



# Sh'ma

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## Finding a place and a voice

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I grew up a child of the 60s, part of the generation who defined “politically correct” long before it was a term coined in the media. Jewishly, my second-generation American, northeastern Ohio upbringing was deeply rooted in the Conservative movement, which was making an effort to address many issues, one of them being

gender. So what did those attempts reflect to a young girl? No separate seating in the synagogue, certainly. Boys and girls studying together, no question. Could I have a *bat mitzvah*? Not even a doubt, and at age 13—just like the boys.

### The Early Years

But the gender message was subtly confusing. *Bat mitzvah* for a girl in my synagogue took place on a Friday night. Each *bat mitzvah* girl was allowed to choose a *haftarah*, and chant it along with the *brachot* in front of the congregation. We prepared and delivered a small talk on our chosen text after which we were duly blessed by the rabbi and presented with the requisite gifts. But this all took place in the middle of a *Kaballat Shabbat* (Friday night) service where there was no possibility of a Torah being involved! It took me some years to fully appreciate the fundamentally different experience of my younger brothers—which, of course, included *aliyot*, reading from the Torah, chanting *haftarot* and leading parts of the *tefillah*.

For boys and girls alike, messages about study and learning were also mixed. Though a devoted three-day a week Hebrew school student and a fairly consistent Shabbat morning attendee, my basic knowledge never seemed to rise beyond the level of “Bible Stories for Children.” Junior congregation and youth group provided opportunities to become familiar with leading prayers and exploring many aspects of our Jewish identities, but did little to build learning skills for text study.

As I grew older, the study of Hebrew and visits to Israel became very important to me. And as I began to raise a family, ritual and celebration became central to my Jewish life. My Jewish identity and my involvement in the community were strong, but somewhere, something fundamental was missing. I found myself searching for a deeper spiritual connection to Judaism, but did not know where to look.

### Encountering Text

Several years ago I was given an opportunity to explore this empty space when my sons’ day school teacher, Rabbi Dov Lerea, began offering a *chumash* class for parents. Being a new, progressive, “non-denominational” school, our tiny group of learners reflected the Jewish rainbow—all ages, both genders, and certainly many different levels of religious education and practice. Initially, it was thrilling to be leaving children behind in order to study *chumash* with other adults. And secretly I hoped that the class would help me stay one jump ahead of what my kids were learning. But to my surprise, I quickly found myself counting the days between classes.

Meeting bi-monthly at the school over a few years, our extraordinary teacher helped us learn to use the ancient Hebrew words as doorways through which we could glimpse the text’s ever-expanding layers of meaning. With Dov as our guide, we began to engage the text in dynamic conversation. Normally, a quiet introspective learner, questions seems to burst from my mouth as I engaged in the lively discussions.

A pivotal moment came for me when we read the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Hearing God’s plan to destroy the cities, Abraham shouts at God, “*Halilah Lekha!*” (shame on you!). My knowledge of Hebrew and my new skills at parsing text allowed me to deeply understand the intimacy of this interchange. As chills ran up and down my spine, I was able to physically feel Abraham’s passionate relationship with God. Encountering the text at this level ignited my own passion. I saw that within these stories I could find reflections of my own life struggles and questions. And I knew that I needed to continue to learn the skills necessary to access and understand the encoded wisdom.

## Sharing The Keys

By the time Dov announced that he would soon begin teaching a class in *Bereishit* at the Drisha Institute, a school founded to provide women with the chance to engage in the serious study of Jewish text, I knew that I would join the class. But what would it be like to study only with women, many of whom had come from an Orthodox background? My life experience had not included the *mehitzah*—why was I now choosing separation?

Feeling welcomed, I soon realized that I had actually found my place and my voice at Drisha. Being women, my classmates and I share a unique experience which is reflected in our ways of seeing and hearing the text. And perhaps it is our shared history of separation and prohibition that seems to bind us so strongly to our goal of learning.

Though an institute for women—the Drisha community is in reality a model of diversity. Its students reflect a full spectrum of religious education and affiliation, age, socio-economic level, academic and professional experience, etc. Its founder, Rabbi David Silber, has created an atmosphere of acceptance and free inquiry which is grounded in the common language of text and commitment to learning. Thus encouraged to bring the fullness of one's life experience and point of view, the resultant dialogue is vibrant and stimulating.

In order for me to take even one class at Drisha, I have had to work very hard to carve the time out of a very demanding home and work life. But that one class has turned into six years, and I continue to juggle schedules and obligations to make sure that I remain a student. Engaging in serious, systematic study of text has provided me with a way to fill the holes which existed in the foundation of my Jewish life. Learning text has helped me deepen my understanding of ritual and *mitzvah*, bringing me to a deeper experience and practice. And as I have grown older and continued to seek ways to explore the depths of my mortality and my spirituality, learning Torah has provided me with an unparalleled road map.

Though this story is personal and certainly reflective of my age and perhaps gender, I believe that it reflects some important truths. First, even though adults have less time to devote to study, we make wonderful students. Maturity brings an ability to focus and engage deeply with issues, and often allows for greater nuance in understanding. And perhaps even more importantly, older students, unlike many of their younger counterparts, truly make the choice to learn. Second, greater knowledge most often leads to deeper involvement. Those who are informed feel more confident to become leaders. Third, when the goal of a deeper Jewish life is shared, diversity is an asset. In a milieu of respect and free inquiry, there is energy and vitality. Like nutrients, it is these qualities which truly enhance growth. And last, unlocking our tradition's classical texts is one path to deeper commitment and spirituality. Our community needs to continue to find the ways to pass on the keys to this doorway. †