

EDUCATION

Women: No Talmud, no power

Rabbi David S. Silber, founder and director of Drisha Institute for Jewish Education, describes himself as "the most important Jewish feminist in the United States."

Silber, an Orthodox rabbi trained at Yeshiva University, says he started Drisha 10 years ago because he wanted to teach, and in teaching he saw that "women get substandard education—lots of schools don't teach girls Talmud.

"This isn't working. First of all, because without Talmud you've cut out a large amount of Jewish knowledge, and second," said Silber, "it gives a message to women, and then they don't study with certain expectations. Knowledge is power in the Jewish community. Without knowledge of Talmud, women have no power."

Drisha's philosophy—which Silber describes as "Jewish education that gives women access to Jewish texts, and which develops and identifies them as potential community leaders"—is gaining momentum.

Since its inception in 1979, Drisha has grown from an initial enrollment of 70 students to 300 women in three programs. Two new programs are scheduled for next year, one of which

will specifically focus on beginners. Last month the institute, which holds classes at the West Side Synagogue at 131 West 86th Street in Manhattan, celebrated its 10th anniversary. It was also recently honored with *Moment* magazine's community service award.

"We're getting young women here who are committed to making changes in the Jewish community, and who will have the knowledge to do it," said Silber.

Among his proudest accomplishments is the Drisha fellowship program, started in 1984, providing intensive training in text, particularly in the area of rabbinics, to young women who already have facility with Jewish texts. The one-year, full-time program helps participants prepare for careers in Jewish education or Jewish studies. Fellows receive a stipend of \$7,500 to help cover living expenses.

The summer high school program offers a full-time, five-week program for young women of high school age, and emphasizes developing skills in interpreting texts.

"This summer," Silber noted, "we'll have about 30 high school age women from all over the country—

the best and the brightest in their classes. Even the modern Orthodox schools don't teach Talmud, or in-depth exploration of text the way we do. We've found that getting these women when they're 35 is too late, so we want them at 15. These high school students are really going to make a difference.

"Our goal, quite simply, is to change Jewish education. We are very open here. We have no hidden agenda, and no dress code. Our goal is not to make our students more observant—though that is often the result of studying. But unlike some other yeshivas, we don't lure people in by saying we're not proselytizing and then proceed to put pressure on them. This is learning for learning's sake, with only those implications.

"There is complacency in the Jewish community," added Silber, "where there should be desperation. Look at the rate of assimilation. Something's being done wrong. And keeping a bright woman from studying text and passing on her knowledge to the community is as harmful to us as making a man who's not academically oriented learn all day long."

—S.P.