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MANHATTAN

JEWISH SENTINEL

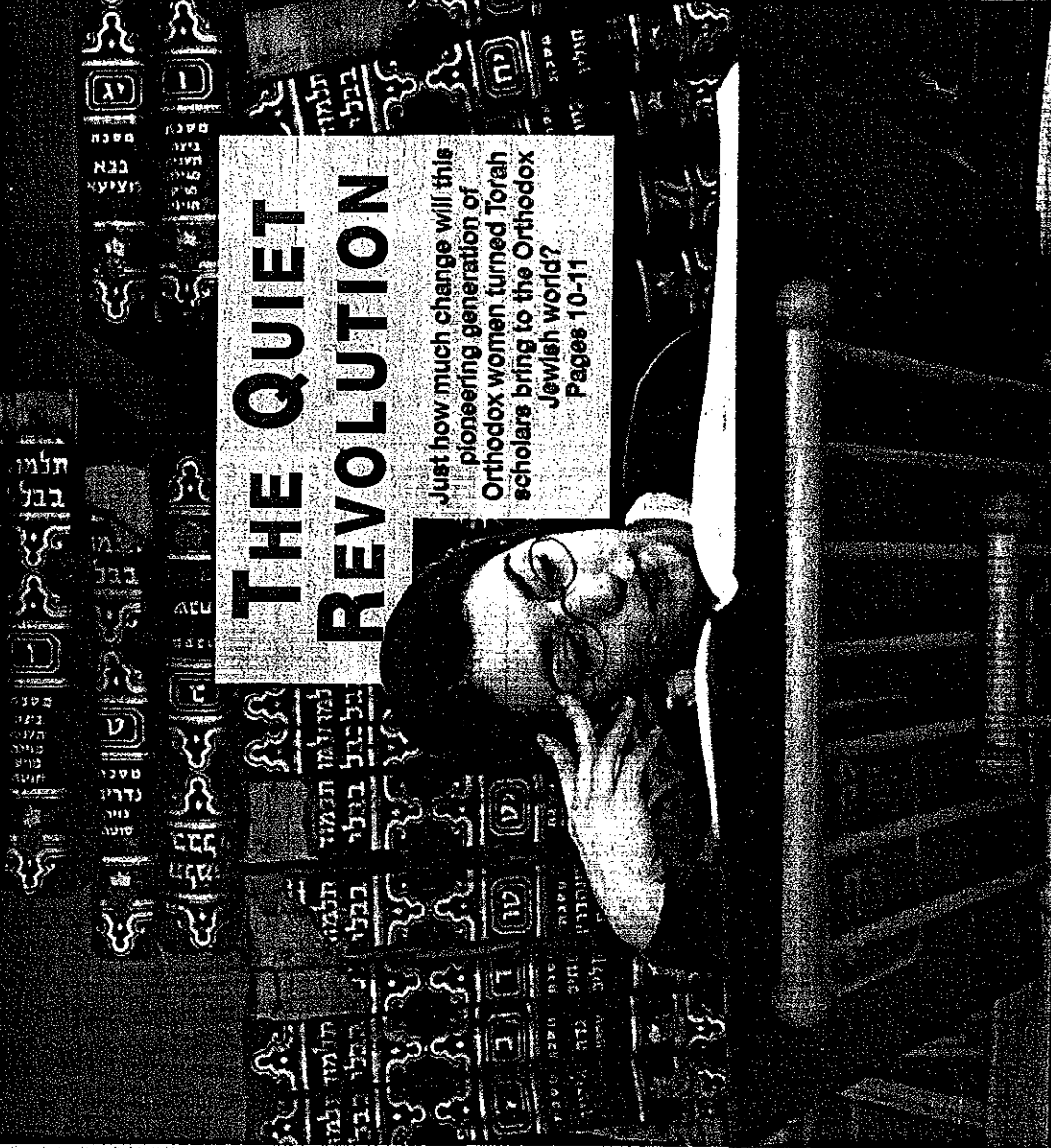
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THE QUIET REVOLUTION

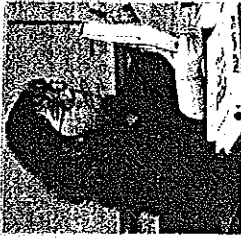
Just how much change will this pioneering generation of Orthodox women turned Torah scholars bring to the Orthodox Jewish world?
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Place Your FREE Jewish Meeting Place Ad; See Classified

A Quiet Revolution: The Women of the Book

WOMAN OF VALOR

In the heart of Manhattan, Orthodox Jewish women are taking on a new role: Talmudic Scholar



Drishta's students, including Anne Gordon, above, often teach as they learn.

Photo: Richard Loebl

BY URIEL HEILMAN

MANHATTAN — It looks like a typical study hall, or *beit midrash*—the walls are lined with bookshelves filled with Bibles, Talmuds and various other religious texts; the sound of Hebrew, English and ancient Aramaic fills the air; pairs of students are hunched over books, reading, gestulating and arguing the fine points of Jewish law.

But these are not young, bearded men in some *kollet* study program in the heart of Brooklyn. This is Manhattan and it's 1989, and the room is filled with young women. Some wear hats, some sport loose-fitting pants, some sit in ankle-length skirts that fall over the edges of their chairs, obscuring their feet. This ain't your grandfather's *beit midrash*.

Located in the heart of Manhattan

tan's Upper West Side—amidst hip coffee shops, trendy pubs and cool fashion boutiques—the Drishta Institute for Jewish Women is fast emerging as one of the nation's leading centers for high-level Jewish learning for women, and it is changing the way the Orthodox community views women's roles in the Jewish community.

Even as its administrators struggle to keep the institution out of Jewish politics, Drishta is taking its place at the center of the national discussion on feminism and Orthodoxy. It is doing so by "creating facts on the ground," according to the institute's founder and dean, Rabbi David Silber.

"Drishta is at the crossroads of the two essential issues in the Jewish community," says Silber. "One:

Drishta is taking its place at the center of the national discussion on feminism and Orthodoxy.

women and their role in the community. Two: Jewish education, or what's known as *continuity*."

The school is not an Orthodox institution, a fact Silber takes pains to point out to all who broach the issue. It's non-denominational, he says. But in catering to women interested in studying Jewish texts in a rigorous high-level program, and in hiring teachers who are all Orthodox, Drishta is becoming a *mecca*

for young Orthodox women. And these students are changing the definition of what it means to be an Orthodox woman.

"Drishta's been a part of raising people's consciousness about women and learning," Silber says. "Drishta changes people's perceptions about what women can and can't do. We're giving women more opportunities to be immersed in Jewish texts. It makes a statement of giving women equal access."

Now in its 20th year, Drishta was founded on the principle of equal access to Jewish texts. It has grown from a handful of classes in 1979 to a full-fledged institute with scores of full-time and part-time learning programs for women of various levels.

Today the institute, which takes up two floors at The Jewish Center, an Orthodox synagogue on West 86th Street, offers 60 different part-time classes per year, eight kinds of intensive-study programs, two full-time, multi-year programs and two summer sessions.

It really has been in the last five years that Drishta has become a haven for serious Jewish female students, capitalizing on the rising interest in Jewish learning in the U.S. and on the increasingly expert scholarship of Jewish women.

Many consider Drishta's scholars circle program its crown jewel. This highly selective, three-year program combines the study of Talmud and rabbinic law, or *halacha*. The scholars, who numbered about 20 this year, receive a full-tuition



Drishta combines chavruta-style learning with intimately sized classes.

waiver and, in most cases, a stipend for living expenses. Graduates receive a certificate but, as with all Drishta programs, no degree.

Drishta also hosts community lectures, which are open to men and women. The institute played a key role in organizing the National Conference on Feminism and Orthodoxy in 1985, according to executive director Nina Bruder.

Women at Drishta can study Bible, Jewish law and Jewish philosophy, but it is in large part due to the institute's Talmud program that Drishta is so successful—and controversial.

"It's the only place in the U.S. [for women] to study [Talmud] on a high level, full-time," says Karen Weinschelbaum, who has been at Drishta for a year and will enter the institute's scholars circle program in the fall. "Drishta is doing something that is not being done anywhere else."

Rabbi Avi Shafran, director of public affairs at Agudah Israel of America, an ultra-Orthodox, or *haredi*, institution, says that the idea of women studying Talmud is completely foreign to the religious community his institution represents.

"I don't know that it's a *halachic* concern per se that makes the *haredi* community not follow the *zeiri-*

geizt in this realm," he says. "It's something much more fundamental: Are gender roles something that are to be seen as targets for dismantling, or are traditional Jewish gender roles part and parcel of Judaism? The very thing that [Drishta] exists for is something we don't subscribe to."

Silber says that the opposition to Drishta and the idea of women learning Jewish texts on the same level as men is a sign that the institute and the principles for which it was established are being taken seriously by Orthodox Jews.

"The Orthodox community is wrestling with this issue," he says. "Why? We have a situation where women are given full access to the secular world and limited access to the religious world, [and it] is a recipe for disaster."

"It's hard to be a thinking Jewish woman and not be frustrated with what you can't do," says Wendy Amselem, a student in Drishta's scholars circle program. "A lot of women realize that in the secular world they have many opportunities to do just about anything they want, and it's disconcerting to realize that as you move into your religious life, which most people view as even more important, your roles are

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Women of all ages and orientations fill Drishta's *beit midrash*.

WOMEN OF VALOR

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much more limited."

By giving equal access to women interested in high-level Jewish learning in a yeshiva-like setting, Silber says, Drisha deals with that imbalance.

"The modern-Orthodox community has not really dealt with the issue head-on," Silber says. "Eidah [a new, modern-Orthodox group under the aegis of Rabbi Saul Berman] is trying to deal with it. A place like Yeshiva University, which should be at the forefront of this whole issue, has taken a back-seat, wait-and-see approach. But you can't just ignore it anymore."

Silber denies that Drisha is about creating women rabbis, which he terms a "political" issue. "From an Orthodox perspective...there's nothing *halachically* wrong with women being rabbis. It's a visceral issue."

"As women are perceived by the community as equally talented in terms of learning and spirituality [and] leadership, I think the community should find ways to recognize their abilities and give them platforms to teach us, lead us, direct us. Whether it's going to be rabbis or different names is a different question," Silber says. "We need to have leaders."

"It's good to have women who are versed in the tradition," says Amsellem, noting that erudite women can help respond to women's particular *halachic* concerns such as laws of family purity or women in the synagogue.

The students at Drisha say they are there to learn and possibly be-

It's hard to be a thinking Jewish woman and not be frustrated with what you can't do.

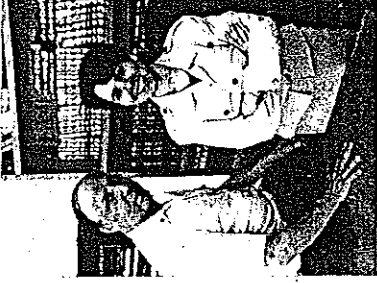
come teachers and Jewish communal leaders, not rabbis. "We're just here learning. It's not political," says Beth Samuels, who just finished Drisha's two-year Talmud and Bible program.

A graduate of an Orthodox Jewish day school in the Los Angeles area and, more recently, of Columbia University, Samuels says she came to the institute to take her learning "to the next step. For Orthodox women, Drisha provides the highest-level learning, probably in the country, maybe the world," she says.

Samuels, who will start a doctoral program in mathematics at Yale University in the fall, says she never viewed her time at Drisha as time off from her life or career. Her *chavruta*, or learning partner, Tammy Jacobowitz, agrees.

"This was not a time out. This was a time in," she says.

Jacobowitz, who will be beginning doctoral work in rabbinic exegesis at the University of Pennsylvania in the fall, Drisha "is a very honest, open place," she says. "It's not pushing any particular agenda."



Rabbi David Silber, founder and dean, and Mina Bruder, executive director, run Drisha's programs.

Photo: Richard Lobell

There is, however, one particular objective that Silber is intent on pursuing: providing educators to the Jewish community. While more Jewish day schools are opening across the country, Silber says, there are fewer teachers or directors to administer them.

"We're getting people to commit themselves to a lifetime of teaching," he says. "We're going to make a really significant impact across the country."

Drisha administrators encourage students to teach classes at Drisha and elsewhere during their course of study, sometimes even flying them to distant cities or states to teach in small communities. Drisha's teaching component, Jacobowitz says, makes the the institute an essential part of the Jewish community.

Drisha is "not an island of learning," she says. "You feel you're at the pulse of Jewish women's activism in New York."

Silber says the impact of what is happening at Drisha will have resonance far beyond the limits of New York. "We're going to make a really significant impact across the country," he says. "Drisha will soon become the most important Jewish institution in North America."

Drisha will offer three programs from June 28-30: a full-time summer institute, continuing education, and a summer high school.

For women only, the continuing education program will feature a class on the weekly Torah portion on Mondays from 9:30-11 a.m.; Aramaic grammar for beginners on Mondays from 1-2:30 p.m.; "Blessing, Covenant and Children: Themes in the Life of Abraham" for advanced students on Mondays from 7-9:15 p.m.; an advanced Mishnah class on tractate Rosh Hashanah on Tuesdays from 6:30 p.m.; and a class on Hebrew, Phoenician and Moabite inscriptions and the Bible for advanced students on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 9:30-11 a.m. For further information, contact Lisa Taubenblat at (212) 244-4949.