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SPECIAL SECTIONS

## Taking A Left Turn (08/23/2001)

*Open-minded Orthodox rabbinical program marks*  
**Steve Lipman - Staff Writer**

One day last semester, in a book-lined basement study hall of a synagogue on the Upper West Side, Jeff Fox was studying Baba Metzia, the talmudic tractate about the laws of lost objects. During the class, the teacher, an Orthodox rabbi, cited, among other commentaries, Talmud Arukh, a book by a Conservative scholar.



"I found this to be very exciting," says Fox, one of eight students in the Talmud class.

The class was part of the curriculum offered by Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, a Modern Orthodox rabbinical training program that marks its first anniversary next month. Founded by Rabbi Avi Weiss, the Riverdale-based activist and pulpit rabbi, it is located in Congregation Ramath Orah on West 110th Street, and presents what it calls an open-minded approach to a movement that appears to have taken a right-wing turn in recent years.

Talmud Arukh is one example of the school's undogmatic style. Written by a non-Orthodox rabbi, "it would not be in the beit midrash" of most Orthodox yeshivas, says Fox. The book is "p'shat-oriented," stressing the basic meaning of the Talmud, commenting through "questions on the theoretical reality of the text." The questions aided Fox's understanding.

"Rabbi Linzer used it a number of times," Fox says. That's Rabbi Dov Linzer, rosh hayeshiva, or dean of Chovevei Torah. Ordained under the auspices of the chief rabbinate in Israel, he teaches a Gemara shiur, or class, at the yeshiva and serves as day-to-day administrator.

While the yeshiva is Orthodox — the students, all male, will also be tested and ordained by the Israeli rabbinate — its approach is in some ways unorthodox, providing a more "critical sensitivity" toward classical Jewish learning than most so-called black hat yeshivas or at Yeshiva University, pillar of the Modern Orthodox world, Rabbi Linzer says. "There's more of an openness to ... alternate manuscripts."

"The yeshiva's environment is one of openness, chavurah, and community," according to its mission statement. "Our staff and atmosphere are open and

  
  
  
  


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welcoming, encouraging all types of questions.”

Chovevei Torah is an outgrowth of the Meorot Institute, a fellowship program for Yeshiva University smicha students started five years ago by Rabbi Weiss and Rabbi Saul Berman, associate professor of Jewish Studies at YU and director of Edah, a liberal Modern Orthodox organization. Designed to supplement the prospective rabbis' education, Meorot expanded to include a parallel program for women and advanced training for university juniors and seniors interested in careers in Jewish religious leadership.

The programs offered a regular series of lectures on various current issues that affect the Jewish community.

A rabbinical school was a natural next step, Rabbi Linzer says. “We could do much more of this, preparing and training rabbis to confront the challenges of modernity, if we had our own rabbinical school.”

“The key program is the rabbinical school — I thought we could make a very important contribution to the Orthodox community,” Rabbi Weiss says.

The four-year program, funded by private donors and promoted largely through word of mouth — and recruiting — at American universities and Israeli yeshivas, is open to college graduates with at least two years of full-time learning after high school. The yeshiva's ordainees must commit to spending at least three years in a pulpit position.

The first class included students with recent backgrounds at YU, the Conservative movement's Jewish Theological Seminary of America, and those making mid-career changes from the business world.

“We are not monolithic,” Rabbi Linzer says, sitting at a table in the Chovevei Torah study hall, his students reviewing tractates with learning partners, chavruta-style, at other tables. “We have people who are conservative. We have people who are very liberal.

“Some people think we have a specific halachic agenda” — a progressive, feminist agenda, the rabbi says. “That's not true.”

“This is a yeshiva that is not afraid of ideas,” says James Moche, 40, from Mamaroneck, Westchester, who studied at Chovevei Torah the last year. “There are eight guys — eight different views about Judaism, all within an Orthodox framework.”

The yeshiva's daily schedule — “We're not a university,” Rabbi Linzer stresses — reads like a typical yeshiva's. Heavy emphasis on Talmud, with classes on Bible and philosophy, as well as sessions on pastoral counseling, life-cycle events, medical ethics and relations with non-Jews.

Instruction and review goes five days a week, 9 a.m.-6 p.m., with at least one late night of studies.

Judged by synagogues' requests for Chovevei Torah graduates and students' reactions and applications for the limited number of upcoming openings, its first year was a success, Rabbi Linzer says. Eleven new students start in September. “Now that we're up and running,” he says, “we're turning people away. We already have eight applicants for 2002.”

“At the beginning,” Rabbi Weiss says, “we were told if we attracted two, three students a year we'd be doing well.”

This year only two incoming students have YU backgrounds.



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“We are taking a few students away, but we are addressing fundamentally different audiences” — students at YU are likely to have a more conservative, traditional approach to Jewish studies, Rabbi Linzer says.

The yeshiva has had “no significant impact on YU,” says one observer with close ties to Yeshiva University. Both Rabbi Weiss and Rabbi Berman, prominent leaders in New York’s Jewish community, felt marginalized at YU because of liberal religious causes with which they are associated, particularly regarding women’s issues. They felt they needed an independent forum from which they could influence a young generation of rabbis, says the observer, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Chovevei Torah “in some ways shows ... the success” of Yeshiva University, says Rabbi David Israel, director of the Max Stern Division of Communal Services of YU’s rabbinical school. “All the originators were YU-educated. The approach is YU’s approach.”

The year-old yeshiva “has not affected the way YU operates or thinks about itself in any way,” Rabbi Israel says. YU has 800 men studying in its beit midrash during the year, 250 in its ordination program, he says. “If people feel more comfortable and will be able to learn [at Chovevei Torah], it’s good for the Jewish people. Orthodoxy is growing ... we’re in great need of rabbis and educators.”

“There’s a real need to have a rabbinical school that reflects a much more open [philosophy],” Rabbi Linzer says.

Jeff Fox, 25, a SUNY Binghamton graduate from New Rochelle, who has spent time at YU and an Israeli yeshiva, says he feels “much more comfortable with Rabbi Weiss’ hashgafa [religious philosophy].

“I love it here,” he says. “I feel my learning has grown tremendously.” Sometimes, while studying Gemara, Fox says, a question might occur to him — the type of question addressed by Talmud Arukh, which is on the shelves of the Chovevei Torah library. “If I had this type of question” in other yeshivas, “it could not be asked.” n

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