

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part --)

Brooklyn Yeshivas Circa 1937 Part I

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 **History of Brooklyn Jewry** by Samuel P. Abelow, Scheba Publishing Company, Brooklyn, NY, 1937. This book may be downloaded at no cost from

http://books.google.com/books/about/History_of_Brooklyn_Jewry.html?id=ttU0AAAIAAJ

Introduction

Today Brooklyn is fortunate to have a large number of yeshivas and Bais Yaakovs that span the spectrum from Modern Orthodox to chareidi and chassidic. Jewish parents thus have a wide range of educational choices for their children. The situation in the 1930s was considerably different. There were, of course, fewer yeshivas, and hence parents' choices were much more limited. In this article we will discuss many of the yeshivas that existed in Brooklyn in 1937.

Yeshiva Rabbi Chaim Berlin

Yeshiva Rabbi Chaim Berlin or *Yeshivas Rabbeinu Chaim Berlin* was established in 1904 as *Yeshiva Tiferes Bachurim*. It is the oldest yeshiva in Kings County, Brooklyn. At the suggestion of Rabbi Meir Berlin (Bar-Ilan) (1880 – 1949) it was renamed for his brother, Rabbi Chaim Berlin (1832 – 1912), the chief rabbi of Moscow who had moved to Jerusalem in 1906. [Rabbi Bar-Ilan lived in the United States from 1913 to 1923.]

In 1937 the yeshiva was located at 1890 Prospect Place. “Thousands of boys have gone forth from its portals to practice and to spread the teachings of the Bible, the Prophets, the Talmud and of the leading rabbis in Israel. The history of the organization has been a struggle for funds and for public sympathy. Within the last few years, this struggle has been an intense one. Many a time did the instructors spend payless weeks, because it was not possible for the officers to collect the dues or the donations that were promised to meet the yearly budget of \$60,000. [This is almost \$1,000,000 today.]

“When the Yeshivah was organized, the parents had to be coaxed and cajoled into enrolling their sons. The parents feared that the curriculum would be too severe and impossible for American children. They also feared that the secular work of the children would suffer. Time and experience proved these fears to be groundless. Besides the hundreds of graduates who have become lawyers, doctors, rabbis and cultured gentlemen, the graduates of the Yeshivah are feeding such movements as the Adas Bnai Israel and Young Israel. The English department of the Yeshivah has sustained itself. The graduates distinguish themselves in the high schools and do very well in college.”

[This last paragraph says much about the attitude of parents during the first part of the twentieth century regarding the importance of yeshiva education. Many parents resisted sending their sons to a yeshiva, because they felt that attending yeshiva would hinder their sons' ability to integrate into American society. They felt that sending their children to public school was the way to accomplish this. Unfortunately, they failed to realize that without a proper Jewish education their children most likely would reject traditional Judaism.]

“The cost of maintaining the Yeshivah is very large. During 1932, the total expense was \$49,699, of which amount \$36,510 went for instruction. The income for the year was \$41,431. The institution ran at a deficit of over \$8000. This meant hardship for the instructors and the children. Nevertheless, the teachers and the staff carried on.

“The faculty consisted in 1933 of the principal, Isidore K. Zwickel, and the following teachers: Abraham Kaplan, M. Ahlich, Joseph Wahrman, Samuel Kaplan, David Kalawitz, Solomon Tanrubsky, Abraham Guslik, Ben-Zion Wienokur, Hyman Rivlin, Ben Zion Tepper, Michael Shranpulski, Eleazar Bzdondsky and Meyer Franim.

“The success of the institution is due to a large extent to the officers who work unselfishly for the cause of Judaism. They derive no material profit from their labors which they give during their leisure moments. They give not only time but money for the development of the institution. Similar to other institutions, the Yeshivah Rabbi Chaim Berlin has several very active auxiliaries: the Ladies' Auxiliary, Parents' Association, Women's Welfare and Social Club and an Alumni Association.”

The reader should not be surprised that Rabbi Yitzchok Hutner, ZT”L, is not mentioned by Abelow. Rav Hutner became involved with Yeshiva Rabbi Chaim Berlin in either 1935 or 1936, and Abelow's book was published in 1937, so Abelow was probably not aware of Rav Hutner's early activities in regard to the yeshiva.

Yeshivah Torah Vodaas

“The Yeshiva was conceived in 1917 by friends Binyomin Wilhelm and Louis Dershowitz to provide a yeshiva education centering on traditional Jewish sacred texts to the children of families then moving from the Lower East Side to the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. The two friends contacted prominent local Rabbi Zev Gold (1889 – 1956) of Congregation Beth Jacob Anshe Sholom and together they formed a board and established the yeshiva in Williamsburg as an elementary school. Rabbi Gold was elected as the yeshiva's first president; he suggested the name Torah Vodaas after the yeshiva founded in Lida in 1896 by Rabbi Yitzchak Yaacov Reines, which combined secular studies with Jewish studies and traditional Talmud study.

“The founding members of the yeshiva soon offered the principalship of the institution to Rabbi Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz, who headed the yeshiva from 1922 to 1948. Under

Mendlowitz's leadership, a mesivta (yeshiva high school) was opened in 1926. Later he opened a *Yeshiva Gedola* as well.”¹

Abelow writes that “The Torah Vodas (sic) Yeshivah is one of the largest Hebrew parochial schools in the borough. It is located at 206 Wilson Street and has a branch on the corner of Bedford Avenue and Taylor Street. It has boys from many parts of the United States. In addition to the Hebrew instruction, it provides the students with free lunches.

“The officers of this school in 1933 were: President, Judah L. Gurfein; vice-presidents, Eleazar Perlmutter, Abraham Levin, Samuel Goldstein, Ben Zion Weberman, S. Silber, Raphael A. Gasner; treasurer, Moses Goldstein; gabbai, S. Hyman Fensterheim; secretary, Nathan Lieberman; ex - president, Eleazer Meyer Blum.”

The Shulamith Institute for Girls

The Shulamith School for Girls was founded in 1930 in Borough Park by Necha (Nettie) Rivkin (1900 – 1988) and Rabbi M.G. Volk. It was the first girls' yeshiva in the United States. Mrs. Rivkin taught kindergarten and first grade and supervised curriculum development. She introduced innovative methods for teaching Hebrew to young children. Rejecting rote memorization, and drawing instead on the work of educational theorists Maria Montessori and Jean Piaget, she taught language skills through song, games, stories, and pictures.

Abelow writes that “The Shulamith Institute for Girls is a progressive school in Borough Park. It is an all-day school with Hebrew classes in the morning and classes in the elementary public school subjects from one to four in the afternoon. In 1936, the Hebrew department consisted of the principal, Bernard Charney, and the following teachers: Ruth Hausman, Rochelle Kirschblum, Nettie Rivkin, Lillian Salwen and Basheva Weintraub. The English department was in charge of Max Kufeld, the principal, and the following teachers: Charlotte Abelow, Etta C. Brinberg, Ruth K. Jacobson, Goldie Murzin and Gertrude R. Samet. Lillian Eidelman was the secretary. The Shulamith Institute is directed by a fine women's organization. The school has its headquarters in the Hebrew Institute building on Fourteenth Avenue and Fiftieth Street.”

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yeshiva_Torah_Vodaas