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November 2, 2007/Cheshvan 21 5768, Volume 60, No. 9

PROFILE

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Empowering Jewish women through study opportunities

VICKI CABOT
Contributing Editor
[E-MAIL](#)

Ask Arna Poupko Fisher, noted educator, scholar and lecturer, what she does in her spare time?

Carpool.

"I have car seats in my car, and I'm back to doing carpool," says the almost 50-year-old Fisher, a university professor and sought-after speaker who crisscrosses the country with her message of Judaism's enduring relevancy.

Her blended family of eight children, five from her first marriage (including two sets of twins) and three from her husband's first, ranges in ages from 19-27, and includes three grandchildren under the age of 5.

"I have toys in every corner of the house," says the effusive Fisher, speaking by cell phone from a cab between sessions at a conference at the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago, "and every kind of high chair and booster seat."

Fisher will be in Phoenix Sunday, Nov. 4, to headline the Phoenix Conference for Jewish Women, sponsored by the Women's Division of the Phoenix Community Kollel with co-sponsors Jewish Federation of Greater Phoenix, Jewish Family & Children's Service Center for Life Enrichment and Jewish Women International. She will speak on "Do Jews Need to Believe in Anything ... or Everything?" at the daylong meeting at the Chaparral Suites Resort.

Other presenters include Sandra Blank, editor of the award-winning cookbooks "The Kosher Palette" and "The Kosher Palette II, Coming Home"; Rabbi Yakov Bronsteyn, senior lecturer for the Phoenix Community Kollel; Risa Brumer, director of women's programming for Jewish Arizonans on Campus at Arizona State University; Linda Cucher, licensed professional counselor; Bella Gottesman, noted Los Angeles educator; and Julie Kwatra, Scottsdale obstetrician/ gynecologist.

Fisher, raised in a Conservative family in Edmonton, Alberta, says she was drawn to a more observant Jewish lifestyle as a young teenager.

"At about 14 or 15, I became enamored by intensive Jewish life," she says. She attended Jewish day school through eighth grade, public school for high school. But a group of teenage friends exposed her to what she calls a more "intensive" Judaism, and she began to explore further.

Her parents, both academics, her father a professor of engineering, her mother, theater, supported her pursuit.

"They even hired a rabbi to tutor me privately," recalls Fisher. She spent two years



Scottsdale
Gymnastics



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studying in Israel after high school, then went on to Yeshiva University in New York, where she majored in Jewish education and Jewish medieval philosophy. She has continued her study in the doctoral programs at both the University of Toronto and McGill University.

Her second husband, Bobby Fisher, too, embarked on a spiritual path after meeting his future wife.

"My husband was just a regular American Jewish guy," says Fisher. "He was not Sabbath observant or kosher observant (Fisher is both), and when he asked to take me out, I told him I would not go out with him unless he became Sabbath observant.

"At the age of 41, he became observant," she says. They married seven years ago.

Fisher says that the foundation of Jewish practice and belief is an understanding of its philosophical bases.

Judaism is a complex and rational religious system, says Fisher, and knowledge of its fundamental assumptions is key to its enduring existence.

Doing Jewish - whether giving tzedakah or promoting social justice - requires appreciation of the underlying religious and philosophical tenets that infuse it with meaning.

"It is wonderful to volunteer," says Fisher, "it is a necessary part of our tradition. But that volunteering should come from a deep sense of what it means to be Jewish and what that stands for."

Education is critical to Jewish continuity, says Fisher, who serves on the faculty of the Wexner Heritage Foundation in addition to teaching "Bible and Law" at the University of Cincinnati. And it should be gender-free, she adds, with similar approaches for both men and women.

She says that she continues to seek out opportunities to learn.

"Any good teacher is a good learner," she says.

And while she advocates lifelong study, she laments the paucity of opportunities for serious learning, especially for women.

"If we want to create American Judaism, we must include places for study," she says. And then we must seek them out.

"The Jews who stick around will do so out of a deeply personal commitment to the Jewish people and to God."

Details

- What: Conference for
- Jewish Women
- Who: Phoenix Community Kollel
- When: 9 a.m.-2 p.m.
- Sunday, Nov. 4
- Where: Chaparral Suites, 5001 N. Scottsdale Road, Scottsdale
- Cost: \$54, includes breakfast and lunch
- Contact: 602-433-0300 or clandesman@aztorah.com

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