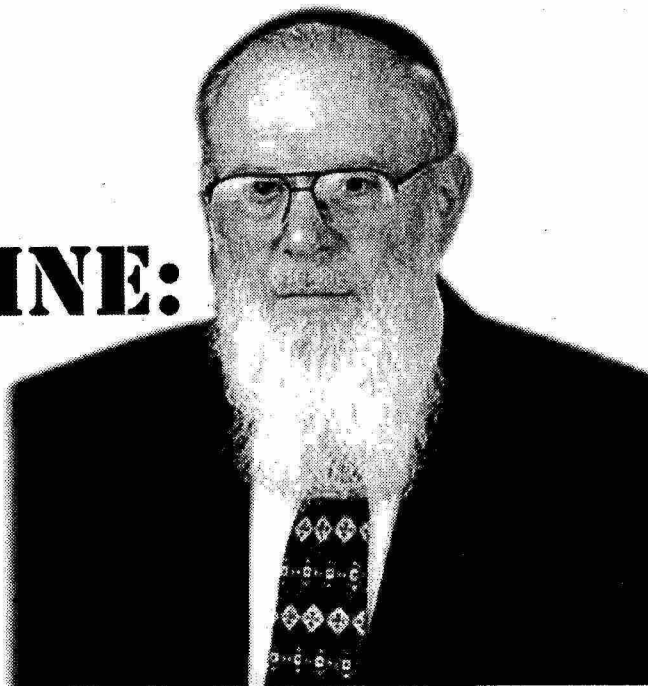


# PROFESSOR YITZCHOK LEVINE: MAKING A POINT IN WEST POINT

Rochel Isaacson



## NOT A TYPICAL CLASSROOM

The time: 7:35 a.m. Class begins punctually, although definitely not in typical classroom fashion. The place: the fabled U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y. The scene: the opening of the Mathematics and Technology classroom session, a setting which proves to be highly unusual by any standard.

Envision, if you will, at the exact time that class should start, a West Point cadet called the 'Section Marcher' standing stiffly erect and saluting as he calls out, "Company attention!" All other students, who are West Point cadets in this unique class, stand ramrod straight at attention. The 'Section Marcher' then salutes the teacher, and loudly states "All present!" regarding classroom attendance, or concerning a missing student, "Cadet (name) absent!" It is then that their distinguished teacher, Professor Yitzchok Levine (a.k.a.

Lawrence E. Levine) calls out, "Please be seated," and dutifully the uniform-attired West Point students sit and face a very Orthodox Jewish-appearing Professor, replete with long beard, black yarmulka and tzitzis.

## NOT A TYPICAL PROFESSOR, EITHER

What's that again? And how does this frum-looking Professor Yitzchok Levine arrive at this American stronghold, whose student body of 4000 represents a cross-section of the United States, and includes minorities such as African-Americans, women, a sprinkling of Jews, but definitely does not embrace Orthodox Jews within its ranks!

Meet Yitzchok Levine, 60, at his more conventional home turf in Brooklyn, N.Y. At first glance, it is obvious that his Jewish religious mode of dress does not parallel the

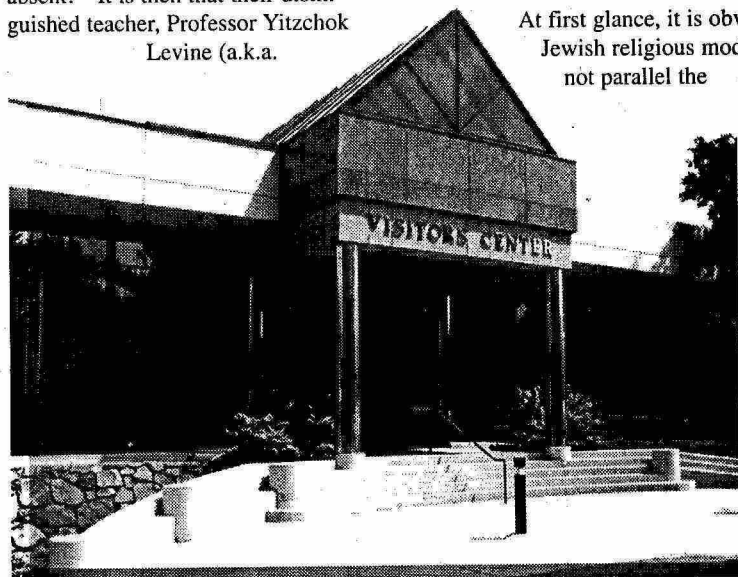
image of the average university professor. Levine, a one-time resident of Chelsea, Mass., was at that time a neighbor of (and afterward a long-standing admirer of) Rav Avigdor

Miller, Z"YA. He enjoys demonstrating his flat Bostonian drawl to his Brooklyn friends, where he has been living since 1974, and pronounces himself a regular 'haimishe' guy.

But no bones about it, Professor Levine is unquestionably an authority at what he does. As a prolific and brilliant lecturer, professor, writer and mathematician, he has spearheaded an illustrious career, since 1968, as a tenured professor of Mathematical Sciences at Stevens Institute of Technology, in Hoboken, N. J. In so doing, he has successfully promoted the positive image of Orthodox Judaism to mainstream America, thanks to his remarkable social interaction with his students and colleagues in his chosen profession.

In a written publication, Levine described his relief when, at the start of his teaching career at the university, a student walked in wearing a yarmulka. "It was ironic that in almost 30 years at the university, there were at most five undergraduates wearing yarmulkas attending the school. It was just my good fortune that the first one was in the first course I taught." Ever since, he has satisfied his students' curiosity about him by answering questions about his Orthodox garments and his religious customs.

This is a practice he continued in his year at West Point, where he was invited as 'Visiting Professor,' for West Point routinely



invites Visiting Professors to their math department. They indeed leave a special position open in the math department toward that end, for they seek to expand upon the outlook of West Point's faculty and cadets.

Professor Levine adds that West Point is a training ground for commissioned army officers, and its students must be of a certain mindset to fit into its controlled environment. "After all, it is the army!" underscores Levine.

### GRUELING SCHEDULE

It's a tough life indeed at West Point. Student cadets must be sponsored by their congressmen, and are required to meet the competitive standards of both educational and athletic ability. "Lehavdil, it is like yeshivos, which want to mold their students, and their students carry a double load of Limudei Kodesh and secular studies" is the analogy that Professor Levine gives. Equally so, West Point strives to shape their cadets into their desired 'product' -- their image of an army officer -- evaluating their 'double load' of academic and military studies, and also their leadership ability!

As for the fortunate cadets who graduate four years later, they receive their Bachelor

Degree and then are required to serve in the army for five years.

Hence from August 2000 through May 2001, Professor Yitzchok Levine was initiated into the mesmerizing mystique of West Point, catapulting him into a faculty composed of both civilian academics as well as military officers, a classroom of cadets - and a military lifestyle he had never before experienced!

### STANDING ROOM ONLY?

At first he was often startled by the unique practices, which distinguish the regimented army lifestyle of West Point Academy. Take the time, at the onset of his teaching career in West Point, when in the middle of Levine's classroom lecture a cadet simply rose from his seat and remained standing. To Professor Levine's consternation, and amusement, he discovered that West Point cadets receive strict disciplinary measures if they fall asleep in the middle of class, and the penalty is the cadet's lengthy march while wearing the full military regalia, regardless of any inclement weather. To avoid this dire consequence, and as they are constantly tired because of the heavy workload they carry, they are allowed to stand up in class until their intense fatigue

passes.

### EXTRA-CURRICULAR EDUCATION

Undoubtedly, it was a strange system for civilian Levine to observe, just as his Orthodox religious customs were totally bizarre and foreign to West Point inhabitants, which is why he made a point of explaining them to his students and colleagues. Take the evening he invited 33 cadets to his apartment for dinner -- an apartment which he used on days that he was not commuting back to his wife, Blima, who stayed at their home front in Brooklyn. Levine cooked a fabulous kosher meal for the cadets, and as he talked to them his easygoing manner won them over. Soon enough they plied him with questions concerning Jewish practices. "They were really curious about everything, asking about the tzitzis or 'fringes,' yarmulka -- even about my siddur -- and they were highly receptive to my answers. I am quite sure that they now view Jewish Orthodoxy as positive."

The responses he got from his students were truly compelling. As one cadet wrote in an essay in class, "The class taught me valuable knowledge about Jewish faith and culture, but even more, I learned something

I didn't know about!" Another cadet responded that she had, "deeper respect for Judaism and the religion," all of this a novel experience for her, making Levine realize that he definitely represented religious Jewry to the outside world.

There were also entertaining moments, such as the episode when he brought a shofar to class and blew its mournful wails, while explaining to the fascinated cadets its profound significance for Jews at Rosh Hashonah. It was at that moment that his friend and colleague in the math department, a Catholic priest who was instrumental in Professor Levine's arrival at West Point, entered the room and as a lark tried to blow the shofar. Interestingly, he could not sound a note, however hard he tried. Suffice it to say that the priest's futile efforts at blowing the shofar proved to be a fitting outcome that was not lost on all those who were present in the class.

Moreover, Professor Levine's educational focus turned out to be instructive even outside the classroom. For example, he helped military personnel understand more about kashrus. He vividly recalls that first semester, when he sidestepped a dinner invitation by a Major in West Point, who hoped to include Levine at a dinner party in his home. He was totally surprised when Yitzchok Levine told him he could not dine on non-kosher food, and Levine proceeded to explain to him about kosher symbols on food packages. Professor Levine then invited the Major, and his small dinner entourage, to a kosher restaurant in nearby Monsey, and afterwards took them all on a guided tour of a kosher supermarket within that area, pointing out the various kosher symbols on food labels.

Although Professor Levine received only enormous deference and respect from the people of West Point, and the community around it in which a host of war veterans lived, Yitzchok Levine acknowledges that West Point is not a place for an Orthodox Jew. This caveat is despite the fact that its commissary (food store) stocked, especially for him, Empire kosher chicken and Manishevitz products. And further, the Shoppette, which sells liquor, ordered Kedem Wine on his behalf, and the PX Post Exchange was, as Levine puts it, "a laboratory to study Derech Eretz" as was the entire West Point area. Still, Professor Levine concedes that there is no active Jewish lifestyle going on.

### NOT FOR YOUR NICE JEWISH BOY

The Jewish chapel is a multi-million dollar building, but there is a scarcity of Jewish activity. The current Jewish chaplain, with the unlikely name of Carlos Huerta, is frum, and has some services on Friday nights (which are really social events). But the chaplain did erect a Kosher succah this year, used by West Point's many observant Jewish visitors on Chol Hamoed, who came to tour and gawk at West Point's vast grounds of 16,000 acres. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur there is a minyan attended by cadets and war veterans

who populate the area, and at Pesach a seder takes place. But other than some artifacts in the chapel's museum, several Sifrei Torah, and Holocaust memorial events attended by the many war veterans, religious Jewish life is sparse in West Point.

As Professor Levin wryly observes, with mandatory football games on Saturday (which cadets must attend and stand throughout), free live weekend concerts, and more, it would be near impossible to be religious in West Point. He himself spent most Shabbosos in Brooklyn, then brought back food with him, or bought it in Monsey, to last for the week. Levine also limited his socializing to academia and felt

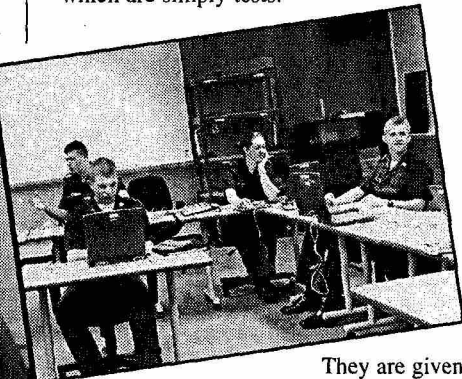
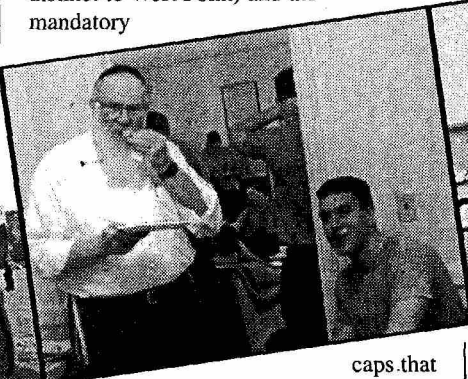
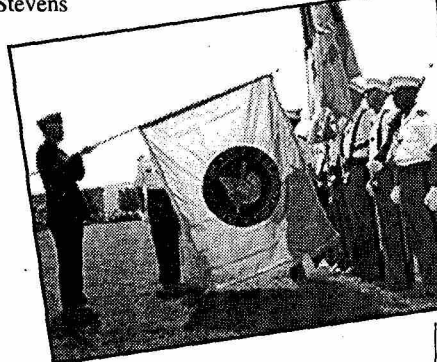
that he could be friendly but he didn't have to fraternize to be 'one of the boys.'

**FOND MEMORIES**

Now back at his home base at Stevens

was disciplined; the many varied uniforms issued to cadets (not army uniforms, but distinct to West Point) and the mandatory

which are simply tests.



Institute of Technology, Yitzchok Levine retains many impressions of West Point, such as: the polite 'sir' that always preceded and followed a request or conversation, from civilians in the general area as well as

cadets; the compulsory salute that must always be given to one's superior -- and if not, the hapless cadet or officer

times. caps that cadets must wear outside at all

But most of all he chuckles at the distinctive language of 'alphabets' that is so prevalent in the West Point jargon. Cadets take WPR's -- Written Progress Reports,

They are given end-of-semester TEE's -- Term End Exams, which are finals! One cannot evade the all-important SOP -- Standard Operating Procedure. Military personnel and cadets will say, "We will proceed according to SOP!" At one point his e-mail had so many abbreviations that he sent it back asking the sender to "please translate it into English!"

The most memorable occasion was when West Point paid Professor Levine to speak at a technical conference for academics.

**ONE CADET WROTE IN AN ESSAY THAT HE HAD LEARNED VALUABLE KNOWLEDGE ABOUT JEWISH FAITH AND CULTURE FROM HIS MATH PROFESSOR.**

As well educated as he is, Professor Levine could not figure out what POV stood for on a form he had to fill out. When he found out that it meant "Personally Owned Vehicle," the perplexed professor joked, "What's wrong with saying 'car' - it's also three letters!" The official retort to Levine? "You might have a truck -- therefore we say it's a POV!"

Levine also tells of the names which cadets receive as they move up the ladder toward their goal of becoming army officers. At the bottom rung are the lowly first year 'Plebes,' with few privileges, who then move on second year to be called 'Yearlings,' and are accorded increasing privileges and weekend passes each subse-

quent year. Third year cadets are termed 'Cows.' This name was given some 25 years ago when cadets returned to West Point following their first weekend vacation after two years, and they descended from the train station to return 'like a herd of cows!' And seniors are ironically dubbed 'Firsties.' Upon graduation they achieve the official rank as commissioned 2nd Lieutenant officers of the U.S. Army -- and afterward move up the hierarchy of promotions.

### AMBASSADOR FOR JEWRY

Professor Levine reflects back upon the nature of his warm relationship with the cadets and the eye-opening impact it has had upon his life, and hopefully that of the

cadets. He cites the famed graduates of West Point such as Generals Eisenhower, MacArthur, and Robert E. Lee. "One day," he remarks, "a former cadet might be in a position of power and an issue concerning Jewish interests might come up. This former student might then remember Professor Levine and play a pivotal role in favor of the Jews!"

Professor Yitzchok Levine just may have a point in that statement, for as a man whose forthright opinions are combined with a sympathetic ear, he has gained fans wherever he goes, and he exemplifies an unswerving commitment to observant Jewish life in any arena. □