



STEVENS GREEN

Rabbi David Silber, educational director of Drisha

By Drisha Institute:

Women Learning How to 'Learn'

By Maury Grabel

"Women are traditionally taught at," says Rabbi David Silber, Educational Director of the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education, "but they don't learn how to learn."

Drisha, an independent school located in Manhattan's West Side Institutional Synagogue, offers sixteen courses in Bible, Talmud, Philosophy and Codes so women of all ages can learn to grapple with Jewish texts. Judging from the school's phenomenal rate of growth since it first opened its doors in September 1980—from two students on the first day to 130 students in this year's spring semester—it appears that Drisha is beginning to fill the void of serious programs of part-time study for Jewish women.

Drisha, taking its name from the Hebrew word meaning "investigation," originally offered an equal number of courses on beginners, intermediate and advanced levels. In response to the calibre of student the school has attracted in its first year and a half, the majority of the courses this semester are on an advanced level. The most advanced courses require previous experience in learning the original texts with traditional commentaries.

The three introductory courses, "Introduction to the Study of Chumash," "The Festivals—A Study of the Laws" and "Mishnaic Methodology and Analysis," concentrate on fewer commentaries and utilize English translations of the texts.

Preparation Time and Group Instruction

Scheduled class time is divided between one period for individual or paired (*chevruta*) preparation, when students attempt to understand the assigned material, followed by group instruction, a style of teaching common in Yeshivas for men.

The content of the courses is mainly geared to the traditional domain of Orthodox women. For example, the courses in Codes include "Laws of Kashruth" and "Laws of the Festivals; with particular emphasis on the specific obligations of women." The most unique features of these courses are the use of texts not usually taught to women (i.e. *Gemara, Shulchan Aruch*) and the overall goal of training women to use halachic texts on their own for their practical applications.

Many of the women are basically self-taught, and finding each other in classes at Drisha creates an atmosphere of camaraderie. "They thought they were the only ones in the world doing this," Silber says.

To accommodate the schedules of working women, college students and housewives, classes are held primarily in the evenings, with a few offered from 9 to 12 in the morning and one on Sunday. Classes generally meet once a week for two or two and a half hours, with very advanced classes meeting twice a week.

Top-Notch Students

Rabbi Silber, who is also involved in the Lincoln Square Synagogue educa-



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A student prepares by herself before group instruction.

tional program, extols his students above any other aspect of the school. "The real building blocks are the students. Educationally speaking, these students are top-notch." Silber credits the "Women Only" policy with filtering out those students who might be more interested in socializing than study and leaves only the serious, motivated pupils.

Many of the women have recently returned from a year or two of Yeshiva study in Israel, and Drisha is one of the few places they can continue their studies on a part-time basis. Approximately 80 percent attended Yeshiva high schools.

Barnard College students, who live approximately 30 blocks away, make up half of the school's population. The majority of the other students are young professionals in their 20s or early 30s, and several older women with families. One particular class in Talmud has three students, all with doctoral degrees. A random sample of the students present one evening included a news assistant at WIIN, a dental student at N.Y.U., a computer programmer for AT&T and a Jewish Agency employee.

Being Status of Jewish Teachers

The staff of four part-time and two full-time teachers includes one woman. Silber admits that he would "bend over backwards to hire women, perhaps even

if I might not hire a man with the same credentials, but there are few women who can qualify to teach these high-level studies."

Drisha is funded by individual donations, which account for 70 percent of the budget, and student tuition. Expenditures for advertising are minimal and recruiting has been done by "word of mouth." Staff salaries are relatively high for Jewish education, in an effort to bring a degree of recognition and professionalism to the field. Despite difficulties in raising funds, Silber is optimistic that as long as there are students who want to learn and a program with a reputation for quality, individuals in the Jewish community will continue to give financial support.

In-reach vs. Out-reach

The basic principle that guides the development of the school is a commitment to "in-reach" as opposed to "out-reach" in the Jewish community. Silber contends that the overall pay-off for meeting the intellectual needs of involved Jewish women is considerably greater than extensive, expensive programs that struggle to reach thousands of unaffiliated Jews with a diluted form of Judaism. Immediate plans for expansion include a full-time summer program, June 22 to July 30, for 15 to 20 advanced students. Only women who will commit themselves to the entire six-week session will be allowed to participate.

Education Causes Changes

Teaching women in a manner and on a level usually reserved for men could be seen as a challenge to traditional male-female roles in Judaism. Rabbi Silber suggests that these educated women may help to shift the focus of the Jewish community away from the synagogue service to the *Bets Medrash* and education in general. In addition, he posits that the Orthodox community may eventually need to develop a new form of official recognition for women who have reached a high level of Jewish knowledge, similar to *semicha* (ordination) for men. He contends that women's desire to learn must be acknowledged and the inevitable effects on society dealt with in turn. "If women are involved in society, going to college and even getting Ph.D.s, then they can't be expected to be Jewish with a second grade Jewish education."

