

New Role, New Opportunity

Women interested in a larger role in traditional religious services will have a new opportunity for participation this High Holy Days season.

For 22 years the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education has offered women advanced instruction in many aspects of Judaism, including prayer. This year the Upper West Side institute will allow women to put their teaching into practice by leading the *p'sukei*



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d'zimra (the preliminary morning service's series of introductory Psalms and readings), as well as read from and be called to the Torah for aliyot during Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur.

"This is a small step," says Rabbi David Silber, Drisha dean. "To me, this is not a political statement but a religious statement. It's more about increasing ruach [spirit], having a smaller minyan, taking the davening more seriously."

An Orthodox-trained rabbi long considered a maverick for his independent thinking and freedom from political constraints, Rabbi Silber says the idea grew out of his attendance at a service known as the Leader Minyan in Jerusalem, where he was on sabbatical last year.

"Some of the features of our new minyan are inspired by the davening I experienced there," he explained in a mailing this week to Drisha supporters.

Drisha holds prayer services only on Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, and this year will hold two services at the Abraham Joshua Heschel School on the Upper West Side. One will feature the additional involvement of women. The other will be led by men, as is the norm. Both services will have a *mechitza* between men and women.

Rabbi Silber noted that while Drisha is nondenominational and open to all, its annual religious service is "not egalitarian, it's Orthodox."

The Drisha decision follows an article by Rabbi Mendel Shapiro in the current issue of the on-line Edah Journal that offers halachic support for women's aliyot. But Rabbi Silber said his thoughts on the service pre-dated the article. He noted that it is difficult and in some ways unfair to encourage women to take seriously the study of Jewish texts and not allow them more ritual participation.

"For Modern Orthodoxy to be taken seriously," he said, "it has to move forward and explore alternatives."

"If it's possible, it's necessary," he added, referring to the fact that halacha, or Jewish law, does not prohibit the kind of female involvement he plans to introduce.

His decision drew a mixed reaction from two prominent Orthodox rabbis who have worked to expand women's roles in the synagogue.

Rabbi Adam Mintz of Lincoln Square Synagogue says he opposes the planned steps from a "public policy" perspective. "It's not technically a halachic issue," he says, adding that *p'sukei d'zimra* does not have the "halachic status" of shacharit and the concluding *musaf* service.

"Leading *p'sukei d'imra* is not against halacha, although it is against the way a traditional Orthodox shul has conducted itself over the centuries," Rabbi Mintz says. "I am hesitant to do something that would make certain people — men and women — uncomfortable."

Rabbi Saul Berman, director of Edah, says he disagrees "on halachic grounds" with Drisha's action and with the supportive halachic conclusions reached by Rabbi Shapiro in the Edah Journal article. But, Rabbi Berman says, he does not challenge Drisha's ability to set its own standards.

"The local community has to make a decision. They have a right to their halachic opinions," he says. "It is important for this conversation" about such women's issues "to be taking place," Rabbi Berman adds.

Rabbi Silber says too many in the Orthodox community have "abandoned our moral intuition" and instead "tend to do things because we're comfortable and used to it."

"This is a work in progress," he says of the changes that Drisha will institute in September. "If no one shows up, we'll stop."

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