

THE SOUND OF LEARNING

by Susan Josephs

A perpetual buzz can be heard inside Drisha Institute. Occasionally laughter erupts, but usually the sound evokes the image of a long-distance runner—of endurance and gradual progression.

The buzz comes from the women sitting around tables with ancient texts and contemporary concerns. They read a passage of Talmud and stop to deconstruct what they read. There's no sprinting to the finish line, but an intense long-term energy struggling in the name of knowledge.

In the heart of New York's Upper West Side, the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education aims to offer something for any woman seeking serious study. It features seven study programs—from weekly classes in Bible and philosophy to the Scholar's Circle—and has attracted some 350 students of all ages, including working women who can only attend in the evening. A three-year intensive program of Talmud and Jewish law, the Scholar's Circle remains the domain of a select group; the women receive a stipend to enable them to devote themselves to mastering the texts.

While it operates under non-denominational auspices, the institute is synonymous with the movement to make advanced Torah study accessible and acceptable for Orthodox women. "Drisha has had an enormous impact," says Blu Greenberg, a prominent Orthodox Jewish feminist. "When we look back a generation

from now, [it] will stand out as the institution that pushed forward women's learning in America."

When Drisha opened its doors in 1979, "there was nothing for women [in New York] besides Stern College and one [Torah] class offered at Columbia," recalls Rabbi David Silber, Drisha's founder and dean. "I wish I could I say I was a visionary, but I...just wanted to teach Torah and I saw a need for a place where women could learn."

Traditionally, women's learning has meant "secondhand and third-hand or folksy material," says Michelle Friedman Belfer, president of Drisha. "[Here] women go straight to the sources and learn how to handle the texts."

From the outset, Silber sought to integrate the commitment and intensity of a yeshiva with the openness of a university. "A place of learning is where you can share different points of view," he says.

Drisha welcomes women from all religious backgrounds. When Angela Warnick, a 24-year-old rabbinical and cantorial student at the Reform Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, enrolled in Drisha's sum-

mer program, she didn't know what to expect. "What I found was a nonjudgmental atmosphere," she says. "There was no sense of people looking over your shoulder to see how many *mitzvot* you were doing."

Ruth Fagin, a Talmud teacher, received her training at the Conservative Jewish Theological Seminary and wondered "whether another



ACCESSIBLE AND ACCEPTABLE *Drisha's Scholar's Circle certificate, here being received by Sally Mayer, may eventually be regarded as the equivalent of rabbinic ordination*

[Orthodox] institution that teaches at such a serious and sophisticated level would be willing to have me on its faculty. I think Drisha is unique because it has great appeal within the Orthodox community yet it's very embracing of people like me. Drisha doesn't impose an ideological structure on its teachers and that's unusual."

Greenberg calls Silber a pioneer. "He pushed forward women's learn-

ing in a way that felt continuous with tradition and community.”

It's the last day of Exodus: The Strategies of Redemption, one of the most popular weekly classes and Silber is cautioning students against “getting psychological” when trying to understand the relationship between God and Moses. “In the twentieth century we perceive everything in psychological terms,” he says. But in the Bible, things “must be understood in ontological terms.”

The 17 students nod collectively. Apparently they understand the difference between psychology and ontology, so Silber moves on to the concept of a covenantal relationship. Students ask questions while he explains that only after Moses fails in life can he really connect with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. For like his forefathers, Moses will not see the efforts of his labors in his lifetime. In the Bible, “not one person can complete a mission...you need the next generation.”

In the next room students in the *beit midrash* program prepare for Silber's Talmud *shiur*. These students spend a year studying Talmud in the morning and Bible and Jewish law in the afternoon. Besides the classes, or *shiurim*, the students also study in *bavruta* sessions, where they pair up to share questions and insights.

Rachel Landsberg, 26, spent two years studying at Pardes, a coed yeshiva in Jerusalem. Then she taught at a Hebrew day school in northern California. “But I felt I didn't have enough background,” she recalls. “And this was the only yeshiva I

would consider in the United States. People here take their studies very seriously and I find that exciting.”

Planning for a career in Jewish education, Landsberg has applied to She'arim, a teacher's training program and Drisha's newest undertaking to revolutionize day-school education. Together with Beit Rabban—the innovative Upper West Side day school directed by Devorah Steinmetz, Silber's wife—Drisha will subsidize tuition for She'arim students.

Beginning next summer, She'arim's syllabus involves one year learning texts and pedagogy, followed by two years teaching in a day school. The goal is to provide the community “with competent, open-minded, knowledgeable day-school teachers,” Silber explains. “It's also about providing schools with female role models.”

The Scholar's Circle is its most revolutionary program. Last summer, the three-year curriculum awarded its first graduates certificates Drisha hopes will be seen as the equivalent of *smikha*—rabbinic ordination that remains off limits for women in the Orthodox world. “This is the most far-reaching impact Drisha can have,” says Belfer. “These young women could have had any career open to them, so they are really making a statement by committing themselves at the highest level to a subject not typically handled by women.”

Laura Steiner, a Scholar's Circle graduate who is a student at Harvard Law School, hopes to one day teach Jewish law in an academic setting. Then there's Leora Bednarsh, who

teaches Talmud at the Yeshiva of Flatbush in New York. Whether these women will have a decisive impact on Orthodox scholarship and decision-making remains to be seen. “I'm not sure any of us are able to make [halakhic] decisions now,” the 28-year-old Steiner says. “But we have a great foundation to pursue that path if we want to.”

On the other hand, it would be misleading to think of Drisha as a school of radicals who want to be Orthodoxy's first female rabbis. Greenberg, for example, recalls a conversation with Drisha students and thinking, “This was the natural constituency with which to have that discussion. But their reaction was more like ‘don't bother us with these ideas, this isn't what we are about,’” she says. “At the time I didn't understand... their [primary] concern is to be involved with great intensity in learning.”

But *can* learning be construed as political? Silber observes that Drisha doesn't have an agenda. Yet “I don't think the Orthodox community has really come to terms with the gender issue in a serious way,” he says.

At the end of class, students surround Silber. Some will return and some will move on. But Drisha will be there to welcome them back if they desire. Because at its core, “Drisha gives women an opportunity to learn,” says Sally Mayer, a 24-year-old in the Scholar's Circle program. “And that's an incredible thing.”

Drisha Institute for Jewish Education is at 131 West 86 Street, New York, N.Y. 10024; 212-595-0307.