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Soul & Scroll

*In joyous evening
of song and dance,
Drisha celebrates
a Torah of its own.*

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A historic step: Women at the Drisha Institute dance in celebration of acquiring their own Torah. RICHARD LAVINE

When the women of the Drisha Institute gather for their weekly prayer group, they no longer have to worry about how and when they can get access to a Torah scroll. Meanwhile, the descendants of Rabbi Sam Genauer can rest assured that their loved one's legacy will endure. For in the beit midrash of Drisha, a Torah that traveled from far away has finally found a permanent home.

A dedication ceremony held last week marked the first time a women's learning institution received its own Torah scroll. Some 200 people attended the evening event at Drisha Institute, located on the Upper West Side, which included dance, song, food and speeches. The evening attested to the power of one closely-knit family, and how times have truly changed for the observant Jewish woman seeking direct access to holy texts.

"This is just another kind of historic step in that direction," says Nina Bruder, the executive director of Drisha. "Having a sefer Torah bearing silent witness to learning in our beit midrash brings *kedushah* [holiness] to Drisha."

Blu Greenberg, a prominent Orthodox Jewish feminist writer and activist, had donated the Torah in memory of her father, Rabbi Sam Genauer. As the guest of honor at Drisha's 20th anniversary dinner in May, Greenberg, rather than donate money, "gave us a Torah and involved her whole extended family in the process," says Bruder.

Estimated to be between 150 to 200 years old, Drisha's new Torah originated in Iraq and numbered among several scrolls confiscated by Saddam Hussein prior to the Gulf War. Beginning in 1991, this Torah, along with some 35 others, was smuggled out of the country and sent to Israel. Repaired by a scribe in Israel and brought to the attention of Greenberg and her family, the Torah was then shipped to America and

ultimately, donated to Drisha.

"I feel it in my bones that this event is part of something much larger," Greenberg said in a speech at the ceremony. "This Torah was stolen by a tyrant, rescued and now is at a women's institution. It is a symbol of the eternal nature of the Jewish people and our hope is that it will stay at Drisha forever."

Though primarily an institution for study, Drisha, in recent years, had organized a weekly Thursday tefilla group — on a weekday when Torah is traditionally read. Only, "we had books and books everywhere but no Torah," says Bruder. "We had to borrow one."

Acquiring a Torah for permanent use proved no easy task. Most recently, the school had been borrowing a Torah from the Orthodox Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun on the Upper East Side and storing it at The Jewish Center — an Orthodox synagogue that shares the building with Drisha. "Now, we don't have to go down to the fourth floor and wait for the men's minyan to finish before we can take the Torah," says Bruder, who explained that the school's Torah will be housed in the beit midrash on the ninth floor. "We will have a Torah in our own space."

Consequently, there appeared to be ample cause for celebration at the ceremony. When Rabbi David Silber, Drisha's founder, carried the Torah into the building flanked by four women holding a chuppah, joyous dancing and singing immediately erupted. The sight of women parading around the room with the Torahs while the men in attendance watched struck many as a potent sign of just how much times have changed. Eventually, the men formed their own dancing circle, though a smaller and subdued one.

"This is so *gevult*. The Torah speaks time and time again of women saving our religion," says Shlomo Wollinf, who attends

classes at the Jewish Center and saw a flier for the Torah dedication.

"It is a fabulous occasion," agreed Barbara Reissman, who has studied at Drisha for the past five years. "I'm glad that Drisha has more resources. This Torah helps us all."

Watching the festivities from a seat near the entrance of the room, Rabbi Emanuel Rackman, a Modern Orthodox rabbi best known for his efforts to reinterpret Jewish divorce laws, stressed that events like this still have yet to "make a dent in the emancipation of the Jewish woman. This [dedication] involves no change of halacha at all," he said.

For the most part, those in attendance primarily focused on celebration and the memory of Rabbi Sam Genauer, a businessman who studied Jewish texts every day. His love of Torah and belief that all should study it made him, according to Greenberg, "a pioneer of Torah study for women."

For Lisa Schlaff Angel, a granddaughter of Rabbi Genauer who had studied at Drisha for years, the Torah dedication "could not be a more appropriate way" to honor her grandfather. "He wasn't a feminist but he couldn't believe that the Torah would be denied to anyone," she says and recalls how he "got very upset" when he learned that her high school did not teach girls Talmud.

Deborah David, another granddaughter, broke into tears as she recalled her grandfather's "extraordinary" qualities. "He'd be proud to come to a center where women can learn all day, just like he did," she said.

As for the Iraqi Torah, Rabbi Silber compared its new status to those who finally find their place in the world. "The Torah needs a place, so does every human being," he says. "And Drisha is a place for every woman ... for those who connect to Torah and want to be at the center of Jewish life." □