

TZVI DOLE
Staff Reporter

"Secret books for men, picture books for women!" cries the book-seller in the opening scenes of the Hollywood musical, *Yentl*. The

movie portrays a brilliant young woman who, through passionate about studying the traditional texts, as a female is excluded from the Eastern European world of learning. "Men are learning about life about the secrets of the universe, and I'm learning the difference between carp and a herring," Yentl laments.

Though he's never seen the film, David Silber is becoming increasingly well-known in the Jewish world for his efforts in providing the modern Yentl with precisely that: a chance for women to study the full breadth of Jewish knowledge.

Rabbi Silber founded the Drisha Institute of Jewish Education in New York in 1979 to provide the 20th century woman with an opportunity for intensive training in the study and analysis of even the most difficult of the traditional Jewish texts. "Look at Jewish education today," he urges during a recent interview. "Probably 80 percent of the Jewish teachers today are women. Why then shouldn't they be as well-versed in the texts as the men who teach?"

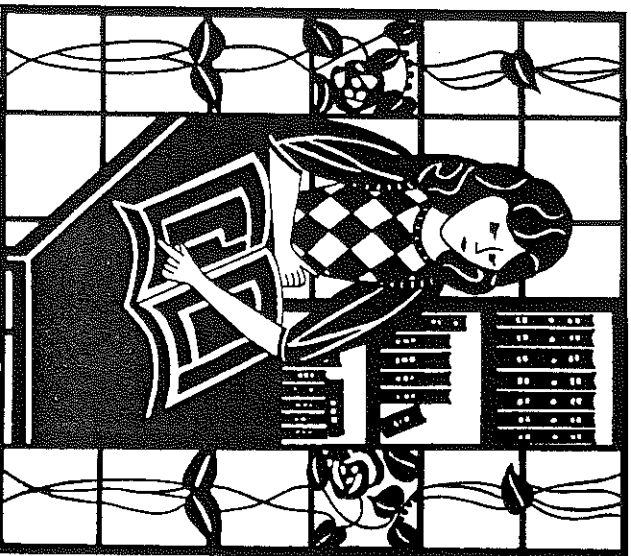
Delivering a series of lectures in the Washington and Silver Spring area last week, Rabbi Silber emphasized the key roles that women such as Rebecca, Tamar, and Ruth play in the Biblical narratives. The purpose of the trip was to publicize the work that Drisha Institute has been involved in as well as to demonstrate the high level of Jewish scholarship carried on there.

Forty one years old and clean-shaven, Rabbi Silber received his university degree and ordination from Yeshiva University, where he studied under Rabbi Yoseph Soloveitchik and Rabbi Aaron Lichenstein. He also spent a couple of years in Yeshiva Kerem b'Yavneh in Israel. His wife, the mother of three, is a scholar in her own right having completed a doctorate at Columbia University in Comparative Literature.

Drisha by its very nature attracts academically-

A School For The Modern 'Yentl'

The Drisha Institute of Jewish Education is unique in providing full-time Talmud and intensive study for women.



oriented women who enjoy sustained intensive study of intellectually challenging ideas. The name of the institute itself reflects this fact. "*Adrosh* in Hebrew means to study something intently," Rabbi Silber explains. "But it also has the sense of 'to seek out' or 'to search.' It conveys both the sense of seriousness of purpose and also a sense that we're involved in a rigorous quest for something above ourselves, beyond our grasp."

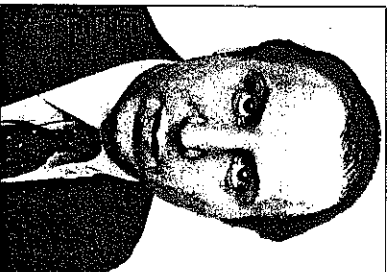
Drisha Institute, now assisting some 200 young women a year in its various programs, started out as only a series of classes for women in Jewish texts in Manhattan. In 1981, a six-week, intensive Summer Institute program was launched, for women of

college age or older. By 1984, Rabbi Silber had organized enough faculty and support to establish what is now the core of Drisha, the full-time Fellowship program. This past year, ten women were provided with \$7,500 stipends in addition to full scholarships to be able to immerse themselves for two semesters full-time under the guidance of five Drisha faculty members.

The schedule includes the study of the Talmud from 9 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. in a typical yeshiva style, while the afternoons are devoted to a study of the Pentateuch, Halacha (Jewish law), and Aramaic and Hebrew grammar. Rabbi Silber says he came to realize that in order to persuade the most gifted women to go into Jewish education full-time, Drisha would have to reach them at a younger age, before career choices were made — before they decided to be doctors, lawyers, and academics.

To meet this need, two years ago the Drisha high school program was started, a five-week intensive course intended for the motivated high-achiever. "It's a program I'm particularly proud of," Rabbi Silber says. "Two years ago we had five faculty and, a smile comes across his face, "four students." This summer Drisha is expecting more than 20 girls, from all parts of the United States.

Besides its three main programs, Drisha has recently been working to establish the Teacher Enrichment Program (TEP), an attempt to assist women and men already in Jewish education by exposing them to creative approaches to Jewish texts. "We still lack the money and people to implement the programs as they should be implemented," Rabbi Silber admits.



Rabbi David Silber: "Learning is what we do."

Though there are other institutions, especially in Israel, that give women an opportunity to study the more difficult Jewish texts such as the Talmud, Drisha has the only American full-time program. Also, according to the rabbi, the school's sense of openness and free inquiry makes it somewhat unique.

"The people who come to us are simply not going to go to a place that just tells them: this is Yiddishkeit," he says. "And because of our open policies, we get the cream of the crop, that's the truth of it."

Part of this openness is Drisha's official "non-demonstrational" stance. "We welcome everyone," assures the rabbi. And so they have, accepting, in addition to Orthodox women, several women affiliated with the Conservative and Reform movements who feel they lack a sufficient familiarity with the texts.

"We don't push a particular viewpoint. Learning is what we do. We have no hidden agenda," Rabbi Silber says.

Even the composition of the faculty testifies to this sense of openness. The only real qualification for teaching at Drisha, the director asserts, "is that they take learning seriously. I'm more interested that people have a respect for the texts — and enthusiasm.

"Drisha is apolitical," he continues. "It's situated on the periphery, which is what I like about it," the founder and director maintains. Rabbi Silber personally characterizes controversial developments like women forming their own minyanim, donning tallim, and wearing tallim, as "positive." But he is emphatic that those opinions are his own, not those of his institute.

"Drisha itself has nothing to do with that. Zard," he says. He does predict, though, "down the line, I think women in the Jewish community will take on more and more responsibilities and will be seen as people who can lead, instruct, and give answers."

The only institutional goals Drisha Institute has are to give women equal access to intensive study of all Jewish texts in an open environment, and to identify and develop

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top young women as outstanding, full-time Jewish educators, he says. "If we as a community fail to challenge these top women to go into teaching, we are losing our best resources, committing national suicide," Rabbi Silber says.

He is convinced that intensive textual study is crucial to the survival of Judaism. "People today are not going to be content with merely being told 'do this' or 'do that.' In our open society, people want to *understand*," he maintains, something quite hard to do without a good knowledge of basic sources such as the Talmud and its commentaries.

Devra Wolf Lehmann, currently living in Silver Spring, is a Drisha graduate. After completing her degree in French literature at Yale University, she says, "I had let my Jewish education get very weak since high school, so I decided to join Drisha's Fellowship program." With her husband still in law school in New Haven, Connecticut, this was no easy decision, for it meant a two and a half hour commute to Manhattan. Yet, she insists her two years at Drisha were well worth the effort.

This past year Lehmann has taught Bible at the Hebrew Academy of Greater Washington, using the "Iterary approach" to textual study she learned from Rabbi Silber. This summer, she plans to be involved with the Drisha high school program in New York.

Rabbi Silber is well aware of the controversial nature within Orthodox Judaism of instruction for women in the more complex Jewish texts. Jewish law itself contains much discussion of this issue — Maimonides, for one, being opposed to the practice, while another commentator, the "Prisha," rules in favor. Today, most Halachic authorities frown on women studying Talmud as not in keeping with their traditional roles in the household, and some rabbis forbid such study.

Rabbi Silber maintains, though, that "the resistance to the idea is not based on Halacha, but on a feeling that it's untraditional and dangerous. And it is. All change is dangerous. But it seems clear that *not* to change is dangerous, too. One becomes sterile and obsolete."

Jewish education must keep abreast of the changes in the role of women found in society as a whole, he says. "Though 100 years ago it was different, today, graduate schools are full of women. Why should they have to sit in the back row when they come to Jewish studies?" the rabbi asks, his voice rising. "What's this? A woman learns *lomdus* [complex argumentation] in Sigmund Freud but not *lomdus* in a page of Gemara? That's crazy!"

"People can talk all they want about women learning or not learning," the rabbi notes, "but I can point to specific people, like Devra Lehmann, and say, 'This is a Drisha product.'"

Through his efforts, David Silber hopes to inspire bright Yentls everywhere with the modified cry, "Sacred books for men. Sacred books for women. Sacred books for all." □

Modern Yentl'

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