



Reclaiming Our Heritage

Jewish study programs for women are flourishing in adult education institutes, synagogues and Jewish community centers throughout the United States.

by NAOMI GROSSMAN

The Beit Midrash at Drisha Institute for Jewish Education on the Upper West Side of Manhattan is buzzing with noise as study partners lean over their respective Talmuds preparing for the upcoming class. Hands are waving, people are arguing, the ancient language of the Talmud flies through the air. The scene would be a familiar one to anyone accustomed to walking through the study hall of any

yeshiva except for one thing: Its participants are all women.

Most of these women are not studying to be rabbis or teachers. They are housewives, accountants, lawyers and college students. Most of their mothers were content to learn the Jewish laws that applied to their cooking and cleaning and to remember the Torah stories they heard in their youth. But these women come to Drisha to learn about

personalities of the Torah or Jewish philosophy or what their prayers mean. Some study obscure texts, some try to decipher the talmudic logic of ancient rabbis.

What is perhaps even more surprising, though, is that these Jewish women are not the exception but part of a fast-growing trend within Judaism. Across the country, over the past five years, from Boston to New York to Califor-

nia, in synagogues, Jewish community centers and adult education institutes, study programs for Jewish women have either sprung up or grown at a rapid pace. Some of these programs focus on learning text; some focus on enhancing a Jewish woman's spiritual growth; still others focus on studies unique to Jewish women such as Jewish women in the Torah or Jewish women's history. All these programs speak to the need among Jewish women of all denominations to develop a strong Jewish identity. "Women are feeling like they're ready to reclaim their heritage," says Lori Lefkowitz, an associate professor of women's studies at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and the director of Kolot, a new center for Jewish Women and Gender Studies at the College.

Twenty years after the feminist movement inspired a generation of Jewish women to discover their potential in the workplace and as people, those same forces are now impelling Jewish women to search for their potential in their religious world. "Feminism has given Jewish women the confidence to access their own tradition," says Sylvia Barack Fishman, professor of contemporary Jewish life at Brandeis University.

In the initial throes of the feminist movement, there was no room for Judaic tradition; there were feminists who happened to be Jewish. Judaism was seen as a patriarchal system irreconcilable with feminism's principles. But those few women who could not abandon either closely held ideology eventually paved the way for Jewish feminism. They began writing and speaking, insisting that rituals be re-examined, text be reevaluated, that the attitude of a community that considers itself separate from secular society, be reconsidered. In recent years, especially as there has been a renewed interest in religion in society in general, Jewish feminism has seen itself move from being a marginal influence to having real impact on its adherents, and, to greater and lesser degrees, on the Jewish community as a whole. This impact can be seen in everything from women rabbis to baby-naming ceremonies for girls to bat mitzvah celebrations that involve a girl reading from the Torah.

But perhaps Jewish feminism's greatest success is that, as it demonstrates all the possibilities that lie

within Judaism for Jewish women, it has made these women want to know more about their religion. Debby Kram, who founded Boston-based Ma'ayan, a text-based learning center for Jewish women, six years ago with Rabbi Seth Farber, believes that this is an indication of a cultural shift among Jewish women to search for meaning in a deeper way. "Women's approach to Judaism has been more touchy-feely," she says. "But now that women are so involved in all other aspects of the world, they are taking advantage of Judaism in a whole new way."

This "new way" means learning how to read the Bible or understand Jewish law or discover the importance of a female prophet. It is being done by women who were able to become doctors, lawyers, scientists, even, many of

*Feminism has given
Jewish women the
confidence to access
their own tradition.*

them, rabbis. For them, their Jewish potential needs to be more than lighting candles on Hanukkah and attending synagogue services. "I wanted to understand the origins of Judaism," says Naomi Sinreich, an attorney and a student at Drisha Institute. "Our tradition is text-based, we have survived because of it, and women have not been able to partake of it. I was looking to get the skills that would allow me to access the text on my own."

Educating Jewish women was Rabbi David Silber's goal when he founded Drisha 18 years ago. "Women were being given more opportunity in their education and in their careers but there was nothing for them if they wanted to increase their Jewish knowledge," says Silber, dean of the Institute. "They were going to college, they were working but they knew nothing about their Judaism." Silber began offering serious text-based classes in Torah, Talmud, *halacha*, and philosophy to Jewish women and slowly they began to respond. Seven years ago Drisha had

180 participants. This year, nearly 700 women — ranging in age and religious observance with the majority being Orthodox — are taking courses there. The Institute has developed its own "kollel" — a three-year full-time scholars program where a group of women are paid to learn, a summer high school program and a training program for future Jewish day school educators. According to Silber, the increased interest is not only beneficial to these women but also crucial to the Jewish community. "This is a big opportunity," he says. "The Jewish community should want these women to maximize their [Jewish] potential. Otherwise it will lose them."

The increased stature of Jewish women's position in secular society has made this focus on learning necessary. Their intellectual needs have become more sophisticated, and what might have satisfied a previous generation of women is no longer enough to ensure that this new generation of women will remain tethered to the traditions of Judaism. Without the knowledge to deepen their appreciation of the rituals, without an understanding of the historical context, without a sense of where they fit in, many Jewish women could simply lose interest. "You cannot keep people on the basis of nostalgia," observes Lefkowitz.

At Ma'ayan, The Jewish Women's Project, women are offered women lectures on female prophets in the Bible, the importance of Jewish women's history or on the Judaica of Jewish women artists. Housed in the Jewish Community Center of the Upper West Side in Manhattan, Ma'ayan also develops educational programs such as bat mitzvah classes for girls and their mothers, which it replicates in various Conservative and Reform synagogues. "The Jewish community has the most educated women and we were losing them," says Barbara Dobkin, co-founder of the project. "I thought, how can we make this community exciting enough not to lose anybody? Our intention is that women should learn what tradition is." Ma'ayan's yearly feminist seder, for which it compiles its own feminist haggadah, keeps growing. This past year 1,200 people attended, more than four times the amount of the first seder four years ago. "[Jewish] women are looking for a connection," says Eve Landau, who founded Ma'ayan

with Dobkin. "Some are looking to be more educated Jewishly, some are looking for a different perspective. Women were being marginalized in the Jewish community and there was a need to bring them to the forefront." To that end, Ma'yan has also established a program in which it attempts to connect funding from Jewish women to Jewish women's projects in areas such as scholarship, leadership programs or education.

As more Jewish women can support these projects and get more Jewish women interested in pursuing areas of Jewish studies, a community begins to take shape. When Irene Fine first opened the Women's Institute for Continuing Jewish Education 21 years ago in La Jolla, California, she says that it was the only place like it. Now, she notes, "We're part of a movement." Jewish women, most of whom are Reconstructionist, Reform or Conservative, come to the Institute to hear lectures on topics such as women in the Dead Sea Scrolls, Jewish women, magic and superstition, or to take a class on the Talmud. "I want to explore what makes Judaism unique and worth keeping," says Z Kripke, co-director, who attends lectures regularly at the Institute. There is a special focus on women in Jewish texts. Many Jewish rituals are reevaluated to incorporate women, and others are created, such as a midlife rite of passage ceremony or a ceremony to honor Jewish elders. "The women who come to the Institute want to learn something new, but they also are interested in enhancing their ability to function as women in Judaism," says Fine.

That is why the Jewish Feminist Center of the American Jewish Congress in Los Angeles established a life-cycle resource center. It allows women to access Jewish information on various events from babynaming ceremonies to blessing on the new month ceremonies to gender neutral prayers. Carol Levy, who was one of the founders of the Center six years ago and currently serves as its director, believes that as Jewish women continue to learn and become more knowledgeable they will impact other areas of Jewish life as well. "As women learn that they can study text seriously, they become more confident in all aspects of Jewish life," she says. "They will become president of the synagogue or

sit on the Federation board. They will develop more rites of passages that will allow Judaism to speak to their whole life. What was traditionally men's expressions they are already claiming as their own."

The Feminist Center was originally an educational institution, but those involved found that because so many of their students were teaching women at local synagogues and Jewish community centers and in communally-based study groups, they were able to focus on thinking of new ways to teach Jewish women. The Center, which continues to offer periodic educational

*As women model
for other women,
their hunger for
learning grows.*

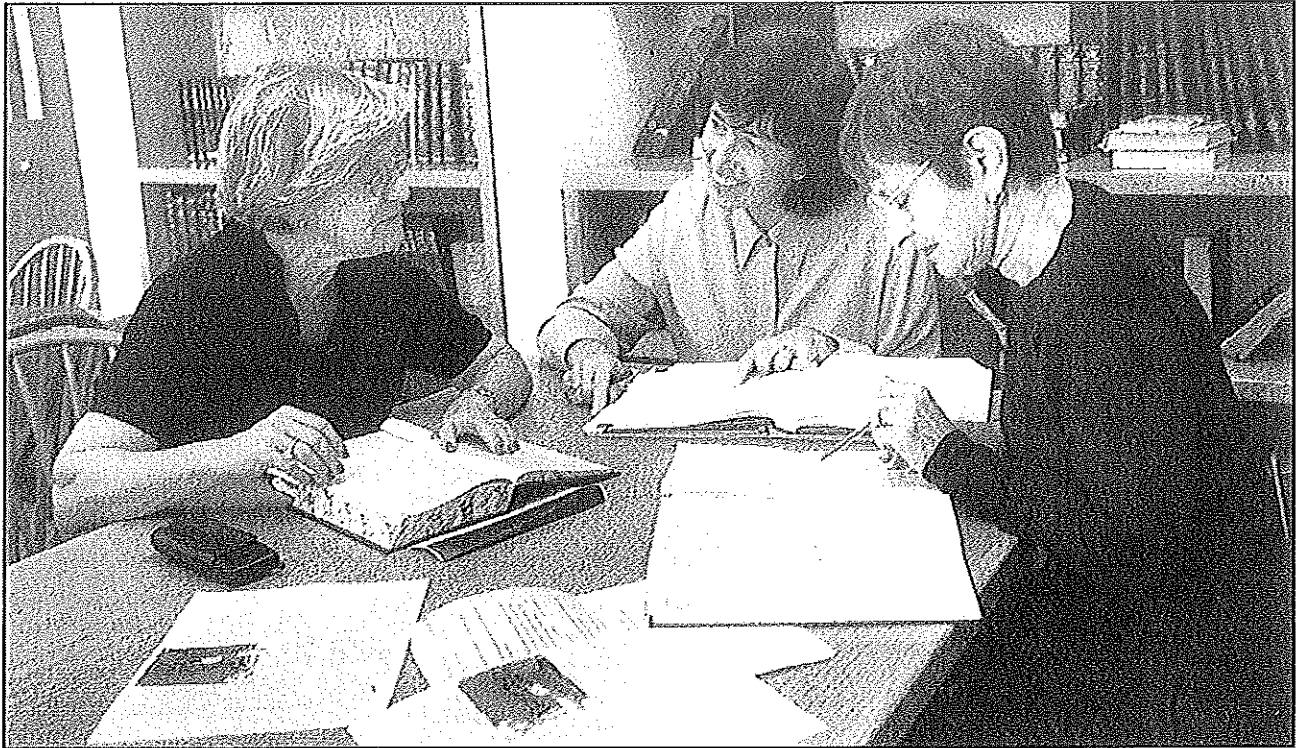
events, recently received a three-year grant to study issues surrounding family and work and its impact on Jewish women. "We are declaring a victory," says Levy. "We have sprouted the seed of women's Talmud classes. We are no longer unique."

Levy also points to the proliferation of books and anthologies on Jewish women as an indication that the movement of Jewish women learning is gaining increasing momentum. But many observers actually credit the emergence of Jewish feminist scholarship as an academic discipline with piquing the interest of Jewish women and prompting their own personal scholarship. When Fine established the Women's Institute as part of her dissertation on developing a Jewish studies program on Jewish women in history, she says that at the time, there were not many books or curriculum on Jewish women that she could use as resources. Now she says that she can't keep up with the reading. A myriad of books have been published exploring everything from Jewish women in history and literature to feminist interpretations of the Bible. Three years ago, the Jewish Theological Seminary established a Master's program in Jewish

women's studies. Its program advisor, Anne Lapidus Lerner, sees this focus as part of a general phenomena in the academic world. "There's been an evolutionary interest in women's studies," she says. The Jewish Women's Studies Project was established eight years ago at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and Kolot is now in its second year. Hadassah recently established the first international research institute devoted to Jewish women at Brandeis University. The Jewish Women's Archives in Boston was also recently established. Its goal is to create a database on Jewish women's lives throughout history. "The rabbinical schools are all trying to develop women's studies programs now," says Lefkowitz. "And all of this scholarship has led to the layperson wanting to learn more." The Reconstructionist College sponsors a series of lectures on Jewish women that are open to the public and the response, says Lefkowitz, is overwhelming. "We cannot begin to meet the demand within the local community."

As more women in Judaism have become rabbis, a trickle-down effect has also been evolving over the years. The prominence of these role models in the non-Orthodox Jewish communities has made this new focus on learning among Jewish women possible and perhaps inevitable. "Jewish women learning began with women being allowed into rabbinical schools," says Francine Klagsbrun, a writer and Jewish feminist activist. "They set the pace for other women." The Conservative's Jewish Theological Seminary began ordaining women 12 years ago. At last count, there were 86 female members of the rabbinical assembly out of 1,377 members. Reform's Hebrew Union College began ordaining women in 1972. That first year only one woman out of 46 graduates received her ordination. Last year, 17 of the 37 graduates were women. According to Carolyn Feibel, the College's national public affairs associate, most of these women go on to take positions as congregational rabbis becoming highly visible within their local communities. "As women model for other women, the hunger for learning grows," says Levy. "As more women become rabbis and cantors, more women will say, 'I can do that' and they will want to learn."

While the Orthodox community



does not permit women to be ordained as rabbis, its high level of Jewish cultural literacy and its emphasis on Torah study has also been credited with contributing to the explosion of Jewish women learning. "The concept of ordinary people having a high level of learning comes from the Orthodox world," says Fishman. "This cultural norm has spread across denominational lines." It is the layperson learning, not the rabbi, that has had the real impact on Jewish women opening up the Talmud. "The rabbi is in a leadership position," she says. "We're talking here about ordinary women studying in a class." Intensive text-based type of learning, like that which rabbinical schools tend to emphasize, seems to characterize most of the learning centers that are largely Orthodox. At Drisha, women learn in *chavruta*, or pairs; they tackle the Talmud — which traditionally has been off limits to women — and they learn the intricacies of *halacha*. At Ma'ayan in Boston, which, while nondenominational, attracts a large base of Orthodox women, the emphasis is on serious text study for women.

This thirst for learning is not limited to the more modern factions of Orthodox Judaism. Shalhevet Institute for Women, a strictly Orthodox learning center for women, was founded six years ago in Queens, New York as an

answer to the scarcity of learning programs for adult women. In a nod to tradition, Talmud is not taught there but that fact only makes the high level classes on *halacha* and Torah more remarkable. "We are in the midst of a revolutionary era for Jewish women's learning," says its founder Esther Krauss. "All Jewish women have a greater curiosity about *halacha*, and the atmosphere is such that this kind of interest is being encouraged." Krauss points to the Hasidic sect of Satmar as evidence of this. In their schools the girls never opened the Bible. Their studies were never text-based but taught by stories. Over the past two years, the Satmar schools have begun to teach their women directly from the Bible. "As isolated as they are," says Krauss, "they had to respond to the greater intellectual curiosity on the part of their women."

It is the women who will ultimately ensure that this trend firmly roots itself at the grade-school level. As Judaism takes its women more seriously, they in turn will begin to view the religion as a viable way to achieve spiritual and intellectual satisfaction — for themselves and for their daughters. It still rankles Klagsbrun when she talks about her experiences as a student at a yeshiva high school in New York over 20 years ago. "While the boys were studying Talmud, the

girls were sent to sewing classes." As a budding feminist, Klagsbrun complained — but she was ahead of her time. These days, observes Silber, "There is pressure put on schools by mothers to teach their girls." Jewish mothers want day schools and synagogues and Jewish community centers to take their daughter's Jewish education more seriously — and it's working. "Day school education has created a certain floor of understanding and learning that Jewish women did not have 40 years ago," says Fishman. "Many women have 12 years of Jewish education and they like it. It creates a post-school interest." As these girls move out into the world, many might want to maintain and cultivate this connection, but these girls won't have to reclaim their heritage; it will already be theirs.

For in a society that reveres its scholars, women are realizing that the only way to fully participate is class by class, book by book. "Knowledge is power in the Jewish community," notes Klagsbrun. "Women have come to realize that if they want the rights they deserve, they need to become more knowledgeable."

Naomi Grossman, a freelance writer living in Monsey, N.Y., wrote "International Conference on Feminism and Orthodoxy" in our May-June 1997 issue.