

# JEWISH INTELLIGENCE

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The Drisha Institute for Jewish Education in Manhattan goes beyond just teaching. Through a variety of intellectually rigorous classes and an emphasis on equal access, Drisha has sought since 1979 to revitalize the Jewish community through learning. Its classes have inspired thousands, and for that JInsider is awarding Drisha its Yasher Koach heksher of organizational excellence.

## An Evolving Mission

When [Drisha] first began it provided an opportunity for women to study Jewish texts. Thirty years ago there were very few opportunities for women to study those texts in a serious way. So we gave those women a chance to be part of that, and also to assume positions of leadership in the Jewish community through their study. In addition, we provide a forum for ideas to be discussed and debated – to get ideas out there into the larger Jewish community.

A lot of things have changed in the course of 30 years, but ... in the traditional community there is [now] a lot of work to be done, not with women, but with girls – not when they're 21, but when they're 5 or 7 – and to get the message out that the Torah is yours. It doesn't belong to any particular group – not for men as opposed to women, not for one group of Jews as opposed to another. The Torah is there for all of us, and there are many different ways to understand it.

## Pressing Need

What I think is the pressing need for the Jewish communities of North America is the lack of sufficient personnel. I refer to teachers, rabbis and communal leaders. Especially in the realm of education, we are not providing a) enough people and b) we have to improve the quality of the people who go into those professions. That is the absolute, No. 1 priority, for me, for our larger community in North America. What I think is really needed, and I think Drisha can help with this, is to attract serious people who really want to engage in their tradition through intense study and, after having studied, to connect that learning to real life and to go out into the community and teach others. Teach both in terms of text and in terms of living, and to address real questions that we have: What does it mean to be a Jew today? What does it mean to be a Jew in Canada or America? How do we apply the teachings to real life?

## Teaching Method

The real goal of the teacher – and it sounds crazy – is to make the teacher disappear. In other words, when the students walk out after a set of classes, or a year or five years, they feel that this is their text, first of all, and they feel directly connected to it and they've gained some ability to learn on their own and work on their own. And they've also gained a sense that these texts can be read in many different ways, that the great texts have many different nuances and a whole variety of shades of meanings.

## On Responsibility

There are deep teachings in the book of Genesis from beginning to end. There are certain things that are central to the book — for example, the idea of taking responsibility, which is one of the first stories. The first sin, I always say, is not just the eating of that forbidden fruit, but the real sin is when Adam says, “The woman you gave me, she gave it to me.” The failure to take responsibility is very central to the book. I don’t think we can move forward as individuals or a community until we are brutally honest about ourselves — about what we really believe — and take responsibility for situations in which we find ourselves.