

Orthodox Institute Offers Torah Honors to Women

FORWARD STAFF

In a groundbreaking theological step, a flagship institution of Orthodox feminism plans to call women to the Torah during High Holy Day services with men and women in attendance.

Rabbi David Silber, dean and founder of Manhattan's 22-year-old Drisha Institute for Jewish Education, said that his organization will offer participants both a traditional and more innovative option, each with separate seating. Contrary to the nearly universal Orthodox custom of excluding women from virtually all ritual leadership roles outside of female-only services, women in the alternative service will be permitted to read from the Torah and recite the corresponding blessings.

The announcement comes about two months after the Modern Orthodox group Edah published an article in its journal, by Jerusalem attorney Rabbi Mendel Shapiro, arguing for the more liberal policy. Though Edah director Rabbi Saul Berman said he did not agree with the article, and an opposing view was published in the journal, Rabbi

Silber cited the piece as one of several signs that the time had come for Drisha to offer an alternative service. He also noted that one monthly, private prayer service, with separate seating in Jerusalem, already allows the practice.

"There is a demand for it. I think it is the next step," said Rabbi Silber, who received his ordination from Yeshiva University. "I'm just worried about doing what's right." Though the Talmud and subsequent commentators said the practice was permitted in theory, these early authorities argued against it for the sake of "the dignity of the congregation." Like Rabbi Shapiro, Rabbi Silber said that this proscription can be understood as simply a reflection of societal norms in ancient Babylonia, rather than an eternal prohibition.

Women at the alternative service would also be permitted to lead portions of the preliminary morning service and the *Shacharit* morning service, Rabbi Silber said. Both services will be held at the Abraham Joshua Heschel Day School, a non-denominational institution in Manhattan.