

# Will Women-Only Torah Study Soon Become Old-School?

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The most remarkable aspect of the first full-time co-ed learning program just ending at the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education, a pioneer in advanced Torah study for women, is how unremarkable it felt.

I visited the experimental program for college and graduate students spending the month of June in a “student immersion program” that combined Talmud and philosophy in examining “the relationship between spirituality and community involvement and action,” according to the program description.

I was impressed that the Beit Midrash, or study hall, looked and sounded like any single-gender yeshiva, with paired off study partners animatedly discussing the text.

About a dozen of the 60 students were from Yeshiva University and its women’s branch, Stern College, and presumably some of them were engaged in co-ed Torah study for the first time. But from conversations with several of the participants, it seemed clear that the attraction to the month-long program was Drisha’s reputation for a rigorous, inclusive and non-judgmental approach to text.

Yishai Schwartz, a student at Yale, said he appreciated that the learning was “not defensive or self-justifying” as found in some traditional Orthodox yeshivas. (Drisha is non-denominational.)

Adina Goodman, who attends Barnard, said she appreciated the non-competitive environment, and Sarah Rapoport, a recent graduate of Brown, liked that the co-ed aspect seemed natural.

Drisha, founded in 1979, remains a haven for women serious about advanced Torah study. No degrees are granted; the reward is personal, intellectual and spiritual.

Some observers believe Drisha felt the need to try a co-ed program in light of the popularity of Yeshivat Hadar, the egalitarian school and Upper West Side neighbor.

Rabbi David Silber, founder and dean of Drisha, said he felt this was the right time to experiment with the co-ed model, and that this was the most exciting project he has been involved with since Drisha began. He said he had to turn away more than 70 highly qualified applicants, and was deeply impressed with the knowledge and enthusiasm of the students, many of them chosen for their leadership qualities.

The rabbi noted that he remains committed to women-only courses at Drisha, in part because there is no other outlet of its kind for women who would only study Torah with other women.

"I can't abandon them," he said. But he believes the one-month co-ed experiment should be expanded and deepened. "This is the beginning of something, but I'm not sure where it's going."

He believes the emphasis, going forward, should be less on studying Torah simply to gain wisdom and more about "learning and doing -- making a difference in the world because we were put on this earth to serve."

The rabbi said Drisha's mission is "to help people integrate learning and service."

It will be interesting to see where Drisha goes from here, based on the success of this first foray into co-ed immersion study.