

DAVID SILBER



Opening Traditional Texts to Women

The Jewish community must prepare its best people to become its educational leaders, whether men or

women," says Rabbi David Silber. "Since women lacked the opportunities to pursue the requisite studies for a career in education, I founded the Drisha Institute to fill the gap."

The Drisha Institute for Jewish Education, which opened ten years ago, enables women of all Jewish denominations and levels of learning to study biblical and rabbinic texts intensively and at an advanced level, full time or part time. Classes are held at the East Side Institutional Synagogue in Manhattan. Most of Drisha's students are in college or are college graduates; most of the faculty are professors at nearby universities, including Yeshiva University, Touro College and New York University.

Drisha teaches traditional texts using innovative methods. With the goal of cultivating future Jewish educators, classes emphasize *how* one should study Jewish texts. A semester's curriculum is usually centered on a major halachic theme, for example labor relations or the laws of mourning. In addition, there are weekly seminars dealing with methodologies used to study the diverse genres of Jewish literature, as well as instructions

on how to utilize research aids and bibliographical tools.

Non-observant women find relevant to their lives courses such as Problems in Jewish Ethics, which discusses Jewish approaches to such ethical questions as abortion, euthanasia and suicide. Also popular is a Talmud class covering the eighth chapter of *Sanhedrin*, which deals with questions of justifiable homicide and other issues concerning the relative importance of human life.

Each year, ten women who are considering a career in Jewish education receive a full scholarship and a \$7,500 stipend for a year of full-time study at Drisha. The school also offers a six-week Summer Institute for short-term, intensive study. In 1987, Silber started a program for gifted high school students. "It became clear to me that if the most gifted young women were to be persuaded to pursue careers in education, they had to be infused with a love of learning at a young age," says Silber. The five-week high school program encourages a passion for inquiry and develops tools to analyze texts.

But Silber still felt that there were women his institute wasn't reaching. So

he inaugurated a Teacher Enrichment Program, which is still in the pilot phase. Aimed at both women and men who are already in the teaching profession, the TEP is an in-service program. Drisha instructors visit Jewish schools of all denominations and expose teachers to creative approaches to biblical and rabbinic texts.

"Through honest and open inquiry Rabbi Silber challenges us to become thinking Jews and to pass on our insights to others," says a Drisha student. "His classes stress that the Jewish family and the Jewish people can prosper only when each of us helps to reaffirm and renew our tradition."