

Mothers & Daughters Learning Together: Drisha's Bat Mitzvah Program

By *Elissa Shay Ordan*

It was with great excitement and anticipation that my husband and I began planning for our daughter's Bat Mitzvah celebration. Although specific aspects of the event were not yet determined, we were certain of a few things. First, our daughter's reaching the age of *mitzvot* would not be marked by a party alone, but would demonstrate achievement in Torah study, *tefillah*, and Torah reading or possibly a combination of the three. We would also include a *hesed/mitzvah/itzedakah* component for our daughter and her friends, as is encouraged by her school. Second, she would need to prepare for this milestone under the guidance of instructors who have a breadth of knowledge and are experienced in teaching Jewish texts to girls of this age. Third, ideally she would study with female *limmudei kodesh* (Jewish religious studies) scholars who would serve as positive role models for our daughter. Fortunately, it was not difficult to find such a source of instruction at Drisha.

Drisha Institute for Jewish Education in New York City, founded in 1979, is the first and leading center for the advanced study of Jewish texts for women. As a student at Drisha for more than 20 years, I have found the impact of the weekly classes that I attend to be transformative. Studying Torah and *Tanakh* on a regular basis, with learned instructors and in a community of women, has shaped my life and deepened my observance enormously. Actually, my daughter began attending Drisha *in utero*.

A pioneer in this area, Drisha has long offered group classes for Bat Mitzvah age girls (ages 11-13) to attend with their mothers (or other learning partners) on topics including prayer and women in the Bible. In the course that my daughter and I attended last fall, six pairs of girls and their mothers, along with one girl and her father, gathered at Drisha on four Sunday mornings to discuss prayer in the Bible and in our lives. One mother was attending with her fourth Bat Mitzvah age daughter!

The small class size and diversity of backgrounds of the students led to lively discussions and stimulating sessions, which were guided by Shuli Sandler, a Drisha Scholars Circle graduate and clinical psychologist. There was no lecturing by the instructor; instead, girls took turns reading the source materials in Hebrew or in English, analyzing forms and examples of prayers, and sharing their insights. In the final session, each girl addressed the group and their invited relatives on a topic of her choice related to becoming a Bat Mitzvah and received a gift of a *siddur* and a certificate as part of the group celebration.

My daughter and I also attended Drisha classes in Riverdale, New York, for Bat Mitzvah age girls and their mothers. These one-hour classes, which focused on women's roles in the history and observance of the festivals, as well as specific festival prayers, were taught by Tammy Jacobowitz, a Drisha Scholars Circle graduate pursuing a PhD in Midrash. (*Editor's note: See her article in this issue.*) They were delightful opportunities for the mothers to connect with their daughters and explore themes of the holidays before we celebrated them together.

One cannot overstate the value and importance of learning with one's daughter in the company of other girls at this age. It is a pleasure to share ideas and discuss new concepts with girls on the cusp of this new chapter of their lives. The instructors' warmth and encouragement also greatly enhanced their scholarship. One would be hard pressed to find better role models of intelligent young women who have chosen a path of Torah scholarship, education, and leadership.

Furthermore, it is beneficial to expose our children to different perspectives and approaches to Torah study. The Drisha programs provide an opportunity for girls and their mothers to experience Torah study in a new way, with new people, and in an environment different from their shul and school. It is good to "mix it up" a bit. The girls may feel freer to ask questions and discuss matters at Drisha than in their school or synagogue setting.

For a girl preparing for her Bat Mitzvah, Drisha also offers the opportunity for private study and will find an appropriate tutor. In addition to the group classes, my daughter studied privately with her teacher, Dina Najman, an early Drisha Scholar who also serves as *Rosh Kehilla* of Kehillat Orach Eliezer on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Like a number of her friends and classmates, my daughter received private instruction in *ta'amei haMikra* (cantillation) and learned to *leym* her Torah portion precisely and beautifully. Together she and her teacher studied her *parashah* in depth and developed the themes of her *d'var Torah*. There are no words that can adequately describe how incredible a teacher and role model Dina Najman is for her students, dedicated to teaching the Bat Mitzvah age girls in our community not only the actual texts that they study but also the significance of being an observant Jewish girl reaching the age of *mitzvot* and assuming a place in the larger Jewish community.

It is very important for a girl to understand that a Bat Mitzvah celebration is not the culmination of a course of study of a few months or even a year followed by a party. Reaching the age of *mitzvot* means the beginning of a life of Torah study and observance that should intensify, grow, and deepen in commitment over a lifetime. At Drisha, classes are offered for girls and women of all ages and backgrounds, and the class experience is enhanced by the exchange of ideas contributed by those present. I am thrilled that my daughter has begun studying at Drisha where she can see that there is a *mekom Torah* created specifically for women and girls and where programs are available for her to attend during the high school years and beyond.

Children are acute observers and follow what they see. If they see that their parents learn Torah consistently and that the values of this learning infuse their home and their lives, then they will follow suit and as *B'not Mitzvah* continue in the path of Torah and *mitzvot*.

Elissa Shay Ordan lives with her family in New York. She is an officer of the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education.