

DRISHA MAKES ANOTHER BOLD MOVE

BY RACHEL CYRULNIK

As students unpacked books from boxes and filled the shelves of their new *beit midrash*, it was evident that Drisha Institute for Jewish Education has once again broken new ground. The organization made its move from its cramped quarters in the Jewish Center on West 86th Street to its new, sunny and spacious location at 37 W. 65th St. "It was time to move on," explained program director Judith Tenzer.

Drisha, which recently celebrated its 25th anniversary, has grown in leaps and bounds since it originally offered its promise to the Jewish community, bringing serious text study to women. According to its administrative executives' estimates, some 1,000 people come through Drisha's doors annually.

Although the decision to move was chiefly based on the organization's need to increase its space beyond its former three classrooms and small *beit midrash*, its administrators are using the move as an opportunity to experiment with new programming ideas. "Now that we are closer to midtown, we started to offer more lunch-time classes," Tenzer noted. "The population is different. We try to attract diverse groups with our various program offerings."

While the securing of a new location is considered a major milestone in the history of the institution, Drisha's development of full-time programming has been the primary factor in shaping the identity of the organization in recent years. Initially, Drisha founded a one-year fellowship program in 1984, in which par-



DRISHA STUDENTS STEPHANIE SHELHAN AND DAVEEDA GOLDBERG.

ticipants studied advanced Talmud. Eight years later, the program was expanded to become the Scholar's Circle, an intensive three-year commitment to learning with a special focus on simultaneously teaching Jewish studies. Courses have been arranged for mothers and daughters of bat mitzvah age, and a curriculum was created for high school students interested in spending their summer vacations learning.

Classes are offered throughout the day and during the evening, and Drisha attracts women—and men—from all walks of life. "In a way, it's a pity that we can't bottle it and send it to the Jewish community at large," Tenzer mused.

That Drisha is based in New York does not inhibit determined students from far-off locales from taking advantage of the organization. "I am a retired chemist from Washington D.C.," explained Brenda Gerwin, who studied in a *chavurah* (learning group) with two women about 30 years her junior. "I wanted to be able to learn texts. It is not possible to have that opportunity in Washington." Gerwin is on her third

visit to Drisha, where she is participating in a three-week summer program. Similarly, Rebecca Milder found her way to Drisha from the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati for the second

year in a row. "It's been a great place to learn," she noted. "I learned much more than I ever expected last year. That prompted me to come back this year."

Perhaps Drisha's impact can be noted best by understanding the history of its teachers. Both Channa Lockshin Bob and Wendy Amsellem are Dr-

BY DAVE HOFFMAN

Fans of free stuff, be aware, there is a guy giving away something for free in Washington Square Park, and this time, it's something that money can't buy. Upper West Side resident Jayson Littman, 26, has spent every Sunday since April giving out free hugs.

"I just kind of realized that the world sucks and we don't connect enough as people," said Littman. "Once I dealt with my own issues, I realized that everyone has them. Most of us never connect because we think we're the only one who has these issues in life."

isha alumnae who were invited to teach courses in Bible and Talmud this summer. Amsellem, who encountered Drisha as a high school student in 1991 and has since returned as a student in the Scholar's Circle, expressed the influence Drisha had over her life decisions: "The Scholar's Circle is a great place to think," she asserted. "What do you want to be doing with yourself? There are interesting people to bounce ideas off of."

Founder and Dean of Drisha Institute Rabbi David Silber, described as a visionary and independent thinker by both administrators and students, explained his thoughts on being progressive and competitive in an interview conducted by Drisha for its 25th

anniversary. "If there is one line, it doesn't get challenged, and, consequently, doesn't improve," he said. "A variety of communities is good for the Jews. I think competition is good." Indeed, when Drisha sponsored the first women's *kollel*, other institutions followed suit. In particular, Stern College for Women inaugurated a Women's Graduate Talmud Program two years ago, exhibiting several similarities to Drisha's certificate Scholar's Circle program. "A lot of women in the Stern program would have come here, so it does have impact," Tenzer admitted. "But there are *how* many millions of Jews in New York? All Torah programs should be bursting at the seams."

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