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'Open' Orthodox yeshiva to ordain first class of rabbis

by Johanna Ginsberg
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For Yaakov Simon, originally of Highland Park, Manhattan's Yeshivat Chovevei Torah suits the way he has reconciled his Orthodox religious outlook with the lessons learned from his "liberal assimilated New York-ish family."

For Jon Duker — who lived in Elizabeth during his studies and interned in Elizabeth and Highland Park — the fledgling Orthodox yeshiva offers a broad-based curriculum and a rosh yeshiva, head of school, whom he describes as "phenomenal."

And for both students, the yeshiva provides an essential alternative to the rabbinical school at Yeshiva University, which they and Chovevei Torah's founders consider to have moved too far to the right of a movement known as Modern Orthodoxy.

On Sunday, June 20, Simon and Duker will be among the nine students to be ordained by Yeshivat Chovevei Torah in its first such ceremony, four years after it opened its doors as the self-described "open" Orthodox yeshiva.

"It's a dream come true. It's a powerful moment for our yeshiva collectively. It's a moment we are all celebrating," said Rabbi Avi Weiss, the Riverdale, NY, synagogue rabbi and political activist who founded the yeshiva. "It's ultimately a celebration of our students. They came in at considerable risk. Now they've all been placed. They're the ones, God willing, who will make a powerful difference in our community."

The core values of the new rabbinical school, currently located in the Abraham Joshua Heschel High School on the upper

west side of Manhattan, are integrating Torah “into all of our worldly pursuits,” “promoting the respectful interaction of all Jewish movements,” and “expanding the role of women in religious life and leadership.” All three aspects are said to be on the wane within Modern Orthodoxy, a movement whose values were once said to be encapsulated in the motto of Yeshiva University: “Torah u’ mada,” Torah and secular learning.

The mission of the school, according to Weiss, is to graduate rabbis who will give back to the community, and every student must commit to “become a communal rabbi with the goal of transforming the community — not to receive smiha [ordination] and then go into business.”

The students, he said, are expected to go into the pulpit, to work at “important” Hillels, and, for those in education, to ultimately become the leaders of their schools.

With an average of 10 students a year (YU ordains nearly 40 rabbis each year) “we want to maximize our impact,” said Weiss. He hopes the impact will be felt throughout the Jewish world, and not just within Orthodoxy. “For 90 percent of the community, Orthodoxy is irrelevant. We want to have an impact on Orthodox Jews, but to build bridges to non-Orthodox Jews as well.”

The school was established with the backing of Howard Jonas, founder and chair of IDT Corp., one of the world’s largest telecommunications companies, headquartered in Newark. As Jonas told NJN in an interview several weeks ago, he has been a supporter and board member of Yeshiva University, but grew disillusioned with what he considered a rightward drift to more hard-line religious policies. In recent years, he said, “a lot of right-wing rabbis hijacked the institution. You couldn’t put a sheet of paper between most right-wing yeshivas in Brooklyn and

RIETS [YU's rabbinical school, Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary]. It's an extreme form of Judaism when people burn their [wigs] because they might come from India. That's a crazy way to reach Jews. I'm troubled by this. I really believe in moderation."

Of the nine Chovevei Torah graduates, four will work in synagogue settings, two will pursue careers with Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life, and three, including both Duker and Simon, will serve as educators.

Both Duker and Simon transferred to YCT from Yeshiva University's seminary. For Simon, YCT was the right match, socially, religiously, even financially, he told NJJN from his current home in Philadelphia. As a ba'al teshuva, or newly religious Jew, he said he found it difficult to break into established social cliques at YU. And from a religious perspective, he found YU to be too narrowly focused on the study of Halacha, or rabbinic law. And finally, as he put it, "Rabbi Avi Weiss offered a very generous stipend to both me and my hevruta [cooperative study] partner, Jeff Fox [also among the ordainees]. That made it easy."

Simon believes there is a place for both YU and YCT in the Modern Orthodox world, saying there is "a healthy competition" between the two institutions. "Both are necessary and have different focuses. YU serves the community that is the right half of Modern Orthodoxy, and Chovevei Torah serves the left half. There's room for both."

Because he grew up "in a Woody Allen movie," which he describes as "a liberal assimilated New York-ish family," he finds the philosophy at YCT better suits the way he has reconciled his religious outlook with his family. He enjoys taking an approach that leaves room for others to make their own interpretations, he said, even if he doesn't agree.

That's exactly how he taught a basic Judaism course, he said, at the Sol Goldman Y while still living in New York City. Technically ordained one year ago, although considered part of this first official class of ordainees, he now teaches at Stern Hebrew High School, an Orthodox Jewish day school in Philadelphia. But, he said, he would love to return to New Jersey. His parents still live in Highland Park.

Like a pioneer

For Duker, the course of study at YCT is what captured his interest. "I was looking for an Orthodox institution, and I wanted a broad-based curriculum," he told NJN. Other factors that attracted him included the small size, which he felt would yield closer relationships between students and between students and teachers; and Weiss. In addition, YCT rosh yeshiva Rabbi Dov Linzer "has a phenomenal personality. That was a big drive in my going there."

The curriculum went through several shifts and starts while the students were there, but they didn't seem to mind too much. For Duker, it was the quality of the teaching, as well as his own "creative, flexible" personality that worked well at the school.

"Every six months we'd go back to the drawing board, and [the administration] would ask, 'What can we do better?' It was fun to be part of shaping the vision." Duker recalled discussions over how much the school ought to emphasize the two different aspects of Talmud study, Halacha and Gemara. "Always one side felt it was losing out," he said. He recalled that students suggested creating two tracks, following the model of a major and a minor, so that students themselves could decide which to emphasize. "It sounds trivial but it was really very important. There are few yeshivot that would change a curriculum to meet the needs of students."

Duker, who said he feels like a pioneer, is completing a semester in Israel teaching at

Reishit Yerushalayim, an all-male yeshiva intended for high school graduates who want to study for a year or two prior to entering universities. When he looks into the future, he said, he sees himself in education for a few more years and then he hopes to work with the broader community in JCCs and Hillels.

School administrators expect 200 guests at the ordination, which will take place at 10:30 a.m. at the JCC of the Upper West Side in Manhattan. "It's an amazing occasion," said Dov Weiss, YCT director of operations. "All these years we've been building up to this moment. This is the first group of rabbis who will go out to change the world."

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