

Our Students

Contributed by YCT Web Site Administrator
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Our student come from all over the United States and abroad with a love for Torah and a passion for service.

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Happenings at the Yeshiva On May 4th three YCT students, Daniel Millner, Aaron Potek, and Andrew Scheer drove through the night to Birmingham, Alabama. They went to provide assistance and emotional support to residents whose homes were devastated by the tornadoes in the south. Below is an article written by Daniel Millner (YCT '14). "I Have Put Before You Life and Death" By Daniel Millner How do we make sense out of chaos? How do we reestablish order in our lives after everything has gone wrong? But, more importantly, after everything has gone wrong, how do we muster the strength and conviction of hope and purpose to commit ourselves to rebuild, to rededicate, and to look forward to a new day- a new life? The Torah teaches us in Deuteronomy 30:19, "I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life-if you and your offspring would live-by loving the Lord your God..." This passage, in many ways, encapsulates the way in which I perceived and internalized the horrific devastation wrought by the tornado in Pleasant Grove, a small town outside of Birmingham, AL. Following an exhausting fifteen-hour drive from New York into Pleasant Grove, I was simply overwhelmed and horrified by the atrocious sight I beheld, and could not understand why this destruction occurred. Why did some houses remain intact, almost pristine, without so much as a scratch on them, while others were decimated, utterly destroyed, reduced to nothing but rubble? Why could this family go to sleep that night in a familiar bed, wake up to familiar faces, and find comfort and security in familiar surroundings, while others could not? It all seemed so random, so unjust. However, as two fellow rabbinical students and I went down into the destruction that had become Pleasant Grove, counseling victims of the tornado, as well as physically helping them sort through rubble and debris in an attempt to uncover a lifetime of family memories, dreams, and traditions, I learned through experiencing the overwhelmingly positive attitudes of the victims and their commitment to persevere through the wreckage, that the question I ought to be asking should no longer be "why," but "how?" How should we respond to this indescribable catastrophe? Should we get lost in the despair of randomness and chaos? Should we become angry with God and the world? Or, should we respond by affirming life, affirming love and community, and affirming a commitment to believe that tomorrow will bring brighter times and a better day? Of course, different people respond to disaster in a different ways, and every response is valid, as trauma and suffering are as unique as the lives effected by them. However, one particular family in Pleasant Grove, Betty and Jack, chose to resoundingly respond by choosing life in the face of death. Though they had lost everything dear to them: a home, security, a lifetime of memories and achievements, they nevertheless chose to affirm life, love of God, family, and community. I recall speaking with Betty, who was sitting on her living room chair amidst the jumbled remains of what was once her house. She told me that the one thing she wished she could find more than anything else was a picture of her son, who tragically perished in a fire while attending Auburn University. I could not even begin to imagine how devastating it must have been for Betty and Jack to endure the "second loss" of their son. Though we searched for hours, though we found many other photographs, none were of their young son. I do not know if Betty and Jack ever found a picture of him; however, they assured us that it was all right, and that despite the loss of this precious artifact, they had to press on, because that is what they felt God and their community desired of them. "God put me where I'm supposed to be," Jack said, "we all have a purpose." Betty and Jack personified and lived the Torah commandment to "choose life," though death had been squarely placed before them. They did not bewail the loss of their material possessions; they did not raise their eyes and fists towards Heaven cursing God, neither did they dwell on the question, "why me?" Rather, they thanked God for their lives, their family, and for the chance to rebuild and renew. Every family and individual I encountered during my time volunteering in Pleasant Grove displayed such tremendous faith, love and hope, that I was left profoundly changed and inspired. No longer can I read Deuteronomy 30:19 without imagining Betty and Jack searching through the rubble of what was once their home for a picture of their son. This experience has inspired me to realize that when catastrophic events occur, it is the responsibility of a rabbinical student to leave the beit midrash in order to live the meaning of the texts we so dutifully study. If my experience in Alabama taught me anything, it is that sometimes we must look for what is written in the Bible in places other than books.