

Special Feature

What Was the First *Yeshivah Gedolah* in America?

By Dr. Yitzchok Levine

Note: Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are from *Yeshivat Or Ha-Hayyim: The First Talmudical Academy In America?* by Shnayer Z. Leiman, *Tradition*, 25 (2), 1990 pages 77-89.

Introduction

If asked, "What was the first European style yeshivah gedolah established in America?" most people would probably respond, "Yeshivat Rabbeinu Yitzchok Elchanan." Indeed, the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS) was founded in 1897 (in 1896 according to other sources). However, it may well be that the institution Yeshivat Or HaChaim founded in 1895 by Rabbi Moshe Weinberger was in truth the first such institution established here. [For information on the life of Rabbi Weinberger, please see Rabbi Moshe Weinberger (1854 - 1940), in the August 6, 2008 edition on page C26.] The reason for using the language "it may well be" is that some sources claim this institution never actually opened, whereas according to other sources it did exist for a short time.

Rabbi Weinberger, in his 1887 book, *HaYehudim V'haYahadus b'New York*,¹ bemoans the sad state of Torah education in New York City. Things were so bad that when he learned that a group of *baalei batim* had in 1886 opened an intermediate school whose curriculum would include the study of Mishnah and Talmud, he wrote:

"Just as we were concluding our words on teachers and schools, we heard the pleasant news that, in recent days, a new school was established here called Yeshivas Etz Chayim [Tree of Life Yeshivah] for the study of Mishnah and Talmud, that is, *Gemara*, Rashi and Tosafos. Fifteen hundred people are supposed to be standing ready to finance the building and appoint eminent teachers who will receive their salaries in honorable fashion from a large community fund. All is said to be prepared, nothing is lacking save for people willing to hand their children over for instruction. Hurrah! What pleasant news! How lovely! How dear! A yeshivah for Mishnah and *Gemara*! How much good is hidden in these words. I can hardly believe my own ears. Am I awake! Is this possible? Can it be? Here in New York? In America? Has such a great thing come about without our knowledge? Yes — so many people say, and so we have seen ourselves in news reports. It is a marvelous thing—a wonder."²

However, the Etz Chaim Talmudical Academy was basically an elementary school, and it did not offer educational opportunities for boys past bar mitzvah age. Furthermore, there was no institution in New York at the time devoted to training

Orthodox rabbis. (The Jewish Theological Seminary existed at this time, but it was becoming increasingly clear to Orthodox Jews that this institution was headed away from traditional Judaism.) With this in mind, Rabbi Weinberger decided to establish an institution that would give young men a substantial background in advanced Talmudic studies and prepare them for a career in the Orthodox rabbinate, if they were so inclined.

Torah Or

Virtually everything we know about Yeshivat Or HaChaim comes from the pamphlet *Torah Or*, published anonymously in 1895 in Hebrew. Despite the fact that Rabbi Weinberger's name does not appear on this pamphlet, "the Hebrew style, vocabulary and syntax are unmistakably his."

"On the title page of *Torah Or*, the association of supporters of the new school is referred to as 'The Jewish Rabbinical High School Association.' It appears likely that the term 'High School' is a literal translation of the German term *hochschule*, which refers to a college or academy of higher learning. While the pamphlet goes on to describe an educational institution that certainly included high school age students, its provision for rabbinical ordination leaves little room for doubt that Yeshivat Or ha-Hayyim was also intended to serve as a talmudical academy or yeshiva *gedolah*, i.e., a post-secondary institution of higher Jewish learning devoted to the study of Talmud."

History, Aim and Structure of Yeshivat Or Hachaim

According to *Torah Or*, the yeshivah was founded by Rabbi Weinberger in Marcheshvan (October or November) of 1895. "Initially, the school served the membership of the Bet Hamedrash Hagadol Anshei Ungarn synagogue, but in a short while, many other congregations and associations joined together in support of the Yeshivah," and it became a community-wide institution.

The aim of the yeshivah was to educate students who would grow up to live as observant Jews. The pamphlet makes it clear that the full-day Jewish education the yeshivah gave was superior to the education that students were receiving in New York's *chadarim* "in every way. The yeshivah towers over the Heders qualitatively and quantitatively." (One should keep in mind that the concept of a yeshivah day school education, something considered "routine" in our time, was considered bold and innovative when Rabbi Weinberger began Yeshivat Or Torah. Furthermore, there were many who viewed day school education as something "un-

American." Virtually all Jews, even those who considered themselves very religious, sent their children to public school.)

"Initially, the yeshivah was intended only for students with a strong background in Jewish studies who wanted to devote time to the study of Torah. After the yeshivah opened, however, it became clear that the yeshivah would have to produce its own products from scratch. It would have to plant the seeds for its own vineyard. So, a preparatory class was introduced and now there are classes for students at every level. A child starts at the lowest level and is promoted from one level to the next until he reaches the fifth and highest level."

All teachers in the school were required to be G-d-fearing men with a solid knowledge of *Tanach*, *Mishnah* and *Gemara*. Those teaching the upper level classes had to have a good knowledge of the *Shulchan Aruch* as well. The teaching staff was overseen by "a Rabbi and a Head of a Rabbinic Court who was ordained by the leading Torah scholars of the generation," and who had to be serving as the rabbi of a congregation in New York.

Rabbi Weinberger was appointed as the *Rosh Yeshivah*, making him most probably the first *Rosh Yeshivah* in America! He taught the most advanced students, regularly tested the school's students and established the academic calendar and the daily schedule of study.

The Yeshivah Curriculum

Instruction in the lower levels of the school dealt with:

1. Reading of Hebrew in accord with the rules of grammar.
2. Blessings and Prayers.
3. Musical notation and the cantillation of Scripture.
4. Correct writing of Hebrew and Yiddish script.
5. Torah with Rashi.
6. *Nevi'im* with simple translation.
7. *Mishnah* with Bartinora.
8. *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch*: Laws of Blessings, Sabbath and Yom Tov.
9. Translation of Blessings and Prayers.
10. Hebrew and Yiddish grammar.
11. Jewish ethical treatises.

The curriculum of the higher levels consisted of:

1. All of *Tanach* with Rashi and other useful commentaries.
2. Jewish history based upon reliable sources.
3. History of famous rabbis and Jewish leaders.
4. *Aggadah* and *Midrashim*.
5. Talmud Bavli with Rashi, Tosafot, Maharsha, Rosh and Rif.
6. *Shulchan Aruch*: *Orach Chaim* with *Taz* and *Magen*



Rav Weinberger was the rabbi of Congregation Beth HaMidrash HaGadol Anshei Ungarn from 1895 to 1906. During his tenure as rabbi, the shul was located at 70 Willet Street, on the Lower East Side. Efforts to find a picture of this shul have not been successful. However, in 1908 the shul built a new building at 242 East 7th Street. Above is a picture of this building. The congregation held on to this building until 1975. In 1985 it was converted to residential use. It is an elegant reminder of the vibrant Jewish community that once filled the streets of New York's Lower East Side.

Avraham.

7. *Shulchan Aruch: Yoreh Deah* with *Shakh* and *Taz*.
8. *Hayye Adam* and *Hokhmat Adam*.
9. *Kuzari* and Rambam, *Sefer ha-Madda*.
10. *Hovot ha-Levavot*, *Menorat ha-Maor*, and other Jewish ethical treatises.
11. Various aggadic and sermonic books.

"The school had three divisions, the highest leading to ordination. Recognizing that American youth also desired secular knowledge, [Rav] Weinberger permitted minimal time for secular studies."³

Success and Then Failure

In his pamphlet, Rabbi Weinberger wrote:

"The number of students studying *Mishnah* and *Talmud* is close to 20. The total number of students in the Yeshivah is close to 80. What a glorious sight it is to see Jewish boys raised in this land — who previously knew nothing about G-d's Torah, and for whom the ability to read *Siddur* and the prayers was considered the entire Torah — sitting before their teachers and discussing Jewish law, responding with clarity to whatever is asked of them, reciting by heart whatever they studied in *Tanakh*, *Mishnah*, and *Talmud*, and sharpening each other's mind with their *pilpul* and reasoned arguments. We trust that many more of the students in the lower levels will soon be ready to study *Talmud*. Within a year, then, the number of students studying Talmud will be 50."

However, these words portrayed an optimism that was never realized.

"One suspects that Yeshivat

Or ha-Hayyim was a noble, but short-lived experiment. In 1914 [Rav] Weinberger published a sermon he had delivered on the Sabbath of Hanukkah in 1895, in honor of the founders and supporters of the Yeshivah. Other than that, there appear to be no references to the institution or to its graduates. In all likelihood, the founding of Yeshivat Rabbenu Yitzchak Elchanan in 1897 — also on the Lower East Side — rendered Weinberger's yeshivah superfluous. The purpose and goals of Yeshivat Rabbenu Yitzchak Elchanan were precisely those of Yeshivat Or ha-Hayyim. But the new Yeshivat Rabbenu Yitzchak Elchanan had the advantage that its founders were already active in Yeshivat Etz Hayyim. Given the excellence of Yeshivat Rabbenu Yitzchak Elchanan's Lithuanian-trained Talmud faculty, and the strong support it received from a segment of the large Russian Jewish community in New York City, [Rabbi] Weinberger's yeshivah apparently could not compete either qualitatively or economically."

¹For a translation of this work, see *People Walk on Their Heads*, Moses Weinberger's *Jews and Judaism in New York*, translated from the Hebrew and edited by Jonathan D. Sarna, Holmes Meir Publishers, Inc., New York, 1982.

²*Ibid.*, page 55.

³*Hebrew Printing in America, 1735 - 1926, A History and Annotated Bibliography*, by Yosef Goldman, YG Books, 2006, page 977.

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