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Students Choose Between RIETS and Chovevei Torah

by Avi Robinson

Founded in 1999, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah (YCT) has rooted itself as the institution of choice for the “left-wing” Orthodox and has been actively recruiting on the Wilf Campus. Presenting alternatives to Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS) in both curriculum and in ideology, the self-described “Open Orthodox Rabbinical School” has quietly begun to lure students from RIETS and has provoked questioning from others who remain about their own school’s direction.

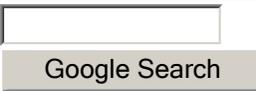
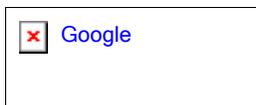
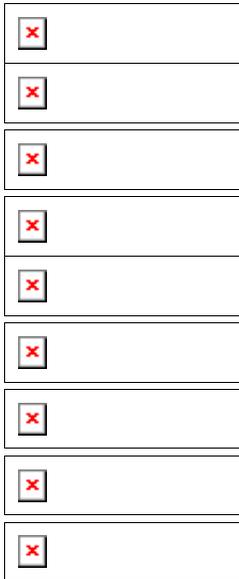
YCT’s demographics reflect its recent efforts to build a student body around a nucleus of Yeshiva graduates. Its first two classes contained equal numbers of transfers from JTS or the Conservative Yeshiva as from YC or RIETS. Seven of the ten students that entered this year, however, spent time at YC or RIETS, while none came from Conservative institutions.

An aggressive marketing campaign has accompanied this demographic shift. At the Yeshiva college career fair in October, YCT faculty members Rabbi Dov Weiss and Rabbi Nati Helfgot, together with students David Hain YC ’01 and Saul Strosberg YC ’00, manned an impressive booth featuring information packets, applications, and a powerpoint presentation. Although Yeshiva’s other graduate schools, such as Revel and Wurzweiler, appeared at the career fair, RIETS was not present.

“I was rather bewildered by the presence of recruiters from Yeshivat Chovevei Torah at the career fair,” commented YC sophomore Amitai Bin-Nun. “Aren’t YU Roshei Yeshiva on the record against so-called “open orthodox” ideologies? I must say, though, that Rabbis Helfgot and Weiss made a tremendous impression by patiently discussing many issues with me, and I definitely left the career fair with a rosier view of YCT than I had before. It’s a shame that RIETS did not similarly use this opportunity to reach out and make a positive impression on the public.” RIETS administrators declined to comment publicly on the matter.

More recently, on Monday, December 23, YCT held an informal recruitment meeting at the apartment of YC sophomore Dov Rosenblatt, attracting about a half-dozen students.

Students considering both schools must weigh several factors. These include



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size, career goals, curriculum, confrontation of modern orthodox dilemmas, and, the most delicate, “openness” and ideology of *halakha*.

Size and Career Goals

RIETS caters to a large student population with varied career interests. Of the approximately 290 students currently enrolled in RIETS, only half will graduate. Students commonly enroll for only one or two years and depart to pursue other careers.

Moreover, according to a RIETS self-study published in June 2002, only 79% of the students who graduated in the last four years are currently working in Jewish public service.

While stressing that a rabbinical school aims primarily to produce active rabbis, Rabbi David Israel, Director of the Max Stern Division of Communal Services, values those students coming just to learn. “Not everyone goes into *avodat hakodesh*, nor would they be qualified. These people are learning totally *lishmah* [for its own sake], and they increase the number of people learning here. This is an aspect of our program which is not a weakness but a strength.”

Of the 147 students who received their ordination at the *chag hasemicha* in March 2002, representing the classes of 1999-2002, 116 are currently using their ordinations in their careers. 46 teach in Jewish schools, 24 are pulpit rabbis, 11 work for Jewish organizations, 4 teach in community kollelim, and 4 are chaplains. 27 of the graduates are continuing to study in *kollelim*, such as RIETS’ selective Wexner *kollel elyon*, presumably with the intention of eventually entering a Jewish field. Thirteen of the graduates currently live in Israel.

In contrast to RIETS’ flexibility in vocational tracks, YCT accepts only students who intend to become pulpit rabbis. “All the experts are saying that transformation comes from communal rabbis,” explains Rabbi Dov Weiss, an instructor in Talmud and director of admissions. “Of course, there are countless examples of Rabbis who teach in the local schools – but the communal rabbi can have maximum impact on the larger community” YCT requires a three-year commitment to rabbinical service after ordination from all students receiving stipends.

Together with the exclusive dedication to community service, the small size of the YCT student body (10 students per class) fosters a warm and supportive environment. “I chose YCT because I wanted a smaller, more intimate atmosphere,” recalls Naftali Balanson YC ’02. “I wanted to be in a community of people dedicated to working for *Am Yisrael* and supporting one another in that common quest. Above all, it is the *chevra* here that has made my decision worthwhile.”

Finances may play a role in some students’ decisions. YCT offers a stipend of

\$12,500 to unmarried students and \$15,000 to married students. RIETS offers a stipend of \$2500 for unmarried *kollel* students and \$6000 for married students. Students accepted to RIETS's Wexner Semicha Honors program, which takes approximately three students per year and requires additional enrichment courses in rabbinic training, receive a \$12,000 stipend.

Curriculum

RIETS's rigorous *talmud* and *halakha* classes occupy the prime position in its curriculum. Following in the legacy of Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik, RIETS boasts an outstanding collection of Roshei Yeshiva, many of whom have achieved international renown.

According to Rabbi Robert Hirt, Assistant to the President of Yeshiva University, rabbis today must acquire greater sophistication in Jewish learning than their counterparts a generation ago. "The members of the Modern Orthodox community today are more knowledgeable about Judaism, more sophisticated, and more Orthodox." By "more Orthodox" Rabbi Hirt means that "people are more inner-directed, looking in rather than out for influences." To keep pace with the community's evolving needs, "Rabbis today also must be more knowledgeable. They need to be stronger in *lomdus* and practical *halakha*. That is the purpose of our *kollel elyon* – to train Rabbis with more learning and more sophistication."

RIETS' multiple *kollelim* and scholarly publications attest to its students' commitment to intensive Talmud study. The Marcos and Adina Katz *kollel*, an afternoon Talmud program headed by R. Herschel Schachter, enrolls close to 100 students. Twelve Rabbis study in the four-year Wexner Kollel Elyon, a selective honors program that trains rabbinic leaders, and approximately five others study in the Machon Beren, which guides the development of future Roshei Yeshiva. In addition, many students avail themselves of the option of spending a year or two of their residency at Yeshiva's Gruss Kollel in Israel. Annual RIETS publications include *Beis Yitzchak*, a 500-page compendium of novella by students and Roshei Yeshiva, and *Kol Zvi*, a journal of scholarly articles by the Wexner Semikha Honors and Kollel Elyon fellows.

RIETS requires all students to complete a corequisite course of study in another Yeshiva school or in a RIETS program. The options include an M.A. in Jewish Studies at Revel, an M.A. in Jewish Education at Azrieli, an M.A. in social work at Wurzweiler, an M.A. in psychology at Ferkauf, six semesters of the Marcos and Adina Katz *kollel*, or six semesters of a Machshevet Yisrael (Jewish thought) sequence.

Ironically, precisely because RIETS caters to students with so many career interests, the requisite intensity in Talmud study can at times be self-defeating. "As someone headed towards day- or high school *chinuch*, I would prefer a more varied program corresponding to what I will be most likely teaching, including *Tanach* and *Machshava*," noted one RIETS student who considered both schools. Although he is studying at Azrieli, the student

wishes that the *Tanach* and *Machshava* curricula could be expanded and integrated into his daily schedule.

YCT offers a more diversified curriculum, at the possible expense of displacing excellence in *talmud* and *halakha* from its traditional preeminence. YCT Rosh Yeshiva Rabbi Dov Linzer, a former student of R. Aharon Lichtenstein and fellow in RIETS' *kollel elyon*, is widely respected in the community for his brilliance and erudition. Most of the students, however, proceed through the program with a less comprehensive background in Talmud than their RIETS counterparts. This disparity is evidenced by the laxer schedule. In part to accommodate students taking courses in graduate school, YCT does not schedule any classes on Sunday and holds night seder only once a week.

RIETS Rosh Yeshiva Rabbi Jeremy Wieder worries, "We want to produce *talmidei chachamim*, they want to produce pulpit rabbis. The serious issue is the implication that one might aim to produce pulpit rabbis without being concerned that they are *talmidei chachamim*." Instead of responding directly to this criticism, YCT leaders point to the general academic excellence of their student body and the large number of transfers from Yeshiva College and RIETS (15 and 8, respectively) studying there.

On the flipside, YCT features an assortment of classes in *Tanach* and *Machshava*, headed by Rabbi Nati Helfgot. By the end of their four-year tenures, all YCT students will have passed *bekiut* tests on all of Tanach and taken at least six advanced *tanakh* classes, as well as approximately six classes in Jewish thought. Highlights of the Jewish thought curriculum include a two-semester sequence on the *siddur* taught by Rabbi Avi Weiss and a class on ideological issues in Modern Orthodoxy taught by Rabbi Linzer.

Both RIETS and YCT offer courses in practical rabbinic training and internships for students in their third and fourth years. YCT's four-year pastoral training program is generally considered the superior of the two, especially among YCT's students.

Confrontation of Modern Orthodox Dilemmas

One of YCT's most effective recruitment techniques for Yeshiva students has been its Meorot undergraduate fellowship. A weekly series of lectures and discussion groups led by rabbis and academics, the Meorot program challenges students to confront the hot-button *halakhic* and ideological questions currently facing the Modern Orthodox community. Lecture titles from last year include "External Values and Ethics" by SCW and Columbia Professor of Philosophy Dr. David Shatz, "Halakha and Faulty Science" by Harvard mathematics professor Dr. Shlomo Sternberg, and "Women in Prayer and Leadership" by JOFA leaders Batsheva Marcus and Gitti Bendheim. Six of the ten students participating in the Meorot fellowship this year are YC undergraduates.

Some RIETS students complain about the absence of similar open discussions at Yeshiva. According to third year RIETS student Ben Skydell, “The *semicha* program does not in any way foster a debate over the ideas and the struggles that face the Modern Orthodox community as it is constituted today. Just as many years ago they took *treifot* out of *Semicha*, because of the new generation, it is vital that the *Semicha* program change to introduce contemporary programming.”

RIETS does attempt to expose students to contemporary problems in a variety of settings. The first year Contemporary Halakha lecture series, taught by a rotating series of Roshei Yeshiva, provides intricate *halakhic* analysis of topics such as ecology, *mikveh* construction, and extradition. Rabbi Hirt teaches a Professional Rabbinics seminar for fourth year students that addresses topics such as relations with other Jewish movements, religious Zionism, and Women and Orthodoxy. Additionally, Rabbi Israel organizes an annual *yom iyun* for RIETS students and faculty; this year’s focused on the powers of the *Beit Din*. RIETS students, however, tend to dismiss these opportunities as tangential to their overall educational training.

Rabbi Wieder has been considering establishing an optional Meorot-style program at RIETS. “If people want to be aware of the issues affecting the community, people need to be exposed to a broad range of opinions, including the right and the left. It shouldn’t be mandatory, but it should be an option for those who want it.” The substance of the *semicha* program must remain, however, studying in the *beis medrash*. “All this stuff is icing on the cake, not the cake itself.”

Openness and Ideology of *halakha*

What exactly does the YCT slogan, “The Open Orthodox Rabbinical School” mean? In a statement prepared exclusively for *The Commentator*, Rabbis Avi Weiss, Dov Weiss, and Dov Linzer explained: “Our Yeshiva is firmly implanted in the Modern Orthodox community. It is a modern Orthodox Yeshiva. Because of the move towards insularization in the Orthodox community we have been using the adjective “open” to describe our commitments. We are fervently Orthodox with an unwavering commitment to Torah and halakha. At the same time we are intellectually open and we strive for greater inclusiveness in practice.

“Intellectual openness means that we encourage questioning and critical thinking as essential components of one’s full *avodat Hashem*. In the context of Talmud Torah, this includes the integration of “outside” disciplines, such as academic Talmud, history, legal theory, and philosophy.

“Openness in practice means a willingness to interact with all Jews and to seek out within Halakha greater inclusiveness for women and non-Observant Jews.”

Detractors of YCT challenge two components of this statement. First, they

wonder how receptive YCT really is to variant opinions. “They claim to be tolerant, but they really are tolerant only to people who think exactly like them,” said one participant in the Meorot program. “They refuse to accept any criticism, especially from the centrists.” In contrast, despite the popular image of “the Roshei Yeshiva” as a monolithic group, RIETS exhibits wider diversity in both its faculty and its student body. “The only true pluralism is here at Yeshiva, where the right and left share ideas and keep both sides honest,” says Rabbi Israel.

Second, in a far more subtle and controversial topic, many accuse YCT and affiliated institutions such as EDAH of subscribing to a *halakhic* methodology that prioritizes agenda-driven interests over the integrity of the *halakhic* system. RIETS Roshei Yeshiva have disassociated themselves from EDAH and refuse to speak at any of their events for political reasons. “Statements such as [JOFA President Blu Greenberg’s] ‘When there’s a rabbinic will, there’s a *halakhic* way,’ imply a complete disregard for *halakhic* boundaries,” alleged one Rosh Yeshiva. “Whenever I interact with these people, I come out with the feeling *rak ein yirat elokim bamakom hazeh* [there is no fear of God in this place].” One YCT student, Nissim Antine, affirms in the YCT publicity handout that “my immediate goal for my years in Rabbinical School is to acquire the tools that are necessary to overcome the *halakhic* and social impediments to change.”

It is sometimes necessary to distinguish between different strands of the Orthodox left. For example, at their conference in November, JOFA leaders rallied behind an initiative to introduce mixed Torah reading in Orthodox services. Rabbi Saul Berman, however, director of EDAH and instructor at YCT, strenuously objected to the proposal. Within YCT, Rabbi Linzer is seen as more radically leftist than his colleagues.

Naftali Balanson staunchly defends YCT’s religious values. “There is nothing controversial about the Yeshiva’s institutional *hashkafa*. The Yeshiva is firmly committed to Orthodoxy and *Halakha*. I can understand that some people find openness inherently controversial, but I think, in the tradition of Gush and YU, that we should not be afraid to think about all sides of an issue, about all possibilities. That should not affect one’s *emunah* or *shemirat hamitzvot*. “Anyone who thinks that our Beit Midrash is not a makom torah has clearly not spent substantial time at the yeshiva. It is most definitely a makom limmud hatorah, chesed, ahavat hashem, and yirat hashem. Just because some talmidim do not have as strong a background as the general population in the YU beit midrash does not mean it is not a makom torah.”

Conclusion: An Uncertain Impact

The conflict between RIETS and YCT is spreading beyond ideology. YCT students are beginning to compete with RIETS students for rabbinic internships – and the tactics employed are not always the most civil. This fall, Congregation Kehillath Jeshurun of the Upper East Side, a prominent Modern Orthodox *shul* with longstanding ties to Yeshiva, hired an intern from YCT.

RIETS, however, reportedly through Rabbi Lamm, pressured the congregation to release him. “Guys at Chovevei are nervous about what YU will do to them,” said a concerned David Hain. “They see YU as a strong union, wanting alone to define what Modern Orthodoxy should be.”

Rabbi Israel defends RIETS’ intervention: “The shul had told us in writing that they didn’t have money for an intern this year. Then we found out that they had hired someone else. . . . Every internship spot is very valuable. We’re just trying to do what’s best for our students.” For their part, YCT insiders have expressed the hope that “the next time questions like this come up, Richard Joel will be making the decisions.”

“The real question,” says Rabbi Shalom Carmy, “is whether a schism is developing in Modern Orthodoxy, or has already occurred.” Veterans of the YU Beis Medrash are afraid that the centrist character of YU’s semicha program will suffer if RIETS does not succeed in holding its left-wing students. “If there is a split, what will be most impacted is centrist Orthodoxy,” warns RIETS *kollel elyon* fellow Rabbi Shmuel Hain. “It will take away RIETS’ vitality. If YU is left with the center and right, the center will disappear.” With the portents of an irreparable rift emerging, it is at least conceivable that, with time, YCT vs. RIETS will become emblematic of such a division.

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