

A Showcase Of Arts And Texts

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How does an Orthodox center for rich and rigorous Jewish learning reach out to self-styled artists who are often in the margins of communal life?

On June 13th, nine artists who have been studying Jewish texts through [Drisha's Fellowship for the Arts](#) will exhibit their visual work along with music, dance and spoken word performances at the [JCC in Manhattan](#). Their theme is the oft-commented Talmudic phrase, "All of Israel has a part in the world to come."



Noach by Rabbi Joanne Yocheved Heligman.
Photo courtesy Drisha Institute

The artists present provocative perspectives on questions of inclusion. Multi-disciplinary [Brooke Borg](#) takes an unflinching look at her own self-destructive behavior in a series of drawings. Painter Coretta Garlow focuses on a reminder that we only see divine truth through a smudged window.

Now in its 7th year, the arts fellowship began in 2006 when two advanced scholars at the [Drisha Institute for Jewish Education](#) were moved to express Talmudic insights in poetry. Under the founding leadership of [Eve Grubin](#), this impulse grew into a broader opportunity for women artists of all Jewish backgrounds to experience a year-long immersion in study.

Past participants include singer/songwriter [Basya Schechter](#), leader of the World Music group Pharaoh's Daughter, poet [Elana Bell](#), winner of the 2011 Walt Whitman award and Anna Schon, a dancer with Fist and Heel and the Metropolitan Opera.

This is not only a matter of enriching artists with Jewish content. Associate Dean Rachel Friedman reflects, "We have been blessed with a community of women artists who have enriched the language of Torah study. Each woman uses the language of her art, whether visual or poetic or some other form, to explore and convey the deeper truths of Judaism."

The singular creativity of Jewish women artists, frequently shaped by a feminist perspective, is nurtured, rather than constrained at Drisha. Lori Leifer, program administrator and participating songwriter says, "Before coming here, I felt a little adrift, and very vulnerable in the outside world. It's the outside that tends to be intimidating and male dominated. Here we have our own niche. It's given me a sense not only of place but of purpose."

Rabbi David Silber, Drisha's founder and dean, who has been pioneering crossover initiatives for decades, is aware of his own iconoclasm.

"Orthodox Judaism tends to be arts-unfriendly for fear that too much individualism takes people off the path." But Silber understands this to be a refinement of thinking around the key concept of individual calling. "Everyone has a calling and no one can tell you what your unique calling is," he explains. "Artists are on a quest. Just like religious seekers, they look at things through a unique lens. Here we inform that quest with some content. It remains individual, yet reaches out to the collective."

The Drisha Arts Fellowship Exhibition is at the JCC in Manhattan, 334 Amsterdam Avenue, Thursday, June 13th, 7 p.m., \$10.

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