

Amazing Gemara Girls and Their Adventures in Drisha Land

by:
Avigayil Halpern and Eden Farber

They can leap tractates in a single bound.



Eden Farber, on left, and Avigayil Halpern, in pink jacket, participate in chavruta study.

After the two of us spent five weeks this summer in New York City, our peers and community members were befuddled as to what we had been doing. “Learning?” they exclaimed. “How, interesting...” as their voices trailed off and suddenly they saw someone — over there — with whom they urgently needed to speak. Other comments ranged from, “Did you do anything fun?” to “Why? Was it for college?”

We were shocked. Modern Orthodoxy is focused on education and Torah learning, but the concept of girls learning for the sake of learning was IS a foreign idea in our communities. This realization was a rude awakening; we come from an environment that fosters a love of learning. We both attend yeshiva high schools and spend half our school day in single-sex classes studying Judaic subjects. But the [Dr. Beth Samuels Drisha High School Program for Girls](#) was different. We joined 16 other girls from the United States and Israel who are passionate about Torah study, from the United States and Israel, for an intensive learning program at the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education in Manhattan.

Chavruta study (learning in pairs) was at the core of our summer experience, and it served the poignant purpose of giving us a sense of familiarity and intimacy with the text. The sounds of women studying in pairs, the way Jewish texts have been studied for thousands of years, emanated from the beit midrash. It was not a soothing, low hum or murmur, but something closer to a roar.

The enthusiastic voices of women of all ages blended so that you only heard tiny snippets of the conversations around you. The room was a fiery glow of fervent study, as if the students were the candles kindling the flames. Clusters of women sat tightly around small square tables; piles of books on the tables masked the individuals. All that could be seen from the doorway were bodies shuckling excitedly from learning. We rotated partners so that we learned with all the girls in the high school program.

Finding a spot to sit or a dictionary to use was difficult. The eagerness of students from the Drisha college program compensated for these minor inconveniences. They shared their Jastrow dictionaries — a massive compendium of practically every word from the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds. Or a teacher from another class would lean across the table and, with a smile on his or her face, offer to help.

Our days were infused with religious activities such as prayer, study and mitzvah projects. When it came to playing sports, the less athletically inclined among us (authors included) tended to utter comments such as, “Can we please go back to class?” Our teachers wondered if we really were high school students. Our evenings included night seder, a class dedicated to in-depth analysis of a story from the Talmud. The cherry on top of an always wonderful day was a fun activity in New York City, such as a concert, scavenger hunt in Times Square or a Broadway show.

We lived in the Tuoro College dorms and in our rooms there was giggling, picture taking and other typical teenage girl-isms. We shared a common ground that made us outcasts in other circles, but united us in this one. Our passion for learning, our thirst for answers, our appreciation of our heritage — boundaries that separate us from our peers — brought us together. We felt free to challenge each other intellectually because there was an understanding that arguments over what we learned were not personal. We argued about the role of women in Judaism and, almost as seriously, about the joys of peanut butter with chocolate.

At the end of the day, even the pairs who had the strongest disagreements were laughing together. We didn't need to have any defense mechanisms up — we could truly be ourselves, without apologizing for it, or being made to feel like we were strange.

Our summer experience at Drisha might sound unique, strange or atypical. However, it is crucially important for the future of Modern Orthodoxy that our experience — and we — are not perceived that way. Learning for the sake of learning needs to be a valid, acceptable choice for teenagers. Students, especially girls, need encouragement, not alienation.

After Drisha, we have continued to learn for its own sake. Avigayil continues her studies of the six books of the Mishna; after a year of learning she's halfway done. Eden began the new cycle of daf yomi, learning one page of Gemara a day for seven-and-a-half years.

At school, Avigayil created a Divrei Torah program so students can learn from each other as we did at Drisha. She leads a weekly Mishna learning club as well. Eden started an initiative to teach women in her community how to layn — the cantillation of the Torah — and she spearheaded a women's Simchat Torah celebration. We both participate in the Yeshiva University Bekiut program, which guides students around the world towards the goal of learning tractate Rosh HaShanah in its entirety by the end of the year.

Our summer experience was reflective of our aspirations as Jewish women: advanced Torah education, religious participation and a trust in ourselves to access and understand Jewish sources. On the very last day, exuding nostalgia, we turned to each other — lost as to how we could go home.

"Eden, what are we going to do now?"

"Avigayil, now we change the world."

Applications for Drisha High School Winter Seminar are now being accepted. For more information click on <http://www.drisha.org/highschool.php>.