

## A Little Unorthodox

*A movement leans slightly to the left when it comes to women*

### THIRD OF A FOUR-PART SERIES

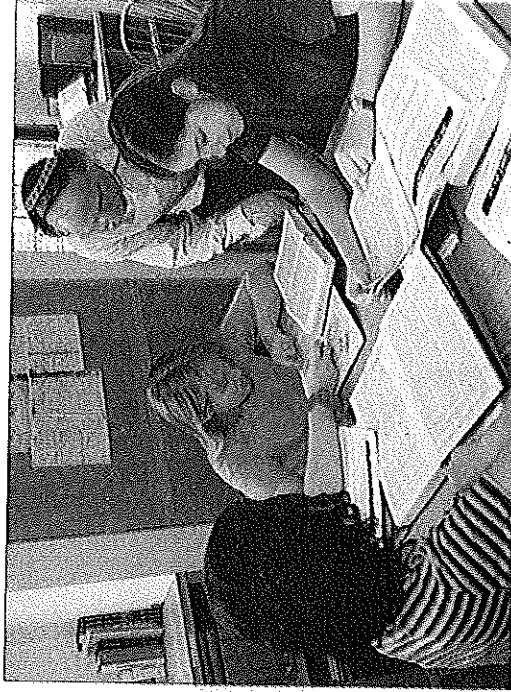
**Sara Isadora Mancuso**  
*Jewish Exponent Staff*

**F**or hundreds of years, Orthodox Jews have uttered the same Hebrew prayers, sung praises to God in staid tunes and lived life as their ancestors before them.

Though observant Jews agree on much, some distinct movements within Orthodoxy have broken off, defining themselves by how much they let the modern world into their lives, particularly as it relates to the role of women.

Just six months ago, a woman delivered the keynote address at the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America's National Convention for the first

**Unorthodox** *Continued on Page 12*



*Rabbi David Silber, founder and dean of Drisha, teaches students during a summer high school program.*

# Cover Story

## Unorthodox

Continued from Page 1

time in history.

Nowhere is the question of modernity more apparent than in the arrival of the Bat Mitzvah into Orthodox life.

While larger celebrations have slowly come about, many haredi families keep the special event lower-key.

Other parents are sending their daughters to Bat Mitzvah prep classes in places such as New York's Upper West Side, or even straight to the bimah, where they read directly from the Torah in women-only services. These families are more likely to hail from the Modern Orthodox movement.

"Since the Jewish community has had the opportunity to enter into the mainstream non-Jewish community, there seems to be one central question: how to preserve Jewish identity and maximum Jewish commitment in some framework of connection to modernity," said Rabbi Saul J. Berman, director of Edah, an Orthodox group that promotes a more modern approach.

"It is, in fact, possible to preserve an intense and passionate Jewish identity while at the same time sustain a significant inter-section with and penetration with the general culture — that's really at the heart of the struggle going on in the Orthodox movement today," said Berman.

Orthodoxy — which numbered 5 percent of local Jewry, according to the 1996/97 Jewish Population Study of Greater Philadelphia, and 7 percent of the Jewish population nationally in 1990 — has clung to Jewish rituals and age-old beliefs, but of late seems more open to re-evaluate the status quo and possible even change in a few key areas.

When it comes to liturgy, the violence of the *in tifa* was enough to prompt groups to add a series of psalms and prayers for Israel and its soldiers, something that's not typically done.

And while homosexuality is clearly wrong, according to the majority within the Orthodox movement, there seems to be room for understanding and compassion for those religious Jews struggling with sexual issues.

As to the West Bank and Gaza Strip settlements and Israel, opinions throughout the different schisms are varied, based on a number of definitions on what constitutes Israel or Eretz Yisrael.

### What women want

But again, the most obvious development in the Orthodox world is the role that women play. Orthodox traditions dictate learning styles and the Torah texts studied at Drisha, an educational center in New York, where most students are women and more than half are Orthodox.

A new Bat Mitzvah program will match students with a tutor and learning opportunities for parents. Then, comes the inter-generational classes — a mix of students, their parents and grandparents.

## Finding ways to mix tradition and mainstream society is at the heart of Orthodoxy today.

"The Bat Mitzvah has become a more mainstream celebration," said Daniela Weiss, executive director of Drisha. "A few decades ago, it simply wasn't on the map."

And it's not just ultra-modern girls heading for the bimah.

"It's not so much that everyone's doing it, but the idea that there is a platform where a 12-year-old girl is publicly affirming her commitment as a Jew is something we're seeing more and more of in different communities," explained Weiss.

Though the girls at Drisha may study similar texts to Orthodox men, there probably won't be folks from Agudath Israel enrolling anytime soon.

"I don't think they're doing the girls a tremendous favor," said Rabbi Avi Shafran, a spokesman for Agudath Israel. "In the long run, they're teaching them something that's at odds with the very thing they promote."

"There's a tremendous respect for women and respect for their partnership in this great endeavor in what we call the Jewish family," said Shafran. The rules of modesty, "make it harder to suggest women be in roles of

prominence."

The same goes for Rabbi Aaron Felder of Congregation B'nai Israel-Ohev Zedek in Philadelphia.

"Just like God created men and women differently physically, women have roles and men have roles," said Felder. "Men have a public role; women have a more private role. For various reasons, these women are unhappy with their roles."

The Orthodox Union is navigating similar waters, but making some changes.

"Many centrist synagogues attempt to involve women in a variety of ways which are relatively nontraditional: ranging from women's education to positions of leadership," said Rabbi Tzvi Hersh Weinreb, executive vice president of the Orthodox Union.

When it comes to homosexuality, most Orthodox Jews agree: It's wrong because the Torah says so in Leviticus, Chapter 20, Verse 13.

"We are, above all, committed to the strictures of Jewish law; we cannot allow it as acceptable," stressed Shafran.

Compassion, however, exists.

"We try to be sympathetic of people, recognizing their inner struggles and the pain of a person who inwardly feels homosexual yet wants to abide by Orthodox practices," said Weinreb.

"We don't want to accept homosexual activity, but we do want to accept people who feel that they have those feelings and urges," he added.

And there is a direct response to gays within the Orthodox community or those who come there for guidance.

"We don't try to isolate them or shun them in anyway, God forbid," said Shafran.

Celibacy, however, is seen as a better alternative than acting on homosexual feelings, say some religious leaders.

"Marriage is an ideal, but there are times when it's not possible," said Shafran. "Celibacy is a terrible state, but there are realities in the world that are based on psychological or spiritual [circumstances], that cause people to choose to live a less than perfect life."

Typically, seeing a psychologist or rabbi for religious counseling are also recommended.