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Culture

## Orthodox Women Read Torah in Mixed Services

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By Ruth A. Seligman  
WeNews correspondent

*Traditionally, women have been locked out of reading the Jewish holy book in Orthodox Holy Day celebrations. But a small movement of female Torah readers is gaining ground both in the United States and Israel.*

(WOMENSENEWS)--Today, the high point of the Jewish Holy Day season, women's voices will be heard reading the Torah in at least two Orthodox Jewish congregations, breaking traditions thousands of years old. The two centers of change in Orthodox Judaism have permitted both sexes to participate in these rituals for the past three years.



Dr. Tova Hartman

Nomi Mark, a psychotherapist in Manhattan, has long participated in women-only services. Her daughter, Tamar Blanchard, will soon mark her *bat mitzvah*, the coming-of-age for Jewish 12-year-old girls, by reading the Torah at a women's service. Mark participated in her first mixed Rosh Hashanah service last week at Manhattan's Drisha Institute for Jewish Education, the pioneering 24-year-old center for Jewish women's scholarship and looked forward to continuing the experience this Yom Kippur.

"As inspiring as the *davening* (praying) was, it was also very moving to see how groups like Drisha and (Congregation) Darchei Noam are working hard to incorporate feminism within community," she said. "The praying, the singing, and, of course, the Torah reading were exhilarating. It was a wonderful way to start the new year."

Historically, Jewish women were prohibited from publicly reading from the Torah, the central text of their religion. Over the past century Torah reading by women has gone from cautious acceptance to being completely commonplace in the Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist movements of Judaism, where egalitarian *minyanim*, or prayer services, abound. But in Orthodox Judaism--the branch of Jewish observance that adheres to strict pursuit of Jewish law, or *halachah*--women's voices during the Torah reading go largely unheard.

But this restriction is relenting in small pockets of the Orthodox Jewish world, and the current Jewish Holy Day season highlights that change.

On Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year, which was observed this year Sept. 26, 27, and 28, and, today, on Yom Kippur, the climactic day of prayer, repentance and renewal for Jews of every denomination, hundreds of worshippers in the United States and Israel will attend services in Orthodox congregations where the Torah will be read aloud by men and women participating equally.

In New York, Rabbi David Silber, founder and dean of the Drisha Institute and in Israel, Dr. Tova Hartman, a founder of Jerusalem's Congregation Shira Chadasha, or "a new song," said they had trouble accommodating the number of people drawn to their services. Drisha introduced men and women Torah readings three years ago.

Rabbi Silber says he introduced the mixed Torah reading to Drisha--and to U.S. audiences--after he returned to New York from a sabbatical year in Israel, where he participated in a similar service at Jerusalem's Congregation Amiqat de-Bira, commonly known as The Leader Minyan. Silber's once-a-year High Holy Day services accommodate those who want to participate in a traditional men-only Torah reading and those who want to attend the mixed reading in a venue with separate services whose worshippers come together for the long, prayer and song-filled concluding portion of the service.

"About 400 people still come to Drisha's services," Rabbi Silber said. "Unfortunately, we still have to cut off the number of people because of space."

Dr. Tova Hartman, a Jewish scholar and a lecturer at Hebrew University's School of Education in Jerusalem, who teaches gender studies and sex differences, said her congregation has a similar experience.

"We get 200 people on a Shabbat, and about 400 for the Yamim Noraim, the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Unfortunately, we had to turn people away," she said.

### **Women's Voice Seen as Too Seductive**

The reading of the Torah, The Five Books of Moses that contain both the laws and central narrative of Jewish life, is the focal point of the synagogue service. It is read chapter by chapter each Sabbath throughout the year, as well as during the week and on most holidays.

Strict Jewish practice prohibits women from reading the Torah for reasons that include the centuries-old notion that women are unable to participate fully in prayer services because of their need to remain at home with household and child-rearing duties, and that taking on a man's role in the service would jar the communal status quo, and even dishonor the community. The notion of *kol isha*, or a woman's voice being too distracting or seductive to be heard by men during worship, has also been a potent prohibition throughout the centuries.

Orthodox Jewish women began reading the Torah in prayer groups exclusive to women in increasingly larger numbers in a worldwide movement that is nearly 30 years old, in services slowly and carefully introduced, largely in Modern Orthodox communities that often included Jewish female scholars.

The movement has been promoted by such organizations as the New York-based international Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, New York's Drisha Institute for Jewish Education, which has been at the forefront of Torah and Talmudic text-based study and teaching for women, and more recently by Edah, an international organization with headquarters in New York that promotes Modern Orthodox ideals, including "integration of passionate commitment to Judaism with openness to the wisdom and culture of the world and the effort to enhance the religious striving of women."

### **Changing Role of Women**

But the phenomenon of men and women sharing in the Torah reading in the Orthodox world is a new one, dating to Israel's Leader Minyan, and to an opinion published in The Edah Journal by Orthodox Rabbi Mendel Shapiro in Israel, in spring 2001, whose argument centers on the idea that traditional strictures on women's participation in worship are no longer relevant in a world where women's roles in public, communal and even religious life are completely different from what they once were.

Shapiro's opinion supports Drisha's prayer services, and those of the year-and-a-half-old Congregation Darkhei Noam in Manhattan whose worshippers join Drisha for the High Holy Days.

A prayer group founded in Yonkers, New York also follows the ruling, along with Shira Chadasha in Jerusalem. But acceptance is far from universal in Orthodoxy, and these services and the Shapiro opinion have elicited strong criticism from the Orthodox rabbis, and rabbinical authorities on the Rabbinical Council of America, to which many Modern Orthodox rabbis belong. To the ultra-Orthodox, the concept of women reading the Torah, whether in prayer groups exclusive to themselves, or in mixed communities, is not even up for discussion.

Of its potential to evoke controversy in the Orthodox world, Dr. Hartman responds, "We don't engage in that conversation. We look inward. We are not interested in convincing the public."

She described the enormous amount of work that goes into organizing this service every week, with considerations of *halacha* and prayer taken very seriously. Dr. Hartman said she and other founders selected the name "New Song" for their congregation--comprised of Israelis, new immigrants, long-time traditionally observant and newly observant Jews--to denote the community's commitment to including "many voices."

"The inclusion of women has been very important to us, but we did not stop at that," she said. "The issue of invisibility of women teaches about the invisibility of others."

Rabbi Silber sees the Drisha service in much the same way. "Women's full participation in prayer is only a tiny step. If we can open the doors of prayer to the entire community, we will be in a position to deepen the meaning of prayer for the community as a whole. Anytime we do something to bring in more people--all people--who are serious about their prayer the community is strengthened."

"Including women can only enhance the role of religious practice in our lives," he added.

*Ruth A. Seligman is a free-lance writer based in Riverdale, New York.*

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**For more information:**

Drisha Institute for Jewish Education:  
<http://www.drisha.org/>

Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance:  
<http://www.jofa.org/>

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