

Find What You're Looking For: A Guide to Jewish Learning in Manhattan

By LILL KALISH

Maybe you've never opened a bible in your life. Or perhaps you spent 12 years in *yeshiva*. Regardless of where you're coming from, you're here now in Manhattan — and it's time to start taking advantage of it.

This borough is one of the world's greatest centers of Jewish learning. One of the mixed blessings of being a Jew in New York, however, is the very overabundance of resources. So many synagogues and organizations competing for your attention. How can you know what's right for you?

The Blueprint has searched far

and wide to find you the best institutions for part-time learning in Manhattan. And the good news is, there is indeed something for everybody.

If you're just starting out, there are a number of programs that could be right for you.

For those novices seriously looking for a deeper connection to their Judaism, the 92nd Street Y, located at 1395 Lexington Avenue, offers a program called Derekh Torah. The Way of Torah. The 30-week program, which covers both the "hows" and "whys" of Judaism, gives students a solid

RELIGION AND CULTURE

FIND WHAT YOU'RE LOOKING FOR:

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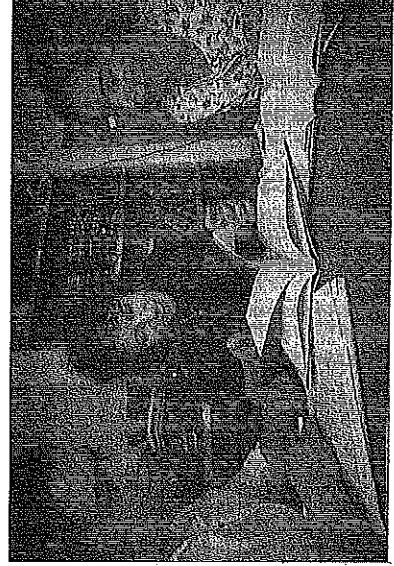
background in Jewish history, theology, and practice.

Perhaps one of the greatest strengths of this program is that it manages to be both supportive and noncoercive. Explains Dr. Paul Radensky, Assistant Director of the 92nd Street Y Broidman Center for Jewish Life, "We want to give people the best knowledge and best experiences, but ultimately the decision is up to them."

If you're not quite ready to commit to 30 weeks, maybe the New York Kollel, located at One West Fourth Street, is more for you. The Kollel, billed by director Rabbi Ruth Gais as "a safe haven for Jews who are laity of the congregational experience and for po-

EXPERIENCE, which meets on the West Side at the Jewish Center and the East Side at the Fifth Avenue Synagogue, offers students the option to pay by the semester or by the class. In The MJE, quite simply, just wants to teach Jews more about Judaism. Incoming students, explains administrative coordinator Jonathan Izbak, "don't really know why they're Jewish, or what being Jewish really means," he says, but "they're all interested in learning a little more." Courses span the basics, as well as offering some opportunities for deeper study. "Pretty much anybody can walk into the class and get something out of it," he says.

THE JEWISH ENRICHMENT CENTER, located at 176 Madison Avenue, describes itself as "down-to-earth Judaism," according to



STUDENTS IN DRISHA'S 2001 SUMMER INSTITUTE; L TO R: LAUREN MERVIS, TANYA FARBER, MYRNA PINSKY-UNGAR

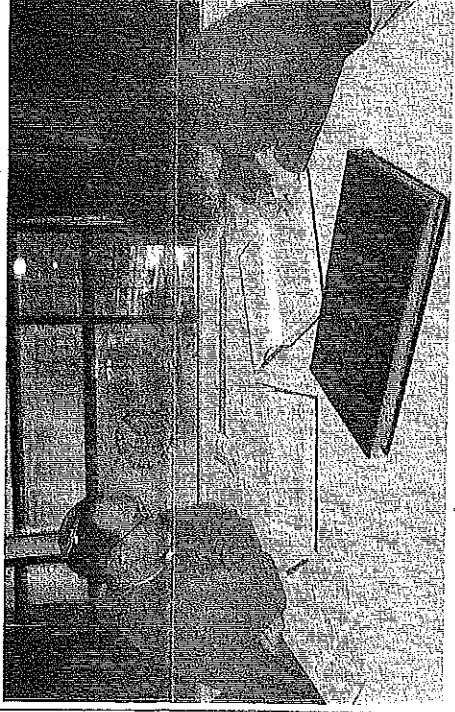
its goal, Executive

Jewishly," without an agenda. Kohn, a single-sex learning center takes away the element of social pressure, allowing learning to be really serious. It also creates an environment in which to address issues that are of real interest to women. According to Kohn, the JRCs' unique niche is that it does "systematic learning, not just introducing people to a flavor of Judaism." Women-only classes include "The Place of Miracles in Jewish History" and "Analysis of Megillat Esther." One of the JRCs' most popular programs, open to men as well as women, is its weekly Parshat Hashavua (Torah Portion of the Week) class, which meets every Tuesday, from 12:15pm-12:55pm, at the Nezer Law Firm on 666 Fifth Avenue, 28th Floor.

For those looking for a more advanced level of learning, Manhattan also has several options.

THE JEWISH RENAISSANCE CENTER, found at 441 West

End Avenue, was created as a place of higher-level learning for women. Why just women? 131 West 86th Street, 9th Floor, is also oriented towards



LEARNING AT HEBREW UNION COLLEGE - JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION/NEW YORK KOLLEL

Another organization that welcomes beginners is Aish New York, at 313 West 83rd Street. Aish offers free learning Sunday through Thursday evenings, with programs like "Torah: The Miniseries" and "Shabbat Made Easy." Aish mainly attracts unaffiliated students, many of whom have little or no background. Their programs endeavor to show these beginners the relevancy of Judaism to modern life, and to offer them tools for Jewish living. Another important goal of Aish is to develop in their students a greater accountability to their heritage. Explains Educational Director Rabbi Chaim

people who are interested in studying," offers its students an increase of Jewish texts, beliefs, and practice in a pluralistic and egalitarian environment. Their classes, which run from 5 to 10 weeks, include such offerings as "A Very Jewish Kind of Evil" and "Psychanalysis and the Biblical Text." Tom Gerdner, an Upper West Sider who had been taking classes at the Kollel for three years, has really enjoyed his time there. "It's an usually good program," he comments. However, he advises that those who come should prepare to be challenged.

THE MANHATTAN JEWISH



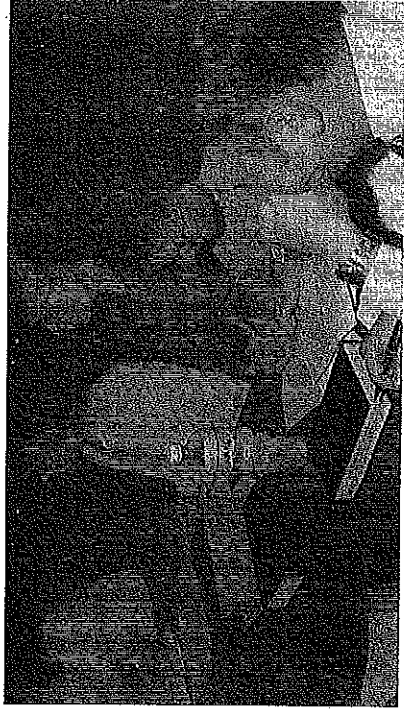
WOMEN LEARNING IN DRISHA'S BEIT MIDRASH

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A GUIDE TO JEWISH LEARNING IN MANHATTAN

advanced study for women. Drisha, which is also committed to preparing women for positions of leadership, believes that it is crucial for the well-being of the Jewish community that women be allowed to develop their intellectual abilities and access original texts directly. Says student Stephanie Pell, "It was their combination of feminist principles within a halachic framework that really spoke to me... There are very little apologies going on." Also impressive is Drisha's diversity—it's one of the few places in the city where you might find a lesbian reconstructionist rabbinical student studying alongside a woman who just graduated from Stern college. "All these women," comments Pell, "really bring something important to the table." While



MANHATTAN JEWISH EXPERIENCE

most of Drisha's classes are women-only, selected courses, as well as all community lectures, are open to men.

scholars from Jerusalem and around the world. This fusion of old world and new is a promising addition to the New York Jewish learning landscape.

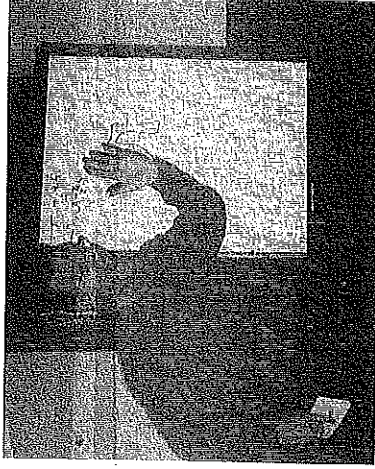
Whether you're religious or secular, man or a woman, beginner or advanced, Manhattan has a place for you to learn. Every one of these institutions mentioned has gotten rave reviews from its students. So try one out. Try three. Just find the place that's right for you, and start learning.

Lili Kalish, a graduate of the University of Michigan, lives on the Upper West Side. She is a development assistant at John Wiley and Sons Inc.

Keep your eyes open, however, for what promises to be one of the most, cutting-edge institutes of learning in the New York area. THE JCC IN MANHATTAN, which recently moved into its impressive new facilities at 334 Amsterdam Avenue, has great plans for its Jewish Learning program. Says Rabbi Carol Levinhan, Senior Director of Learning Outreach and Support, "In the past, our programs were geared towards those who were searching, unaffiliated. Now, with the vastly expanded space and particularly with this wonderful beit midrash (house of study)...we're going to be offering the possibility of serious study at a higher level." In addition to its many classes, including "Love and Death: The Jewish Life Cycle" and "Jews and Food: Eating our



92ND STREET Y HEBREW CLASS



MOŠHE KATZ, HEBREW LEVEL I TEACHER
MANHATTAN JEWISH EXPERIENCE

RESOURCES

- 92nd Street Y (212) 415-5767
- New York Kollel (212) 674-5300, ext. 272
- Manhattan Jewish Experience (212) 787-9533
- Aish New York (212) 579-1388
- Jewish Enrichment Center (212) 889-5532
- Jewish Renaissance Center (212) 580-9666
- Drisha Institute (212) 595-0679
- The JCC in Manhattan (212) 580-0099

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