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MY MIND IS MADE UP; DON'T CONFUSE ME WITH THE FACTS!

Dr. Yitzchok Levine
Posted Sep 22 2004

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Observant Jews are supposed to be committed to a Torah of emes. Indeed, given all the misinformation that comes from the media regarding Jewish and Israeli issues, one would think that Orthodox Jews would not tolerate anything that is not absolutely true. Unfortunately, I have found that not always is this the case, particularly when it comes to historical events. There are those who either rewrite or deny history in an attempt to make it conform to their religious views.

In his article "Facing the Truths of History" (Torah U'Madda Journal, 8, 1998, pages 200-276: http://yuriets.yeshivalive.com/TU8_Schachter.pdf), Rabbi Dr. Jacob J. Schachter deals with a number of cases in which Orthodox writers have significantly changed what really happened to conform to their view of what they feel should have happened. Doing this allows them to support what they consider to be "proper Torah values."

This is a dangerous approach and is limited not just to writers. There are some today who are recasting the past in a mold to fit what they feel it should have been, even if this leads to blatant untruth. Allow me to share some examples.

Rav Zaks and Yeshiva University

Not too long ago a friend of mine and another fellow were in a seforim store in Boro Park talking about their days at Yeshiva University. One of them mentioned something about an interaction he had with Rabbi Mendel Zaks (1898-1974), who married a daughter of the Chofetz Chaim in 1922. Rav Zaks in 1946 was appointed a rosh yeshiva and bochen at the Rabbi Yitzchok Elchanan Seminary. He served in this position until the early 1970's, when he moved to Eretz Yisroel. He passed away in Jerusalem in 1974.

Someone who happened to overhear their conversation got all excited and said that Rav Zaks had never taught at Yeshiva University. He maintained that a son-in-law of the Chofetz Chaim would never be associated with YU. When told of Rav Zaks's lengthy association with RIETS, this fellow refused to believe what he heard. Since this fact did not fit the view he had of the world, he insisted on denying it. His mind was made up, no matter what.

Innovative Education for Girls<



BR-> Suppose someone were to write that in Lithuania between the two world wars schools for girls had been founded under the most respected of Orthodox yeshiva auspices in which the language of instruction was Hebrew. Some no doubt would say, It cannot be! It is impossible that this European yeshiva would be intimately involved in such a "Zionistic" school!

The fact, however, is that the Yavne School for girls and the Yavne Seminary for young women were established in Telz in the 1920's by Rabbi Yoseif Leib Bloch, who was the rav and rosh yeshiva of Telz. Similar

Yavne schools for girls were set up in Ponevez and Kovno.

Mrs. Etel Miller, the widow of Rav Avigdor Miller, zt"l, told me that her father sent her to study in two of these Yavne Schools, first in Telz and then in Kovno. "We learned in ivrit b'ivrit," she told me. "I studied algebra, geometry and trigonometry in Hebrew, something that is not even done today."

Dr. Rivkah Teitz Blau, on pages 187-188 of Learn Torah, Love Torah, Live Torah, her biography of her father, Harav Mordechai Pinchas Teitz, tells us about the school in Telz:

"After World War I, when the Yavneh school and seminary for young women opened in Telz,

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not only did teachers and students speak Hebrew in all classes - physics and algebra as well as Bible and Halakhah - they corresponded with each other in Hebrew during summer vacation. In addition to the secular courses offered in Yavneh's eight-year program, equivalent to the American middle school, high school, and first two years of college, and Hebrew, French, German, Lithuanian, and Russian, the girls studied Bible, the Prophets, Halakhah, Aggadah, and Jewish history. If you trace the educational ancestry of the few Americans who know Hebrew in this generation, you often find a Yavneh graduate at the beginning of the line.

"Although they did not have gemara as a separate subject, while studying biblical commentaries the women learned large portions of the Oral Torah."

These statements are backed by the following quote from page 57 of *The World That Was: America 1900-1945 Transmitting the Torah Legacy to America* by Rabbi A. Leib Scheinbaum.

"Yavne, originally established in Telshe, Lithuania after World War I, was an innovator in the field of education for girls. Not only did teachers and students speak Hebrew in all classes - including secular courses such as physics and algebra ? they even corresponded with each other in Hebrew. The students were exposed to the full gamut of Jewish religious studies on the highest level, plus five languages and such secular subjects as mathematics, science, geography, history, crafts, singing, and exercise."

Rav Avigdor Miller and Yeshiva University

There are those who will claim that Rav Miller, zt"l, was opposed to Yeshiva University and those who taught there. Indeed, one might hear someone assert, He would never have set foot there! He would never have anything to do with such a place! He considered Yeshiva College off limits always. He never had anything good to say about those who taught there!

While it is certainly true that later in his life Rav Miller was not in favor of Yeshiva Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Seminary (RIETS) and did speak negatively about certain aspects of this institution, not only did he "set foot" in RIETS, he studied there from 1925 until 1932, when he left to study in Slabodka. He was also a member of the first entering class at Yeshiva College in 1928.

What did Rav Miller think of the hanhalla of RIETS at least until 1939? I have copies of two letters Rav Miller wrote to Rav Dr. Bernard (Dov) Revel, the head of RIETS and the president of Yeshiva College, that tell us. The first was sent from Slabodka in 1933 and the second from Chelsea, Massachusetts, in 1939. (I want to express my thanks to the staff of the Yeshiva University Archives for making these letters available to me.)

Both letters address Dr. Revel as "Moreinu, Rabbeinu, Harav, Hagoan, Hagadol." The first letter asks Dr. Revel to pass on a request for financial assistance to someone whom Rav Miller knew in Europe and who was in dire financial straits. The second asks Dr. Revel to send a representative from RIETS to attend the installation ceremony of Rav Miller as rav of the Walnut Street shul on June 11, 1939.

The 1939 letter concludes with Rav Miller sending greetings of shalom to the "Ra'amim, Hagoanim" at RIETS. We see that at this point in his life he had the highest regard for the head of RIETS and Yeshiva College as well as for its roshei yeshiva. It is, of course, true that later in his life he disapproved of how this institution developed. However, the real story of his view of RIETS and Yeshiva College is obviously not "black and white."

Not-So-Perfect Europe

Very often one hears people speak with nostalgia about the Jewish world that had existed in Europe before World War II. This is certainly understandable. It is impossible for us to appreciate all that was lost at the hands of the Nazi beasts. We know that six million Jews were killed, but this figure is impossible for us to comprehend. (To put it in some perspective, if one were to observe a minute of silence for each of the six million, one would be silent for 6,000,000 minutes, which equals 100,000 hours, which equals 4,167 days, which equals 139 months, which equals 11 years and 6 months.)

Without in any way disparaging those who lived in Europe before the war, the fact is that in many places Judaism was being abandoned. Rav Shimon Schwab pointed out that while there were approximately 100,000 shomrei Shabbos Jews in Warsaw, the Jewish population of the city totaled about 400,000. Therefore, three of every four Jews were not observant.

Rav Avigdor Miller spoke more than once about his observations of the Jews of Kovno while he studied in the nearby Slabodka yeshiva, Kneset Yisroel, from 1932 to 1938. He said that when he first came to Slabodka, there were pleasure cruise boats leaving every hour on the hour on Shabbos. Jews filled these boats with a total disregard for the fact that it was Shabbos. By 1938 the boat schedule had been increased to departures every fifteen minutes to accommodate the increasing number of Jews who desired to participate in these outings.

Based on his experiences in Lithuania, Rav Miller concluded that a large portion of European Jewry was rapidly moving away from Torah Judaism.

There is no question that there were bastions of Orthodox Judaism in Europe before World War II. At the same time, however, there were large segments of the Jewish population that had abandoned a Torah lifestyle. While there is much to admire, emulate, and learn from the lives of the Jews of Europe before that society was destroyed, there were many religious problems as well. But there are some who refuse to acknowledge the negatives and insist that all was a "perfect, religious Jewish world." This simply is not true.

Observant Jews must do their best to conduct their lives according to emes. This means we should not rewrite or deny the way things were. To do so leaves open the possibility that our children will one day learn the truth and become disillusioned with the world view that we want to instill in them.

On the contrary, we should face the truth of the past, embrace it, learn from it, and build on it. This is the approach that emes demands of us.

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