

Women relish class offering advanced text study

by Johanna Ginsberg
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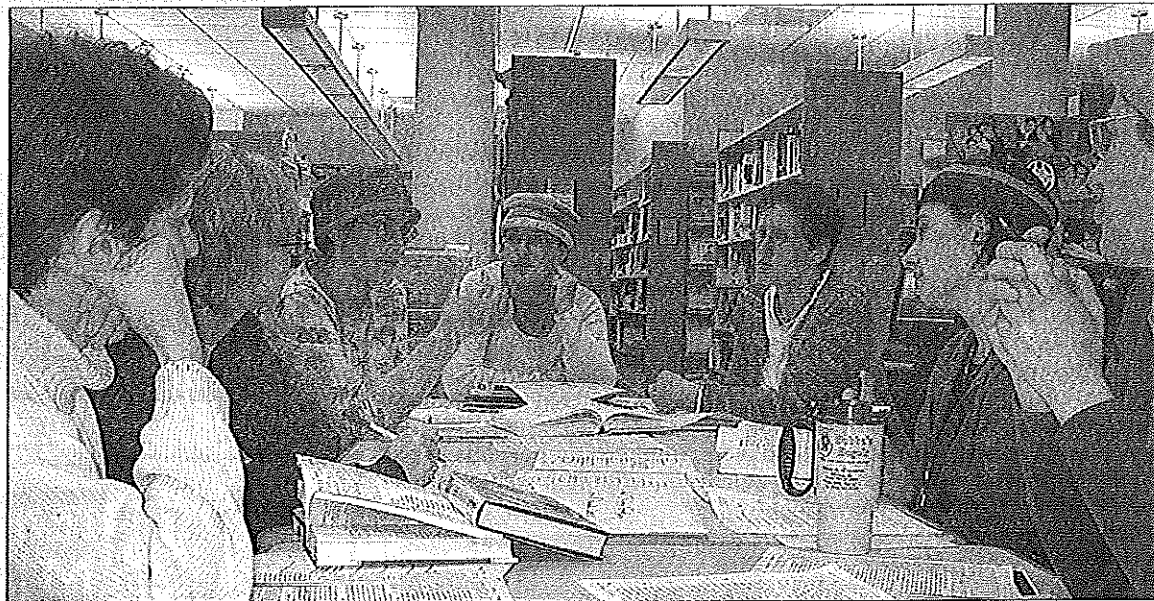
Eight women sit at the table in the library, poring over the text of Talmud along with the pages of their prayer books and the *Book of Psalms*.

They are trying to ascertain when the divine *Shehina* — God's presence — might rest upon someone. Take David, for example. Did the *Shehina* rest upon him after he started writing *Psalms* or was he inspired to write them because the divine *Shehina* rested upon him?

At one time, Barrie Jacob of West Orange dismissed questions like these as entirely useless, "just an intellectual exercise." But after a year and a half of intensive weekly study, she now has a different perspective. "I have an appreciation through the centuries of how much people really want to do Hashem's will and want to get to the bottom of what it is about, what effect it's supposed to have on us, who we are — it's amazing how much it enhances my feeling of who I am and my practice [of Judaism]."

Jacob is in a class that meets every Thursday morning from 8:15 to 9:30 a.m. in the library of the Joseph Kushner Hebrew Academy in Livingston. The class began in February 2004, when Drora Arussy of Livingston felt there weren't enough serious learning opportunities available locally to women at convenient times. She contacted the Drisha Institute, the Manhattan-based center that pioneered advanced study of classical Jewish texts for Orthodox women. They agreed to create a local satellite location and provide an instructor.

The location is no accident. Arussy and the rest of the women in the group all have children who



Exploring Talmud texts at the study group offered in Livingston by the Drisha Institute are, from left, Eve Pasternak of Livingston, Leah Gruss of Randolph, Barrie Jacob of West Orange, Drora Arussy of Livingston, Judy Sandman of Springfield, Instructor Alieza Salzberg of Riverdale, and Debbie Druce of West Orange.

Photo by Johanna Ginsberg

go to school at Kushner. They want their sons and daughters to internalize what they are doing. "Many children see their fathers take time out of their busy schedules to learn. It's important for children to see their mothers take time out as well. It's a core part of who we are as Jews," said Daniela Weiss, executive director of Drisha.

"The kids davening across the way can see their mothers studying. For my son, that's a positive approach," said class member Leah Gruss of Randolph.

Many of the women have yeshiva backgrounds, but few have studied *Gemara* — the Babylonian Talmud — having come of age at a time when such an endeavor was considered a male pursuit.

Sheri Prupis, who counts herself in this category, joined the class for its serious content. "Generally,

most of the learning available for women is fluffy and rarely text-based. This class is very enriching," she said.

She also enjoys being able to keep up with her 19-year-old son, who is now studying in Israel. "We were learning the same texts. He casually mentioned something on the phone, and we had just learned it here. That was a great deal of fun for me."

But to keep the class going, it will have to double in size, according to Weiss. "We're looking for 20," she said. The target audience is women who are open and interested in furthering their knowledge and understanding, who "want to develop intellectually and spiritually." While all the women currently in the class have children at Kushner, that is not a requirement. Nor is having a particular level of

skill. "The levels in the seminar vary. One woman was intimidated at first because she had no background. But she stayed, and she's glad," said Weiss.

The women, disappointed that their class may come to an end, joked about hiring their current teacher, Alieza Salzberg, privately. Asked what she would do if the class ends, Arussy answered only, "Cry."

Women interested in joining the group are invited to attend an introductory Talmud class at Kushner on Thursday, May 5, 9:30-10:30 a.m., and to a lunch-and-learn Yesodot skill-building program at Drisha Institute on Wednesday, June 1, noon-2:30 p.m. Both classes are offered free of charge. For more information, contact Judith Tenzer at jtenzer@drisha.org or 212-595-0307. ■

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