

From the Jewish Standard, Teaneck, December 5, 2003

Shabbaton to study Chanukah

HELEN WEISS PINCUS

TEANECK – Chanukah, the holiday of rebellion and miracles, not explicitly mentioned in the Bible and only briefly noted in the Talmud, will be the subject of a Shabbaton sponsored by Davar, an Orthodox thinktank in this township.

Students and faculty of the Manhattan-based Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the self-described open Orthodox rabbinical school, will examine the holiday's significance. YCT, founded in 1999 by Rabbi Avi Weiss, and led by Weiss and Rabbi Dov Linzer, "views Orthodox Judaism as an intellectually rich, questioning, spiritual and inclusive Jewish movement," according to the mission statement on its Website. The statement describes the school's goal as educating "Orthodox rabbis who will lead the Jewish community and shape its spiritual and intellectual character in consonance with modern and open Orthodox values and commitments."

Davar grew out of a Tuesday-night lecture series given by Rabbi Tully Harcsztark, principal of the SAR High School in Riverdale, N.Y. Larry Krule organized the series and founded Davar because he and many others, Krule told this newspaper, missed the "intellectual honesty and inquiry" of the divrei Torah Harcsztark delivered when he was the rabbi at Cong. Keter Torah here. Davar and YCT are in some ways similar, said Krule. "I see Chovevei as an interesting new version of a classical institution. We share a similar hashkafic orientation. But Davar is not yet defined and has no real predecessor model...it's not a shul, a shtieble, a yeshiva, a JCC, or a beit midrash."

Still in an "evolutionary" mode, Davar offers lectures roughly once a month, usually on Shabbat and in conjunction with Shabbat services. The format has been expanded to include music performances and art workshops. A recent program led by artist Tobi Kahn focused on developing "sacred spaces." The institute has also hosted meditation classes by Dr. Alan Brill and hopes to screen a movie in the spring. A chamber music concert is in the works as well.

The weekend's educational approach offers a taste of yeshiva learning styles. A Friday evening d'var Torah on "Nes Chanukah: The Esoteric and the Exoteric," will be delivered by Rabbi Yissoschar Katz, a Gemara rebbe at both YCT and SAR. On Shabbat morning, rabbinical student Sam Feinsmith will talk about "Chassidus, Chinuch, and Chanukah." Post-lunch Shabbaton participants will engage in traditional chavruta-style studying of rabbinical and biblical sources in preparation for two afternoon lectures by rabbinical students: "A literary analysis of 'Mai Chanukah': Inspired Editor or Random Compiler?" by Nissan Antine and "Historical vs. Rabbinic Chanukah: Contradiction or Synthesis?" by Zev Farber.

"Chavrusa learning, one-on-one study, is really a very intense and beautiful way to study," said YCT director of operations Rabbi Dov Weiss in a telephone interview. "You

bounce ideas off your study partner and develop questions and insights that you might otherwise miss. When you study alone, if the text gets difficult you can just close the book. It's also exciting to see how others look at the text. The idea is not just to remember information but to understand it in a much deeper way. You become very close with your study partner. I have studied with the same guy for eight years, for seven to eight hours a day for five days a week." Studying with a partner underscores how complex intelligence is, Weiss said. "Certain people have better reading skills, some have better conceptual skills. There are a lot of different elements."

During the third Shabbat meal, Weiss will talk about "The current challenges for modern Orthodoxy." Weiss, who received rabbinical ordination from Yeshiva University, is a master's candidate in western thought at CUNY. "How do we strengthen modern Orthodoxy?" he asked. "Without competent well-trained leaders the movement is going nowhere. Basically, we need to be intellectually open and pragmatically inclusive within parameters of modern halachic commitment."

In the yeshiva, students from varied backgrounds, including Yeshiva University and the Jewish Theological Seminary, sometimes have "disagreement on specifics," Weiss said. The debates can sometimes be "heated — but we all feel connected about what we want to do for the Jewish community. All the students are knowledgeable and passionate about religion. They want to foster a welcoming, open, and loving kind of Judaism in this country. We want to produce a rabbi who is learned and bright but who gives people the feeling that they can connect with him. That's part of the reason we include a course in pastoral counseling taught by psychiatrist, Dr. Michelle Friedman. Our guys are really trained, not just in terms of learning but in dealing with family conflicts. We're creating something different."