

In A Class By Themselves

Certificate in hand, the first three graduates of Drisha's Talmud program are pioneering new roles for Orthodox women.

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Call Devorah Zlochower a radical — it doesn't bother her. Laura Steiner can live with the term, too.

They and Yeshivah of Flatbush graduate Leora Bednarsh are the first Orthodox women to be formally recognized for completing a program of advanced Torah study in a traditional Jewish setting.

At a commencement ceremony on Sunday, the women received a Drisha Scholars Certificate marking the end of a three-year program of Talmud and Jewish law.

Zlochower studied for two years at the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education on the Upper West Side before embarking on the Scholars Circle program.

"In the beginning it felt pretty radical," says Zlochower, 30. "I was in a whole different community than what I had been used to, but almost immediately it felt like 'of course this is what you should be doing.' Because I was living out my dream."

Of course, to most people "it becomes clear that we're doing something that few people are doing," she adds. "And if that's radical, then that's fine with me. I don't have a problem with being radical."

Steiner, 28, has a similar perspective. "At Drisha, you never feel like you're doing anything radical, you're too busy," she says. "The times I'm self-conscious are when I'm teaching and spreading the word that women should be learning. So many women still have no idea what Talmud is, and I think that's tragic."

Socially, Steiner says she's "gotten plenty of flak. People will ask 'what do you do?' and I'll say Drisha and someone will start up with me," she says. "Sometimes, people just disapprove. But I do have friends in many different circles and they're all supportive of me."

When the three twentysomething women began the program, they were pursuing the kind of Talmud study associated with students seeking rabbinic ordination. Only ordination, or *smicha*, in the Orthodox world has been off limits to women.

They hope the Drisha certificate will tell the world that they too possess the knowledge of the ordained.

"Having this certificate sets a standard, like *smicha*," says Steiner. "It makes a statement that women can study and be recognized for it. It's a step in the right direction no matter what."

The women completed about five comprehensive exams each year and learned on a full-time basis. Drisha subsidized them in the manner of a traditional kollel — a place of Jewish study where scholars get paid to learn.

"We gained a lot of exposure to halachic practice," Steiner says. "I'm not sure that any of us are able to make [halachic] decisions now, but we have a great foundation to

pursue that ... we're on that path if we want to be."

As the first graduates of Drisha's Scholars Circle — there are eight other full-time students in the program — these women "send a very important message to the Jewish community," says Rabbi David Silber, director of Drisha, where 300 to 400 women study part-time. "They will pave the way for other women to follow."

Bednarsh and Steiner came to Drisha with degrees from Princeton University, while Zlochower came with a bachelor of arts from the University of Pittsburgh and a master's degree in political science from Columbia.

"These young women could have had any career open to them — they could have gone to law school or medical school," says Drisha president Michelle Friedman Belfer. "So they are really making a statement by committing themselves at the highest level to a subject not typically handled by women. This is the most far-reaching impact that Drisha can have."

Belfer refers to the "brain drain" in the Modern Orthodox community — the phenomenon of young women using their talents in secular professions because they feel the door to Jewish scholarship on the most sophisticated levels has been closed to them. While a "handful" of women who teach Talmud do exist, "they are usually self-cultivated; for example, their father taught them," Belfer says.

"Drisha offers a system for women to achieve such excellence, and its graduates are now role models to other women because they have the ability to discourse on the Talmud at the highest level."

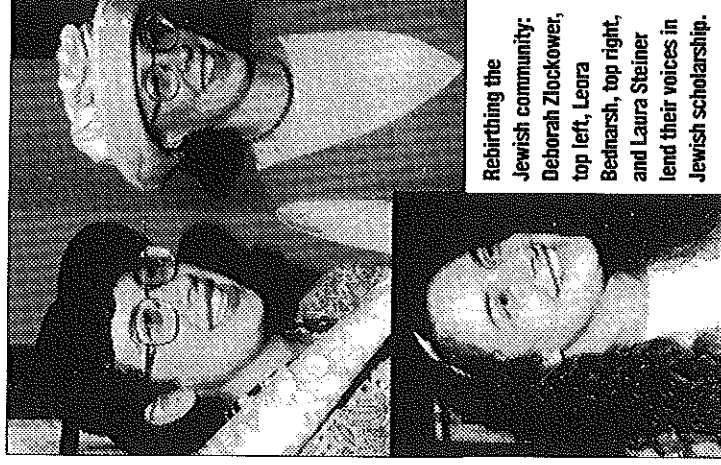
In the fall, Bednarsh will return to the Yeshiva of Flatbush to teach Talmud and will also be a visiting scholar for a community-wide adult Jewish education program in Columbus, Ohio. Zlochower will teach honors Talmud courses at a Modern Orthodox high school in North Miami Beach, Fla., and give lectures for adults in the evenings.

Steiner will attend Harvard Law School and dreams of one day teaching Jewish law in an academic setting. "What I want to do is very hard to do," she says. "But my fantasy is to make it into legal academia and split my time between Jewish and secular education."

Noting how two of the three women will teach at established Orthodox institutions, Belfer observes that "these are not women taking sledgehammers and bashing tradition. 'Yet I would call them path-blazers, of a quiet but profound sort.'"

Zlochower, for example, describes her decision to study at Drisha as full of "struggle and involving major self-exploration." Growing up in a "right-wing" Orthodox community in Pittsburgh, Zlochower did not learn Talmud in school.

"But I always wanted to," she says. "I have a younger brother and I realized that our school was giving us entirely different educa-



Rebirthing the Jewish community: Deborah Zlochower, top left, Leora Bednarsh, top right, and Laura Steiner lend their voices in Jewish scholarship.

tions. ... I wanted my brother's education."

Zlochower, who lives in Boca Raton, Fla., "grew to live within the parameters of her [Jewish] education" and turned her energy to studying political science. "It took me a number of years to get from hearing about Drisha to actually going there," she says.

While university study "was pushing things" in terms of how the Pittsburgh community would perceive her, "that move felt a risk lower," Zlochower says. "But I became dissatisfied with graduate study; I was missing a spiritual dimension. So I returned to my original dream — to study Torah. I was ready for Drisha."

For Rabbi Silber, the Scholars Circle represents only the beginning of expanding women's opportunities in the Jewish community. He envisions women speaking from the pulpits of Orthodox synagogues and sees the potential for women to become scholars-in-residence at community centers like JCCs.

Jewish institutions "are in sore need of being regenerated, and it's obvious how women are underrepresented," Rabbi Silber says. "If we're to rebirth the Jewish community, then women need to have much more of a voice."

Since Drisha opened in 1979, Rabbi Silber observes that "the Jewish community's perception of women has changed, [meaning] that women are being taken more seriously. Yet we live in a sexist world, and I think that the community is still struggling with how women fit in," he says. "We still have a lot of work to do."

For that reason, "it's up to us to make the Drisha certificate a serious thing," Rabbi Silber adds. "Within the next 10 years, we hope you would see a scholar with a certificate and think 'wow, this is a Drisha woman.' Otherwise, it will just be another piece of paper." □