

You've Come a Long Way, Yentl: Women as Talmud Scholars

Women can become rabbis within the Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist branches of Judaism, but not in the Orthodox branch (some would say not yet). Even studying the Talmud, the foundation of Jewish Law, is almost revolutionary for an Orthodox woman. But no longer must a woman go as far as Yentl did in the Isaac Bashevis Singer short story, and dress up as a Yeshiva boy to study in public.

Today, three Orthodox women — Devorah Zlochower, Leora Bednarsh and Laura Steiner — will be recognized as the first to complete a rigorous three-year Talmudic program at Drisha Institute for Jewish Education, a school for women on West 86th Street. "The course of study they are taking is as rigorous, or more rigorous than their male

counterparts going for ordination," said Rabbi David S. Silber, who founded Drisha 18 years ago.

Ms. Zlochower, 30, who grew up in Pittsburgh, said: "Going to Drisha was one of my biggest steps, and one of the riskiest in my self-exploration. I spent most of my life in communities where this would be considered the out-of-place thing to do."

Ms. Zlochower, who moved to Florida in February with her husband, Rabbi Dov Linzer, will teach at the Hillel Community School in North Miami Beach. She has a degree in political science from the University of Pittsburgh.

Attending Drisha was a more natural step for Mrs. Bednarsh, 26, whose husband, Assaf, is studying to become a rabbi. She said she learned as much about the Talmud as boys

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did at the Yeshiva of Flatbush High School in Brooklyn, where she will be teaching the Talmud in the fall.

"It was my favorite subject," said Mrs. Bednarsh, who has a degree in psychology from Princeton University. "It's not something I'm in conflict about. I have a lot of relatives in Israel and it's unusual for them. They think it's an American thing."

Ms. Steiner, 28, who grew up among Conservative Jews in Lexing-

ton, Ky., said she received support there. "It's a very easy-going and accepting community," she said. "My family and friends support me and didn't have the same biases as the Orthodox world. People were excited. They thought it was cool."

Some modern Orthodox men, she said, have given her more trouble. "They don't come out and protest women studying all kinds of fields like law, medicine or business, but I get flak when I say I study Talmud," said Ms. Steiner, who has a degree in computer science from Princeton.

She is now enrolled at Harvard's Law School and would like to teach and research Jewish law. "That is my plan, my hope, my dream," she said. "It's almost analogous to my saying I want to be President."

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