



Drisha Institute founder Rabbi David Silber says the school's goals are to teach women to study religious texts independently and to teach future leaders in Jewish education.

Photo/Helayne Seidman

Designed for women

Drisha Institute offers program of advanced talmudic study

By GITELLE RAPOPORT

Students of Jewish religious texts in New York-area yeshivas generally have at least one thing in common: they are men. Women's yeshivas oriented toward advanced study of classic texts — the Bible, Talmud, Midrash, Codes of Jewish Law and rabbinic commentaries — are virtually non-existent.

The exception is the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education on Manhattan's Upper West Side.

"I always wanted to have a full-time program for women to learn," says Rabbi David Silber, who founded Drisha (which means "serious inquiry" or "searching") in 1979.

The school's two goals, he says, are to teach women to study religious texts independently and to train future leaders in Jewish education.

During the last year, Drisha's approximately 400 students chose among evening classes, a six-week summer institute, a summer high school program and the fellowship program (a tuition-free year of intensive, full-time study of Bible, Talmud, Jewish law and philosophy) often with a *chavruta*, or study partner.

The Teacher Enrichment Program sends Drisha fac-

ulty members to other Jewish schools to demonstrate creative methods of teaching classic source material.

A new beginners' program this fall will be geared to women who do not have facility with Jewish texts.

"The Drisha experience gives [one] respect for how exciting Jewish scholarship is," says Shoshana Jedwab,

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a former Drisha Fellow with a successful career in Jewish education. This summer she taught a Drisha course in biblical exegesis.

"In all my [secular] studies up to now, I felt [something] was missing: a Jewish voice or way of thinking," says summer institute student Ruth Gelman, an ex-television producer and talk show host.

The Talmud not only "teaches me how to think," she discovered, but it has "a moral structure."

Chavie Levine of Englewood, N.J., one of 16 girls who just completed the high school program, jumped at the chance to learn Talmud, since "they don't believe in

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teaching girls *Gemara*" in her traditional high school.

The *Gemara* (that part of the Talmud that examines and elaborates on the Mishnah) records different opinions on the desirability of teaching women complex religious texts. Still prevalent in some schools is the view that Talmud should not be taught to most women because, among other reasons, women raising families will not have time to continue in-depth study, and superficial study is worse than none.

Silber, however, stresses that *Gemara* study "is essential to the experience of Jewish learning" and to understanding the halachic system.

"The message being sent to a girl by not teaching her *Gemara* is: 'There are things that are not meant for you to think about.'"

Drisha students, like the talmudic sages, think about everything. "They're more ready [than men] to ask questions about the relationship of halacha to all areas of contemporary life," says faculty member Rabbi Tsvi Blanchard. Students often take a critical approach to texts, and both traditional and unconventional ideas permeate the classrooms.

"The environment here is friendly to progressive, liberal, feminist views," says Wendy Lecker.

However Ellen Cohn, a former Drisha Fellow, adds, "I'm basically for innovation, but I feel that my experience at Drisha makes me more cautious because, having studied the sources, I have more respect for the seriousness of the tradition."

A Drisha education often leads to a more rigorous religious life because "most of the [teachers] are committed to halacha" (Orthodox Jewish law), says Esther Krauss, assistant principal of the Yeshiva University High School for Girls in Queens.

According to Silber, most of the teachers are Orthodox only because "a large percentage of the people studying texts at an intensive level are Orthodox."

Most of the teachers at Drisha, however, are also male. "There are not many women yet who are qualified to teach at this [advanced] level," says Silber.

One of his goals is to produce such women, and next summer, he says, a woman will direct Drisha's high school program.

While some Drisha students feel teachers' gender does not matter, others, like Amy Wolf Isseroff, feel women teachers provide "a different perspective to Jewish laws affecting women" and show special "sensitivity to women characters in the Bible."

One of Drisha's faculty is Silber's wife, Devora Steinmetz, who believes women role models "make a tremendous difference to younger people. Unless you see you can go further [with Jewish education]," she says, "you give up."

Drisha's student body, like the faculty, is mostly Orthodox, though it includes "a considerable number of Conservative and Reform women. We don't care what their affiliation is," says Silber. "We're not a denominational institution."

However, he continues, "If a woman is going into the Conservative or Reform rabbinate, she should be a learner. The only agenda Drisha has is learning. How women are going to apply it in their lives, what they do with it, is their business. As long as it's for the communal good, we're in favor of it."

Community service careers are attractive to Drisha students: they want to be teachers, administrators, librarians, ethical consultants. In addition, says Wolf Isseroff, a Drisha board member and officer, "education will give us more credibility in Jewish communal affairs."

"A lot of important disputes relate to halachic issues. If we're going to inject ourselves into shul politics, we should speak from a position of knowledge."

Still, some of the younger students are wary about religious-communal applications of their studies. "Women here don't want to take on non-traditional roles," insists 20-year-old Pnina Weissman.

"I understand that men and women are different; I'm not interested in women's prayer groups or putting on tefillin," echoes 16-year-old Efrat Altschul.

"I would daven in an all-women's prayer group, but I would not be a rabbi or a cantor. I want to stay Orthodox, and most Orthodox people would not accept me in that role," says Deena Shore.

Perhaps, say some students, but there is more than one way to put knowledge to use.

"If Orthodoxy isn't ready for women rabbis at this point in history," says Jedwab, "it has to move women into other positions of spiritual leadership."

"If [women] have the ability and the knowledge, eventually they will become *poskot* [halachic decisors]," performing one of the traditional functions of a rabbi, predicts Rosen.

Silber simply says that "Education is about encouraging people to think, to find solutions to problems for themselves. I'd like to see women in leadership positions, whatever they are called. I'd like to see women *rashei yeshiva* [leaders of yeshivas]." Someday, he says, there may be new institutions where women will be able to teach Torah on the highest level to whoever the students may be, male or female.

But that is a long way off. "Until women can learn Talmud on a level with men, they won't be taken seriously in the world of Jewish learning," Silber cautions. "And schools that deny women equal access to this type of learning are denying them power in the Jewish community."

Silber says that so far Drisha has aroused "not opposition but indifference" from leaders of the Orthodox community. Certain elements, especially in right-wing circles, "don't think it's really important for women to learn Torah."

Even Drisha does not yet offer women exactly the same opportunities as men.

"There's no equivalent to [a rabbinical degree] for [an Orthodox] woman," to show she has mastered a certain body of knowledge, says high school senior Beth Zuckerman.

"The one thing that's frustrating about [Drisha] is that after the fellowship program, there's no higher level to go to," says Cohn. "Ultimately, I would like to see a serious, long-term program that would allow women to study for several years, as men do."

Although he may establish such a program in the future, Silber says, "I'm not sure there's a market out there. You have to be a little ahead of your time, but not too far. Drisha is about as far ahead as you can go."

In a larger context, says Silber, "Drisha is part of a general movement within Western society that is redefining gender roles. Every revolution has its excesses, but basically, I think it's a good thing.

"I don't think Jews are imitating the secular world" by forming women's study or prayer groups, he says. The forces causing secular social change affect Jewish society, too, but "the Jewish world hasn't thought it through. Halacha always sets limits; the question is what the limits [for women] will be."

Meanwhile, Drisha students are ready to stretch their capacity for Torah learning as far as possible. "I think girls are aspiring to learn on the same level as men who are rabbis," says Zuckerman. "One way to reach God is through learning."

Although classes are open only to women, Drisha offers periodic workshops, lectures and seminars that are available to men as well. A text-oriented seminar on "Interpreting the Bible" with Silber, Steinmetz and other educators, will take place from August 27 through August 30 at Drisha, at 131 West 86th Street. For information, call (212) 595-0307.