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Conference on Tanakh is smorgasbord of learning

By Deborah Klee
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"Who gets up this early on a Sunday morning?" joked a conference participant as he signed up for a day of learning at the third annual "Yemei Iyun on Tanakh and Jewish Thought," sponsored by Yeshivat Chovevei Torah (YCT) Rabbinical School of New York.

The answer: Adults who are passionate about Torah.

The three-day conference took place June 26-28 at Ma'ayanot Yeshiva High School, Teaneck, and included more than 75 classes and workshops. While geared primarily for Jewish high school teachers, it attracted other teachers as well as yeshiva students and lay people.

"The vast majority — I'd say 80 percent — of the people who participate are teachers — mostly high school, but also elementary and adult education," said Rabbi Nathaniel Helfgot, who created the program in 2003. "The other 20 percent are interested lay men and women."

Word of the workshops was sent to about 200 schools throughout the country, mostly to Modern Orthodox day schools, but also to community schools and Solomon Schechter high schools.

Helfgot said there is a "window each year" for scheduling the conference.

"We try to schedule it after most day schools and community schools are finished, and before camp has started," added Helfgot, who is chair of the Bible and Jewish thought

department and director of continuing education at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah in Manhattan.

Attendance — which over the course of the three days attracted about 250 learners — was particularly strong on Sunday. This year was the first time Sunday was an option, which allowed people who work during the week to attend — such as Aviva Shefa of East Windsor, a public school social worker. This was her first Yemei Iyun.

"I haven't take any formal Torah-related classes for a while," Shefa explained. "I wanted something that was stimulating, uplifting — and it was very wonderful."

A graduate of Stern College, Shefa said she found the presenters "very clear and organized."

"I had a Tanakh to refer to and the handouts were appropriate, relevant and helpful," she added. "The majority of people attending were Jewish educators, but — though I wasn't — I didn't feel it was over my head. I felt I could keep up."

Another first-time attender was Roselyn Bell of Edison, who works in New York at the American Jewish Committee. She attended the conference with her husband, Eli Leiter, and her friend and co-commuter, third-time attendee Barbara Kessel, also of Edison, who works at New York's Board of Jewish Education.

"I have been interested in Jewish learning for many, many years," said Bell who, growing up in Houston, attended afternoon Hebrew school for 12 years.

"I have a master's in Jewish education

from Yeshiva University and taught for a little while — and I've taken courses in Drisha (Institute for Jewish Education in New York) for many years. My model for many years has been this kind of 'recreational learning.' It sounds too light, but it is enjoyable — especially learning texts from a literary point of view."

It was clear from the greetings, laughter and energy heard in the halls as people made their way from session to session that "the participants are clearly here out of love for Torah," said Kessel.

Chaye Kohl of Highland Park agreed.

"The aura of excitement is palpable when one arrives," she said. "We are all there to imbibe as much Torah as possible. For me, it is a chance to learn new things or see material I know presented with interesting new twists."

Kohl has just finished up as assistant principal at The Frisch School in Paramus in order to become principal of the Hillel Community High School in North Miami Beach, Fla.

The joy of learning something new was expressed also by Dorothy Friedman, a retired programmer/analyst living in East Windsor.

"I went to further my own knowledge and to be exposed to new ideas and new instructors," she said.

YCT may specialize in "new twists" as it is a self-described "open Orthodox rabbinical school" in New York.

"We're moving forward in being able to see the light and bring modern — what I call

'open' — Orthodoxy to this country and beyond," said Rabbi Avi Weiss, founder and dean of YCT. Weiss is also the yeshiva's chair of the department of leadership and professional training and instructor of Bible and prayer, as well as senior rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale and president of AMCHA-The Coalition for Jewish Concerns.

Events such as this Yemei Iyun — which cull attendees from the tri-state area, the Midwest, Canada and Israel — serve as a link between the yeshiva and local communities to share the "open Orthodox" philosophy.

"'Open' means 'inclusivity,'" explained Weiss. "Inclusivity of women — regarding Jewish ritual, learning and leadership. Inclusivity of Conservative and Reform — without blurring the distinctions, having respectful dialogue, engaging values. Inclusivity of all Jews — regardless of affiliation, commitment or background. Whatever level of learning or observance, each Jew has something to offer. We kindle a spark."

Weiss and Rabbi Dov Linzer, chair of YCT's departments of halakhah and Talmud and instructor of advanced halakha, Talmud and Jewish thought, have written about their reasons for creating, in 1999, an open Orthodox rabbinical school (www.shma.com/jan03/Weiss.htm).

"Orthodox Judaism is currently at a crossroads," they wrote. "In the post-Holocaust generation, Orthodoxy has shown new life, attracting and maintaining adherents and cul-

tivating an increasing commitment to scrupulous observance and regular Torah study. The choice that Orthodoxy faces today is whether to focus on the needs of its own community or on the needs of the larger Jewish community, expanding outward, non-dogmatically and cooperatively. Believing in an Orthodoxy that is open intellectually and expansive and inclusive in practice, we need a new breed of rabbis ... critical thinkers with intellectual integrity and who openly engage the challenges of our modern and post-modern world while living a life of faith and religious commitment."

This year's co-sponsors of YCT's Yemei Iyun included ATID, the Lookstein Center for Jewish Education at Bar Ilan University, the Jewish Agency for Israel and the New Jersey Association of Jewish Day Schools — all of whom had representatives teaching sessions.

"It's a nice mix of people who like to learn and educators," said Bell. "It's done with scholars who are of a modern bent."

The Yemei Iyun is "a Torah scholar's dream," said Kohl. "Tanakh teachers of international reputation — from the United States as well as Israel — gather to share their knowledge and expertise with those of us who are eager students. There are many different topics and methodological approaches that are represented. I have never been disappointed with any of the sessions."

In all there were nearly three dozen men and women presenting Yemei Iyun sessions — scholars from synagogues, educational centers, yeshivas and universities, including several educators from YCT.

While most of the sessions were conducted in English, a few were in Hebrew. Most had source handouts in Hebrew (some with English translations).

Sessions — each 65 minutes long — ran throughout the day, offering several choices each hour. Sunday and Monday focused on topics in Tanakh, while Tuesday focused on Jewish thought and philosophy.

"I always make sure to take a class with Rabbi Hayyim Angel (Yeshiva University) and Zvi Grumet (Lookstein Center for Jewish Education at Bar Ilan University) because of their innovative thinking and their

supreme command of the subject matter," said Kessel. "I also try to catch Rabbi Yoel Bin Nun (Yeshivat Kibbut Ha-Dati, Israel), mostly because I want to practice my Hebrew listening skills."

After lunch on Sunday, for example, one could choose from: "Approaches to the Teaching of the Flood Narrative," with B. Barry Levy of McGill University; "The Enigmatic Hatan Damim (bridegroom of blood) Episode," with Leeor Gottlieb of Hebrew University; "The Song of Deborah: The Power and Prophecy of Poetry," with Rachel Friedman of Drisha Institute for Jewish Education; "The Still Small Voice: The Investiture of Elisha," with Rabbi Nachman Levine, noted biblical educator; "The Prophecies of Consolation: Isaiah 40-48," with Rabbi Menachem Leibtag, founder of the Tanach Study Center website (www.tanach.org) and teacher at Yeshivat Har Etzion in Israel; or "Introduction to Kohelet (Ecclesiastes): Hazards and Rewards," with Rabbi Hayyim Angel of Yeshiva University.

And that was just from 2:15-3:20.

Friedman had taught a session, "Bereishit: Creation, Separation and Evil," before lunch as well.

Shefa was able to attend both of Friedman's presentations.

"She broke things down and discussed them," said Shefa. "Then, at the end, she tied things together. It was very systematic, and the material was interesting. She was consistently analytical and organized for both classes."

Eight of the presenters at Yemei Iyun were women — about 23 percent.

The presence of women scholars within an Orthodox learning setting was an inspiration for Shefa.

"All the presenters were very good, but it was great to have women role models that were so intellectual," she explained. "They were serious women scholars. It's wonderful to have women that I can respect intellectually who embrace their subject and who are so articulate and stimulating."

About 60 percent of all conference attendees are women, reflecting "the reality of Jewish education, especially in the area of

teaching Bible," said Helfgot.

During the question-and-answer period after each session, it was clear the participants were seasoned and enthusiastic learners — whether professional or avocational.

"The caliber of participants was very high," commented Shefa. "Some of the questions people were asking were very challenging."

Other presenters would even come and sit in on their colleague's presentations and engage in high-level discussion.

During the short breaks between sessions, participants could grab a coffee and muffin, purchase audio tapes of the sessions and browse the book fair, run by YCT student, Yonah Berman.

There was also time to catch up with others.

"I enjoy the breakfast and lunch breaks as an opportunity to connect with colleagues," said Kohl. "It is especially wonderful for me to meet up with former students of mine from my years at Yeshiva of Flatbush High School, who are now Jewish educators. Real nachat (pride)!"

Eli Leiter, a psychologist in New York, was particularly interested in the Tuesday sessions on Jewish thought.

The Yemei Iyun "is a more modern style of learning," he said, adding that "even someone without a background in Jewish education can get a lot out of the sessions."

The main topics on Tuesday covered prayer, the thought of the Maharal (16th century theologian Rabbi Leow of Prague) and of Rabbi Eliezer Berkovitz (1908-1992), theologian and educator, whose writings deal with the contrasting claims of religious tradition and secular nationalism.

There were also sessions on ethics.

Rabbi Shalom Carmy of Yeshiva University, for example, spoke on "Ethics and Halakhah: One Category or Two." Can a person, for example, be ethical and an atheist? Are morality and religion the same thing? Is it possible for a religious law to be unethical?

A practical application of this kind of Jewish thinking came in a later session, "The Role of Ethics in Determining Halakhah: The Case of Organ Donation," with Rabbi

Dov Linzer, rosh yeshiva and academic head of YCT Rabbinical School.

Among the last sessions of the three-day conference was "Jewish Prayer and the Non-Believer," given by Dr. Gabi Cohn of the Lookstein Center for Jewish Education.

"Tefilah (prayer) is an emotional encounter with God," he said. "But some people have difficulty praying Jewish prayer, said every day, three times a day. Why not be more spontaneous?"

"A bigger problem is if a person doesn't believe in God. Yet, who of us believes all the time with the same intensity?"

"Or what if a person has no belief in an active God? After the Shoah, many people can't pray."

"These are all valid questions. How do we answer people who have difficulty praying — even if that person is oneself?"

Cohn went on to show that the Jewish prayer book is not so much prayer — as in asking for something — but tefilah, from the Hebrew hitpalel, to judge oneself. The first question in the Torah is when God asked Adam — after the first couple had eaten the forbidden fruit — "Where are you?" This question captures the essence of what it means to be self-reflective. The prayer book is composed of history, philosophy, literature and direction. In each case, one can ask, "Where am I?" such as, "Where am I in the frame of Jewish history?"

Hearing Cohn speak was particularly special for Bell.

"He was my teacher at Hebrew University decades ago," she said. "I hadn't heard him since then. When I saw his name on the list, I really wanted to see him again."

"He was very good," she added.

"He was vibrant as ever, as well as insightful and humorous," agreed Kessel.

Information about the Yemei Iyun workshops had been sent to about 200 Jewish schools throughout the country.

And word got around.

"Last year there was a nice group of 20-30 people who were not educators but who took off work for a day or two to spend the day learning with us," said Helfgot. "It was a beautiful sight and a beautiful message."

It was Helfgot's idea to start this commu-

nity-based program here, modeled on a successful program in Israel done by Herzog Teachers College at Yeshivat Har Etzion in which he participated.

“About 12 years ago they started the Yemei Iyun B’Tanakh for teachers throughout national religious schools in Israel,” explained Helfgot. “They have many more teachers, having a centralized school system, and the ministry of education gives credit for attending. They get about 1,500 people for the three days in the summer.

“We borrowed the model from them. I give them a lot of credit. In fact, we brought in some of the teachers from there to speak. For example, Rabbi Menachem Leibtag, who is well-known from the Internet, and Yoel Bin Nun, one of the leaders of that teachers’ seminary.”

The workshops also provide opportunities for networking.

“Last year Rabbi Leibtag set up an informal network of department heads of Bible in various yeshiva high schools throughout the country,” said Helfgot, adding that they created an informal listserve to talk about issues.

Conference attendees this year are ready for more.

“While it can be difficult to sit for five classes in a row, with only a lunch break, I never for a moment felt bored,” said Friedman. “Instead I came away invigorated, and eager for more knowledge. All of the classes I attended were high level and challenging. While the instructors were all different in their methodologies, they were all interesting, and very knowledgeable in their fields. I definitely look forward to attending again next year and only wish that there were more classes of this caliber available closer to home.”

“It was a very challenging day,” agreed Shefa, “but I wasn’t tired. I went to all those sessions and I was able to focus. And I think it was because the personalities and styles were different — but they were all equally well prepared. Come the afternoon, I was not tired, or beginning to get antsy — I never looked at my watch. I was engaged all the time.

“I left feeling, I wouldn’t mind more of this,” she added. “It would be great to study some aspect of Tanakh in a scholarly way.”

The Yemei Iyun “positively restores my soul,” said Kessel. “There is an atmosphere of sublime excitement which is really quite moving. This program is like Gan Eden — a taste of Paradise for people who hope and believe that the afterlife is comprised of spirituality and Torah study.”

For more information about Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School and upcoming events, call (212) 666-0036 or visit www.yctorah.org

To purchase audio tapes or CDs of the sessions, call (718) 252-5274.