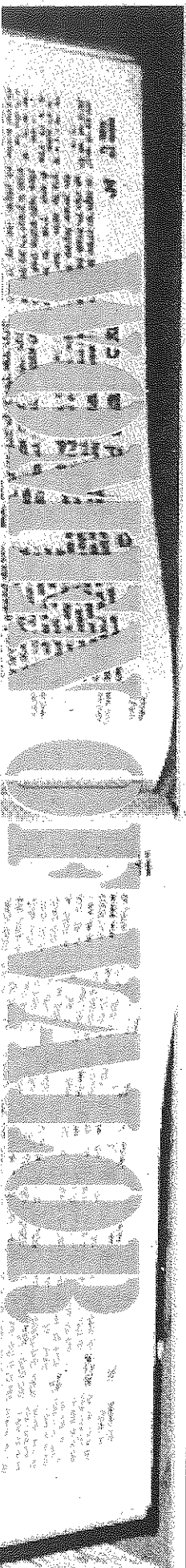


A Quiet Revolution: The Women of the Book



In the heart of Manhattan, Orthodox Jewish women are taking on a new role: Talmudic Scholar



Drisha's students, including Aime Gordon, above, often teach as they learn.

Photos: Richard Lubell

BY URIEL HEILMAN

MANHATTAN — It looks like a typical study hall, or *beit midrash*—the walls are lined with bookshelves filled with Bibles, Talmuds and various other religious texts; the sound of Hebrew, English and ancient Aramaic fills the air; pairs of students are hunched over books, reading, gestulating and arguing the fine points of Jewish law.

But these are not young, bearded men in some *kollet* study program in the heart of Brooklyn. This is Manhattan and it's 1999, and the room is filled with young women. Some wear hats, some sport loose-fitting pants, some sit in ankle-length skirts that fall over the edges of their chairs, obscuring their feet. This ain't your grandfather's *beit midrash*.

Located in the heart of Manhat-

tan's Upper West Side—amidst hip coffee shops, trendy pubs and cool fashion boutiques—the Drisha Institute for Jewish Women is fast emerging as one of the nation's leading centers for high-level Jewish learning for women, and it is changing the way the Orthodox community views women's roles in the Jewish community.

Even as its administrators struggle to keep the institution out of Jewish politics, Drisha is taking its place at the center of the national discussion on feminism and Orthodoxy. It is doing so by "creating facts on the ground," according to the institute's founder and dean, Rabbi David Silber.

"Drisha is at the crossroads of the two essential issues in the Jewish community," says Silber. "One:

Drisha is taking its place at the center of the national discussion on feminism and Orthodoxy.

women and their role in the community. Two: Jewish education, or what's known as continuity."

The school is not an Orthodox institution, a fact Silber takes pains to point out to all who broach the issue. It's non-denominational, he says. But in catering to women interested in studying Jewish texts in a rigorous high-level program, and in hiring teachers who are all Orthodox, Drisha is becoming a mecca

for young Orthodox women. And these students are changing the definition of what it means to be an Orthodox woman.

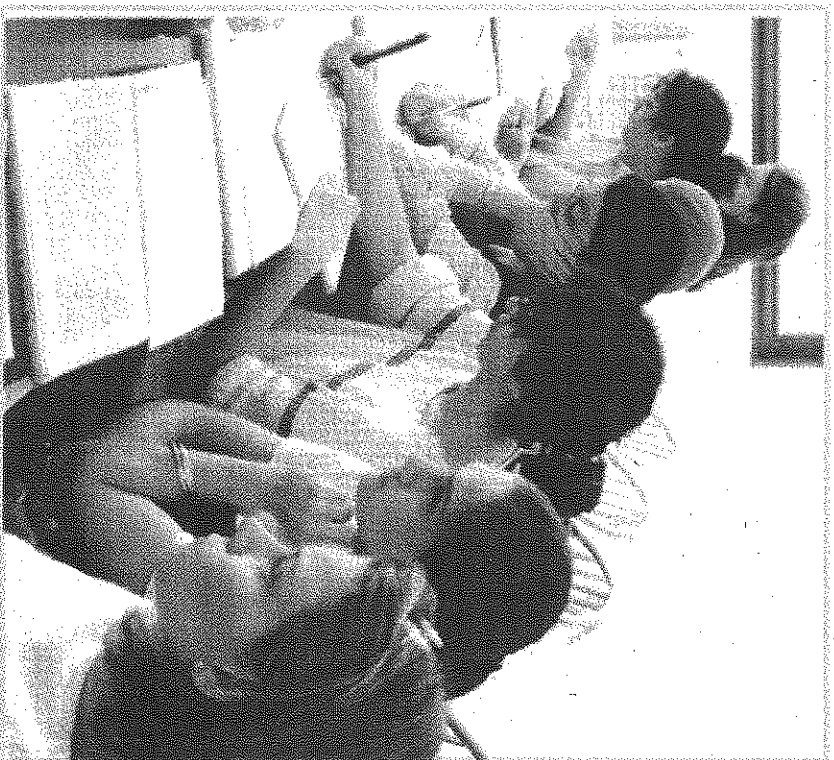
"Drisha's been a part of raising people's consciousness about women and learning," Silber says. "Drisha changes people's perceptions about what women can and can't do. We're giving women more opportunities to be immersed in Jewish texts. It makes a statement of giving women equal access."

Now in its 20th year, Drisha was founded on the principle of equal access to Jewish texts. It has grown from a handful of classes in 1979 to a full-fledged institute with scores of full-time and part-time learning programs for women of various levels.

Today the institute, which takes up two floors at The Jewish Center, an Orthodox synagogue on West 86th Street, offers 60 different part-time classes per year, eight kinds of intensive-study programs, two full-time, multi-year programs and two summer sessions.

It really has been in the last five years that drisha has become a haven for serious Jewish female students, capitalizing on the rising interest in Jewish learning in the U.S. and on the increasingly expert scholarship of Jewish women.

Many consider Drisha's scholars circle program its crown jewel. This highly selective, three-year program combines the study of Talmud and rabbinic law, or *halacha*. The scholars, who numbered about 20 this year, receive a full-tuition



Drisha combines chavruta -style learning with intimately sized classes.

waiver and, in most cases, a stipend for living expenses. Graduates receive a certificate but, as with all Drisha programs, no degree.

Drisha also hosts community lectures, which are open to men and women. The institute played a key role in organizing the National Conference on Feminism and Orthodoxy in 1998, according to executive director Nina Bruder.

Women at Drisha can study Bible, Jewish law and Jewish philosophy, but it is in large part due to the institute's Talmud program that Drisha is so successful—and controversial.

"It's the only place in the U.S. [for women] to study [Talmud] on a high level, full-time," says Karen Wenshelbaum, who has been at Drisha for a year and will enter the institute's scholars circle program in the fall. "Drisha is doing something that is not being done anywhere else."

Rabbi Avi Shafran, director of public affairs at Agudath Israel of America, an ultra-Orthodox, or *haredi*, institution, says that the idea of women studying Talmud is completely foreign to the religious community; his institution represents.

"I don't know that it's a *halachic* concern per se that makes the *haredi* community not follow the *zeir-*

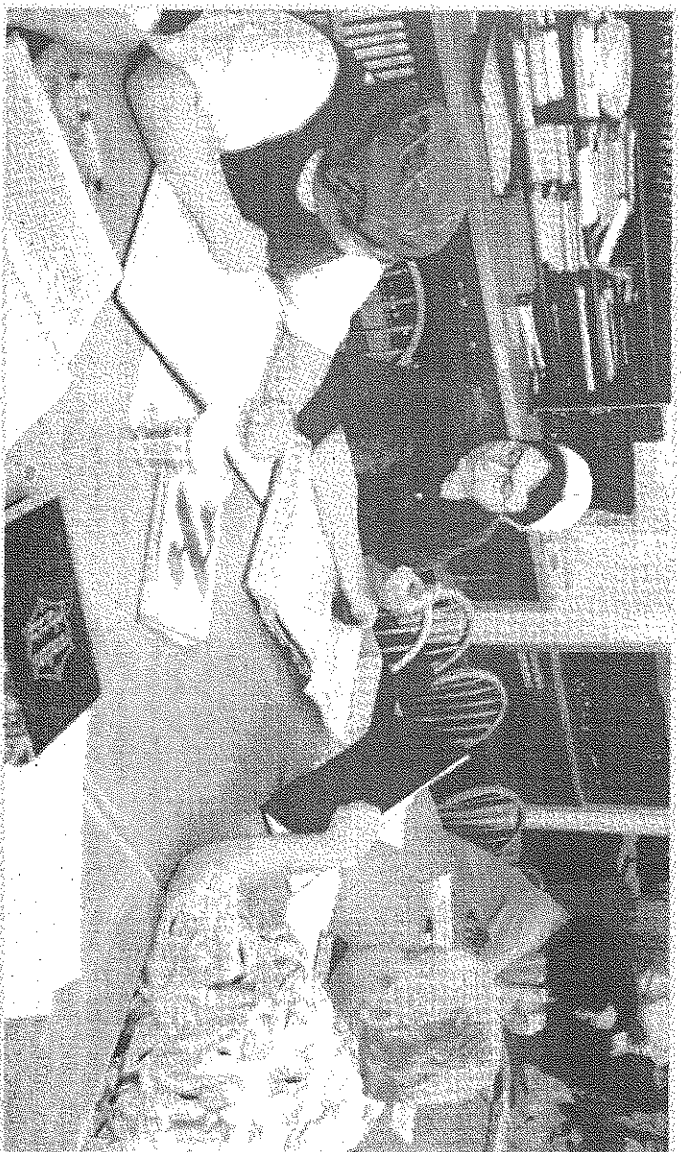
geist in this realm," he says. "It's something much more fundamental: Are gender roles something that are to be seen as targets for dismantling, or are traditional Jewish gender roles part and parcel of Judaism? The very thing that [Drisha] exists for is something we don't subscribe to."

Silber says that the opposition to Drisha and the idea of women learning Jewish texts on the same level as men is a sign that the institute and the principles for which it was established are being taken seriously by Orthodox Jews.

"The Orthodox community is wrestling with this issue," he says. "Why? We have a situation where women are given full access to the secular world and limited access in the religious world. [and it] is a recipe for disaster."

"It's hard to be a thinking Jewish woman and not be frustrated with what you can't do," says Wendy Anselm, a student in Drisha's scholars circle program. "A lot of women realize that in the secular world they have many opportunities to do just about anything they want, and it's disconcerting to realize that as you move into your religious life, which most people view as even more important, your roles are

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Women of all ages and orientations fill Drisha's beit midrash.

BY MELANIE SIBEN

For most women, one trip down the aisle of matrimony is stressful enough. Imagine doing it twice in one year!

Devorah Rose Kigel doesn't seem to mind. "My wedding day—six months ago—was the most amazing day of my life. All that tulle and lace and a veil trailing behind me made me feel like a real princess. To dress up like a bride again takes me back to that day."

Kigel is one of six young women volunteering for the Jewish Renaissance Center's (JRC) "June Brides" fashion show to be held from 5:30-9:30 p.m., Sunday, June 27 at Park East Synagogue, East 68th Street and Lexington Avenue.

Don't expect to see henna tattoos and low-cut jeans on the runway. Three thousand years of traditional Jewish bridal gowns—including Biblical, Yemennie, Moroccan, 16th century French, 18th century En-

connection for me."

Sunday's event, however, won't be solely for the papparazzi-inclined. JRC director Leah Kohn plans to infuse the night with learning. "The wedding day is compared in Judaism to Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year. It's a day of introspection, prayer and resolutions. All the customs and the rituals have meaning and symbolize the dif-

'This is a special opportunity to experience the Jewish traditional style of past generations'

ferent aspects of this great day.

"Beauty in Judaism," Kohn adds, "is used to express appreciation. We buy beautiful Shabbat candlesticks because we want to express that we value the Shabbat. Similarly, we beautify ourselves as a means to enhance

groom start out with a clean slate through the process of introspection and the acceptance of resolutions. Both the bride and groom can be seen as Adam and Eve at the dawn of a new world.

According to Jewish law, a gown may be any style as long as it conforms to the rules of modesty. The sleeves must cover the upper arm, the material can't be too sheer and the neck-line is probably not anything Cher or Madonna would want to wear.

As for the veil, symbolism is endless and it's a key spiritual element to the ceremony. It's customary for the groom to veil his bride. One reason for this is to assure her that he's interested not only in her physical beauty but in her spiritual beauty as well. The veil also denotes the clothing and shelter the groom will provide for his soulmate.

"The veiling ceremony (*bedekin*)," says Kigel, "is the



Devorah Rose Kigel has volunteered to relieve her wedding day for the JRC's "June Brides" fashion show

The Jewish Renaissance Center
cordially invites you to:
"June Brides"
A Fashion Show and Evening of Learning

Date: Sunday, June 27th, 1999
Time: 5:30 p.m. to 9:30 p.m.
Place: Park East Synagogue
68th Street between Lexington and Third Avenue

glish, and contemporary—will be in the spotlight for the 300 or so women from all backgrounds expected to attend.

"This is a special opportunity to experience the Jewish traditional style of past generations," says Brigitte Stambouli, one of the models.

Also floating down the lighted stage and wearing a gown of North African origin will be Bizu Riki Mullu from Ethiopia. "Knowing that this is something my great, great grandmother may have gotten married in is a real

the meaningfulness of the relationship we are about to enter."

Eve may not have worn a Vera Wang, but God graced her with 24 adornments before bringing her to Adam. Little has changed over the centuries. Dresses are generally full-length and white is still the color of choice.

According to Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan's book, *Made in Heaven*, Judaism is different from other traditions in that white isn't symbolic of virginity. Instead it suggests erasure from sin. Regardless of the past, the bride and

most intense emotional moment of the whole wedding day. Steve hadn't seen me in a week [and] when we looked at each other at that moment, we really felt like our two souls were becoming one."

One of the models will hit the catwalk wearing a gown that easily could be found on the cover of today's bridal magazines. That young woman will make more than an impression. She'll make a statement. One that says traditional Jewish bridal dresses can be both modern and sophisticated.

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much more limited." By giving equal access to women interested in high-level Jewish learning in a yeshiva-like setting, Silber says, Drisha deals with that imbalance.

"The modern-Orthodox community has not really dealt with the issue head-on," Silber says. "Edah [a new, modern-Orthodox group under the aegis of Rabbi Saul Bernan] is trying to deal with it. A place like Yeshiva University, which should be at the forefront of this whole issue, has taken a back-seat, wait-and-see approach. But you can't just ignore it anymore."

Silber denies that Drisha is about creating women rabbis, which he terms a "political" issue. "From an Orthodox perspective...there's nothing *halachically* wrong with women being rabbis. It's a visceral issue.

"As women are perceived by the community as equally talented in terms of learning and spirituality [and] leadership, I think the community should find ways to recognize their abilities and give them platforms to teach us, lead us, direct us. Whether it's going to be rabbis or different names is a different question," Silber says. "We need to have leaders."

"It's good to have women who are versed in the tradition," says Amsetlem, noting that erudite women can help respond to women's particular *halachic* concerns such as laws of family purity or women in the synagogue.

The students at Drisha say they are there to learn and possibly be-

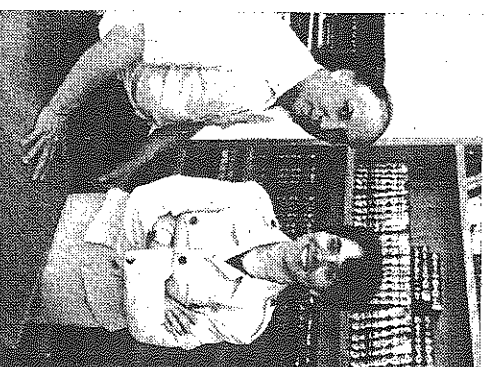
'It's hard to be a thinking Jewish woman and not be frustrated with what you can't do.'

come teachers and Jewish communal leaders; not rabbis. "We're just here learning. It's not political," says Beth Samuels, who just finished Drisha's two-year Talmud and Bible program.

A graduate of an Orthodox Jewish day school in the Los Angeles area and, more recently, of Columbia University, Samuels says she came to the institute to take her learning "to the next step. For Orthodox women, Drisha provides the highest-level learning probably in the country, maybe the world," she says.

Samuels, who will start a doctoral program in mathematics at Yale University in the fall, says she never viewed her time at Drisha as time off from her life or career. Her *chavrutta*, or learning partner, Tammy Jacobowitz, agrees.

"This was not a time out. This was a time in," she says. Jacobowitz, will be beginning doctoral work in rabbinic exegesis at the University of Pennsylvania in the fall. Drisha "is a very honest, open place," she says. "It's not pushing any particular agenda."



Rabbi David Silber, founder and dean, and Nina Bruder, executive director, run Drisha's programs.

Photo: Richard Lobell

There is, however, one particular objective that Silber is intent on pursuing: providing educators to the Jewish community. While more Jewish day schools are opening across the country, Silber says, there are fewer teachers or directors to administer them.

"We're getting people to commit themselves to a lifetime of teaching," he says. "We're going to make a really significant impact across the country."

Drisha administrators encourage students to teach classes at Drisha and elsewhere during their course of study, sometimes even flying them to distant cities or states to teach in small communities. Drisha's teaching component, Jacobowitz says, makes the institute an essential part of the Jewish community.

Drisha is "not an island of learning," she says. "You feel you're at the pulse of Jewish women's activism in New York."

Silber says the impact of what is happening at Drisha will have resonance far beyond the limits of New York. "We're going to make a really significant impact across the country," he says. "Drisha will soon become the most important Jewish institution in North America."

Drisha will offer three programs from June 28-30: a full-time summer institute, continuing education, and a summer high school.

For women only, the continuing education program will feature a class on the weekly Torah portion on Mondays from 9:30-11 a.m.; Aramaic grammar for beginners on Mondays from 1-2:30 p.m.; "Blessings, Covenant and Children: Themes in the Life of Abraham" for advanced students on Mondays from 7:45-9:15 p.m.; an advanced Mishnah class on tractate Rosh Hashanah on Tuesdays from 6-7:30 p.m.; and a class on Hebrew, Phoenician and Modiah inscriptions and the Bible for advanced students on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 9:30-11 a.m. For further information, contact Lisa Taubenblat at (212) 244-4949.