

I Am Woman— Hear Me Daven



Julie Stern Jospel, Mia Diamond. Photo: Joan Roth/ Courtesy, Drisha Institute.

Religious feminism bursts onto the Torah study scene

The Beit Midrash at Drisha Institute for Jewish Education on the Upper West Side of Manhattan is abuzz. Study partners lean over their Talmuds in preparation for class. Hands wave, people argue, the ancient language of the Talmud flies through the air. It is a scene familiar to anyone who has walked through the study hall of a yeshiva, except for one thing: The students are all women. Most are not studying to be rabbis or teachers and most of their mothers were content to learn the Jewish laws that applied to their cooking and cleaning and to remember the Torah stories they heard as children. They are housewives, accountants, lawyers and college students, yet they come to Drisha to learn about personalities of the Torah, Jewish philosophy, the meaning of their prayers. Some study obscure texts and work to decipher the logic of ancient rabbis.

These Jewish women are taking part in a fast-growing trend. From Boston to New York to California, in synagogues, Jewish community centers and adult education institutes, study programs for Jewish women have sprung up. Some focus on learning texts, some on enhancing spirituality; still others offer such topics as women in the Torah and Jewish women's history. "Women are feeling like they're ready to reclaim their heritage," says Lori Lefkowitz, an associate professor of women's studies at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and the director of Kolot, a new center for Jewish women and gender studies at the college.

Twenty-five years after the feminist movement inspired a generation of Jewish women to discover their potential in the workplace and as people, those women are striving for their full religious potential.

"Feminism has given Jewish women the confidence to access their own tradition," says Sylvia Barack Fishman, professor of contemporary Jewish life at Brandeis University.

In the initial throes of the feminist movement, there was no room for Judaic tradition. Judaism was seen as a patriarchal system. But women who could not abandon either closely held ideology eventually paved the way for Jewish feminism. They began writing and speaking, insisting that rituals be re-examined, texts re-evaluated, attitudes reconsidered.

In recent years, Jewish feminism has gone from being a marginal influence to having real impact. Women rabbis now lead many congregations. Parents can choose baby-naming ceremonies for girls and *bat mitzvah* celebrations in which girls read from the Torah. But perhaps Jewish feminism's greatest success is that so many women want to know more.

"Women's approach to Judaism has always been more touchy-feely," says Debby Kram. "But now that women are so involved in all other aspects of the world, they are taking advantage of Judaism in a whole new way."

Six years ago Kram and Rabbi Seth Farber founded Boston's *Ma'yan*, a learning center for Jewish women that promotes text-based study.

"I wanted to understand the origins of Judaism," says Naomi Sinreich, an attorney and a student at Drisha Institute. "Our tradition is text-based, we have survived because of it, and women have not been able to partake of it. I was looking to get the skills that

BY NAOMI GROSSMAN

would allow me to access the text on my own."

Educating Jewish women was Rabbi David Silber's goal when he founded Drisha 18 years ago.

"Women were being given more opportunity in their education and in their careers, but there was nothing for them if they wanted to increase their Jewish knowledge," says Silber, dean of the institute. "They were going to college, they were working, but they knew nothing about their Judaism."

Silber began offering classes in Torah, Talmud, *halacha* and philosophy. Seven years ago, Drisha had 180 students. In 1997, nearly 700 women, most of them Orthodox, took courses. The Institute has its own *kollel* (a three-year full-time program in which women students are subsidized), a summer high school program and a training program for future Jewish day school educators.

"This is a big opportunity," he says. "The Jewish community should want these women to maximize their potential. Otherwise, it will lose them."

"You cannot keep people on the basis of nostalgia," agrees Lefkowitz.

Ma'yan, The Jewish Women's Project, offers lectures on the female prophets, on Jewish women's history and on Judaica created by Jewish women artists. Housed in the Jewish Community Center of the Upper West Side of Manhattan, *Ma'yan* also develops educational programs such as *bat mitzvah* classes for girls and their mothers which have been replicated by Conservative and Reform synagogues.

"The Jewish community has the most educated women and we were losing them," says Barbara Dobkin, cofounder of the project. "I thought, *How can we make this community exciting enough not to lose anybody?*"

Ma'yan's Passover seder, for which it compiles its own feminist *haggadah*, was attended by 1,200 people last year, more than four times the number who went to the first one four years ago.

"[Jewish] women are looking for a connection," says Eve Landau, who founded *Ma'yan* with Dobkin. "Some are looking to be more educated Jewishly. Some are looking for a different perspective. Women were being marginalized in the Jewish community and there was a need to bring them to the forefront."

To that end, *Ma'yan* attempts to find funding for scholarships and women's leadership and education programs.

When Irene Fine first opened the Women's Institute for Continuing Jewish Education 21 years ago in La Jolla, Calif., she says that it was the only place like it. Now, she notes, "we're part of a movement."

Jewish women, most of whom are Reconstructionist, Reform or Conservative, attend lectures at the institute on such topics as "Women in the Dead Sea Scrolls" and "Magic and Supersition." They also study Talmud.

"I want to explore what makes Judaism unique and worth keeping," says Z Kripke, codirector, who attends lectures regularly.

Not only do women at the institute re-evaluate Jewish rituals to incorporate women. They have created new rituals, such as a midlife rite of passage. The Jewish Feminist Center of the American Jewish Congress in Los Angeles

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established a life-cycle resource center. It allows women to access information on everything from baby-naming ceremonies to blessing-the-new-month ceremonies to gender-neutral prayers.

Carol Levy, the center's director, helped to found it six years ago. "As women learn that they can study text seriously, they become more confident in all aspects of Jewish life," she says. "They will become president of the synagogue or sit on the Federation board. They will develop more rites of passages that will allow Judaism to speak to their whole life. What were traditionally men's expressions they are already claiming as their own."

The center was originally an educational institution, but because so many of its students were teaching women at local synagogues, Jewish community centers and the like, the center is branching out. It recently received a three-year grant to study issues surrounding family and work and its impact on Jewish women.

"We are declaring a victory," says Levy. "We have sprouted the seed of women's Talmud classes. We are no longer unique."

Levy points to the proliferation of books and anthologies on Jewish women as an indication that the movement is gaining momentum. But many credit Jewish feminist scholarship as an academic discipline with piquing interest.

Fine established the women's institute as part of her dissertation on developing a program to study Jewish women in history. She says that at the time, there were not many written resources. Today, there are even feminist interpretations of the Bible. Three years ago, the Jewish Theological Seminary established a master's program in Jewish women's studies. Its program advisor, Anne Lapidus Lerner, sees this focus as part of a general phenomenon in the academic world. "There's been an evolutionary interest in women's studies," she says. The Jewish Women's Studies Project was established eight years ago at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and Kolot is now in its second year. Hadassah recently established the first international research institute devoted to Jewish women at Brandeis University. The Jewish Women's Archives in Boston has also been created to compile a database.

Some say the prominence of women rabbis made this all possible.

"Jewish women learning began with women being allowed into rabbinical schools," says Francine Klagsbrun, a writer and Jewish feminist activist. "They set the pace for other women."

The Conservative's Jewish Theological Seminary began ordaining women 12 years ago. At last count, 86 of the 1,377 members of the rabbinical assembly were female. Reform's Hebrew Union College ordained a woman in 1972. Last year, 17 of its 37 graduates were women.

While the Orthodox community does not permit women to be ordained as rabbis, its high level of Jewish cultural literacy and its emphasis on Torah study has contributed to the movement.

"The concept of ordinary people having a high level of learning comes from the Orthodox world," says Fishman. "This cultural norm has spread across denominational lines."

Intensive text-based learning characterizes most centers that are largely Orthodox. At Drisha, women learn in *chavruta*, or pairs; they tackle the Talmud—traditionally off-limits to women—and they learn the intricacies of *halacha*.

At *Ma'yan*, which, while non-denominational, attracts many Orthodox women, the emphasis is also on serious text study.

This thirst for learning is not limited to the more modern factions of Orthodox Judaism. Shalhevet Institute for Women was founded six years ago in Queens, N.Y.

Talmud is not taught there, but that fact only makes the high-level classes on *halacha* and Torah more remarkable.

"We are in the midst of a revolutionary era for Jewish women's learning," says its founder, Esther Krauss. "All Jewish women have a greater curiosity about *halacha*, and the atmosphere is such that this kind of interest is being encouraged." Krauss points to the hasidic sect of Satmar as evidence of this. In its schools, girls never opened the Bible—until two years ago. "As isolated as they are," says Krauss, "they had to respond...."

It still rankles Klagsbrun when

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she talks about her experiences as a student at a yeshiva high school in New York over 20 years ago: "While the boys were studying Talmud, the girls were sent to sewing classes." These days, observes Silber, "there is pressure

put on schools by mothers to teach their girls."

"Knowledge is power in the Jewish community," notes Klagsbrun. "Women have come to realize that if they want the rights they deserve, they need to become

more knowledgeable."

Naomi Grossman is a freelance writer living in Monsey, N.Y. This article is excerpted and appeared in full in the January-February issue of Na'amat Woman.