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News

Cardinals Study With Orthodox Students

By JENNIFER SIEGEL

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When second-year rabbinical student Will Friedman sat down to review a passage of Talmud on Monday, he was greeted by a study partner who wore a scholar's intent expression and V-neck sweater — along with a clerical collar.

Francis Deniau, archbishop of Montpellier, France, was one of nearly three-dozen Catholic clerics who spent the morning with students of New York's fledgling, liberal Modern Orthodox rabbinical school, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah. There, for the first time, he found himself poring over one the Talmud's most commonly studied passages, in the tractate Berakhot, or blessings.

"We believe that every word, every phrase in the Bible, has meaning and something to teach us," Friedman told his Catholic study partner. As an example, he cited the Hebrew word for "stand," which he said also can be understood as a synonym for "pray."

The archbishop smiled, his knees nearly touching the student's. Nodding, he replied, "Jesus stood up early in the morning to pray."

In a groundbreaking move, the American Orthodox seminary had invited Catholic clerics to participate directly in the life of their *beit midrash*, the daily study hall that is an essential component of rabbinic training. The session, a stop on a three-day visit to New York that was spearheaded by Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger of Paris and by officials at the World Jewish Congress, ignored long-standing taboos in some Orthodox circles against teaching Torah to non-Jews.

"The question is, 'How much interaction should there be?'" said Rabbi Israel Singer, chairman of the WJC policy council. For the first 20 years of Jewish-Catholic religious dialogue, "it was like one hand clapping — you couldn't hear it." He added, "This is the most substantive of all these kinds of efforts."

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The openness at Chovevei, which was founded by rabbis who argue that Yeshiva University has drifted to the right, stood in contrast to a similar session last year at Y.U.'s affiliated rabbinical seminary, during which Catholic clergy were asked to wear secular garb and their presence in the *beit midrash* was curtailed to five minutes.

At Chovevei, the room was a sea of head coverings: the yarmulkes worn by the Jews interspersed with a few flame-red skullcaps worn by Catholic cardinals. Accompanying Lustiger were Cardinal Peter Erdo of Hungary and Cardinal Jean-Pierre Ricard of France. Ricard, who had been promoted from bishop only the day before, was introduced with a loud chorus of *mazel tous*.

"I should have been in Rome," Ricard told the audience through a translator. "The pope is to receive the new cardinals, but I wrote... him about this meeting in New York City, [and] he said, 'Of course you can go.'"

Rabbi Avi Weiss, Chovevei's founder and dean, worked to dissipate any lingering tensions in the room through a mix of hospitality, humor and candor.

During an open discussion following the text study, the rabbinical students struggled to find the correct appellations for their guests, settling eventually on "brother." In response, Weiss quipped, "My problem is that all the brothers in the Bible don't do that well."

Weiss also obliquely acknowledged that he had had his share of serious differences with the Catholic Church, as when he scaled the walls at Auschwitz in 1989 to protest the presence of a Carmelite convent on the death camp's grounds.

"We're in a different space. We're in a different place now," Weiss said.

In an address opening the program, Weiss asked the Catholic audience for "help in confronting the evil of antisemitism" — particularly in France, where most of the bishops were from.

Lustiger, who was born to Jewish parents in Poland but raised as a Catholic by a family that hid him during World War II, stressed the new understanding of the Catholic-Jewish relationship that has emerged since the historic 1965 meeting of the Second Vatican Council, when the church formally rejected the notion that the Jewish people bore collective responsibility for the death of Jesus. The French cardinal also spoke of a special bond that Catholics share with Judaism, above all other world religions.

In addition to the visit to Chovevei, the Catholic clergy used the

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three-day New York trip to tour Jewish sites in Manhattan, pay a visit to the Chabad-Lubavitch headquarters in Brooklyn and drop in on an advanced Talmud class at the *beit midrash* at Y.U.'s Stern College for Women.

The visit to Stern was a first for the Catholic clergy members, who, in their previous two visits — respectively in 2004 and 2005 — met with Y.U.'s rabbinical students, who are all male.

According to Pinchas Shapiro, the WJC's director of NGO and interreligious affairs, it was Rabbi Zevulun Charlop, dean of Y.U.'s affiliated rabbinical seminary, who suggested the alternative visit to Stern. The meeting at Stern was not open to the press, and WJC and Y.U. representatives declined to comment on the event.

In an interview with the *Forward*, Weiss said that the open nature of the dialogue and study at Chovevei "is something that we do in an unapologetic way." Weiss questioned whether the 1964 essay "Confrontation," written by the late spiritual leader of Modern Orthodoxy, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, could still serve as a guide to Jewish-Catholic dialogue given changes over the past two decades. In the essay, Soloveitchik permitted interfaith dialogue, but not on matters of theology.

In the end, however, Weiss seemed eager to say that he was not violating the taboo against holding theological discussions with non-Jews. "This is not theological dialogue — this is a study session," Weiss said. But at several moments, as straight text study made way for free-flowing discussion, it seemed hard to draw a clear line dividing the two categories.

For example, one set of study partners, first-year rabbinical student Michael Katzman and French Bishop Guy de Kerimel, strayed from the talmudic text to a discussion about how the interpretation of texts — including New Testament passages about the Jews' role in the death of Jesus — can change even after thousands of years.

Rabbi David Rosen, the American Jewish Committee's Israel-based director of international interreligious affairs, has participated in a series of twice-yearly meetings between the Israeli Chief Rabbinate and Catholic leaders. Rosen said there is no problem with Jews and Christians discussing matters of faith, as long as they don't debate them.

Without that distinction, Rosen said, Christians and Jews would not be able to talk at all. "When two people of faith are talking about the weather, they're having a religious dialogue," Rosen said.

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