

Female Scholar Offers Classes

SANTA FE — A female Talmud scholar who has studied widely in intellectual classical Jewish realms traditionally reserved for men will offer New Mexicans ongoing public classes and free lectures this month.

Wendy Amsellem, scholar-in-residence for the Orthodox congregation Pardes Yisroel this month, will offer extensive programs from Aug. 4 to Aug. 27. (See Calendar, Page 14)

Amsellem, a member of the distinguished Scholars' Circle at Drisha Institute for Jewish Education in New York City, America's only institute of advanced Jewish scholarship for women, will start off her lectures with "Heretics, Outcasts and Other Famous Jewish Women You May Not Have Heard Of" on Aug. 4.

The classes, which cover everything from marriage to halacha or legal process, will be highly interactive as discussions about the Talmud must be, Amsellem said in a recent phone interview.

The intent of Amsellem's residency is to create an opportunity for studying classical Jewish texts that is accessible to both women and men in the community, regardless of their level of experience, Pardes Yisroel officials said.



Wendy Amsellem

Talmud Scholar Draws Crowd

By Marguerite Kearns

SANTA FE — As might have been expected, the presentation "Heretics, Outcasts and Other Famous Jewish Women You May Not Have Heard Of" attracted a crowd that filled every seat here in the St. John's College library lecture room last month.

The Aug. 11 program presented by Talmud scholar Wendy Amsellem opened her month-long scholar-in-residence program at the Orthodox congregation Pardes Yisroel. Her stay included offerings of public classes, free lectures and private sessions on subjects including exploring the origins of Jewish law, Talmudic reasoning and issues of good and evil in the Torah.

Carolyn Swearingen, a Presbyterian and graduate of Yale Seminary, represented a portion of the audience since Amsellem's programs were included in St. John's announcements. Swearingen said she was interested in Orthodox theology and wanted to know more about significant Jewish women. She left the event with a lot to think about, she said.

"I feel very inspired by what I heard," participant Shari Weinstein said, after the Tuesday session. "Wendy Amsellem was able to talk

to a mixed group about women in the Torah. She's a great model."

Amsellem is a member of the Scholars' Circle of the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education in New York City, the nation's only institute of advanced Jewish scholarship for women. About 18 full-time students attend the institute, which is in its 19th year.

Amsellem focused on the female Torah scholar Beruriah during her presentation, keeping her audience focused while moving through subject matter and back into history.

She shifted between Hebrew and English as she told of the balancing act Beruriah had to accomplish to be both a woman and a scholar, according to the account in the Torah.

"She was a great Torah scholar," Amsellem explained. "She challenged the thinking of the times — that women were weak-minded and men shouldn't talk too much to women. I believe her story remained in the Torah as a way of men asking the question: 'What if there were a woman who was just like us?'"

Beruriah, according to Amsellem, could be "caustic and biting" when facing these attitudes head-on.

"Beruriah was not only scholarly, but she put men in their place."

This may have come back to

haunt her later, Amsellem said.

"She was supposed to be either a scholar or a woman. But not both. Because she chose to be both, this may have been her downfall."

In an interview, Amsellem said she was impressed, not only with the insights and points of view offered, but with the way in which the setting of northern New Mexico made its presence felt.

"One person quoted Native American legend as being parallel to our Talmud study," she said. "You wouldn't find this in New York."

Phil Lecuyer, a faculty member of St. John's and an organizer of the event, said that in the week following the event he spoke to several individuals who had attended.

"Everyone said they were still thinking about the survival issues Beruriah faced," he said.

Other presentations by Amsellem last month included "How to Marry a Millionaire and Other Connubial Issues" and "Separate but Equal: The Laws of Milk and Meat."

The roots of the Orthodox community in Santa Fe go back to 1985 to Torah Bamidbar, the Orthodox synagogue that disbanded and evolved into Pardes Yisroel in 1991. Pardes Yisroel comprises about 30 people.