“You wouldn’t think that a guy who was pre-med, well-dressed and going to Hillel on Friday nights was bad in any way,” says Shira Epstein, assistant professor at New York’s Jewish Theological Seminary. Epstein has designed a curriculum—“Strong Girls, Healthy Relationships”—for Jewish Women International (JWI).

The curriculum comes in response to a staggering statistic: One in five college students admits being abused by a current partner....


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Queen Esther’s Fast

Now you have a dramatic new way to celebrate one of the few holidays on the Jewish calendar where the key player is a woman. Kolot, the center for Jewish women’s studies and gender studies at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, this year launched Ta’anit Esther: The Jewish Day of Justice, reclaiming a part of the Purim ritual to call attention to the sexual exploitation of women. Ta’anit Esther, the Fast of Esther, marked the day before Purim, commemorates Queen Esther’s fast before she implored the King to save the lives of Persia’s Jews. For over a decade, Kolot has used the occasion of Ta’anit Esther to explore issues from sex-trade trafficking to the plight of women in Afghanistan. For Purim 2008, Kolot launched a pilot program, with support from the Jewish Women’s Foundation of Metropolitan Chicago, focused on the issue of HIV/AIDS in Africa, featuring Dr. Mardge Cohen, described as “a modern-day Esther.” Cohen’s research and practice are devoted to the social and medical issues faced by women with HIV.

“We saw Ta’anit Esther as a wonderful possibility for infusing a traditional holiday with contemporary relevance,” Kolot director Lori Lefkovitz told Lilith. “Esther spoke truth to power, and that’s extremely contemporary, but it’s also a restoration of meaning to this holiday. Purim is a holiday with a heroine, and we want to redefine, using a Jewish idiom, what heroism is for Jewish women. Our mission, really, is to get every community to celebrate a contemporary Esther every year.”

For more information on bringing Ta’anit Esther to your community, go to www.kolot.org.

MELANIE WEISS

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Houston’s Lilith Salon

“My (obese) mother sent me a care package to college with weight-loss pills—and cookies!” After hearing this recollection we had, as you might imagine, a lively discussion about food and families, and heard statistics from one of our participants on eating disorders as a heritable trait.

That the conversation took many paths didn’t surprise anyone.

Since 2005, about 30 verbal, well-read Texas women (all with strong opinions!) have gathered every few months for a Lilith salon. They come from all branches of Judaism, and some are unaffiliated with any synagogue or Jewish organization; meeting to talk with other Jewish women seems to be their Jewish connection. The Lilith topics we’ve chewed over have included legislative battles for reproductive rights; the concealment of mental illness, the power of friendship; and, most recently, Jewish women and their mothers. Thirtysomethings and eightysomethings have a lot to say to each other, it turns out. Reproductive rights is a case in point. An early cover of Lilith, which we had on hand, showed a wire coat hanger, which had no resonance for younger women, unable to envision a world before Roe v. Wade. One woman spoke of her illegal abortion in the 1960s. Another spoke of the importance of lobbying state and national officials to encourage stem cell research. Because a number of us wanted to know what we could do next, we sent out a follow-up letter with suggestions for action.

So how is the Lilith connection different from just plain talk? The magazine’s articles are a resource that keeps us connected to the subject at hand, both as a trigger starting the talk about our own views and as a window onto the experiences of others represented by the sometimes idiosyncratic voices we hear in Lilith. Appreciating this, we concluded one recent salon with a 30th birthday party for the magazine. As a door prize, we gave the winner a copy of the magazine’s first cover, signed by the Lilith editor in chief Susan Weidman Schneider. And the birthday cake (which we did all eat) read LILITH LIVETH!

JULIA WOLF MAZOW