

## Women's Learning: "It's Not a Feminist Issue"

**W**hen Rabbi David Silber started the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education in 1978, he says his goal was to give women as strong an education as men were receiving, not to change the place of women in Orthodox Judaism. At the time, he was the only one doing anything like it, and 18 years later, Drisha still holds a unique spot in the world of higher education for Jewish women.

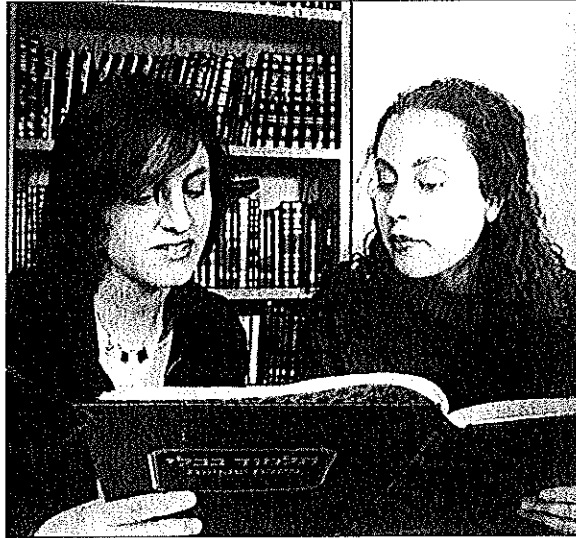
Silber, 48, a modern Orthodox rabbi ordained by Yeshiva University's Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, confesses that "I didn't realize at the time I was doing something revolutionary."

What started as a few part-time classes has blossomed into a school with approximately 450 women taking regular classes or attending periodic public lectures, and yet Silber still holds to his initial goal of providing strong learning, not political change.

"This is not a feminist issue," he says. "It is a community issue. The more thoughtful and knowledgeable men and women we have active in the Jewish community, making good ethical decisions and setting good goals, the better community we have."

Though Drisha provides the opportunity for women to learn Talmud (traditionally texts that women were not taught), the institution has avoided taking a stand on issues controversial in Orthodox circles, such as the legality of women's prayer groups, women serving as *poskot* (experts who make determinations about Jewish law), counting women in a *minyan* or the ordination of women rabbis.

In order to include students from vastly different backgrounds, Drisha bills itself as non-denominational, though it approaches learning from a traditional *halachic* perspective. It has also made it a priority to meet the differing needs of students who walk through its doors. Some are college students taking a single night course, or business people who free up an hour for a "lunch and learn" session. High school students can spend five weeks in the summer learning all day. And New Yorkers who can only take Christmas Day off congregate in the *beit midrash* and pore over Bibles and



FROM THE DRISHA INSTITUTE, NEW YORK

Talmuds. Reni Dickman, a second year rabbinics student at Hebrew Union College, spent her winter break at Drisha learning and says she never felt uncomfortable about being a Reform Jew.

"Even though we all came from different backgrounds," she notes, "we didn't talk about it. We just studied Torah; nothing else mattered and we were unified in that goal."

Even the certificate awarded to a woman who completes the rigorous Scholar's Circle program, modeled upon the *kollel* (traditionally the "house of study" where men learn full time), avoids any politically laden words and states that "having dedicated three years to the intensive and advanced study of Talmud and Halacha [Jewish Law] . . . , she is hereby deserving of this recognition." Nowhere does the diploma confer a title like "leader," "*poseket*" or "rabbi," though a man finishing up a similarly rigorous program would be well on his way to qualifying for rabbinic ordination. What is stressed is the importance of learning, not titles or labels.

Until Drisha "there has never been an opportunity for traditional women to gain knowledge of central rabbinic texts," says Noa Jeselsohn, who plans to teach Talmud at Pelech, an innovative religious girls' high school in Jerusalem, using skills acquired at Drisha. She began there at 17 and will soon be the fifth Drisha student to graduate from its Scholar's Circle.

"The women we get in our programs are exceptional, but they are all special cases," Rabbi Silber stresses. "The day-school

movement is not producing girls with the necessary skills and attitudes who say, 'I want to learn and teach.'" Rabbi Silber hopes that a new Drisha program to train future Jewish day school teachers, created with the Beit Rabban Center for Research in Jewish Education, will help to change that.

Though he has seen changes in attitude in the last 18 years, Silber says it continues to upset him that some women are reluctant to support financially an institution they obviously care about.

"If they took themselves seriously, they'd write bigger checks," he elaborates. "Women are still socialized to see their own learning as being secondary in importance to men's."

—Natalie Blitt



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