

# Learning to Learn

By Roselyn Bell

If Yentl the Yeshiva Boy, the I.B. Singer heroine, were living in New York City today, she would not have to don her father's clothes in order to study Talmud. She could choose to study a topic traditionally closed to her in Torah, Nach, Mishna, Gemara, halacha, or Jewish philosophy at Drisha, a new institute designed to meet the intellectual needs of committed modern Jewish women.

In its first semester of operation, Drisha has attracted over 90 post-high school women to 15 courses. Classes meet afternoons and evenings in the West Side Institutional Synagogue, 122 West 76th Street, on Manhattan's Upper West Side. Each class session is two and one half hours long, to permit time for serious examination of text, more than half the courses meet twice a week, while the rest meet weekly.

Not surprisingly, considering the time commitment involved and the nature of the studies, a majority of the women who have enrolled have had yeshiva high school education or intensive study at one of the women's learning programs in Israel. Classes are however, offered on beginning, intermediate and advanced levels in all the major subject areas.

Rabbi David Silber, founder and director of Drisha, sees the program both as responding to the demand for serious learning which does not descend to women and as awakening an awareness of the importance of high-level Jewish education for women. At a time when women are excelling in all fields of study, it would be tragic, Rabbi Silber said, if women could not use their

Jewish heritage.

The program aims, in the words of its brochure, "to facilitate the development and strengthening of learning skills, enabling women to study and analyze traditional texts independently." To this end, most classes are structured around the classic yeshiva model of *hachana* (independent preparation of text) and *shiur* (lecture). On the beginning levels students may work along with the teacher in the preparation of a text, but the objective is to be able to deal with sources independently.

The Drisha faculty of seven includes two full-time teachers who are ordained rabbis and five part-time instructors, including two women. The student body comes from a variety of backgrounds and includes college students, young professional women, mothers at home with children, and older women.

For the spring term, plans are being formulated for morning classes to accommodate mothers with small children, and more upper and intermediate classes to meet the heavier than expected demand for advanced study.

Drisha supporters are extremely pleased with the first-semester response to the program both in terms of numbers and the caliber of students, and feel that it reflects the growing awareness of the importance of Jewish education for women. Rabbi Silber concludes that "In a time when Jews are an embattled minority and every person counts, we cannot afford to lose the contributions and talents of more than 50 percent of our population."

For further information, write to Drisha, P.O. Box 858, Ansonia Station, New York, New York 10023 or call (212) 877-4919.

## IMPACT OF WOMEN ON JEWISH HISTORY

by Prof. Livia E. Jackson

### Drisha — Institute Of Learning For Women

"Talmud Torah kneged kulam."

The learning of the Torah outweighs all the other mitzvot. This Talmudic dictum has had an inestimable impact on Jewish society. Besides encouraging the intellectualization of mitzvot that could not be performed since the destruction of the Temple and giving wide speculative foundation to many others, it actually restructured Jewish society. It created an academic elite which has had an undisputed primacy over any other segment of Jewry. This place of top priority given to learning on the ladder of Jewish values extends also to secular studies. Within the world of religious observance, however, Torah learning is the supreme tool to social achievement.

In recent decades women have begun to acquire these tools in every increasing numbers. Torah learning has become one of women's objectives, and more and more institutions began providing opportunity for it. With increased sophistication of learning among women, however, a serious need arose for institutions that not only cater to a need for basic information but for higher learning, as well.

Such an institution is Drisha. Appropriately named, search, this new institution of higher learning for women is a new approach to Torah study for girls. It assumes that which is becoming increasingly evident: women are capable of commitment and concentration in Torah study on par with men. And the program of Drisha is designed to accom-

modate this capability. Each class session is two and a half hours long to permit "hachana," or independent preparation of the text, and "shuir," lecture by the instructor. Modeled after the classic yeshiva study pattern, this method aims to develop learning skills to enable the students to do independent study and research.

Drisha opened its doors last fall and is already becoming a vigorous, well-attended house of learning. Ninety young women, high school graduates, attend fifteen courses in Torah, Nakh, Mishna, Gemara, Shulhan Arukh and Jewish Philosophy. Classes meet once or twice a week in the afternoons and evenings at the West Side Institutional Synagogue on 76th Street of Manhattan. This arrangement enables the students to hold jobs or care for small children at home. The student body is composed of professional women, young mothers, housewives and students attending other colleges simultaneously. For the spring term classes are planned for the morning as well to accommodate the unexpected demand of prospective students with different time schedules.

Rabbi David Silber, a brilliant young scholar, is the founder and director of Drisha. His faculty of two full-time and five part-time teachers are hand-picked to help fulfill his dream of creating an intellectual medium for the Jewish woman of today who is aware of the immense importance of Torah study. The overwhelming response to the program is ample proof that Rabbi Silber's vision is an echo of an urgent contemporary need.