

Common cause

David Silber seeks a place for women in a world once closed to them

By Na'ama Batya Lewin

WJW Staff Writer

Rabbi David Silber is trying to dispel the myth that "Orthodox feminism" is an oxymoron.

As the founder of the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education in New York, Silber, 43, is an Orthodox advocate for increasing the woman's role in Jewish intellectual life. Drisha (Hebrew for "inquiry" or "investigation"), which he founded in 1979, offers intensive programs of advanced Jewish studies exclusively for women. "The most important purpose," Silber says, "is to identify and train young women to be potential leaders in society and in Jewish education."

Silber believes women should have the same access as men to biblical and religious texts so that they can learn as intensively as men.

Washingtonians got a taste of Silber's own intensity during a lecture at Adas Israel Congregation on Monday night. Pacing and gesticulating, he dramatically tied together the biblical episodes involving Judah and Tamar. The talk, the fourth in the Bible Heritage Series sponsored by the Foundation for Jewish Studies, was attended by about 100 people.

The Bible as literature

Silber is also pioneering in his approach to biblical study. After almost 11 years of learning under Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchick at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University, first in the smicha, rabbinic ordination, program and then in the *kolel*, a full-time study group, Silber was asked to teach a class in Bible at Lincoln Square Synagogue in New York City. "The class was filled with young people who were full of questions, and my discussions with them led me to see the biblical text in my own way."

Silber acknowledges the influence of Umberto Cassuto, the Italian rabbinic scholar and professor of biblical studies at Hebrew University. Cassuto's analysis of the literary and linguistic aspects of the biblical text was the model for Silber's original approach to teaching Torah and the Prophets: comparing texts without the aid of traditional commentaries, focusing on the significance of particular words and derivations that recur in one or several related passages.

Women's cause

Silber believes the Drisha Institute, which now offers five academic programs for a total of 350 women, is "at the cutting edge of Jewish



Rabbi David Silber, founder of the Drisha Institute, tied together the biblical episodes involving Judah during a lecture for the Foundation of Jewish Studies last Monday night. Photo by Na'ama Batya Lewin

education."

Even in the right-wing Orthodox community, things are changing, Silber says, and he proves his point by citing recent Lubavitch publications in which half of the children pictured are girls.

In addition to the continuing education program in Jewish history, biblical texts and halacha, the Drisha Institute offers a summer program for women who want an intensive learning experience. A summer program for high school students was begun in 1988, and, since 1984, 10 women have received full-year fellowships. Each fellowship provides a stipend of \$7,500 for a young woman to study traditional Jewish texts with the expectation that she will integrate Jewish learning into her teaching or professional career.

Silber's wife, Devorah Steinmetz, is also a member of the Drisha faculty and author of a text in biblical commentary. She recently founded an elementary school in Manhattan called Beit Rabban. The Silbers have four children.

The Silbers share a goal. "We want women to be free to talk, express their ideas and develop their full religious potential," says Silber. "The women's cause has become a common cause, and there are women who are dealing with serious thoughtful ideas in the secular world and must have the opportunity to deal with similar ideas in the religious sense as well." ■

The final lecture in the Foundation for Jewish Studies Bible Heritage Series will be given May 4 by Professor Marc Lee Raphael of the College of William and Mary. The name of his talk will be "Sexuality from Biblical to Rabbinic Times."