

THE JEWISH ★ STAR

Summer Learning



By Miriam Bradman Abrahams

I must admit I'm a bit envious of my kids. My friends say they would love to live their children's lives. We are a fortunate generation in so many ways and thankfully our kids reap the benefits with the ability to study what and where they wish. My daughter's grade has just graduated high school and some are leaving soon for a year in Israel where they will become fluent in Ivrit, do community service, delve into Jewish texts and philosophy, tour the country. The study is generally "lishma" for the sake of learning, without outside pressures. It's an incredible luxury whose spiritual benefits will hopefully validate the mundane expenditures of time and money. I have an assortment of feelings about it: I'm sad that she's leaving, excited for her, jealous about what she'll experience, and wish I could go, too.

Learning Torah in Israel is a special treat, but of course furthering one's Jewish education can be accomplished right here. I've been to great shiurim in the Five Towns and fondly remember the wonderful teachers who taught Tanach B'Shana. Feeling motivated to spend a few quality summer hours studying something new, I signed up for a class given by Rabbi Skydell, a local rabbi I admire. The title of this series, "Lovers, Children, Friends: Understanding the Relationship Between G-d and Israel," intrigued me, as did so many of the other great offerings on Drisha's summer schedule. I would have loved to sign up for all of them; however I could only fit in one.

Drisha's classes are held on the 5th floor of a modest building across the street from Lincoln Center. Its website says Drisha "provides students of all ages and backgrounds with the opportunity to encounter texts in a serious, intellectually rigorous and inclusive manner through specialized courses, lectures and an emphasis on havruta [partner] study. It is a pioneer in advancing Jewish scholarship for women" with co-ed classes, too. I joined a class in the five week summer institute which is open to all ages and was surprised to be one of only two older women there. I realized the younger women were friendly and inclusive right away, when it was time to break up for 20 minutes of havruta, and before I could feel uncomfortable, someone immediately

offered to be my partner. Though I attended a progressive yeshiva high school with Talmud study for girls, I wasn't ever part of a havruta, so I was grateful for this gesture.

More intimidating than the age difference was the fact that these young ladies are extremely knowledgeable, inquisitive and eloquent. I quickly decided it was ok to be one of the few quiet participants, fully engaged and absorbing the lively discussion without stressing myself vocally. I was taking only one ninety minute class, but these ladies were learning from morning till evening five days a week and their enthusiasm for what they were studying still shone through during this late afternoon session.

Occasionally, I've run into Five Towns women taking the train to the city for a Drisha class and was impressed by their effort to fit a voluntary commute and learning into their day. That encouraged me to try single session lunch time classes. In this summer course, I got some insight into one of the more intensive programs offered. I asked one young woman from our neighborhood whose class I was in, what motivated her to spend her summer vacation from university engaged in full time study. She expressed excitement about the learned educators being extremely approachable and about the other participants who are so motivated to learn and engage in thought-provoking conversations - whether about in-class topics or issues in the Jewish community today. She was impressed by the intellectually stimulating atmosphere and happy about the ability to learn without the pressure of grades or other school time distractions. She enjoys meeting students from a variety of backgrounds each offering a fresh and unique perspective.

These young women could be spending their summer advancing their careers, traveling or hanging out at the beach, all valid choices, but instead or in addition, they're choosing to study 'lishma" right here in the city. Had I been given this opportunity during my college days, I don't think I would have been mature enough to take it. It takes a very special young lady to appreciate this gift. Knowing a women's program like this exists close by warms my heart. Sitting in a classroom with exceptional people who discuss nuances of Jewish text and philosophy with conversational ease, fills me with hope for the future. Being able to spend a few hours simulating a tiny percentage of what my daughter will experience in the coming year in Israel is priceless!

There is definitely something immeasurably special about living and learning Torah in the place central to Judaism. To my daughter, my niece and their friends flying soon to Israel, I wish you "tzeitchem l'shalom" - go in peace, stay safe and enjoy every moment of this truly unique time in your lives. I can't wait to hear all about it.

Miriam Bradman Abrahams is Cuban born, Brooklyn bred and lives in Woodmere. She organizes author events for Hadassah, reviews books for Jewish Book World and is very slowly writing her father's immigration story. She can be reached at mabraha1@optonline.net