

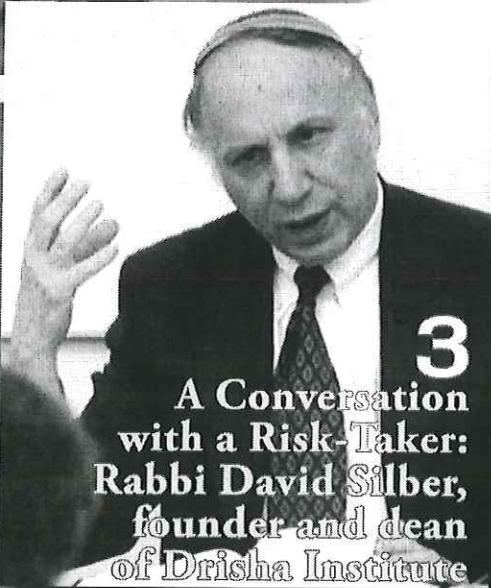
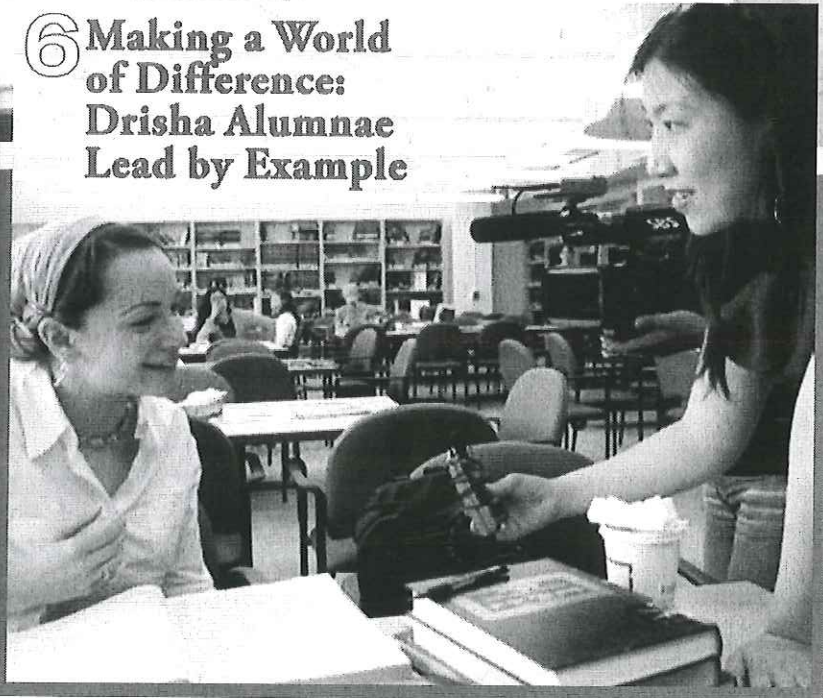
דרישה

DRISHA: INTO THE FUTURE



drisha (dri' sha), deep inquiry, seeking, searching out a meaning

6 Making a World of Difference: Drisha Alumnae Lead by Example



3

A Conversation with a Risk-Taker: Rabbi David Silber, founder and dean of Drisha Institute

inside:

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On The Cover: Miriam Gedwiser (left) and Ethel Goldberg, students in the Drisha Scholars Circle, learn in the Beit Midrash

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A conversation with a risk-taker: rabbi david silber, founder and dean of Drisha Institute

You're seen as a risk taker. How has that approach worked for Drisha?

Playing it safe is not the way to break fresh ground. The role of an institution is to figure out what the community needs, and pave the way. We've been successful in doing what hasn't been done before, and stimulating others to follow. For example, we started a full-time learning program in 1984, the high school program in 1988 and the Scholars Circle in 1991 — all programs that were way ahead of their time. At the end of the day it's about service. Institutions exist to serve people.

How has your thinking about Drisha changed over the last 25-plus years?

Early on, I tended to distinguish the learning from the political and social reality, but I don't do that anymore. It's very much connected to women finding a place in society — issues of control and power which transcend the Jewish community and are universal. The real question is how can the community move forward and provide itself with the best kind of spiritual leadership.

I also have a much broader view of what it means to study Torah, and how different points of view have a lot to teach us. No one has the whole truth. I see great value in people talking and understanding each other's approaches to the text.

What's an area where belief and practice may conflict?

Prayer is one. For example, if you go into a synagogue Saturday morning and walk out three hours later and wonder what actually happened, that's a very important question. If the answer is "not much," then something's wrong.

The idea of living as a commanded being — that the world doesn't revolve around us and that we are here to serve — is very central to me and to Drisha. What's important is not my feelings or my self-esteem, but rather taking responsibility. I would like to see a more reflective and committed Jewish community, and I think education is a big part of that.

What do you mean by a more committed community?

A healthy community has within it several communities. If there's only one line, it doesn't get challenged and, consequently, it doesn't improve. I'm a capitalist and I think competition is good, and we can all learn from the next person. If someone has an idea, he or she should defend it rationally and be willing to take criticism. At Drisha, we want our students to make informed decisions about themselves and their communities, with an understanding of what Jewish tradition and practice has been about.

What are some issues that arise at Drisha?

Although specific issues do emerge about very discrete roles for men and women in the traditional community, the feminist critique is more about how the Torah seems to be addressed to the men about the women.

Separate but equal is not equal, and women are not equal in any event. They are separate certainly, in terms of participation in prayer and exemption from mitzvot. These issues also have carry-over effects on how women see themselves, how men see women. Those are deeply troubling for me. Working towards bridging the gap is something I believe is important, and there is a big upside. The more opportunities you give people to be full participants, the more people will step forward. For example, if men and women are equally involved in prayer, you have better prayer.

What do you mean by "better prayer?"

More engaged prayer. It's about being fully present. That people bring themselves, their bodies, minds, spirit; that we work collaboratively to figure out how we can move forward as a religious community.

Does education have an impact on prayer?

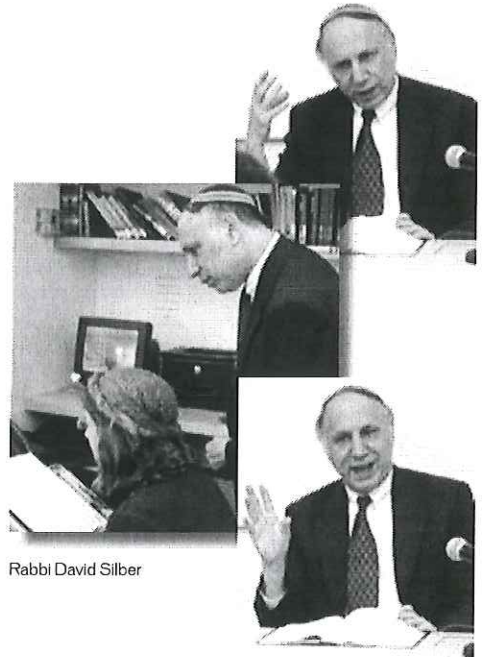
It helps. It's important to know the meaning of prayer, to understand more fully the ideas

embodied in prayer and what it signifies in terms of service. There are a lot of ways to pray: You can get attached to the Torah reading, the intellectual piece; you can get deeply involved in introspective prayer. And there are different ways to get a sense of one's self, not so much from the words but from meditation and music. It's easy to just go through the motions but that doesn't take you any place. Prayer is a tremendous opportunity. That people care deeply about it is a good step toward authentic religious experiences. The more we get engaged, the better we are. Everyone has to pray. It has to do with the human condition.

What makes Drisha different from other places where women can learn?

Where Drisha differs from other places is that we have on our agenda the empowerment

of women. It's not enough to give women equal access to the texts. We want them to have leadership opportunities equal to men, and jobs where they can fully maximize their God-given talents. I believe this not because I'm a feminist, but because I love the Jewish people. ♦



Rabbi David Silber

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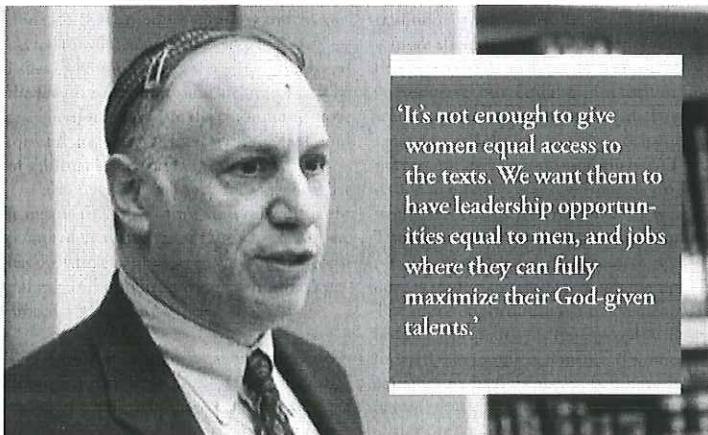
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'It's not enough to give women equal access to the texts. We want them to have leadership opportunities equal to men, and jobs where they can fully maximize their God-given talents.'

How do you teach women confidence and love of learning? start when they're 11 years old.

BY SANDEE BRAWARSKY

Fifteen-year-old Rebecca Linfield broke the silence that fell over the Riverdale congregation one Shabbat morning when it was asked if someone would like to give a dvar Torah.

"I have something to say," she volunteered, and stepped forward.

"She was incredible on her feet, and people really enjoyed her talk," recalled Sally Mendelsohn, a regular at the minyan.

Linfield is one of 23 bright and motivated girls who took part in Drisha's five-week Summer High School Program last July. The girls hailed from around the country and from Israel, from Jewish schools as well as private and public schools. Some had studied Gemara before while others came to it for the first time.

The rigorous program of study — now in its 17th year — features three hours of Talmud study five mornings a week, with a daily shiur and havruta. Other classes include Bible, Jewish Law and Parashat HaShavua and an optional evening class on chasidic thought. Over the course of the summer, each girl chooses a topic and, with guidance from a faculty member, researches and writes a dvar Torah.

Wendy Amsellem, who directs the program, said, "We want the girls to be exposed to intense Jewish learning, to have time to work through the text and

to see themselves as independent learners." Each summer, she sees the girls gain in self-confidence, as their learning and their ideas are taken seriously.

The program isn't limited to study. One afternoon a week, the girls did a community service project coordinated with Dorot where they visited neighborhood senior citizens, providing them with company and computer skills training. On a second afternoon, the girls had a sports program that includes a Drisha version of color war.

Students also enjoyed getting to know Manhattan, taking in many special events the city has to offer. They attended Shakespeare in Central Park and an outdoor movie in Bryant Park, went on a walking tour of Greenwich Village and rode the Staten Island ferry at sunset. On Shabbat they visited nearby communities like Riverdale and Teaneck, N.J. "We want our students to have a full New York experience," Amsellem said.

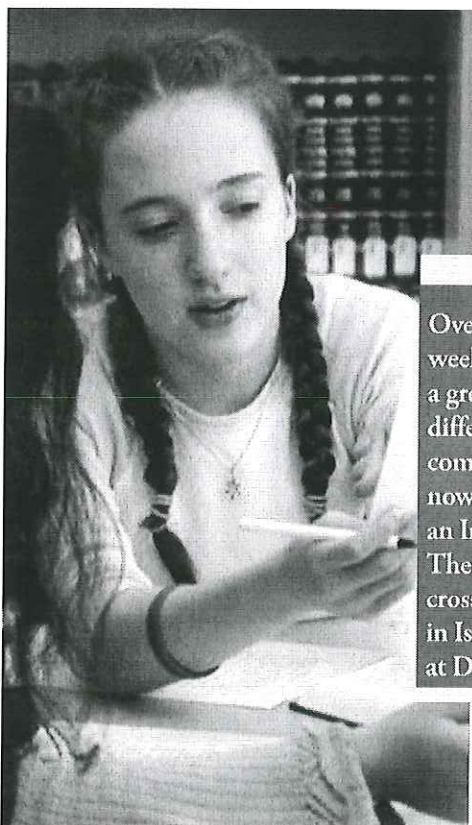
Over the course of just five weeks, the girls shifted from a group of teenagers of different backgrounds to a community of friends. They now keep in touch through an Internet user group. Their paths are likely to cross again later, perhaps in Israel, at college or again at Drisha.

"Drisha is one of these experiences that stays with you forever," said 15-year-old Mitzi Steiner of Los Angeles, who came back for a second summer and brought two friends with her. "I wanted to go beyond the classroom in my religious studies. Alumni told me I would get a new perspective on Talmud Torah and also make friends for life. They were right."

"I never anticipated the incredible group of people I would meet from all religious and geographic backgrounds," Steiner added. "Our teachers were wonderful and enthusiastic about getting to know us and be our mentors."

Reflecting on the program, Rachel Furst, one of the Gemara teachers said, "Regardless of their backgrounds, the girls are used to being told what the material they're studying means. Here, they gain the ability to engage a text and come into their

15-year old Mitzi Steiner of Los Angeles returned for a second summer of learning at Drisha and brought two friends with her.



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Teenage girls from across the US and Israel learn together in the Drisha Summer High School Program



own interpretation, to think and reflect upon that. It's incredible to see this in action."

The staff and adult Drisha students can't help but be moved by the girls' enthusiasm, dedication and spirit. "Everybody who works here loves the high school program. The kids feel it and know that Drisha is their place, and they can always come back," Amsellem said.

After the students return home, parents often write and call Drisha to express their enthusiasm and appreciation. One mother, Bracha Jaffe, wrote from Raanana, Israel, "If you ask my daughter Meital, the operative word about her experience at Drisha was amazing. If you ask me, a more thoughtful and mature young lady returned to Israel. I can't thank Drisha enough for broadening her horizons, introducing her to the world of Gemara, respecting her love of knowledge, and providing her with an opportunity to learn and to be with other girls who enjoy learning."

When asked about how the program measures success, Rabbi David Silber, founder and dean of Drisha replied, "It's about learning, not about how much material they cover. The really important goal is to have the students make a deeper connection to their tradition and to the Jewish people. These girls are the future."

"The high school program is life changing," Rabbi Silber said. "Society tells girls about what they can and can't do. It's important to let these girls know that Jewish education is an exciting opportunity, that lifelong study of Torah is possible, that they can enjoy this and make great contributions. We want to get to them when they're younger as opposed to college, when they've already made choices."

During the year, Drisha reaches out through a weeklong learning program for high school girls as well as the "Bat Mitzvah and Beyond" program for 11- to 13-year-old girls and their families, and tutor-matching services. This fall, Shuli Sandler, a graduate of the Drisha Scholars Circle who is pursuing a doctorate in clinical psychology, taught about biblical

from drisha to harvard and back (again)

wendy amsellem first came to drisha as a teenager in the summer high school program. after earning her bachelor's in history and literature from harvard university, she left harvard law to study in the drisha scholars circle. today, she is the director of high school programs at drisha, and is pursuing a doctorate in judaic studies at new york university.

I was 16 when my grandfather heard about Drisha for the first time. He had seen an ad for the Drisha Summer High School program and he was instantly sure that this was where I should spend my summer. I was less immediately convinced – I still thought of school as a chore – but I agreed to try it and in doing so began a profoundly transformative experience.



Learning in the Drisha Summer High School Program was unlike anything I had done before. Because I had made the choice to attend, the learning felt different. I wasn't studying for a test or because I needed to get into college. I was learning because I wanted to know more. Even better, I was sitting in a room full of other girls who were there for the same reason. Many of them had come from places I had never been (I remember

Urbana, Ill., sounding distinctly far away) and there was a special sweetness in friendships formed on the basis of Torah lishmah, study for its own sake.

Most significantly though, the teachers made us believe that our learning was significant – for ourselves, for the Jewish people, for the world. This imbued our studies with a sense of purpose and led us to feel that we were engaged in a timeless project that was critically important and larger than ourselves.

Many things have changed about the high school program since I first attended it in 1991. Students now live together in a dorm at the 92nd Street Y. Counselors, evening activities and Shabbatons add interpersonal and spiritual dimensions to the program. Weekly afternoons of community service and sports enhance the curriculum. In December, young women have additional study opportunities at the High School Winter Week of Learning.

As the director of the program, I am part of a team that constantly tries to expand the program and make it even more innovative and creative. Yet, I think that the elements that drew me in 14 years ago – the independent learning, the community of friends and the sense of being an important part of the larger national endeavor of Talmud Torah – these continue to be the mainstays of the Drisha Summer High School program and the reason why each summer high school girls continue to be inspired and transformed at Drisha. My colleagues and I are, in turn, inspired by them. ♦ WA

role models in a six-part course titled "Our Mothers, Ourselves."

In December, Drisha hosted a Sunday learning program on Chanukah for families. This month, Adira Netzel-Abramson is teaching a three-part class on the Shema and its blessings. A new initiative with an on-line component is in the planning stage.

"When hnot mitzvah can take on an independent learning project, with a group of girls from different schools and backgrounds, they have a greater sense of responsibility," said Sandler. "They capture this spiritual time in their lives in a way that adds to their family or communal celebration."

Each time she teaches the class, Sandler witnesses an uncommon bonding between mothers and daughters, and among the families in the room who find they really enjoy the chance to learn together. Sandler is also gratified that the experience is transformative for the students. It's not unusual

for her to hear that a bat mitzvah stood up at her celebration and talked about how her Drisha class on prayer changed the way she davens (prays).

"We present an educational experience where you can be serious and you can have a great time. It's electric, and people really want to be here," Rabbi Silber said. ♦



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Making a world of difference: drisha alumnae lead by example

BY EVA L. WEISS

When Sara Hurwitz was a college student, a career guidance test indicated that her strength was pastoral counseling and that she should consider a profession in the clergy.



Sara Hurwitz (top) and Leebie Mallin are graduates of the Drisha Scholars Circle who are breaking new ground in Jewish communal life.



At the time, she shrugged off the recommendation with a laugh. It seemed beyond the realm of possibility for a young Orthodox Jewish woman. Today, Hurwitz, a graduate of Drisha's Scholars Circle, is a religious mentor, a newly envisioned position at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. She recalls that last winter, her congregants felt she cut a striking figure when she addressed them at a Sabbath service in the last month of her pregnancy. Hurwitz hopes that by the time her twin boys are older, the image will be far more commonplace.

Seventy-one year-old Drisha student Esther Rivka Wolpert summons an image from her past when she contemplates her Jewish learning. She recalls her late grandfather, and wonders how he might react if he could see her immersed in holy texts in Drisha's beit midrash. She imagines his first response might be discomfort, but she believes he would be overtaken by pride. Wolpert feels that being a student at Drisha is an integral part of the process that led her to a second career as a hospice chaplain. A range of experiences — from Rabbi Silber's analysis of Biblical figures to women's Purim megillah readings — have contributed to the profound appreciation of Jewish heritage that she brings to her new vocation.

If there is a common thread in the experience of Drisha's diverse students, it is the seminal encounter with Jewish texts. When Rabbi David Silber founded the Drisha Institute in 1979, the aim was to create a center for advanced Jewish learning that would open the door for women to achieve their full potential as scholars and educators. The challenge has been met by thousands of women from all walks of life who have reaped the academic and spiritual benefits of in-depth learning with mentors and peers in Drisha's Beit Mi-



drash. The capacity to study Talmud and gain access to centuries of rabbinic discourse has been a catalyst for Drisha scholars to define their place and role in the Jewish community. This quest has made Drisha a resource for Jewish intellectual growth in communities across North America and beyond, and in countries from Uruguay and France to, of course, Israel.

Joe Toledano, director of the Andre Neher Institute in Paris, the leading Jewish pedagogical center, says that the French community is only beginning to realize the value of enabling women to study Mishna and Talmud. When Deborah Boudjnah, a member of his staff, enrolled in Drisha's Beit Midrash program, he saw it as a welcome opportunity to expand horizons.

Boudjnah felt her Drisha studies enabled her to gain insight into the dialectical mode of thought, which women often miss out on: "If you struggle with a Gemara text, you will absorb it more effectively than if you learn it in a philosophy class."

When Toledano and his colleagues visited Drisha, they found a learning center



The seminal encounter with Jewish texts and the diversity of students are a central part of the Drisha experience.

The capacity to study Talmud, and gain access to centuries of rabbinic discourse has been a catalyst for Drisha scholars to define their place and role in the Jewish community, across North America and beyond.

that "offers a place for everyone." They were deeply impressed with the new approaches to analyzing and interpreting texts that Boudjnah had gained through her Drisha studies. They anticipate that Boudjnah will apply these gains to developing new curricula in Oral Law studies for girls in Jewish schools in France. Toledano observed, "So many ambitions for secular studies are being realized by women. It would be a loss if we do not make progress in Jewish studies."

Closer to home, Leehie Mallin, a graduate of the Drisha Scholars Circle, may be the first Orthodox woman to become a Hillel director at an American college. As the solo Jewish professional at the College of Staten Island, she takes a multifaceted approach to enriching Jewish identity among students. In exploring issues from the environment and social justice to stem-cell research, Jewish students, regardless of their background, can relate to the texts that Mallin brings to the fore in their discussions and projects. For students participating in Hillel International's anti-hunger campaign, a quotation from the Book of Deuteronomy (15:7, 8) resonates strongly: "If there is among you a poor man, one of your brethren . . . you shall not harden your heart . . . but you shall open your hand to him, and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be."

Riverdale's Hurwitz recalls that when she led the internship program for graduates of Drisha's Scholars Circle, Jewish organizations in New York were pleased to bring knowledgeable Orthodox women into their ranks. Mallin also feels that the communal world recognizes the need for more leaders able to share an in-depth knowledge of Jewish heritage.



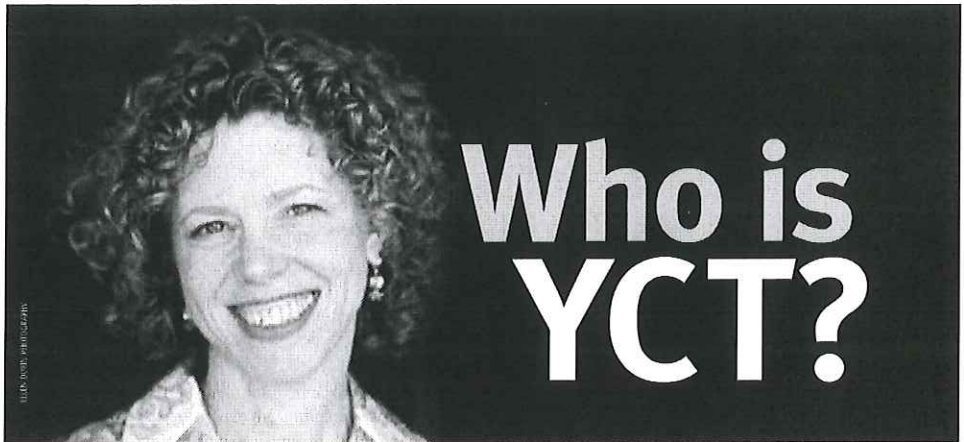
Drisha Scholar Lisa Wolf Bennett is interviewed for a Korean documentary on Jewish education, and was also featured on PBS television.

While Hurwitz and Mallin know that they are breaking new ground, they acknowledge the ambiguity of not having a commonly recognized title or degree to define their roles. As a spiritual mentor in an Orthodox synagogue, Hurwitz comforts mourners with words of Torah and ensures the minyan for families sitting shiva in her congregation, yet she herself may not be counted in the prayer quorum. Mallin believes that when communal leaders observe Drisha graduates at work, "actions speak louder than words, yet there are moments when it is awkward not to have the conventional title or diploma."

However, this dilemma is not an insuperable barrier for Drisha alumnae in pursuing their core goals. Ilana Fodiman-Silverman defined her work as chair of Judaic studies

at the Jewish Community High School in San Francisco, with these words: "I share the vision of Jewish community grounded in the fundamental values of education and mutual respect."

Hurwitz draws inspiration from the character of Yalta, the wife of the Talmudic sage Rabbi Nahman. She first encountered Yalta when learning Talmud at Drisha, and to this day, she sees her as a role model. "Yalta was a woman who challenged the rabbis, yet she remained within the tradition." In more mundane moments, Hurwitz recalls the elderly man who greeted her skeptically when she explained her role at his nursing home. After participating in her first class, he remarked, "I forgot you weren't a rabbi." ♦



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One stop with an abundance of uncommon choices

BY MARTHA MENDELSON

Would you like to take a course at Drisha from your home, your office, or aboard a commuter train?

Drisha will soon contribute its own "Mishnah Yomit," a program modeled after the worldwide Talmud "Daf Yomi." Students will log on to the Internet to study two units of Mishnah a day, in English and Hebrew, completing the cycle in six years.

Drisha's Mishnah Yomit will be part of the larger Mishnah initiative begun in 2004 in memory of the late Rifka Rosenwein, a Jewish Week columnist and former Drisha student.

"Mishnah is an excellent entry point for people to get involved in the study of Torah She'ba'el Peh," said Rabbi David Silber, dean and founder of Drisha, referring to the Oral Torah. "By exposing people to traditional and academic approaches, we hope to create a more powerful community of learners."

Rabbi Silber is shaping this initiative together with Rabbi Avie Walfish, an expert on the discrete internal structure of the Mishnah who has published widely on the conceptual and spiritual issues as well.

Rigorous academic analysis will enhance traditional interpretations of the first recording of the Oral Law, the 63 "simple but dense" tractates compiled by Yehudah HaNasi around 200 CE, which make up the first part of the Talmud.

Thorny questions will be tackled. Is the Mishnah a code? Is it commentary? How does it relate to earlier texts?



The Beit Midrash at Drisha is alive with the energy of people learning in havruta and in classes, day and night.

Women will be involved in both learning and teaching the Mishnah, Rabbi Silber said.

Thanks to Drisha and other study centers that have followed its lead in cracking the parchment ceiling of advanced Torah study, qualified female Talmud teachers are no longer a rarity.

Each new program is a "calculated risk," said Judith Tenzer, Drisha's program director. "We're not afraid to experiment."

For example, last summer Drisha introduced Matmidot, a full-time program of advanced study in Talmud only, in addition to its three-year Scholars Circle, one-year Beit Midrash program, Yesodot program and HaSha'ar teacher training track.

Five hundred women register for Drisha's continuing education classes every fall, winter, and summer, and more than 1,000 people attend coed community programs and classes — many are free — which take place in Drisha's airy, well-appointed space, where light seems to pour over volumes of the Talmud even on cloudy days.

snapshot of choices

Rabbi David Silber's legendary continuing education course on Parashat HaShavua usually covers the weekly Torah portion, but last summer students read the Book of Judges and the story of Samson.

Weaving connections to other Bible stories and welcoming students' comments to pursue "an unmediated experience in which you look at the text yourself," Silber suggested that Samson is driven by a basic human need "to confess, to tell the truth" when he reveals the source of his strength to Delilah. "It's hard to live in silence; he's in a situation where he just can't take it anymore."

Next, in her class on BaMidbar (Numbers), Rachel Friedman, director of the Yesodot skill-building program, contrasted the way human behavior is viewed before and after the giving of the Torah.

Genesis, which focuses on individuals, "tells the story of women struggling to support and protect their families — and to find a parking spot for their cattle," Friedman said.

"The Mesopotamian Shidduch Scene," taught by Yehudit Robinson, a graduate of Drisha's HaSha'ar program for future Jewish educators, explored the role played by the biblical version of the water cooler — the well — in the social life of biblical singles.

Presenting the Bible's heroes as flesh-and-blood human beings is a hallmark of Drisha teaching. Too often, "there's a tendency to idealize our ancestors or to paint them as all good or all bad," but in Drisha classes, "we're not afraid to look at their flaws," said Surie Rudoff Sugarman, a 51-year-old lawyer, who takes Silber's and Friedman's classes (sometimes with her mother Judy Rudoff), and jokes that she builds her work schedule around her Drisha schedule.

Students often find it helpful to fit a skill-building class into their schedule. Pointing out that Hebrew vowels are only 1,500 years old, Rabbi Yitzhak Berger deconstructed their complexities in his fall Biblical Hebrew beginner's class. Did you know that our forebears pronounced the letter ayin with a guttural cluck?

In a coed Rosh HaShanah class about the banishment and retrieval of Ishmael, Wendy Amsellem, Drisha's director of high school programs, called the way Abraham's

firstborn is supplanted by Isaac "every sibling's nightmare." But God answers Ishmael's prayers, which is why the reading is particularly suited to Rosh HaShanah, Amsellem said.

Sensitivity to women's needs has led Drisha to fill community and family needs as well, by offering High Holy Day programs and prayer services, lunchtime and evening lectures and courses that focus on life-cycle events such as the bat mitzvah, marriage and engagements.

Adam Emmerich, a lawyer, began attending Drisha High Holy Day services as a college student in the 1980s. "People don't just stay there for two hours and go home. They're really focused on praying," said Emmerich, whose daughter recently learned Torah trop for her bat mitzvah with a Drisha Scholars Circle graduate.

The services, which now take place at the Abraham Joshua Heschel School and draw over 500 participants, include a service in which women read Torah, as



The Maida Katz Memorial Lecture with James Kugel on "Natural Disaster in the Biblical World: The Hand of God?"

well as a traditional minyan.

Lecture series and lunchtime classes feature prominent scholars and academics. Lecturing last year on "the subject of women" in Genesis, Leon Kass, chairman of the President's Council on Bioethics and the author of "The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis," called it "a thrill" to speak to an audience "who knew the texts really well. Their questions were as fine as any I've ever heard. I was impressed by the combination of learning, thoughtfulness and openness." Leon Kass said.

Rabbi Robyn Tsesarsky, who was ordained at the Reform movement's Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, found an open-minded, accepting atmosphere when she studied in havruta, or partnership, with a diverse group of women last year as part of Rachel Friedman's Parshanot, or biblical exegesis, class. "It wasn't about my being a rabbi so much as a person who really wanted to study and learn," Rabbi Tsesarsky said.

Open, frank discussions typify "Let the Loving Couple Rejoice," a class for engaged couples taught by Shuli Sandler, a doctoral candidate in psychology and Drisha Scholar, and her husband, Ben Sandler, a software developer.

Learning the laws surrounding sexual relations "allowed for an important avenue of communication to be opened between my wife and me," said Alon Kol, a medical student, who took the course with his wife, Yamit Alpern-Kol, before their marriage last June.

"Now we both have the same point of reference," said Alpern-Kol, a health educator.

In "Our Mothers, Ourselves," a Sunday bat mitzvah preparation program, Rachelle Bitton, a physician, and her 12-year-old daughter Daniela, a Ramaz student, explored the meaning of ritualized prayer for women.

Bitton's three older daughters have also studied at Drisha, and her husband, Avi, happily attended a Father's Day learning program for families.

The entire family is committed to Drisha's mandate as an institution specially geared for women. "My husband is very involved in the concept of letting women do everything they can in careers and religion," Rachelle Bitton said. ♦

Forget the day job, for now: options to learn, morning to night

BY YAFA WHITE

In a book-lined room overlooking Lincoln Center, there's a lively hum of Aramaic at all hours of the day and night.

Around each table, women learn in pairs in the Drisha Beit Midrash, adding their voices to the chorus of men who traditionally preside over the study of Talmud.

"Talmud has been the gold standard of what it means to learn," says Rabbi David Silber, founder and dean of Drisha Institute. "Life can be devoted just to the study of Talmud."

Now women are coming from as far as Israel to study Talmud, 12 hours a day, in Matmidot, the newest of the full-time learning programs at Drisha.

"The focus on advanced Talmud study is just what I was looking for," said 21-year-old Yedidah Koren from Jerusalem. She aspires to be a Talmid Chaham, a scholar, and also master Halakha LeMaase, the practical application of Jewish law. With a resume of published articles on topics such as "Priorities in Saving Lives" and "Elisha Ben Abuya: A Comparison of the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds," she is currently authoring entries for the Encyclopedia Judaica.

"Judaism has an ancient tradition of not only performing the law, but analyzing its concepts and texts," says Koren. "Participating in this tradition enhances my feeling of being a Jew."

In addition to the experience of intensive study and accomplishment in the Matmidot Program, Koren mentions a less ancient benefit. "It's also good to network with women who share my interests and goals, yet are so different from me in their age, culture and views about life."

This diversity raises awareness that full access to Jewish texts is new for women.

"As a former Bais Yaakov girl, it's something of a

"It's a spark that happens when you engage with the teacher and go back and forth, delving into the topic."

shock to me that I'm doing this," says Shayna Rhodes, mother of four and a rabbinical student at Hebrew College in Newton, Mass. "Despite the fact that I'm approaching 50, and the sea of Talmud is vast and deep, I would like to spend the rest of my life learning and teaching."

Rhodes describes Matmidot as "an amazing experience of complete immersion," where each of the rabbis used their own teaching method to bring the Talmud to life. She added, "It's still thrilling for me to see a Beit Midrash filled with women. It's not something I take for granted."

The concept for the Matmidot program evolved from a series of conversations that Sarah Goldberg, a student at Columbia University, initiated with Rabbi Silber last winter.

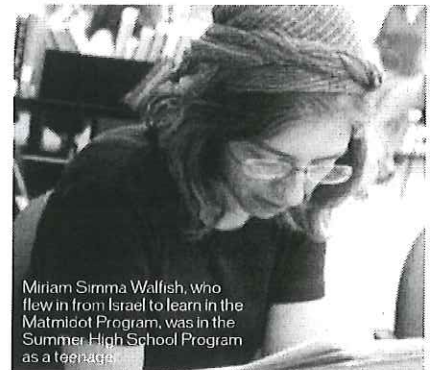
"The idea was to bring together dedicated women who want a place to learn Gemara in depth with other women who would both challenge and strengthen them," said Goldberg.

After spending the summer in Matmidot, Miriam Gedwiser opted to leave her job as a math teacher and enroll in the three-year Drisha Scholars Circle. "This was the first thing I was excited about in a long time," Gedwiser said.

Students are not the only ones who revel in the serious but open-minded environment. Faculty member Rabbi Daniel Reifman says he loves the freedom to approach material in a new way and design the kind of Gemara and halacha classes he wished for as a student. "In halacha, I focus on the tension and interplay between the sources, and the historical context in the development of halacha," Reifman explained.

"With Gemara, it's important to think about the case law and the function it serves, to anticipate the questions of the commentators — and to have students come up with their own questions," said Reifman. He encourages his students to put the issues in a broader religious and ethical context without losing sight of the technical issues at hand.

The drive to struggle with ideas is energizing and creates a spirit of teamwork, says Frayda Gonshor, a second-year student in the Scholars Circle. "There's



Miriam Simma Walfish, who flew in from Israel to learn in the Matmidot Program, was in the Summer High School Program as a teenager.

a chemistry with teachers at Drisha," she said. "It's a spark that happens when you engage with the teacher and go back and forth, delving into the topic."

Gonshor also enjoys the opportunity to teach as a congregational intern at the Hebrew Institute of White Plains. She finds there is a growing recognition of her as a woman leader. "People are paying attention to what I say, and are no longer just shocked that I'm speaking," Gonshor observed.

Teaching is also part of the bigger picture for Lisa Wolf Bennett, who will graduate from the Scholars Circle this spring. "My heart is with the middle school and high school kids," she said, referring to her teaching experience at Prozdor, a supplementary school program run by the Jewish Theological Seminary. "When you introduce kids to the tradition of Jewish texts, you can follow an idea from the Torah through the 21st century," she said. "I encourage my students to add their voice."

Wolf Bennett plans to pursue graduate studies in education and biology and teach classes in the sciences and Jewish studies. She wants to help her students "integrate different truths and connect the dots so they see Judaism as part of their entire life."

The integrated approach to teaching also resonates with Carmit Delman, who is studying Talmud, Bible and halacha in the one-year Beit Midrash program. A professor of creative writing at Chester College in New Hampshire, Delman says, "I would like to create a new curriculum for Jewish day schools that combines creative writing ideas and exercises with the larger Jewish learning process."

Delman, the author of "Burnt Bread and Chutney: A Memoir of an Indian Jewish Girl," first came to Drisha during the five-week Summer Institute of full-time learning in Talmud, halacha, Biblical Hebrew and philosophy. She discovered it opened new vistas for her and chose to attend the Beit Midrash program during her sabbatical leave last fall.

Sometimes the hardest adjustment is leaving Drisha. Nathalie Tenenbaum of Paris came to Drisha last summer to study full time, and is now back home completing her doctorate.

"When I try to describe to close friends what I've learned at Drisha, they immediately think I've been converted to Reform Judaism during my stay in the U.S.," she recounted. "French rabbis and even some women are profoundly reluctant to be seen as 'lenient' and so studying Talmud is a contested privilege in Paris."

Tenenbaum added, "I am dreaming of the opportunity to come back to Drisha."

Devorah Zlochower, Rosh Beit Midrash, commented, "Our students really go through a spiritual and intellectual journey, a revelation of themselves as Jewish women. It's very satisfying to take part in this tremendous progression." ♦



Orly Lieberman, Drisha Scholar, learning with Nathalie Tenenbaum who came from Paris to study in the Drisha Summer Institute.

Exegesis for beginners

BY EVA L. WEISS

It takes courage for an accomplished adult to take on the challenge of learning Jewish texts as a beginner," says Rachel Friedman, director of the Drisha Yesodot program.

With admiration, she describes how a small group of women asked Drisha to help them learn the fundamentals of Biblical Hebrew ten years ago — and their request was the impetus for the establishment of the Yesodot (Foundations) Program.

Today, scores of women are enrolled in the program, and the first class has long since graduated from basic language skills to an in-depth study of biblical exegesis and Talmud. Many others have joined, motivated by their desire to gain insight into biblical narratives and law through a shared learning experience.

intentional murder of his brother Abel, and the significance of blood vengeance and asylum, is led by Friedman, who traded in her legal career to pursue advanced Jewish studies. Her students range from grandmothers to younger women immersed in raising families and pursuing careers in fields from education and psychology to dentistry and business. All wholeheartedly devote five hours of their week to classes. They are deeply loyal to the dialectical method of study and their beloved instructor.

Friedman, in turn, admires her students' enthusiasm and resolve. "This isn't a lecture class. It's about developing the skills to grapple



Rachel Friedman, director of the Yesodot skill-building program at Drisha.

'This isn't a lecture class. It's about developing the skills to grapple with texts.'

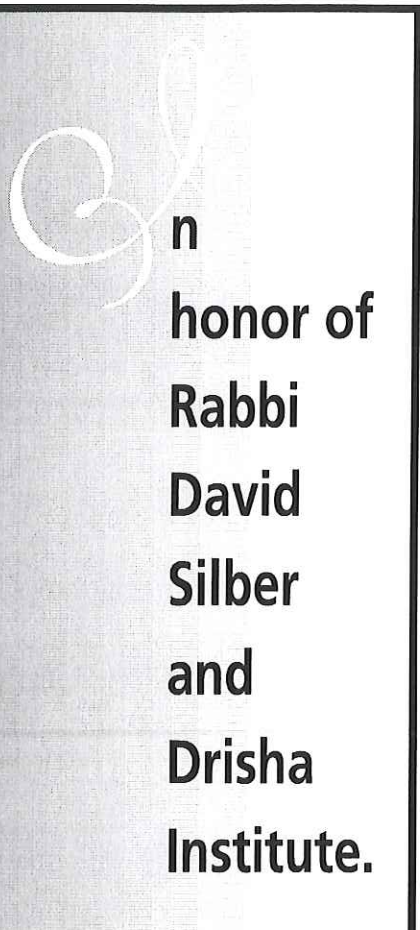
A core group has studied together in the biblical exegesis class for a number of years. As student Elizabeth Leiman Kraiem puts it, "In the fall of 2001, the Children of Israel left Egypt in Rachel Friedman's Parshanut (biblical exegesis) class."

This year, they are camped in the biblical portion of Mishpatim (Laws), examining rabbinic interpretations of legal values expressed in the work of scholars from the middle ages to the 20th century.

A lively discussion of Cain's possibly un-

with texts. It's a privilege to see the students grow as we all learn together. The students share with each other and, in turn, with their families and communities."

On the subject of community, Friedman notes that her students include the traditionally Orthodox as well as women of different ideologies and practice. If it were not for Drisha's classrooms, she couldn't imagine a place where such diverse people might study Torah together: "Our learning is based on mutual respect. We are all striving for a more profound understanding of our heritage." ♦



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'I hitched my wagon to a star': the journey of a lifetime

BY MARTHA MENDELSON

In the Westchester community where Belda Kaufman Lindenbaum spends the summer, a congregant at the local shul, a 70-ish physician, refuses to kiss the Torah when it's carried through the women's section. "I'm traditional," the female doctor says.

Lindenbaum, Drisha's board president, doesn't mince words when faced with an old-world religious taboo. Too often, she says, "social policy" poses as halacha. "Was it customary in the secular world for a woman to go to medical school when you did?" she asked the woman.



Belda Kaufman Lindenbaum

Not so long ago, when it was traditional for women to be barred from advanced Jewish education, Lindenbaum and a forward-looking young rabbi helped launch Drisha, an institution where women of every age and background would be able to study Judaism's sacred texts on a high level.

"I hitched my wagon to a star in David Silber," Lindenbaum says, sitting in the library of her Central Park West apartment.

Lindenbaum comes by her passion for women's Jewish education naturally. Her grandfather, a rabbi and a shochet, hired tutors to teach her mother, Rita Skydell Kaufman, and her four sisters as rigorously as his sons. In the '50s, Lindenbaum and her siblings commuted from the Bronx to Manhattan, to the fledgling Ramaz School. While in college, Lindenbaum studied at the Jewish Theological Seminary. Her husband Marcel's grandfather, Moshe Avigdor Amiel, was chief rabbi of Tel Aviv in the 1930s, and his step-grandfather, Max Stern, founded Stern College for Women.

Belda and Marcel Lindenbaum are benefactors of Midreshet Lindenbaum, a women's center for Jewish studies in Jerusalem. Both of their daughters, Ramaz graduates, spent a year of study in Israel, and are at the forefront of Jewish communal life in New York.

Raising her five children in the '60s and '70s, Lindenbaum found it "a challenge to replicate for my daughters what my sons got

automatically." She knew she was succeeding when her husband urged their sons to review the Talmud daf, page, before going to bed. The boys didn't, but their daughter Victoria did.

Despite Drisha's success in educating a new generation of women leaders, and in being a catalyst for change — such as inspiring Darkhei Noam, the minyan modeled after Drisha's High Holy Day services where women and men layn the Torah — there are times Lindenbaum is, well, disappointed in Jewish women.

"With Drisha, we have this wonderful resource, and as crowded as we are, we should be more crowded. Some women want the education and participation, and others are too busy — they don't want the obligation."

Still others, she says, don't feel the obligation to "give financial support to the organizations that do the most for them. I'd like to see women help us and themselves by contributing above the tuition to help cover the real cost of Jewish education."

She admits this can be difficult, because a husband's pet organizations often take precedence, while the wife's interests are "low man on the totem pole." Lindenbaum makes sure any institution she supports has women on the board, and she was proud of her son when he refused to support an organization that would not sign onto an ad protesting the plight of agunot.

On every level, women's participation is essential, Lindenbaum says. "We have different insights, and it's important for men to hear our voice and benefit from our talents. Sending out educated mothers and professional educators and scholars is one of the most important goals of the Jewish communal world, and Drisha has been at the forefront, taking the risk to do what's never been done before." ♦

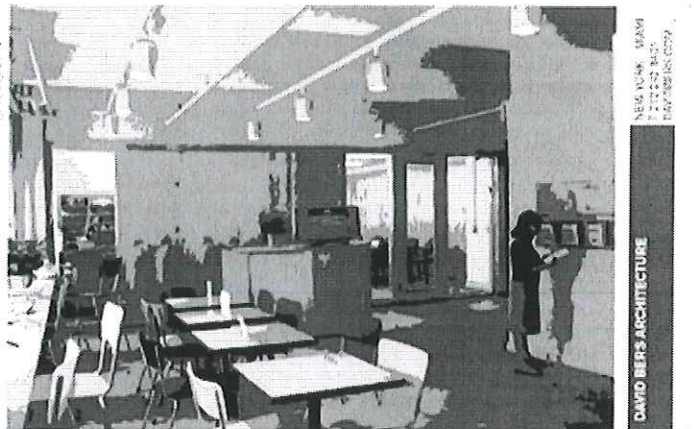
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A day in the life of a rosh beit midrash

BY SANDEE BRAWARSKY

In naming Devorah Zlochower the Rosh Beit Midrash, Drisha recognizes her pathbreaking role as a scholar and leader, responsible for the educational vision of the full-time learning program

Her new title, literally, head of the Beit Midrash, speaks to the centrality of the learning and seriousness of purpose at Drisha. "As women assume new roles in the community, we need to give appropriate recognition. Titles are one way to reflect the new reality," commented Daniela Weiss, executive director of Drisha.

In her daily role at Drisha, Zlochower teaches Talmud and halacha to full-time students, and mentors students of all ages who have religious questions and who see in her a role model for their own advanced study. "I share my journey," she said, "and give them guidance along theirs. It's important to know that you don't have to settle for a job in the secular community to fulfill your potential.

You can join the struggle to make it happen in the traditional community, and be an active participant and leader."

This month, Zlochower will be the first woman scholar-in-residence to accompany a delegation of rabbinical students on an American Jewish World Service trip to El Salvador, where they will learn as well as work to help this community. She is co-editing a series of halachic monographs on women and mitzvot which the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance will distribute to an international audience. On the speaker circuit, she will travel and teach on topics such as the social and historical factors that influence the development of halacha.

A male Rosh Beit Midrash would be addressed as

rabbi, but it's not clear how to address a traditional woman who holds a position of educational and spiritual leadership. "The title that best reflects what I do is

rabbi or rav, but I'm not entirely comfortable with that," said Zlochower.

Zlochower, who grew up in Pittsburgh, attended right-wing Orthodox schools and completed whatever formal learning programs were

available. When she was in graduate school in political science, she signed up for a week of intensive learning at Drisha. "I fell in love, and have never really left," Zlochower said, referring to the Drisha alchemy of serious Torah study and an open intellectual approach. She studied at Drisha full time for five years, and was one of the students who approached Rabbi David Silber about creating what became the three-year Scholars Circle, of which she is a graduate. Most recently, she was director of full-time programs.

For Zlochower, learning has been a lifelong passion. One of the most memorable experiences of her childhood is studying Torah with her father. "He never told me that there were limits in what I could learn because I was a girl," she noted. At Drisha, she found a home with lots of opportunities to test the waters, where it's "normal" to pursue her love of learning.

"In many ways, this fulfills a dream, where I can give back some of what I've received from Drisha. Hopefully I can make a place for the all the young girls who may be frustrated or limited in school or by community expectation," said Zlochower.

Advanced Torah learning is idealized for men, not women, Zlochower observed, and women often struggle to pursue this path on their own, without the support of family or peers. "I think we can learn a lot from the yeshiva culture, where the learning and spirituality is all encompassing, and the focus is on the ideal: vi-hagita bo yomam va-laila, devotion of all one's time to study," Zlochower said.

"My dream is that we'll make the hard choices, and commit to developing the talents of all our potential leaders, male and female," Zlochower continued. "There's no doubt in my mind that the Jewish community will be richer." ♦

'You don't have to settle for a job in the secular community to fulfill your potential. You can join the struggle to make it happen in the traditional community, and be an active participant and leader.'



Devorah Zlochower, Rosh Beit Midrash at Drisha