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## ABOUT Religion

### Knowledge, Power and Women New York's Drisha Institute attracts female Jews of all backgrounds

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Pluralism is alive and well on the Upper West Side. At 86th Street and Amsterdam Avenue, on the ninth floor of the Modern Orthodox Jewish Center Synagogue, women from a diversity of backgrounds, with a variety of experiences and attitudes, hover over thick Jewish texts — analyzing the words, mulling over the meanings, discussing the applications.

It is here, at the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education, founded two decades ago by Rabbi David S. Silber, that 25-year-old rabbinical student Jessica Zimmerman chose to spend her summer, rather than at a camp or in an internship. This past June and July, the institute, which is not affiliated with the Jewish Center Synagogue, attracted hundreds of women, drawn by their desire to delve into traditional texts.

At the Reform movement's Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Los Angeles, said Zimmerman, "we learn about traditional Jewish sources, the basis for Jewish knowledge. However, this summer, I needed to really focus on specific areas of Jewish law and tradition and to learn how to study texts on my own."

The San Francisco native spent five weeks learning full-time at the institute, where she studied Talmud and halachah, or Jewish law.

"Sometimes, people don't have the knowledge of texts that allows them to see how modern ethical society is derived

from the sources," she explained. "The more educated we are, the more authentic and informed our Jewish choices can be."

It is the diversity of those choices, made privately in the lives of the women who pass through the doors of Drisha each day, that appealed to the third-year rabbinical student, one of four HUC-JIR students who learned at the institute this summer.

"The differences sometimes came about when we discussed, for example, the issues of law and morality in the Talmud," Zimmerman said. "Everyone came to the text from a different perspective. I found that the Orthodox women took the texts as legally binding, whereas I came to them with the idea of a moral, ethical society in mind. Yet, it was the various experiences of each woman that actually enhanced the conversations."

Tina Grimberg, a 36-year-old in her fourth year at HUC-JIR's New York campus, expressed a similar sentiment when discussing her summer experience at Drisha.

"It is a very warm, welcoming, safe environment," Grimberg said. "I was made to feel a part of things and treated with respect ... I was [also] very impressed by the passion for and the knowledge of the texts and the tradition."

Grimberg's observations about the environment at Drisha speak to the connection that more and more women are making with Jewish texts. Her insights echo the words of Silber, the institute's dean, who claims that "the world is now clamoring for deep textual study."



Devorah Shubowitz (right), a scholar's-circle student, assists summer institute student Eva Oles (left) with a Hebrew text.



Women of all ages gather in pairs to study Jewish texts at the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education.

While Grimberg is confident in her choice of a career in the Reform movement, she readily admits that Drisha helped her to sharpen her skills, to understand the tradition more deeply and to gain the knowledge that will be integral to her life as a rabbi.

#### A place for all kinds of women

The positive experiences of these Reform rabbinical students are testament to Drisha's success in providing a comfortable, nonrestrictive environment where all women can come to learn.

The reality of diversity is a given at the institute, according to Drisha's executive director, Nina Bruder.

"At Drisha," she explained, "one can find a 20-year-old college student; a woman her mother's age; women in skirts with hats; pants with hats; women from Reform, Conservative, Orthodox and Reconstructionist synagogues; unaffiliated women — all types. People say the diversity is refreshing, but it's just the given, the backdrop of our environment."

Silber agreed with this notion. "If one asks, then I would say that we are a transdenominational institution, but really the idea of denomination is a nonissue for us," the rabbi said. "Drisha is only about learning, about the interchange of ideas in an atmosphere of mutual respect."

Silber believes that a major reason why women at Drisha are able to come together so smoothly there is because, as a group, they feel a challenge to change people's perceptions about what women can and cannot do.

"There is no sense of conflict here that I have ever seen," said Silber. "Many of the women feel bonded in that they face similar issues in today's society, and they seem to get along great. Ultimately, the kind of women who tend to come here — within a wide range, of course

over

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— are those who are here to study Torah seriously, intensely.

"The women know that Drisha is not a place which is trying to effect lifestyle changes," he added. "We are not trying to convert anybody to Orthodox Judaism. We are only trying to help them become more serious Jews."

One woman who appreciates this approach is Elga Stulman, a mother and grandmother who lives on New York's Upper West Side. Stulman spoke candidly about her own Jewish life and choices.

"I am not at the level of observance of the people at Drisha who

have Orthodox backgrounds," she said, "but that doesn't make a difference at all, not at all. That is the legacy of Silber, that he created an environment of acceptance, an open community."

Stulman has taken classes in Drisha's Yesodot, or foundation, program, which provides students with limited backgrounds in Jewish text study a chance to develop their Hebrew-language and textual-analysis skills.

"No matter what level of knowledge you are at," she said, "Drisha offers a profound level of learning. It is an intellectual, emotional, spiritual experience. You learn how the Bible affects your life, and

it changes the way you relate to your peers, family and community. ... This learning affects you viscerally."

## **From civil to Jewish law**

Just as enthusiastic about Drisha is Naomi Sinnreich, an attorney in her mid-40s who lives on the Upper East Side. She attends a Modern Orthodox synagogue with her husband and children, lives an observant life and has been a regular at Drisha for four years. Her life story is as distinct as those of the other women, yet she began her studies for many of the same reasons.

Growing up, Sinnreich did not attend a Jewish day school and did not learn to read Hebrew or to study religious texts on her own.

"Being a lawyer," she said, "I get into the nitty-gritty of everything. Yet I'd never applied the same level of intellectual scholarship to my religion."

At Drisha, Sinnreich has studied, among other things, the Bible and related commentaries, and even helped found a semi-intensive biblical Hebrew class. Today, Sinnreich finds herself more knowledgeable and is able to help her own children with their text study.

"There are other classes in the area, but they don't reach the caliber of those at Drisha," claimed Sinnreich. "Here, they don't teach you dogma, either. They are not here to influence, only to foster textual exploration and open inquiry. Nobody is threatened, which is why, I'm sure, the HUC students and all of the different women from different backgrounds can come here."

Judging from several interviews with Drisha students, Sinnreich is right — the variety of women who find their way to 86th Street and Amsterdam Avenue from all over the world do so to become more educated Jews, and to become steeped in classical Jewish texts without feeling delegitimized or disrespected.

Silber believes that this increase in Jewish literacy can help relieve the denominational tensions that plague the Jewish community worldwide.

"I wish we had more serious Reform and Conservative Jews here, more Jews from all walks of life," he said. "It would be very good for the Orthodox community and for all of the movements. It would promote educated dialogue, and that is exactly what the Jewish community needs." ■