

Grants to aid women's Talmud studies

By GITELE RAPPOPORT

The Drisha Institute for Jewish Education in Manhattan has received two foundation grants for a new Scholars' Circle, a model program for the advanced study and teaching of Talmud by women.

The grants, from the Covenant and Cummings foundations, will help support 10 women with "a strong ability to read texts and the desire to enter the field of Jewish education — to make Jewish education their life," said Rabbi David Silber, founder and director of Drisha.

Drisha was launched in 1979 to give women intensive training in the study and analysis of traditional Jewish texts.

Beginning in September, the scholars will study primarily Talmud and *halacha* (Jewish law) for a year. They will receive stipends of \$7,500.

One Drisha grant, \$100,000 for three years, came from the Covenant Foundation, which aims to strengthen educational projects that "perpetuate the identity and heritage of the Jewish people."

The grant was one of approximately 10 given every year. Drisha is "a highly regarded institute, and training women in Talmud is still quite innovative," said Judith Ginsberg, executive director of the foundation. The scholars' program "met our criteria of excellence and innovation," she said.

The \$50,000 grant from the Jewish Life Program of the Cummings Foundation was a result of Drisha's "commitment to the spiritual growth of Jewish women," said program assistant Julia Greenberg. One of the foundation's goals is "outreach and continuity in Jewish education," she said.

The Scholars' Circle "will create a cadre of women fluent in Talmud, inspire other women to take up Talmud study and assert that that is a valid and important thing to do," she said.

"This is a new stage in advanced Talmud study for women," said 26-year-old Devorah Zlochower, one of the few scholars already chosen.

Zlochower is in her second year of Drisha's *bet midrash* program, which focuses on Talmud and Jewish law, and teaches a beginning course in Talmud to other Drisha students.

"I hope we'll be covering large portions of halachic material, with more sophisticated analysis. I'm looking for the equivalent of a standard [men's] *yeshiva* program. ... I would like to be able to teach Talmud at an advanced level, and this will be a start toward getting the education necessary," she said.

Another scholar, Laura Steiner of Lexington, Ky., will move to the Scholars' Circle after three years in the *bet midrash* program.

"Until you have basic skills with texts, you can't even begin to talk about halacha, she said. "There's a halachic conversation going on out there. Until you have had a lot of experience and have seen tons of texts and [interpretations], you can't enter the conversation."

In addition to the Scholars' Circle and the *bet midrash* program, Drisha offers three-week and five-week summer institutes for women of college age and above, a five-week summer program for high school students, a one-week summer seminar for both women and men and individual classes and community lectures throughout the year.

Applications for admission to the Scholars' Circle will be accepted until April 15. For information on this and other Drisha programs, call (212) 595-0307.