

Women and Learning by Debroah Zlochower

One of the most critical developments in Jewish life today is the recent creation of formal programs for advanced Judaic studies for women. Institutions such as Drisha Institute in New York and Nishmat, Midreshet Lindenbaum and Matan in Israel, whose curricula match those of the advanced yeshivot for men, have now made it possible for women to acquire the knowledge and skill necessary to participate in the halakhic discourse. New models of leadership are already being realized, as day schools and high schools seek out these women fluent in Talmudic texts to teach their students. Are rabbinic roles for Orthodox women far behind?

HISTORY OF FORMAL JEWISH EDUCATION FOR WOMEN

From the biblical Deborah to the Talmud's Bruria, there have been a few Jewish women who have mastered the intricacies of Jewish law. Various commentaries and codes of the past centuries attest to the prominence of learned Jewish women. These women, raised in rabbinic families and usually tutored by their learned fathers, were the rare exceptions. Their Jewish sisters had no formal Jewish schooling.

This picture changed in 1918, when Sara Schenirer opened a Jewish school for girls in Cracow, Poland, with the blessings of Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan (the *Hafetz Haim*) and the Rebbe of Ger. The Beth Jacob school system, which now provides a traditional Jewish education to girls in the *haredi* Orthodox community, is Sara Schenirer's legacy. The Beth Jacob schools, however, do not teach Talmud or major halakhic texts.

Over the past twenty years a new revolution in formal Jewish education has occurred. Stern College, the women's division of Yeshiva University in New York, with the public support of Rabbi Joseph Baer Soloveitchik, began offering Talmud classes to women in the late 1970's. A *beit midrash* program opened in the beginning of 90's. Jewish day schools and high schools teach Talmud to their female students, and more and more of them are presenting identical curricula to boys and girls. Institutions offering advanced Talmudic study opportunities to women have opened in both Israel and the United States; a number of these institutions now offer a curriculum in *halakha* on par with the *semikha* programs in men's *yeshivot*.

DRISHA INSTITUTE'S PROGRAMS

In 1979, under the direction of Rabbi David Silber, Drisha Institute for Jewish Education was begun. Since its beginnings, Drisha has provided serious textual study in Tanakh, Talmud and halakha for women of all ages.

In addition to a full array of classes for part-time students, Drisha runs three full-time programs. The Beit Midrash Program is designed for post-college women who wish to dedicate a year to studying classic Jewish texts intensively. HaSha'ar, inaugurated in 1998 and co-sponsored with the Beit Rabban Center, is a fellowship program designed to prepare men and women to teach in Jewish day schools. The program combines intensive pedagogical and Judaic studies. The

in Jewish day schools. The program combines intensive pedagogical and Judaic studies. The Drisha Scholars' Circle, Drisha's crown jewel, is a three-year program of intensive Talmudic and halakhic study. After mastering laws of Shabbat, *kashrut* and *nidda*, as well as three years of advanced Talmud study, Drisha Scholars receive a certificate formally recognizing their outstanding achievements. The Talmud/Tanakh track grants certificates to women who, in addition to advanced Talmud study, devote years to the study of Bible and related texts. Graduates of the Scholars' Circle teach Talmud and Jewish law in high schools, synagogues, and community centers in this country and in Israel and are remunerated commensurately to recently ordained rabbis. Graduates of Drisha's full-time programs are also employed by modern Orthodox synagogues as members of their educational and halakhic teams. These women represent the first break in the previously universal male hegemony of rabbinic positions in the Orthodox world.

Programs like the Drisha Scholars' Circle were founded with the belief that serious halakhic knowledge is essential to authoritative leadership roles in the Jewish community. Historically, Jewish leaders have been outstanding scholars; women must make the grade if they are to become authority figures. As more women begin to scale the heights of Talmudic erudition, they provide new models to Jewish girls who confront daily the reality that the venerated rabbis of our tradition are all men. One of the most significant roles that these pioneering women fill is to help erode that image through their educational and leadership functions.

A question often asked to these women is: Do women study halakhic texts differently than men? Will women's participation in the halakhic discourse change its character? The answer is unknown, but the question itself attests to a new reality.

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