landowne of Manhattan, 42 years old and the mother of four, said, "The more I see of the process the more respect I have for it." Both women



Jack Munnag/The New York Times

agreed they feel as if they are "part of the dialogue."

On the pages of the Talmud the dialogue is strictly between men, for the Talmud is not so much a book of laws as a chronicle of the discussions and debates of the rabbis of the great academies of Jewish learning for a period of seven centuries ending with 500 A.D. It was through those discussions — and succeeding ones that grew out of them over the course of Jewish history — that Jewish law has been read, understood and interpreted in the light of contemporary issues.

Some scholars have likened the Talmud to the Constitution of the United States. The rabbis interpret the Talmud and the rulings that flow from it in every generation just like the justices who explain the Constitution and its interpretations. Indeed, many say that the encounter with the Talmud's 60 volumes, each dealing with a separate realm of Jewish life, is much like the study of secu-

lar law itself. Both teach a way of thinking and analysis that disciplines the mind.

The Talmud is studied by Judaism's non-Orthodox branches — Conservative, Reconstructionist and Reform. These branches, which ordain men and women, give everyone equal access. But there is little Talmud study outside the branches' rabbinical schools.

Among the Orthodox, who ordain only men, Talmud study for women is growing, although it is limited to a handful of schools and synagogues. When Ms. Landowne graduated from Yeshiva University's Stern College for Women, in New York City, in 1971, there was one elective in Talmud. When Ms. Septimus enters the school next year, there will be at least four.

At Drisha, where the two women are among 200 studying this summer, 40 of them full-time, Talmud study is taken seriously. Rabbi David S. Silber, the director, said that when he founded the school 12 years ago

he included Talmud in the curriculum because he was determined to offer women "a well-rounded Jewish education."

Today, Talmud study is central to the school's mission. Last year its fellowship program provided stipends of \$7,500 each for 12 women to study Talmud full time, in the tradition of the "kollel," the advanced yeshivas where men are paid to study full time. The women's study, however, does not lead to advanced degrees.

Much like the practice at men's yeshivas, the women at Drisha gather in a study hall, known as the bais medrash, in groups of two or three to dissect the text before the formal Talmud lecture. They concentrate on the basic meaning of the text — what do the words mean, where do the sentences start and end, what is a statement and what is a question. Then they attend class, known as a shiur, where a teacher tests and augments their understanding by drawing on other sources to explain, expand and illuminate the text. After class, the women again gather and review what they learned.

The encounter with the text is not always pleasant. Not only are women left out, but the role outlined for them in ritualistic Jewish life is secondary to that of men. The Talmud teaches, for example, that women cannot serve as witnesses and only men can constitute a minyan, the quorum of 10 needed for communal prayer.

"We're not always happy with what we are learning,"

said Joyce Streg Kosowsky of Brookline, Mass., one of six women who each week study Talmud with Rabbi Gershon Gewirtz at the Young Israel Synagogue of Brookline. The women's dismay has been heightened by their study of a volume called Kiddushin, which deals with the laws of marriage and begins, "A woman can be acquired in three ways."

"We give Rabbi Gewirtz a very hard time," said Ms. Kosowsky, who is 53 years old.

"We press him about the role of women and groan when we hear what sounds like a poignant

ics to us. Still, Ms. Kosowsky, who recently earned a master's degree in computer science, says that her Talmud class is "the high point of my week."

"I put in more preparation for that class than I did for anything I took in graduate school," she said.

Yitta Halberstam Mandelbaum, who directs educational programs at a religious Zionist organization called Amit Women, said that the popularity of Talmud cannot be separated from an overall renewal in the interest in Jewish learning among women. She and others noted that religious women today are given substantive secular educations and are entering the professions in greater numbers than ever before. It is only natural that they should have the same intellectual curiosity about Judaism.

Last winter, 300 religious women attended an Amit event called "A Day of Learning: Women Teaching Women," which was double last year's attendance. Among the popular sessions was "How the Talmud Views Biblical Women," taught by Dr. Susan Aranoff.

For the women who attended, Ms. Mandelbaum said, the experience was "a confirmation and affirmation of their scholarly abilities" and gave them access to something that religious men "take for granted."

## Heady implications

The long-term implications of Orthodox women learning Talmud are heady. If women know Talmud, can they interpret the law? If they interpret the law, will their conclusions differ from those of men? If they can decide matters of law, should they not be able to serve as rabbis?

The women at Drisha, like Devorah Zlochower, 36, of Pittsburgh, do not dwell on such speculation. They prefer to talk about how much more they have to learn. And for now, the mere act of study seems to suffice. "This is something I've always dreamed of doing," Ms. Zlochower said, turning to the open Talmud before her.