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## Spiritual Lives Enriched



Rachel Friedman and two of her students at the Drisha Institute for Women in Manhattan.

Drisha Institute for Jewish Education is located at 37 West 65th Street (5th floor), between Central Park West and Columbus Avenue in Manhattan. To request a catalogue or for more information, please call 212-595-0303, e-mail inquiry@drisha.org or visit www.drisha.org.

## Spiritual Lives Enriched At Drisha Institute

BY ROCHELLE MARUCH MILLER

For Candace Plotsker Herman, studying Torah is a multigenerational endeavor. The many classes she has attended at Drisha Institute for Torah Studies with her mother and with her daughter have been particularly gratifying.

"The glance my daughter gave me as she looked up from her *machzor* during *Eileh Ezkerah* on Yom Kippur several years ago spoke volumes," Candace told the *Five Towns Jewish Times*. "Michelle's eyes spoke not only about the intellectual exercise of exploring the differences between the Tishah B'Av and Yom Kippur liturgy in Elana Stein Hain's class, but also about our shared experience. And, of course, I'll never forget the day my mother, Elaine Riff, rang my bell with *sefarim* under her arm. I thought she was stopping by for coffee. She, however, informed me about the importance of review and preparation as she spread her books across my table."

Why does Candace, who runs two successful businesses and is a self-professed

"card-carrying member of the sandwich generation" invest her time and effort traveling to New York City to attend classes at Drisha? "Simple: my time there is always intellectually challenging and spiritually rewarding," she explains. "I enjoy the fact that my conversation on the LIRR with my *chavrutta* might revolve around the state of the world, the country, or much more mundane issues, yet when we arrive at class our discussion shifts to why *Sforim's* approach to a particular dilemma appeals to us while another commentator's opinion seems to be pushing the envelope. I've learned to apply the same critical-thinking skills that I bring to most other life situations to Torah learning. This proactive method is in sharp contrast to simply absorbing a teacher's message as I did in my pre-Drisha life."

So infectious is Candace's enthusiasm for Drisha that she inspires other women to join her in Torah study. Sharon Senderowicz lives around the corner from Candace and is one of many women who commute from the Five Towns to Drisha's West Side venue regularly. Sharon, a gifted high-school teacher, has been studying at Drisha for 25 years. "I feel quite comfortable at Drisha and I enjoy the diversity of the group," Sharon explains.

"The quality of Drisha's faculty is first-rate and it attracts a multi-generational group of women from a variety of backgrounds, all of whom share a passion for enriching their lives through Torah study."

Drisha Institute is a center for the advanced study of Jewish classical texts by women in an open and thoughtful environment. Drisha provides the opportunity to encounter Jewish texts in a serious, intellectually rigorous, and inclusive manner through specialized courses, lectures, and an emphasis on *chavruta* study. Drisha has grown significantly in scope and impact since its founding in 1979, and its graduates serve as educators, scholars, and leaders in the Jewish community and the world at large.

Drisha's full-time programs are designed to engage post-college women in the study of classical texts. The Scholar's Circle seeks to create the next generation of Jewish leaders. Highly qualified women participate in this intensive multiyear program, studying Tanach, Talmud, and *halachah*. Over the course of three years, the curriculum will cover *niddah*, Shabbat, and *kashrus*. Scholars will also take training seminars to develop the skills necessary to exercise effective leadership. Scholar Circle graduates have gone on to teach and take leadership roles in schools and learning institutions throughout the United States and Israel.

The Beit Midrash Program offers one year of intensive study of Talmud, *halachah*, and Tanach, with a strong emphasis on *chavruta* learning. It is taught on two different levels—intermediate and advanced—depending on the student's learning experience. The program runs from September through May; students may apply for a second year.

Yesodot, a key part of Drisha's continuing-education program, is also a full-time program. The morning curriculum

includes two levels of Biblical Hebrew and Bible. Afternoons are devoted to the study of rabbinic texts, with two afternoons of Talmud and two afternoons of *halachah*. Students prepare in *chavruta* and then attend a *shiur*.

The Gwendolyn and Joseph Straus School of Continuing Education offers daytime and evening classes and the Yesodot Skill-Building Program. Courses in Bible, Talmud, *halachah*, Biblical Hebrew, and philosophy are offered during the fall and spring semesters. Drisha has programs for every life stage, including a *bat mitzvah* program for girls and their mothers, a premarital program for engaged couples, activities for high-school students, community lectures, skill-building, and satellite programs in other locations.

Women of all ages and backgrounds, with varied personal, professional, and spiritual lives are drawn to Yesodot, Drisha's program for building skills in Hebrew language and Jewish-text study. The excitement of preparing a *d'var Torah*, appreciating the beauty of *tefillah*, sharing Torah or Talmud study with your children—these are hallmarks of the Yesodot experience. In a nurturing and supportive Torah atmosphere, women master the nuances of biblical Hebrew, study *Chumash*, and tackle a tractate of Talmud. Yesodot has enriched the lives of many Drisha students.

Betsy Lopata was on Drisha's mailing list and had found some classes that looked interesting. "I have two daughters and thought it would be a wonderful treat for all of us to attend a one-time luncheon lecture together," she explains. "The lecturer was Rabbi Leibrag, who was my daugh-

ter's teacher in Midreshet Lindenbaum in Israel. It was a wonderful experience—a memorable mother/daughter activity. This summer there were classes offered one day a week for five weeks. A friend of mine from the Five Towns wanted to take a *parashah* class, and a friend from my old neighborhood (Forest Hills) wanted to take a class with Rachel Friedman. We have attended Rachel's classes in Queens and are big fans. I thought, why not take both? So the three of us attended both classes for the summer session. We enjoyed our experience immensely; it was a productive way to attend *shiurim* and keep up contacts with friends."

What draws women from the Five Towns to Riverdale and well beyond to Drisha? Says Candace Plotsker Herman, "Obviously, our community offers a plethora of learning opportunities and I feel privileged to take advantage of several of these. However, Drisha's unique appeal is its deep commitment to serious textual study for women. It offers a variety of courses which are taught by talented, innovative scholars."

One such individual is Rachel Friedman, a noted scholar who was profiled in the *Shabbos Bereishis* edition of the *5777*. For Rachel, blending Torah scholarship and academic skills and using this synthesis to teach Chumash and Jewish studies to diverse audiences is a *raison d'être*.

"Teaching Torah has brought me a sense of purpose in my professional and family life," explains Rachel, associate dean and chair of Tanach Studies at Drisha, who also directs Yesodot. "I am ceaselessly amazed at the unique blend of law and narrative that is the Torah—each informing the

other—to create not only a law code or a history book but rather a way of life. In a recent class we studied a comment of Rashbam, the grandson of Rashi, who suggests that the Torah begins with the story of creation so that the Jews at Mount Sinai might understand the basis of the commandment to keep Shabbat. The deeper implications of this comment illuminate the intricate tapestry of the Torah—Biblical narrative informs the law and ritual of Shabbat, the organizing paradigm of the Israelite way of life for thousands of years. And the later books of the Tanach—books of history, prophecy, poetry, and wisdom—trace the earlier periods of Israelite nationhood and exile, providing not only a sense of the past but insights that resonate throughout history."

Adds Rachel, "People often ask me why women travel from distant locations to study Torah at Drisha. The answer is simple: Drisha is a true *Makom Torah*—a house of Torah. There are no distractions and no competing attractions. From the *beit midrash* to the classrooms to the hallways, from the most intense *shiur* to the engrossed *chavruta* pair to the casual conversation, the words spoken at Drisha are always about Torah and Jewish learning. The word Drisha means to expound, to examine, to interpret the texts of our tradition. True to its name, the students at Drisha are continually absorbed in the depth, rigor, and excitement of Torah study—it engages their minds, infuses their hearts, inspires their souls, and enriches their daily lives." ❖