

BACK of the BOOK

RIFKA ROSENWEIN

'God Should Be There For Everybody'

Turning the idea of Drisha into a reality.

I recently attended a dinner celebrating the 18th anniversary of the Drisha Institute, a center of Jewish learning for women in Manhattan. My husband and I don't attend many Jewish organizational dinners, but we have tried to make it to the Drisha dinner every year since its inception.

The dinner seemed true to the spirit of Drisha's founder and dean, Rabbi David Silber, who has always emphasized the study of the text itself, without too many layers of interpretation coming between the student and the sources. And every year at the dinner, guests go first to a *shiur*, a study session, before sitting down to eat. They aren't just supporting a school dedicated to learning, they are learning the sources themselves.

At this year's dinner, Rabbi Silber went back to Drisha's sources, back to its beginnings. He recalled its auspicious start: on the first day of classes in 1979, no one showed up. Slowly, the school began to attract a small group of mostly young women. "We got a lot of Barnard students who had no place else to go," he said wryly.



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I was one of those students. In 1980, I had just come back from my proverbial year in Israel, all revved up, with nowhere to go. I started college, so I knew my secular education would be taken care of. But I didn't know what to do with all this Jewish learning honed during my time in Israel. Where was I to go to further that?

And then someone told me about Drisha. I took one Drisha course during my first semester in college, and I was hooked. There was a kind of purity of purpose in those days, as there is, I suppose, at the outset of many an endeavor. "We could say whatever we wanted," Rabbi Silber recalled. "No one cared."

The story of the growth of Drisha is the story of a man with a vision and a strong streak of perseverance, one might even say stubbornness.

I have long admired Rabbi Silber and his aide and abettor — his wife, Dr. Devora Steinmetz — not only because of Drisha itself, but because of the example they have set for anyone who has a dream and is willing to dedicate their life to realizing it. Theirs is a tale larger than the creation of one institution.

Steinmetz, in fact, realized her own dream when she established a different institution, the Beit Rabban day school, several years ago. And this, while raising six children! (That's been the kicker for me since

I became a mother. I mean, my dream is usually just to make it through the day.)

"I've learned," Rabbi Silber says, through years of struggle to get his message out about women learning, that "a place of learning is a place where people can speak their minds and say the truth. I've learned that Drisha itself is not important. It's the idea of Drisha."

The idea of Drisha has, over time and through a great deal of effort, turned into the institution of Drisha. From its humble beginnings, it now boasts a myriad of programs for part-time, as well as full-time students. It even offers

certification in Talmud and Jewish law for women in its three-year Scholars Circle program.

And this is just at Drisha. As imitation is the highest form of flattery, institutes of Jewish learning for women have sprouted up all

over, from Queens to Boston to Jerusalem.

With the institutionalization of an idea comes, of course, a certain distancing from the source. Even visionaries have to spend time raising money and getting enmeshed in politics.

And on a more personal note, with the advent of work and children, I, who used to attend classes, now attend dinners.

Rabbi Silber and Dr. Steinmetz have certainly paid a price for the tenacity with which they have stuck to their beliefs. But they have accomplished something that few of us ever achieve: they have accomplished what they set out to do. They have changed the framework of our discourse and the assumptions under which at least a segment of observant Jews operate.

They say that a generation spans 18 years. In that sense, Drisha has now spawned a generation of women who can take for granted that there is someplace to go to learn on a serious level and even get accreditation for their efforts.

For that alone, I believe the project called Drisha has been worthwhile. But as Rabbi Silber himself stressed, we cannot lose sight of "the ultimate goal" and the original idea: "God should be there for everybody, for men, women, old and young," said the rabbi. "We've taken the first steps. We must now try to build a Jewish community in which God is present for every person" and, I might add, where every person can pursue his or her own dream. □

HOME FRONT



"We've taken the first steps," says Drisha founder Rabbi David Silber, with wife Dr. Devora Steinmetz.