Women's Yeshiva Recasts Traditional Roles

By MIRIAM RINN

Walk into the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education and you see what you might at any other yeshiva: large, sunny rooms furnished with long tables, religious texts scattered across the tabletops, and groups of scholars animatedly discussing the books open in front of them.

Occasionally, however, one of the students stretches her arms above her head or lifts her long hair off her neck.

What's happening is the dream of Rabbi David Silber, who founded Drisha in 1979 to give women the opportunity to study and analyze traditional Jewish texts, something denied to many Jewish women, particularly in the Orthodox community. Rabbi Silber believed that women in secular and religious colleges and universities who had strong Jewish identifications needed a communal center where they could study religious texts.

"Women will be unaccepted as equals when they can compete in the same program as men and do well," he says, noting that women's Jewish educations are inferior to men's, putting women at a disadvantage. "Separate but equal doesn't exist in the Jewish world. We live in a sexist society, so we are going to be affected by that."

Enrollment was slight at first, but it has grown to 350 continuing-education students, who take classes in the evening or morning, and 13 full-time students, who study either all day or half-days. Drisha recently began providing babysitting services to encourage women with young children to attend.

The strongest resistance to the notion of female scholars is in the Orthodox community's right wing; although women from that background are welcome at Drisha, few attend. Most people who work with the Orthodox in Borough Park and Williamsburg will not even discuss the matter.

Rabbi Morris Schmidman of the Council of Jewish Organizations of Borough Park believes "young women in his community get all the education they need from their community institutions. Most of them marry in their late teens and quickly have children. "They have no need for what Drisha has to offer," he says, adding that graduates of women's seminaries "know more than any Conservative or Reform rabbi in the country."

Rabbi Silber disagrees. "Women from ultra-Orthodox backgrounds are not being presented with learning as a real option," he says. They may be encouraged to support their husbands' learning, but it isn't something they see themselves doing."

Shelley List, a former student at Drisha who recently opened Machon N'she Torah, a women's study program in Brooklyn, reports that most of the 25-30 students are modern Orthodox, although two Lubavitcher women are in the group. She and Ellen Cohn had great difficulty finding a hospitable home for the school and they began in a basement apartment. They have since arranged to hold their meetings at Congregation Eitz Chaim on East 13th Street.

Ms. List notes that she and Ms. Cohn have been described by some on the right as "those women who have no rabbi." She says it's similar to the medieval concept of women: "Having no male protection, you can get into real trouble."

Devra Lehmann, Drisha's associate director, attended the Drisha Fellowship Program from 1986 to 1988. While a fellow, she felt strongly that the school should be co-educational, but most of her colleagues disagreed. Raised in Orthodox households and socialized to be submissive, she says, they felt more at ease expressing their thoughts among other women. Because religious women don't have the kind of intellectual background religious men have, Ms. Lehmann says, they are intimidated more easily.

When she taught Gemara, commentary on the Torah, at Yeshiva University High School for Girls, Ms. Lehmann told her students that she didn't have as extensive a background as many of the other teachers but that she was sure that they could find the answers they needed by working together. As soon as they ran up against a difficult passage, Ms. Lehmann says, the girls suggested that she ask her husband.

"It killed me," Ms. Lehmann says. "In my house, I happen to be more learned than my husband."

To give women the skills they need to make independent judgments about religious texts, Drisha stresses the tools of learning — cross-referencing and the use of dictionaries and indexes.

This technique contrasts with the way Jewish girls and women are taught in most schools. "Basically, they are taught in an oral-culture way," Ms. Lehmann says. "Do this, don't do that. This is how you shake the *lulav*," the palm branch, at Sukkot. "It's a total turnoff to the girl who thinks."

Shani Cohen, a student at Drisha, concurs, saying the school takes "a much more intellectual approach." While other religious schools train women to be observant wives and mothers, teachers at Drisha "treat women more seriously."

Cindy Kosowsky, a student at Columbia Teacher's College and one of Ms. Cohen's study partners at Drisha, was initially repulsed by the restrictions observant women face, but through her intensive study at Drisha, she came to see them as meaningful. Jewish law, she now says, "is really beautiful and it really makes sense."

Although the women studying at Drisha take their Judaism seriously, they have no plans to overthrow the male establishment. Shoshanna Levine, a graduate of Frisch High School in New Jersey and Stern College, says she is not distressed that she can't be a rabbi or hold a powerful position in Jewish religious life. Because she always knew she couldn't, it never became an issue for her.

Nevertheless, she says, "If I was a guy, I probably would be." Instead, Ms. Levine is thinking about a career in Jewish education, which is what Rabbi Silber hopes many of his female students will choose.

Rabbi Silber also says that instead of building Holocaust memorials all over the country or staging massive events, Jews should be funding nursery schools and day schools — but not the same schools that exist today. He urges educators to develop creative new programs that "take the tradition seriously and wrestle with it."

He works hard to instill the love of learning for its own sake into his students. "I became a teacher for one reason," he recalls. "None of my friends who became teachers wanted to teach, not one. We wanted to learn. The life I wanted was the life of learning. In order to stay in learning, you have to become a teacher."

FORWARD ARCHIVES

A MAN'S WORLD? A 18th-century print depicts the banishment of a woman wearing phylacteries as a hat.

If I was a guy, I probably would be a rabbi,' says one woman schol

Ms. Rinn, a former children's-book editor, writes frequently about issues of education and Jewish life.

Facing History In the Schools

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tend to view Lucy Dawidowicz's criticisms as mistaken. Rather than indoctrination, they experience the program as opening them up to a field of deep questions without easy answers.

While the program thrives in Boston, it is not clear how it will fair in New York, where relationships bet[illegible]acks and Jews are often tens[illegible]rs that members of the black community may say the Holocaust is "your" catastrophe, not "ours," however, are tempered by

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