

Blossoming Friendship

Two leading feminist groups with distinct missions find fertile ground in pre-Shavuot study program.

ELICIA BROWN
STAFF WRITER

With sticky clay in their hands and personal journeys on their minds, about a dozen women gathered around a U-shaped table on Sunday afternoon. One by one, they spoke the names of their maternal ancestors, and later, moved by their clay creations, many told intimate details of their lives.

The candor seemed all the stranger considering the eclectic nature of the group attending the pre-Shavuot arts workshop, "The Silent Aleph Within: An Inquiry Into Identity Through Art." Sandy Warshaw, 65, wearing cropped hair, an "Aging To Perfection" button, and a hot pink aleph necklace, attends Congregation Beth Simchat Torah, the gay and lesbian congregation in the West Village.

Far away sat Doris Marmorek, a retired teacher of Queens, who told a visitor she can't read Hebrew.

And across the table, the conservatively dressed Sonya Jacobs, an Orthodox mother from Washington Heights with four married children, hovered over her delicately crafted Havdalah candle of clay.

The arts workshop "draws on the commonalities rather than the differences," said instructor and potter Lia Lynn Rosen.



Crafting a new community?: An arts workshop was one of the sessions at the joint tikkun sponsored by Drisha and Ma'yan.

Richard Levine

The workshop was one of 10 sessions at the first joint pre-Shavuot study program of Drisha Institute for Jewish Education and Ma'yan: The Jewish Women's Project. Sponsored by two organizations that share the desire to empower women in Jewish life, but whose missions and clientele contrast in character, the event drew a diverse crowd of more than 100 women as well as a handful of men. The sessions varied from text-based discussions led by Drisha-affiliated scholars, to less conventional Ma'yan-style classes such as the clay workshop on the unspoken identities — inspired by the Shavuot Midrash on the "inaudible aleph from which the Torah emerged."

In previous years, Ma'yan has solely hosted a pre-Shavuot *tikkun*, or night study program. But outgrowing its space in a private home, and hoping to expose a larger group of women to a wider range of teaching styles, this year the group approached its uptown sister about an event at Drisha's 86th Street home.

"I was very surprised that Drisha and Ma'yan got together," Paula Mullin, a tikkun participant, said after a traditional text-based discussion of revelation, in a class led by Drisha instructor Devorah Zlochower. "I think they're very different organizations."

Although both groups share feminist goals and Upper West Side addresses, the organizations differ in focus. Drisha was founded 20 years ago by Rabbi David Silber with the particular mission to advance women's study of Jewish texts. Serving 1,000 people annually in its array of study programs, Drisha tends to attract a Modern Orthodox constituency. In fact, although the administration welcomed the joint program, some Drisha students expressed reservations about hosting an event with speakers of a less-than-traditional bent.

Some "Drisha people were a little uneasy," says Shira Hanlon, an administrative assistant at Drisha, whose roommate Erika Katske works as program assistant at Ma'yan. Of course, "there isn't anyone who will say, 'don't bring Torah to people,'" emphasized Nina Bruder, Drisha executive director. Still, at Ma'yan, Hanlon senses, the shared event was "a little more run of the mill."

Founded in 1993 as the only organization completely funded by women, Ma'yan focuses on women's ritual, feminist scholarship and women philanthropists. Known for its communal feminist seders, which attract more 1,500 participants annu-

ally, Ma'yan caters to women of all backgrounds, but tends to appeal to those affiliated with the liberal movements.

But while the pairing may have been historic for the two groups, joint women's learning programs are not unusual around the country, according to Susan Weidman Schneider, editor-in-chief of *Lilith*, a Jewish feminist magazine. "Women are modeling for men ways of crossing perceived boundaries in order to work with Jews of other denominations."

Not everyone expressed pleasure at the opportunity to serve as a role model. Warshaw, who has attended Ma'yan pre-Shavuot tikkuns in the past, said she enjoys "the challenge of having to put myself into a situation." The text-based presentation delivered by Zlochower, for example, didn't relate directly to the lives of the listeners, complained Warshaw. "And that's everything at Ma'yan," she said.

A brief moment of tension — provoked by the diverse classroom — erupted during Zlochower's talk, when the conversation touched on Moses' warning to the Jewish people in preparation for Sinai: "Come not near a woman."

One participant announced she understood this advice, as boxers might avoid distractions before a match. But others wondered aloud: then why doesn't Moses also suggest women avoid men?

At one time, responded the first woman, "women were not as aggressive in matters of sex."

Mullin and others nearby were incredulous. "Oh yeah? Oh yeah?"

But the point of tension may have been anomalous, as even Warshaw left the joint tikkun on a positive note. And Tamara Charam, a full-time Drisha student, observed that she didn't feel isolated as an Orthodox Jew as she has at other Jewish women's events. The theme of the holiday helped: Charam felt especially "connected to the other people there" during a discussion of the unity of the Jewish people at the revelation on Mt. Sinai.

Yet "another reason this is a great story for Shavuot," was offered by Tamara Cohen, Ma'yan program director.

"In the past few years," she noted, "there has been conflict at the Kotel between the different religious groups. Somewhere in the back of my mind I thought this is a great way to say ... there are ways of handling differences among Jews. Hey, Israel, take a look." □