

What Was the First Yeshiva Gedolah in America?

Dr. Yitzchok Levine
Department of Mathematical Sciences
Stevens Institute of Technology
Hoboken, NJ 07030
llevine@stevens.edu

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 yeshiva gedolah established in America?” most people would probably respond, “Yeshiva 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 founded by Rabbi Moshe Weinberger [see **Rabbi Moshe Weinberger (1854 – 1940)**] in 1895, Yeshiva Or HaChaim, was in truth the first such institution established here. 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, *Ha-Yehudim veba-Yahadus be - 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 Ets 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 yeshiva 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 Yeshiva 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 gedola, i.e., a post-secondary institution of higher Jewish learning devoted to the study of Talmud.

History, Aim and Structure of Yeshiva Or HaChaim

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

The aim of the yeshiva 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 yeshiva gave was superior to the education that students were receiving in New York's *Chadarim* "in every way. The Yeshiva towers over the Heders qualitatively and quantitatively." (One should keep in mind that the concept of a yeshiva day school education, something considered "routine" in our time, was considered bold and innovative when Rabbi Weinberger began Yeshiva 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 Yeshiva was intended only for students with strong background in Jewish studies who wanted to devote time to the study of Torah. After the Yeshiva opened, however, it became clear that the Yeshiva 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 Ha Yeshiva, making him most probably the first Rosh Yeshiva 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 Yeshiva 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. Prophets with simple translation.
7. Mishnah with Bertinoro.
8. *Kitzur Shulhan Arukh*: 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 Hebrew Scripture 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. Babylonian Talmud with Rashi, Tosafot, Maharsha, Rosh, and Rif.
6. *Shulhan Arukh*: Orach Hayyim with Turei Zahav and Magen Avraham.
7. *Shulhan Arukh*: 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, 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 Yeshiva is close to 80. What a glorious sight it is to see Jewish boys raised in this land—who previously knew nothing about God'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 Weinberger published a sermon he had delivered on the Sabbath of Hanukkah in 1895, in honor of the founders and supporters of the Yeshiva. 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 Weinberg's yeshiva 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, Weinberger's yeshiva apparently could not compete either qualitatively or economically.

¹ For 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.