A Yeshiva of One's Own

By Devora Steinmetz and 10up March 17, 2020 10:52 am

"But why do you call it a yeshiva?? A yeshiva is for men. Women learn in midrashot!"

This is often the first question that people ask when they hear about the yeshiva that Drisha opened in Israel a year ago—especially in Israel, where there is no other learning program for women that is called a *yeshiva*. The word *yeshiva*—and the dissonance, and often discomfort, that it evokes for many people—offers a good focal point for discussion of the nature and goals of Drisha's newest and most robust educational initiative.

The simplest answer to why the yeshiva is called a *yeshiva* is: Why not? What does it mean to create a full-time, multi-year intensive learning program and *not* to call it a *yeshiva*, because it is for women, not for men? As a proud Barnard alumna, I like to say: Imagine if, when Columbia College refused to grant degrees to women, Frederick Barnard and Annie Nathan Meyer had decided to open a parallel educational program for women—but not to call it a *college*, because a college is for men! The whole point was to open the same opportunities for educational advancement for women that had for centuries been available to men. To call Barnard anything other than a college would be to concede that women are, in some fundamental way, different from men in their educational needs and in their educational horizons. Colleges are for men; for women … well, they get something that's not a college.

So, really, the question "Why do you call it a yeshiva?" doesn't need answering at all. It's called a *yeshiva* because it's a yeshiva…. A yeshiva is a place where there are learners on many levels, all engaged in pursuit of a shared purpose.

So, really, the question "Why do you call it a yeshiva?" doesn't need answering at all. It's called a *yeshiva* because it's a yeshiva. Nevertheless, the word *yeshiva* is as evocative as it is old, and it carries a set of connotations that are worth unpacking in order to explain what is distinctive about the new learning environment that Drisha has created.

A yeshiva is a place where there are learners on many levels, all engaged in pursuit of a shared purpose. A first-year student can look up to second-year students; a second-year student can aspire to be like the fifth-year students; fifth-year students look up to the young *ramim*, who look up to the senior *ramim*, who look up to the *rashei yeshiva*. Not everyone will learn for five years or become a *ram* or a *rosh yeshiva*, and that is as it should be. But everyone knows that, if they want to continue to learn and if they have the capacity to become great in learning, they can do so. There is no ceiling. Torah learning can be a lifelong pursuit; the only things that limit a person's attainment are the individual's own inclinations, capacities, and life choices.

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Even though learning opportunities for women have increased dramatically over the past few decades, sadly there are still serious limitations on opportunities for women to become truly learned. Young women most often begin by having to play catch-up, not having been exposed to Talmud study in a serious way—and often not at all—before beginning post-high school study. Often there is little support for young women to learn past the first year or two of *midrasha*, and very few programs exist for women

to continue learning for enough years to begin to become strong learners. Furthermore, only in rare settings do young women find role models of more advanced learners, *ramiot*, or learned female institutional leaders.

Yeshivat Drisha is structured differently. Led by Rosh Yeshiva Hanna Dreyfuss (Godinger) and Seganit Rosh Yeshiva Yael Shimoni, the yeshiva is a place where young women learn from *talmidot hakhamim*. Rabbaniyot Dreyfuss and Shimoni spend much of their time in the *beit midrash* learning together, growing in their own learning while modeling for the students that learning is a lifelong path, that everyone is a learner, and that all learners in the *beit midrash* are on a shared journey. The yeshiva opened with a cohort of students who had already learned for one or more years in a post-high school setting, and many of the students have committed to learning for at least three years in the yeshiva. The yeshiva will likely begin to accept *shana alef* (first-year) students in the not-too-distant future, but the core culture of the *beit midrash* is shaped by more-advanced learners who understand themselves to be only at the beginning of a long path of becoming learned.

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A yeshiva is a place where people sit and learn—and, in sitting and learning, learn how to learn. There are no shortcuts, and a yeshiva schedule reflects that. Rather than trying to offer a large range of lectures delivered by star teachers, many of whom teach part-time in several different settings, a yeshiva focuses on a few core disciplines with the goal of achieving mastery. At Yeshivat Drisha, the weekly schedule includes five morning *sedarim* (extended learning periods) of *gemara iyun* (depth) and four *sedarim* of *gemara bekiut* (breadth), as well as *sedarim* in *halakhah* and Jewish thought. Most of the time is spent learning in *havruta*, with *shiurim* that enrich and deepen the students' learning. There is a strong focus on learning how to learn, no matter how experienced the learner might be. Faculty meet regularly with individual students to cooperatively assess the student's skills, what the student needs to work on, and how the student will work to achieve her goals. In addition, one afternoon a week is set aside for individual research in an area that each learner chooses to pursue, supported by faculty who guide the students' research and writing.

A yeshiva is a total environment. Students learn traditional texts, and they also learn how to *daven*, how to be their best selves, and how to form a *tzibur* (collective). At Yeshivat Drisha, students are present morning through evening; they are supported by stipends so that they can devote all of their time to learning. The community *davens* together three times a day, exploring what it means to create a *tzibur* of women, how to be a prayer leader, and how to engage more deeply in prayer. *Selihot*, *shabbatot yeshiva*, *tikkun leil Shavuot*, *megillah* reading, and a variety of other shared experiences create a community centered on spiritual pursuit and shared practice as well as on learning. Faculty and mentors support individual students in their personal, religious, and academic growth.

The yeshiva's goal is to enable women to learn Torah at the highest level, to become bearers and transmitters of Torah, in some cases to become *talmidot hakhamim*. Each woman will take her learning on the path that she chooses, whether she chooses to pursue *semikhah*, whether she chooses to become a Torah scholar and teacher, or whether she chooses to pursue a different calling.

A yeshiva is a place that trusts Torah and Torah learners. It is a place that is guided by aspiration rather than by fear. It is shaped by the assumption that learning will help bring learners to good places, to lives of goodness and service of God. The question we are most often asked in America about Yeshivat Drisha is "Are you giving *semikhah*?" No, the yeshiva is not giving *semikhah*. The yeshiva's goal is to enable women to learn Torah at the highest level, to become bearers and transmitters of Torah, in some cases to become *talmidot hakhamim*. Each woman will take her learning on the path that she chooses, whether she chooses to pursue *semikhah*, whether she chooses to become a Torah scholar and teacher, or whether she chooses to pursue a different calling. Whatever path she takes, the yeshiva will have equipped her with the knowledge, skills, self-awareness, and self-efficacy to build a life shaped by Torah learning. And we hope that some of our students will assume the mantle of leadership in Torah learning and help create a generation of true *talmidot hakhamim*.

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