

Jewish Theological] Seminary [JTS] moves to the left, it's very clear that there is place in there for an Orthodoxy that is more open," Weiss said.

That openness has often put Weiss and his protégés on the margins of the Orthodox community, which views with suspicion Weiss, willingness to break with tradition.

But students seem to be willing to take the risk: All the spots in the first three years were filled, many by students who had been at YU, Modern Orthodoxy's flagship institution.

While YU recent appointment of Richard Joel as president to replace Rabbi Norman Lamm could pull the school and its rabbinic seminary, Rabbi Isaac Elchanon Theological Seminary, more to the center, Kanefsky believes that YCT will reinject an intellectual honesty into Orthodoxy.

"Somewhere along the way, much of the Orthodox community has lost its commitment to real scholarship and integrity in Torah study," he said. "There is an unwillingness to expose oneself to sources that challenge traditional assumptions."

Sam Feinsmith, a second year student who transferred to YCT from the JTS, said he values the traditional immersion in halachic texts in an atmosphere where no scholar or source is considered off-limits.

"There is a sense of vision and passion that pervades everything we do here," Feinsmith said. "It's great to be in a place where at least one time in the course of every day someone will say something that will stir something inside of me and remind me of why I'm doing this in the first place."

Weiss is committed to giving the students solid professional training through a curriculum that includes instruction by mental health professionals and courses in Jewish leadership, public speaking and developing a personal mission and vision.

"The goal is to train passionate community leaders, not just people who know halacha," said Jason Weiner, a first-year student from Palos Verdes.

Weiner says he chose YCT because it offered the rigorous Talmud study other ordination programs offered, while broadening out to other areas such as Bible, mysticism and spirituality, in an atmosphere that he finds nurturing and vibrant.

Both Feinsmith and Weiner admit they had reservations about investing so much time in a new school that, with Weiss at the helm, was sure to generate controversy.

Aside from his sometimes radical religious views, Weiss is known worldwide for his activism — he has personally confronted onetime

Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke and Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, and led a protest at Auschwitz over the presence of a Carmelite convent at the death camp.

Weiss said his politics stay out of the beit midrash, and that the school does not espouse his personal views.

Still, he said, "There is a world of politics out there, and I feel a sense of responsibility to my students and their families."

Weiss preempted potential backlash against his graduates by arranging for YCT students to have the option take the ordination test of the chief rabbinate of Israel. He also waived tuition and offered students a living-wage stipend to eliminate any sense of a financial gamble.

"I don't think I'll have a problem getting a job," Feinsmith said. "The buzz on the street is good. People are excited about this place." Feinsmith is honing his professional viability with an internship with B'nai David's Kanefsky. Feinsmith flies out to Los Angeles once a month from New York and spends his Friday shadowing Kanefsky as he visits the ill, counsels congregants and prepares classes and sermons. The two have a chavruta (study partnership) using actual questions Kanefsky has had to answer for congregants, and throughout the year Feinsmith delivers some sermons and teaches classes.

It is this kind of practical training, coupled with the intellectual exercise in the beit midrash, that Weiss hopes will help create a new crop of rabbis that will have a significant impact on American Jewry.

"I believe that we have the potential to transform the Orthodox community — [but] not only the Orthodox community, because our Orthodoxy is so open, ultimately it could transform the larger Jewish community," Weiss said. "This is not an Orthodoxy which is insular. It is an Orthodoxy which is unapologetically inclusive."

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