

Innovative Approaches to Getting a College Education

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

Introduction

A number of weeks ago I received an email from someone asking me to consider writing an article about yeshiva high school students and college education. She wrote, "We are interested in an article about what Yeshivot can do to better prepare their students for college admission. I know you covered secular studies in a front page article for [the Jewish Press¹], and we would like that expanded. Please let me know if you're interested."

I called her. It turned out that she was interested in an article about how yeshiva high schools could prepare their graduates to function within a secular college environment and still maintain their level of observance. I pointed out that I thought this was an impossibility. Since she thought I was advocating a year of study in Israel and then college, she replied that there were students who did not wish to spend a year in Israel studying. She wanted an article aimed at this group. I told her I did not think that a year or two of study in Israel could guarantee immunity to the negative influences found on college campuses today. My approach seemed to surprise her, and, after some further discussion, we agreed that I was not the one to write the article that she wanted.

Marketable Skills

Before discussing why I feel that yeshiva high school graduates should not attend secular colleges, let me point out that I am in principle not opposed to a person pursuing an advanced secular education that will help him or her earn a respectable *parnasa*. While the importance of Torah study must take precedence over all other study, there are many young men who are not cut out to sit and learn for years and years and then pursue careers in *Chinuch*, *Rabbanus*, or related areas. There are many idealistic young women who want to marry someone who will learn in yeshiva for several years after marriage. These women are willing to support their husbands and growing families. However, to do this they need to be equipped to earn a living. The reality is that the majority of Orthodox men and women end up working in jobs that are in the "outside world." This is as true for the Charedi community as it is for the Modern Orthodox.

Acquiring Marketable Job Skills

The question is, "How should an Orthodox youngster acquire marketable job skills?" More often than not the answer is to attend college. Of course, there are other alternatives, such as learning a trade, becoming a technician, etc. However, pursuit of these non-college alternatives often takes one into an environment that is at odds with the world of the yeshiva or Bais Yaakov. Furthermore, for many, a career that requires the skills obtained in college and graduate school, is a natural choice.

There are, of course, universities and colleges that are under religious auspices. Yeshiva University, Touro College, and the Hebrew Theological College immediately come to mind. However, these institutions are not for all Orthodox students. Furthermore, they may not provide programs in areas that students may want to pursue. In short, they are good for those whom they serve, but they do not and cannot serve an Orthodox community that produces graduates with a diversity of religious perspectives from "Modern" to "right-wing" Orthodox.

Another drawback to attending these institutions is their cost. Tuition and fees at Yeshiva University came to \$23,630 during the 2004-2005 academic year.² Added to this is \$7330 for room and board!³ Hebrew Theological College charged \$15,160 for tuition, \$6,790 for room and board, plus \$3,060 for "other expenses" during 2003-04.⁴ During 2002-2003 Touro College charged \$415 per credit for part-time students.⁵ There is no question that the price of an education at these institutions will increase for 2005-2006. "A good rule of thumb is that tuition rates will increase at about twice the general inflation rate."⁶

Negative College Environment

The reader may wonder what is so bad about a high school yeshiva graduate or someone who has attended *bais medrash* or seminary attending a secular college. After all, there was a time when many young men learning in *bais medrash* attended secular colleges on a part-time basis. I was told two stories by former talmidim of Yeshiva Rabbi Chaim Berlin in which Rav Yitzchok Hutner, ZT"L, knowingly allowed young men to attend college. One fellow, who came from Connecticut and attended Chaim Berlin in the forties, related to me that, at the age of twenty, he had graduated Brooklyn College while learning full time in the Bais Medrash! He was then accepted and planned to attend Columbia University graduate school. Rav Hutner took him aside and said something to the effect, "You are only 20 years old. Spend the next year learning full-time, and afterwards go to graduate school. While studying in graduate school you can live in the dormitory and eat in the dining hall." And this is exactly what he did! Another former Chaim Berlin talmid told me that in 1960 Rav Hutner called his mother and said, "Your son has been learning full-time in the *bais medrash* for two years. It is now time for him to also go to college."

These anecdotes must be put in proper context. The environment on college campuses was drastically different in the forties and fifties from what it is today. Those young men pursued their undergraduate studies primarily by attending evening classes. To a large extent this sheltered them from negative influences.

Young people attending secular colleges can, unfortunately, be harmfully affected by a college environment. There is a fascinating incident related about an “experiment” conducted by Rav Yisroel Salanter (1810 – 1882). During the 19th Century there were those in Russia who came to believe that

... anyone who had received an advanced secular education as being on a higher level and therefore not expected to obey the mitzvot of the Torah as did the rank and file. R. Israel endeavored to eradicate this popular misconception and to produce secularly educated, G-d fearing Torah scholars. This would be the weapon against the specious Maskilim who considered the fear of G-d and enlightenment to be mutually exclusive, and who looked with contempt on Judaism. He conducted an experiment — extremely audacious for the climate of opinion of those days. Choosing one of his outstanding disciples, Isar Einhorn by name, R. Israel sent him off to study in a secular institution. The student was most successful and in a short time was graduated from the St. Petersburg Military Medical Institute. As a physician he was truly outstanding. But he succumbed to temptation. Having attained high military rank, he abandoned his Judaism and converted to Christianity. He was the well-known Gen. Einhorn.⁷

This incident described above, while extreme, nonetheless, points out that even the best of yeshiva students can be negatively affected by attending a secular college. The life style evidenced on college campuses today is often diametrically opposed to the morals and values of a Torah education. Putting any yeshiva student in such a situation, even one who has spent a few years learning after high school, can be a risk.

On some campuses anti-Semitism is on the rise. “The claim of universities to be fostering diversity and preventing discrimination against vulnerable minorities is oddly compromised by a surge of anti-Semitism.”⁸ On May 9, 2002, the day after activists at a Jewish peace rally at San Francisco State University were confronted by a terrifying, threatening mob, Professor Laurie Zoloth wrote:

Today, all day, I have been listening to the reactions of students, parents, and community members who were on campus yesterday. I have received e-mail from around the country, and phone calls, worried for both my personal safety on the campus, and for the entire intellectual project of having a Jewish Studies program, and

recruiting students to a campus that in the last month has become a venue for hate speech and anti-Semitism.

After nearly 7 years as director of Jewish Studies, and after nearly two decades of life here as a student, faculty member and wife of the Hillel rabbi, after years of patient work and difficult civic discourse, I am saddened to see SFSU (San Francisco State University) return to its notoriety as a place that teaches anti-Semitism, hatred for America, and hatred, above all else, for the Jewish State of Israel, a state that I cherish.

I cannot fully express what it feels like to have to walk across campus daily, past maps of the Middle East that do not include Israel, past posters of cans of soup with labels on them of drops of blood and dead babies, labeled "canned Palestinian children meat, slaughtered according to Jewish rites under American license," past poster after poster calling out "Zionism=racism" and "Jews=Nazis."

This is not civic discourse, this is not free speech, and this is the Weimar Republic with brown shirts it cannot control. This is the casual introduction of the medieval blood libel and virulent hatred smeared around our campus in a manner so ordinary that it hardly excites concern -- except if you are a Jew, and you understand that hateful words have always led to hateful deeds.⁹

For more on the return of this insidious disease to the university campus I suggest that the reader make a Google search of "anti-Semitism on campuses" and see the results.¹⁰ It may not only be spiritually dangerous for Orthodox youngsters to go to a secular college; they may also find themselves in physical danger.

One final point that is most important: attending a secular college full-time will mean the interruption (cessation?) of the attendee's Torah learning. This is certainly not desirable.

Modern Solutions

Interestingly enough, technological advances today allow for the establishment of educational institutions where students can continue their intensive Torah study and, at the same time, acquire the skills needed to compete in today's world. Furthermore, advanced secular studies can be pursued in some disciplines without the yeshiva student leaving the yeshiva environment. This can be done by providing students with a solid learning environment during the day and access to on-line course work over the Internet in the evening. Utilizing distance learning, students can obtain degrees from accredited institutions that may well rival degrees obtained by attending secular colleges on a full-time

basis. While such programs are relatively new in the US,¹¹ there is no question that the delivery of course material via the Internet and by other technological means will continue to become more and more commonplace. Below we describe two efforts that are already underway.

Collaborative Teaching via Video Conferencing

“In the spring 2003, Dr. Sheldon Epstein, Professor in Computing and Business Decision Sciences of the Stillman School of Business (at Seton Hall University), began an exploratory discussion with Rabbi Avraham N. Zucker of Yeshiva Gedola Ohr Yisrael of Marine Park, New York, on the possibility of offering Seton Hall's management courses online to the Yeshiva. Rabbi Zucker wanted to offer his students a secular education in the direction of a M.B.A. The Business School offered an integrated M.B.A. which fit well Rabbi Zucker's intentions. To structure this course to be delivered on-line was easy, but the didactic reality of ‘class time in real-time’ was even more attractive than asynchronous distance learning. Seton Hall, with its ITV (Interactive Television) set up, can easily accommodate videoconferencing with other institutes.”¹²

In order for the yeshiva students to participate in studying via video conferencing, it was necessary for the yeshiva to upgrade its existing equipment. Students at Ohr Yisrael are now able to take courses given at Seton Hall delivered via this technology. While one visit to the Seton Hall campus was necessary for an initial orientation, virtually all other work is done by the yeshiva students from within the yeshiva environment. Email is used extensively as a means of communication between students and faculty.

The Open University

In England there already exists the means to obtain a high quality degree using Internet technology. With this in mind, a group of Rabbonim and *baalei batim* residing in London recently formed the **Shaarei Orah Institute**.¹³ The institute is composed of a Bais HaMedrash program and an Academic Learning Center. Entering students are expected to have achieved sufficient proficiency in Gemora and Halacha so they can continue independent learning. The first part of the daily schedule at Shaarei Orah is similar to that of many yeshivas: *Shacharis* at 7:30 followed by the study of *halachah*, breakfast, first *Seder*, a lunch break, *Mincha* and second *Seder*, and supper at 7:15 PM.

Between 8 and 10 PM the students devote themselves entirely to secular studies in the Academic Learning Center. Academic courses are provided on a distance-learning basis from recognised and accredited British Universities. The application of the disciplined learning environment of the Yeshiva combined with the facilities of the Center avoids the major weaknesses of distance learning. The undergraduate degrees offered are a BSc in Accounting and Finance, Banking and Finance, Business Administration, Information Systems and Management,

Law with Accounting, Property Management, and an LL.B in Law. It is expected that students will achieve comparable if not better academic qualifications than those they would have achieved through full-time study at University.

One can easily envision an institution for young women incorporating the same approaches. After attending morning and early afternoon seminary studies, the young women would then devote the late afternoon to acquiring academic skills in a variety of disciplines.

To this writer the scenarios outlined above seem to be ideal. The student remains in a Torah environment, continues his or her Torah studies, and also earns the necessary qualifications to succeed in the outside world. Hopefully, we will soon see a number of Torah institutions that incorporate secular studies via technology established throughout the world.

¹ **The Case for Secular Studies in Yeshivas**, *The Jewish Press*, November 19, 2004 page 1, http://www.jewishpress.com/news_article.asp?article=4395 and **Accepting A Challenge**, *The Jewish Press*, February 9, 2005 page 1, http://www.jewishpress.com/news_article.asp?article=4682.

² http://www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/college/directory/brief/drglance_2903_brief.php

³ Ibid.

⁴ http://www.universities.com/Schools/H/Hebrew_Theological_College.asp

⁵ <http://www.touro.edu/LanderCollege/tuition.asp>

⁶ <http://www.finaid.org/savings/tuition-inflation.phtml>

⁷ **The Mussar Movement Its History, Its Leading Personalities and Doctrines**, Rabbi Dov Katz, Volume 1, Part 1. Translated into English from the fifth Hebrew edition by Leonard Oshry, Orly Press – Tel Aviv, 1975 page 240.

⁸ **Anti-Semitism on Campus**, Dr. Ruth R. Wisse, *The Wall Street Journal*, December 13, 2002, http://isurvived.org/2Postings/Anti-Semitism_Wisse_Ruth.htm.

⁹ http://www.aish.com/jewishissues/jewishcommunity/Fear_and_Loathing_at_San_Francisco_State.asp

¹⁰ For example, <http://www.jafi.org.il/education/antisemitism/nf/left1.html>, <http://www.facinghistorycampus.org/Campus/Campus.nsf/0/d5f4a4845701e78385256d210069d9fa?OpenDocument>, and <http://www.hillel.org/Hillel/NewHillel.nsf/0/039D27FB094E07B385256C3E00734215?OpenDocument>

¹¹ See <http://www.online-degrees-today.com/>

¹² <http://technology.shu.edu/page/Collaborative+Teaching+via+Video+Conferencing!OpenDocument>

¹³ Information about the Shaarei Orah Institute comes from <http://www.shaarei-orah.org/>.