

A Challenge to an Orthodox Bastion

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A grand experiment in Orthodox Judaism sits nestled in four classrooms of an Upper West Side Jewish high school.

It is Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, a small rabbinical school poised to challenge the might of Yeshiva University, a bastion of Jewish Orthodoxy and the nation's main supplier of modern Orthodox rabbis.

The school, founded five years ago, will ordain its first class of rabbis in June. The founders hope the nine young men will be the vanguard of a liberalizing, more open force in the world of modern Orthodoxy, which they believe has grown increasingly closed and intolerant.

The new yeshiva's founder, Rabbi Avi Weiss, said he hoped to ordain 8 to 10 working rabbis a year who are "fervently Orthodox" but are also open and inclusive-minded.

"We can literally transform the fabric of the Jewish community in America," he said in an interview. "And that's our goal."

Rabbi Weiss, the longtime senior rabbi at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, is well known for high-profile political activity. But he also has a reputation as a modern Orthodox liberal, giving women a greater role in his synagogue, stressing openness to non-Orthodox Jews and keeping the doors open to other faiths.

"He's trying to reproduce himself with this institution," said Samuel C. Heilman, a professor of Jewish studies and sociology at Queens College.

Over at Yeshiva, officials privately raise doubts about the quality of rabbis who will come out of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah and publicly question whether it was even needed.

"If they can produce talented and well-trained rabbis for a community, then that's great, because the need is there," said Rabbi David Israel, Yeshiva's director of communal relations. "At same time, do I feel that the extra seminary is needed?" Probably not, he said.

Orthodoxy demands a stricter interpretation of Jewish law than other branches, like Reform and Conservative Judaism. It calls for separation of the sexes in synagogues and some other places, and provides little role for women in synagogue ritual. Modern Orthodoxy is distinct from the more insular ultra-Orthodox world, which includes Hasidic Jews from Eastern Europe, who keep their separateness visible by having their men wear side curls and black hats.



James Estrin/The New York Times
Uri Topolosky, left, and Dr. Akiva Siltan in the study hall at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, a new seminary training Orthodox rabbis.

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William B. Helmreich, a professor of the sociology of religion at the City University of New York Graduate Center, said that many modern Orthodox rabbis have grown increasingly conservative, with a small "c," in recent years. The signs range from the raising of walls separating the sexes at services to a ban on female singers or mixed dancing at social events to barring non-Orthodox rabbis from using an Orthodox synagogue's ritual bath for conversions. Professor Helmreich cites several reasons. Ultra-Orthodox communities, which are growing rapidly, are exerting more influence. As modern Orthodox have moved into secular professions, the teaching - and molding of young Jewish minds - is left to more ultra-Orthodox. And a growing number of converts to Orthodoxy are bringing their own zeal.

From a pilot class of two, the student body of Chovevei Torah, or "lovers of the Torah," has grown to 37. It has lured many students from Yeshiva University. Five of the nine to be ordained either have undergraduate degrees from Yeshiva or studied at its rabbinical school.

How many in the ordination class find jobs in the next few months will be a critical marker of success.

Of the two in the pilot year, who are included in this year's ordination class, Jeff Fox is a rabbi in Tenafly, N.J., and Ya'akov Simon teaches at a Jewish high school in Philadelphia. From the rest of the class, Daniel Levy has a teaching job offer, and Aaron Levy has accepted a job as campus rabbi at Cornell University with Hillel, the center for Jewish student life. School officials say two dozen congregations or schools have expressed interest in their graduates, and others in the class have interviews. In contrast, Yeshiva University's theological seminary reported that it had 147 graduates from 1998 to 2002. Of those, 24 have full-time pulpit jobs and 47 serve in some other professional rabbinical capacity, Yeshiva said.

Yeshivat Chovevei Torah (pronounced yeh-shee-VAT kho-veh-VAY toh-RAH) is temporarily housed at the Abraham Joshua Heschel High School, at 60th Street and West End Avenue in Manhattan, where teenage girls giggle in the lobby as the earnest young men study ancient texts upstairs.

Rabbi Weiss said an endowment has been started to build a new home for the school, probably in Riverdale. The budget runs about \$1.8 million a year. First- and second-year students receive yearly stipends of \$10,000. Third- and fourth-year students receive \$15,000. All graduates are expected to work in a congregation or teach for at least three years.

The board includes several members of the rabbi's synagogue, including Howard Jonas, the chairman and founder of IDT, the telecommunications giant. Other major donors include S. Daniel Abraham, the founder of the Slim-Fast diet food company. Dr. Jonathan Zizmor, the dermatologist of subway ad fame, sits on the board.



James Estrin/The New York Times
Rabbi Yaacov Love, second from right,
with students at the seminary.

At Yeshivat Chovevei Torah's first gala dinner, on March 28, Mr. Jonas was quoted by The Forward as saying that Yeshiva University had moved to the right because of the "gutless and the spineless in a coalition with the mindless and the senseless." Although several students at the dinner confirmed the comments, Mr. Jonas, in an interview from Israel, disputed using that language, but

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acknowledged he had criticized Yeshiva as moving to the right and suffering a leadership void. In a gathering of some fourth-year students, most agreed that attending an upstart school was risky. But they praised its intimate, open atmosphere and tolerance of dissent, aspects several said were lacking at Yeshiva University.

"We embrace the fact that we have divergent viewpoints," said Aaron Levy, 28, a Columbia University graduate with a sparse goatee. He supports more equality for women in Orthodoxy. Dan Levy, 26, no relation, disagreed, saying Orthodoxy already takes the feelings of women into account.

Certainly the school would never sanction the ordination of women, and the kinds of changes possible are ones of degree. Such changes might include bringing in more women to synagogue leadership, encouraging women's prayer groups or female Torah readers (in single-sex services) or allowing girls at their bat mitzvahs to address the entire congregation during the service.

In a larger sense, leaders of the new yeshiva say they are supplying something sorely needed in a world where religions are growing more fundamentalist. It is, according to Rabbi Dov Linzer, the school's academic dean, an interpretation of faith that allows for openness to modern ideas while remaining faithful to basic tenets.

"A major segment of the modern Orthodox community is looking for leadership that has that intellectual openness," said Rabbi Linzer, a 37-year-old scholar.

Students seek to master the Talmud, the early medieval codification of Jewish law, and its commentary, whose study lies at the core of becoming an Orthodox rabbi. But officials of the school say they offer strong teaching in areas that traditional yeshivas shortchange, like the practical application and evolution of Jewish law, as well as Jewish philosophy and spiritualism. Yeshivat Chovevei Torah also says it uniquely offers intensive training in how to lead congregations and minister to individuals.

"Our students learn that religious growth comes not through dogmatism, but through questioning and struggle," Rabbi Linzer and Rabbi Weiss wrote in *Sh'ma*, a journal of Jewish communal issues. Such words are an implicit rebuke to the intellectual world of Yeshiva University. Rabbi Weiss, who taught for three decades at Yeshiva at the Stern College for Women, stressed that Yeshivat Chovevei Torah and Yeshiva were not competition.

Some Yeshiva officials dismiss Yeshivat Chovevei Torah as unnecessary, and say it could end up producing lightweight rabbis.

Yeshiva's chancellor, Rabbi Norman Lamm, considered a leading spokesman for modern Orthodoxy, said that indeed, some Orthodox congregations wanted more liberal Orthodox rabbis, but that the inverse was also true. Some Yeshiva officials said they worried that the new school will



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James Estrin/The New York Times
A student participates in morning prayers wearing Tefillin—small boxes, containing Scriptural passages, fastened with leather straps.

The New York Times

draw away liberal students, upsetting the balance at Yeshiva's seminary. Others think Chovevei Torah it is just too liberal, with teachers who tolerate improper practices, like women helping to conduct services.

"Their spin is that they're offering something totally unique in terms of pastoral psychology and speaking, but we have all those courses as well," said Rabbi Israel, Yeshiva's director of communal relations. Sure, congregants expect pastoral care, he said. But that should not come at the expense of Talmudic knowledge.

All third- and fourth-year students at Chovevei Torah take a "life cycles" course, which covers rituals, laws and pastoral care over the course of a human life. Topics include Jewish law and how it relates to abortion, contraception, capital punishment, preventing cruelty to animals and relations with other religions.

One class last month concerned Jewish laws about a grown child's obligations to an ailing or aging parent. The teacher was Rabbi Yaacov Love, a mirthful man whose eyebrows rise and fall dramatically. He often threw up his arms with a "What can I tell ya?" and gave homespun examples.

Asked whether a rabbi should seek to enforce Jewish law among congregants, he replied, "If I can prevent this guy from having a ham sandwich by inviting him to my house for pastrami, why not do it?"

The students raised questions about do-not-resuscitate orders, Medicare, Alzheimer's disease and decisions about putting elderly parents in nursing homes. Rabbi Love preached a subtle approach to congregants, urging the future rabbis to consider motives, family situation, character and temperament before pronouncing on legal requirements.

"We're not miracle workers," Rabbi Love said. "We don't have to be, and we're not supposed to be."