

# CATERED EVENT The New Bat Mitzvah Mothers, Daughters And Torah

New Drisha program puts a generational twist on the rite of passage.

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Staff Writer

When Geri Gindea's older daughter, Arielle, who is now 14, was getting ready to become a bat mitzvah, they took an adult education class together at a Great Neck synagogue. Arielle was the only young person in the class, in which they studied the first book of the Bible once a week for six weeks. "We enjoyed it, but it wasn't focused on mother-daughter, and didn't cater to our particular needs," said Gindea, an Internet executive.

Now her younger daughter, Sophie, has just turned 11. They'll soon participate in a new specially designed, mother-daughter class at Drisha, the center for Jewish women's Torah study on the Upper West Side.

The class, which starts in February, will meet for 90 minutes every other Sunday afternoon. Participants will analyze women's contributions to, and involvement in, Torah study and prayer throughout Jewish history. They'll begin by looking at women in the Talmud, then move through the Middle Ages, Early Modern, and contemporary periods. Part of each session will be devoted to chevra, or paired, text study. Sometimes the daughters will learn with their mothers other times the participants will study with their peers.

"It addresses a real need and interest on the part of the 11-year-olds and their parents," said Daniela Weiss, Drisha's executive director. "Adolescence is just ahead, but there's this nice window at this age when children like to do things with their parents."

Drisha is modeling the program on similar classes held in Jerusalem and in London. The Torah learning center, which attracts adult students from a wide range of backgrounds, has classes for seventh- and eighth-grade girls, and other classes for adults, but this is the first time they are bringing the generations together to study, said Weiss. News of the class is creating lots of interest among Drisha's constituents, and, even before it begins, a request for a satellite course in Princeton, N.J., is being considered.

The enthusiasm reflects the desire of many women to infuse their daughters' coming-of-age rite with seriousness and study. In the Orthodox world, bat mitzvah celebrations are primarily parties, and frequently don't involve Jewish study beyond preparing a chesed, or charitable good deed project. Girls, like women, do not lead synagogue services in traditional synagogues. And while a growing number are creating bat mitzvah events for women only, at which the 12-year-old girl reads from the Torah or leads the worship, it isn't a widespread practice.

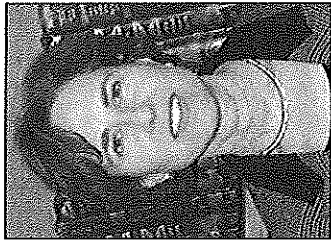
Gindea was raised in the Conservative movement, and celebrated her bat mitzvah at age 13 by chanting the Haftarah portion during Shabbat services. Now Modern Orthodox, she embraces the culture of her community but misses at least one aspect of the way bat mitzvah is handled in other movements.

"It's frustrating to be a Modern Orthodox female who takes learning seriously and wants to convey that to her daughters, when there

is no well-accepted forum for this event. So you create what you can in whatever ways you can," says Gindea, who also has a 15-year-old son.

"A bat mitzvah shouldn't do something that won't ever happen again, like speak in the shul when it's clear it's just a one-time event. And in the structure of the Modern Orthodox synagogue there really is no place for them to do things like that," Gindea says.

"Women don't have to find their voice within the synagogue. There are so many places a woman can take a leadership role within the Jewish community. That's something I want to teach my kids, that they have to look in all the many crevices of Jewish life and find the place that they can shine," she said. "Drisha's program giving it a more substantive, formal context is an exciting turn in the Orthodox world." □



**Drisha's Daniela Weiss: Addressing "a real need."**