

Healing the World

The Jewish women's organization Bet Debora holds its first conference in Austria

By Alexia Weiss

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The name says it all: Bet Debora, the House of Debora. In Judaism, schools of thought or textual study are known as “houses” – like Bet Hillel and Bet Shammai, which respectively stood for more liberal or more stringent interpretations of the Torah in Talmudic times. The name Bet Debora carries on this tradition of debate and study. Started 15 years ago in Berlin, the initiative – which brings together female rabbis, community leaders, Jewish activists and scholars – took the name of the biblical prophet and judge Debora (Dvora). Its goal is to give voice to women’s interpretations of Judaism.

Bet Debora’s international conferences are dedicated to this goal. And the sphere of influence has extended well beyond Germany by now. This year, from February 12-15, the organization’s 6th conference took place – this time, in Vienna. The theme: “Tikkun Olam” – “Healing the World”.

In that context, the role of women in modern Jewish society was discussed. Many participants shared their experiences; it became clear that they represented different groups within the Viennese Jewish community.

For example, Elvina Gavriel spoke of her confrontation with the theme of circumcision when her son was born. Previously, she wouldn’t have been able to explain why Jewish boys are circumcised. For Gavriel, who grew up in Azerbaijan, religion “never played a major role. “She “grew up thinking that Jews should hide.” Today she tries to not only practice religious customs and rituals, but also to understand what’s behind them.

For years now she has lived in Vienna, where she works as a psychotherapist caring for refugees. Gavriel wants to transmit other values to her teenager daughters than those she received from her own mother: Her daughters don’t necessarily have to follow in her footsteps, marrying and having children early. Instead, Gavriel’s top priority for them is that they get a good education.

Shirley Pritz comes from a Georgian family and spent her early years in Israel. She had to fight for the right to study and to leave home without being married. But she added: It feels different to live Jewishly in Israel versus Austria. “In Vienna, there were morning prayers, and that was something new: it was also compulsory.”

Attorney Dorothea Kippermann comes from Vienna. “When I was a child, I thought of Israel as a vacation spot. Later it became a place to party. “Tel Aviv is a hopping city.” But she couldn’t live in Israel: “There’s a big difference in mentality.”

Sofia Kaikov, who is studying in Israel, agrees. There's a fine line between love and hate in Israel. She doesn't plan to spend her life there.

Participants at the conference also discussed the role of women in religious life. Vienna has only one liberal synagogue. And professionally successful women often have no problem letting men handle certain tasks, such as reciting from the Torah.

Many women came to the Vienna conference from abroad – especially from Eastern Europe. They brought optimistic attitudes with them. For example, Svetlana Yakimenko reported on “Project Keshet,” a “Tikkun Olam” project that brings together more than 3,000 Jews from 150 cities or towns in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia and Israel. One of their goals is to raise awareness about breast cancer.

Historian Eleonore Lappin-Eppel, who organized the Vienna conference, grew up in an Orthodox milieu and later co-founded the Reform congregation Or Chadash. “I am at home in both worlds.” And it was her goal to bring these two worlds together. But the Vienna community does not seem quite ready for this. For the most part, local orthodox women kept their distance from the conference's lectures and seminars. So participants had intensive conversations, but essentially they were “preaching to the converted.”

Last but not least: Women's work may well be valued, said Yakimenko, but when it comes to funding, women field rejection after rejection. In short, one gets the feeling that, despite their important contribution, women are not taken seriously enough. Conclusion: Equality is elusive, even for the most dedicated women.