

Religious Life

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TEACHING TALMUD TO WOMEN

Bisphenous or blessed?

BY SOSHEA LEBRIER
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"Teaching a woman Talmud is teaching her foolishness."

The Talmud

New York — In a stifflingly hot room, the six students sit hunched over their Talmudic tomes listening to one of their colleagues, who in a singsong voice is interpreting a troublesome passage. It is 12:40 Thursday afternoon, and class officially ended ten minutes ago.

What makes this class unique is that the students are women, all married and ranging in age from 20 to more than 30. They will soon be picking up their little ones from nursery school and heading home to tend to their households and families. But for the next few minutes they remain immersed in their studies, as they have been for the past three hours.

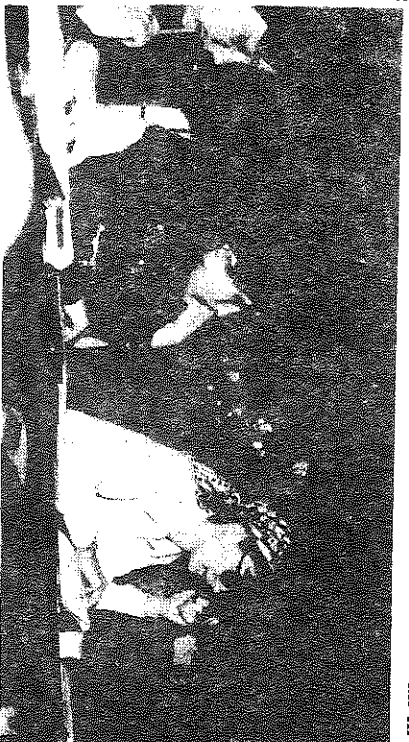
That evening, eighteen young women, most college and graduate students, straggle into

class officially begins, Rabbi Silber steps aside. During the next hour the women, following black-board instructions, read certain passages in the book of Genesis and study assigned commentaries. They study alone or in small groups. Their Rabbi sits nearby, also studying.

This hour, referred to as *hachana*, or "preparation time," is just one of the unique features of Drisha, a new school for women, which in its first year has attracted more than 100 students.

Miriam Alter, a West Side mother of three, spends two and a half hours every Tuesday morning at Drisha. Classes begin at 9:30 so that she and other mothers have time to accompany their older children to school before themselves coming to class.

On the few occasions when baby-sitter arrangements fall through, Miriam brings her infant with her. While she listens to Rabbi Silber, her baby sleeps in the adjacent corridor along with other infants. When an infant awakes — an in-



Drisha students are not distressed by the fact that their Talmud study will not lead to ordination.

the makeshift classroom of Drisha Institute for Jewish Education, located in the West Side Institutional Synagogue on Manhattan's Upper West Side. They chat amongst themselves as they settle into the brown scratched desks and take out their books and notebooks.

Upon a portable wooden black-board in the front of the room a boyish looking Rabbi, David Silber, writes instructions for his class while taking care to greet each student as she enters the room.

When 7 p.m. approaches and

evitable occurrence — the mother normally takes up a position in the doorway, rocking her child while listening to the class.

"Going to class," says Miriam, "is total relaxation for me. Intellectually I don't have many outlets and here I find the release I need." Her husband, himself a Talmudic scholar, is supportive of her learning and tries to accommodate her study schedule in every way possible. Both parents feel Miriam's studies at Drisha will help in bringing up their children as Torah Jews.

Ms. Silber, a recent graduate of New York University's Graduate School of Journalism, is a free-lance writer from New York.

Drisha is the brainchild of Rabbi Silber, who is at once its founder, director and star teacher. He envisioned Drisha as

a place where Jewish women of post high school age, highly motivated and dedicated to learning, would be able to pursue Jewish scholarship just as men do at the many yeshivot available to them. "It is preposterous," says Rabbi Silber, "that women who are advancing in all other fields should be held back when it comes to Jewish studies."

A member of Drisha's Board of Directors, Arlene Agus, a woman who has been in the forefront of Jewish feminist affairs, says that "until Drisha, a serious yeshiva for women didn't exist."

To Mrs. Agus, Drisha is part of a trend amongst Jewish women out of which in the last few years has emerged Bat Mitzvah ceremonies (the female version of a Bar Mitzvah) and Simchat Bat parties (the celebration of the birth of a daughter). "Ten years ago," says Ms. Agus, "an Orthodox woman with three children didn't learn Talmud. Today more and more women are interested in serious study."

Ms. Agus is one of the women who, in 1972, headed the first Jewish feminist conference, at which she and others discussed the idea of a yeshiva where women could immerse themselves in the study of Talmud. The idea was then considered radical. Among Orthodox Jewry, women have traditionally been excluded from Talmudic studies — the oft-quoted basis being a verse in the Talmud which reads, "Teaching a woman Talmud is teaching her foolishness."

Nevertheless, despite opposition from certain segments of the Orthodox community, Ms. Agus and her colleagues have seen their dream become a reality. Today there is a yeshiva in Jerusalem, Michalel Bruria, where many young American women spend a year studying Talmud and other religious subjects. There is a program at Lincoln Square Synagogue in Manhattan, Stern College and Teachers Institute for Women have both begun giving Talmud courses. And today, too, there is Drisha, which many consider the most advanced such study program in New York. (The school has already received requests for extension programs in Riverdale and Teaneck, New Jersey.)

One student, who had graduated Stern College and was studying Talmud at another institute for two years, said of Drisha, "I had reached a level in my studies where Drisha was the only place I could go." According to Rabbi

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Silber, Drisha attracts the cream of the crop. Students include many who've spent previous years studying at two of the top yeshivot for women in Israel, Michlelet Bruria and the Jerusalem College for Women. There is a contingent of Barnard students. There are professional women, who work during the day and come to Drisha at night. There are young housewives who attend morning classes.

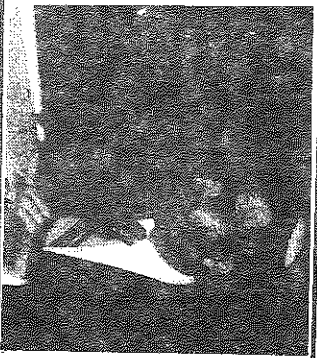
Drisha offers no college credits, and no degrees. The women who attend, most of whom have yeshiva backgrounds, seek to further their knowledge of Torah only for the sake of knowledge itself, not for degrees — and not, as many emphatically state, to be in the forefront of change among Orthodox women.

Many women at Drisha study Talmud on an advanced level using the same approaches as in men's yeshivot, but on the whole,

women to be leaders in the community," she says, "they will have to travel the route of Talmudic scholarship." And, she feels, once a woman is on a par with a man about to take his *smicha* (ordination) exam, it will be inevitable for her to wonder: *Why not me, too?*

Rabbi Silber agrees with much of her assessment. While he doesn't envision women receiving *smicha* in his program, nor think he will be the one to one day confer it on them, he can envision Orthodox women receiving *smicha* some day. Rabbi Silber concedes his program may have "political" impact but — like his students — resents that politicizing and stresses that Drisha is first and foremost educational. His goals, he says, are to teach women how to learn and to instill in them a greater love of learning. A graduate of Yeshiva Univer-

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they are not distressed that a woman may amass fully as much knowledge as a Rabbi yet he denied the title Rabbi. The notion of women Rabbis does not yet have many backers at Drisha. Some women feel there is absolutely no place for them. Others are just unwilling to take a stand on so sensitive an issue. Still others are insulted by what they consider a politicizing of their learning.

Nevertheless, Blu Greenberg, a lecturer, writer and leader of Orthodox feminist causes, who hopes to see Orthodox women as Rabbis during her lifetime, considers Drisha and programs like it the main vehicle for realizing her dream. Currently completing her book *Women in Judaism: A View from Tradition*, Mrs. Greenberg speaks hesitantly about the changes she supports. While she says she hasn't all the answers, she is sure that education — and by that she includes Talmud study — is the only way for women to achieve equality in Judaism. That achievement, the ultimate goal of which is practicing women Rabbis, will be a slow and drawn out process, she concedes. But the first step toward it lies in programs like that of Drisha.

Mrs. Greenberg favors Talmudic study by women not only because she feels it is something holy which everyone should experience, but because leadership in the Orthodox community has always been synonymous with Talmudic study. "In order for

sity, Rabbi Silber is known among New York's learning community as a brilliant young scholar. He acquired this reputation through his weekly Bible class at Lincoln Square Synagogue, the synagogue patronized largely by the Orthodox young adult community on Manhattan's West Side, and led by Rabbi Steven Riskin. "The class was a turning point for me in terms of public exposure," he says. Since its inception it has grown six fold. One woman described his Shabbos class as "so brilliant it moved me and others to tears."

Participating in Rabbi Silber's Drisha Bible class is something akin to working a jigsaw puzzle. During the *Shachana* period, students work at finding a theme that connects the various passages they were assigned to study. On occasion when the missing link is even more maddeningly elusive than normal, they worry that perhaps Rabbi Silber assigned them the wrong passage.

But as Rabbi Silber begins his class, the pieces always start falling into place. At some point students will often emit a collective Aha! as they see the puzzle on its way to completion. By class's end, the theme Rabbi Silber has woven to connect the passages seems so clear that students wonder how they could have missed it.

Rabbi Silber tries to humanize

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Bible personalities. In teaching Genesis, for example, he delves deeply into Abraham's character, pointing out his flaws and documenting his problems in accepting the role G-d gave him.

Some students find such humanization hard to swallow, especially when previous teachers had given Abraham and other Biblical characters G-d-like qualities. Pulling them down from the pedestal offends some students — just as high school students are often offended when they first hear the raults ascribed to George Washington or Abraham Lincoln. "In the end," Rabbi Silber says in defending his technique, "the heroes remain heroes."

The name Drisha was taken from the Hebrew phrase *Drisha Ve Chakira* which means a thorough investigative analysis of the text. Rabbi Silber says he designs his lessons to "enable the women to study and analyze the texts independently." To the women — amongst them a stock analyst, a Ph.D. in mathematics, computer programmers, and other professionals — the approach is a refreshing break from the traditional "spitback" method used by many yeshivot.

Rabbi Silber stresses that his approach is totally intellectual, and not in any way religious indoctrination. Some of his students, particularly those who've studied at yeshivot in Israel, where a religious approach is stressed, find its lack at Drisha distressing. "It's conceivable," says one student, that "an irreligious person will join Drisha, study here for one or two years and then, when she leaves, still be irreligious." Rabbi Silber prefers to let the traditional texts speak for themselves.

The reaction of other women's schools to Drisha has been mixed. The principal of the Rivka Breuer Teacher's Seminary, Rabbi Elias, flatly condemns the teaching of Talmud to women. Rabbis at Bruria West — the sister school of Michlelet Bruria in Jerusalem — and at Teacher's Institute for Women — a branch of Yeshiva University — say they approve of the teachers at Drisha. Indeed, two teachers at Drisha also teach at Yeshiva.

Still, the competition Drisha poses worries the other schools. One Rabbi at Teacher's Institute for Women said he imagines that higher-ups in the Yeshiva University administration are particularly unhappy now, with Yeshiva in severe financial straits.

The Director of Teacher's Institute for Women, Rabbi Walter Orenstein, said he doesn't see the need for establishing a new school unless "there's a population boom. Quite frankly," he said, "I think we should use the schools available, because there's only a limited number of students."

Rabbi Orenstein feels it's still too early to tell how Drisha will affect his school's enrollment. The question, he feels, is whether stu-

dents stay at the new school or return to their old schools once their curiosity is satisfied.

For Rabbi Silber this is also a "key question." Will the students return next year? Rabbi Silber has ambitious plans for his school — a summer program, a library, a larger staff, a Beit Medrash (a place where women can come in to learn any time) and more. But all this depends heavily on the coming September's enrollment. As Rabbi Silber says, "the jury is still out on us."

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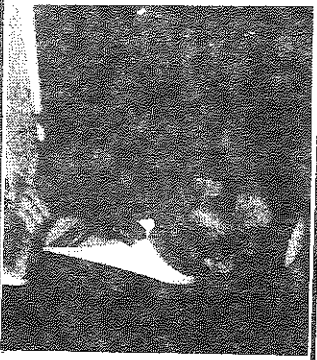
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