



# The **C**OMMENTATOR

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**Who is YCT?**

**A Look at Upper Manhattan's Other Orthodox Seminary**

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In the last six years, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah (YCT) has spent a great deal of money and resources on bolstering their unique rabbinic graduate-semikha program. Although YCT officials affirm that they would like their student roster to remain small - they currently have 43 students - they continue to bolster the program to attract targeted students.

YCT has ordained 27 graduates as of 2006 and will graduate another nine students in Spring 2007. Further, YCT boasts a high retention rate. Only four students have left the school without graduating since its inaugural year.

YCT provides a \$10,000 yearly stipend for its graduates for the first two years after graduation and \$15,000 for the following two years so long as the graduate continues to work as interns. "In their third and fourth years our students typically do rabbinic internships, so their stipend money increases," explained Director of Admissions Rabbi Dov Weiss. "Often, the various institutions they work for often pay for a sizable portion of the stipend."

"YCT is a program of intense learning of Gemara, Halakha, Tanach and Machshava combined with practical rabbinics, pastoral counseling and leadership," stated YCT Founder and Dean Rabbi Avi Weiss. "We are a Yeshiva firmly rooted in Halacha and yet open and safe for students to express their views; a beit midrash within which the goal of learning is to give back to Am Yisrael; a school that is a family, where an atmosphere of love and respect for others prevail."

YCT offers the traditional halakha curriculum found in most rabbinic seminaries. Second year

students study laws of family purity and mourning; the third year students focus on Sabbath and laws and the following year concentrates on kashrut. "We try to get practical contemporary halakha questions for our students to study," said Rabbi Weiss. "We turn to rabbis in the field to give us their most prevalent questions."

YCT officials feel that their unique integration of Brisk and classic style Talmud and Tanakh learning with academic study attracts their targeted students. YCT also incorporates less conventional pedagogic devices into their integrated curriculum. "For example," said Rabbi Weiss, "A class on the issue of circumcision may have Rabbi Linzer discuss halakhic perspectives as well Rabbi Avi Weiss explain how to make the event more meaningful - do you sing, dance, give a speech? Then we might bring in a psychologist into the same room to discuss other areas. As apposed to a traditional shiur setting where everything is individualized, we try to integrate all nuances into one large discussion."

YCT also requires students to participate in a four year pastoral counseling program directed by Dr. Michelle Friedman. Dr. Ron Heifetz from Harvard University participates in the seminary's leadership curriculum where students encounter hot button social issues and miscellaneous topics like how to engage board members and congregants. Students also meet in a process group once a week to talk about their feelings and the tension within yeshiva. YCT also feels that students are attracted to Rabbi Dov Linzer, a former member of the RIETS Kollel Elyon and a "top student of Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein."

Rabbi Weiss added that many of the YCT courses provide opportunities for simulated role playing and student lectures. "The most important part about our system is that there is constant evaluation and assessment. Students sit on the curriculum committee with faculty and administrators. We want to ensure that we are constantly getting better at what we do."

YCT officials boast that the intimacy and closeness with rabbinic staff makes their seminary particularly attractive. "Our beit midrash is only made up of smikha and pre-smikha guys and our rabbis are here from minyan in the morning until late in the afternoon. We have constructed a small but great sense of chevra and family where everyone knows who everyone else is. This is all meant to foster a greater sense of spirituality."

Each class has an average of ten students a year and is guided by a mentor who stays with them exclusively throughout the four year smikha program. There is also a remedial Beit Midrash Program for students not yet ready for the higher level smikha program taught by Rabbi Daniel Reifman.

YCT also relies on its affiliate, the Me'orot Fellowship program, to attract students. Currently, four out of 20 Me'orot fellows are Yeshiva College students. Aside from participating in Me'orot, many YC students gain interest in YCT after contact with the seminary's faculty who are involved in Jewish programs and projects around the New York area.

The student body at YCT is diverse. Aside from attracting many students from Brandeis and Ivy League universities, the seminary in the last few years accepted two students from Lander College and Yeshiva of Philadelphia.

Many recognize YCT through its creative advertisements featuring profiles of individuals involved in YCT. The 'Who is YCT' ads are regularly run in many Jewish news publications, like The Jewish Week, The Jewish Press and The Commentator. "People always ask about our institution's ideology," discussed Rabbi Weiss, who pointed out that other Jewish organizations have also begun to use the same marketing technique. "We feel that the best sell, for us, is our students. When we show that our students an faculty are involved in so many activities and are diverse, we think it's effective."

When asked why YCT advertises in The Commentator, Rabbi Weiss explained that "we get a

very good rate and we feel that YC has the best and brightest young students and leaders." Rabbi Weiss also said that the majority of Yeshiva College graduates who have attended YCT were enrolled in MYP while studying at Yeshiva.

The YCT Admissions Office does not contact references by phone. "We do, however, require all prospective students to supply three letters of recommendation, and ask that one of these letters be written by a academic reference and one by a rabbinic reference," explained Rabbi Weiss. "Most YC graduates applying to YCT obtain these letters from one their YC instructors and receive letters from one of their MYP Roshei Yeshiva as well."

Yeshiva College Advising Center Director Thea Volpe told The Commentator that her office is not prepared to advise students who are considering rabbinic professional options. Instead, Dr. Volpe says that it is her impression that those students turn to the staffs in the various morning programs for counseling.

"When I was a college student at YU," said fourth year YCT student Akiva Herzfeld, "I was inspired by the leadership of Rabbi Avi Weiss and the activist role that he took in fighting to defend the Jewish people. As a college student, I participated in a couple of rallies with Rabbi Weiss."

Mr. Herzfeld contrasted his educational experiences at Yeshiva College and YCT. "The teachers at YU are excellent and so is the education. But the environment for learning at YCT is different from the one that I experienced at YU. At YCT, many students engage in an open exploration of knowledge from all sources as they passionately pursue their Torah studies."

Another fourth year YCT student, Yonah Berman, found that certain courses propelled him to consider continuing his studies at YCT. "I believe that there is a strong association between the psychology courses which I took at YC, and the understanding they gave me of human thoughts and behavior, and my pastoral psychology training at YCT. In addition, my study of Bible and Jewish thought have in many ways been linked to related coursework at YC."

While two-thirds of YCT alumni enter into the pulpit, others have found their niche elsewhere in the rabbinate. "Our curriculum is geared toward rabbinic leadership and specifically pulpit work," explained Rabbi Weiss. "But if our students are interested in teaching, we train them to become principals and school administrators."

YCT administrators feel that as 30% of their graduates find jobs at Hillel Outreach programs, they provide much needed support for Jewish students attending secular universities. Before YCT's first graduated, only six Orthodox rabbis were directing Hillel programs across the country. YCT graduates currently serve as Hillel directors at Columbia, Northwestern, Washington (St. Louis), and Toronto Universities.

YCT realizes that its program is not for every student interested in becoming a rabbinic professional. "Our students are the type of people who want to know about women and orthodoxy and will be opening to reading Rabbi Meir Twersky and Rachel Adler," surmised Rabbi Weiss.

Rabbi Weiss estimated that his school has a 60 percent acceptance rate. Additionally, Rabbi Weiss consults with most of the interested clientele before they submit applications. "Not everyone is for us. Some students may be too far to the left while others are too far to the right. I get many calls from undergraduate students and many times, by the end of the conversation, we agree that YCT isn't the place for them."