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TIME IN A BOTTLE: RIETS, CIRCA 1928

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What were the concerns of the students at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS, better known today as Yeshiva University) during the 1920's and 1930's? What was their reaction to the new multi-million dollar school building that they moved to in 1928? What was student life like? Some answers to these and similar questions can be gleaned from the student publication Hedenu.

Hedenu was probably first published in the early 1920's. I say "probably," because the first issue that I have is dated December 30, 1928, and carries the numbering VOL. IV, No. 1 (17). (I want to express my thanks to the Yeshiva University Archives for supplying me with a copy of this issue.) The next issue I have is dated April, 1929 VOL. IV., No. 2 (18), whereas the third issue is dated March, 1932 VOL. IX, No. 1-2 (20). (I wish to express my thanks to a friend who wishes to remain anonymous for allowing me to copy these issues from his family's personal library.)

The earliest issue that the YU Library has is from 1935-36. The other issues from the Twenties and early Thirties may well be lost. Still, from these issues one can get insight into the thoughts of the students.

Each issue of Hedenu consists of two parts - English and Hebrew. The English articles consisted of editorials, stories, news of events, book reviews, poetry, and scholarly Torah articles. The Hebrew articles dealt primarily with Torah topics. This article focuses on the English section of the December 30, 1928 issue.

The Great Debate and the New Building

The English cover page features "DEBATE ISSUE" in large letters at the top. Indeed, the first item on page 1 under Editorials deals with a debate between the Debating Team of RIETS and the "distinguished visitors, the Debating Team of the Hebrew Theological College of Chicago" to be held on the evening of December 30, 1928. It was billed "Our First Public Function."

The occasion of tonight's debate is the first public function sponsored by the Student Body of the Yeshiva. Our limited facilities for accommodating guests have made such undertakings impossible in the past. With our new quarters and spacious auditorium, we hope that we will

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be heard from more often.< BR> And to the guests of this evening we extend our heartiest welcome. You have given us courage by your enthusiastic response to our first call for a New York audience. We hope that with your cooperation we will have more opportunities to bring before you the results of our hours and days of study, and that we will thus take our proper share in moulding [sic] Jewish life in our community.

The reader should keep in mind that the official opening of Yeshiva University's original main building in upper Manhattan took place on December 9, 1928.

(Pictures related to the groundbreaking for this edifice and its construction are at http://www.yu.edu/news/photogallery/photogallery_show.cfm?categoryID=1105).

What did the students think of the yeshiva's move to its new home? The next item under Editorials on the first page tells us.

THE DEDICATION

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What happened on the 26th of Kislev, 5689 - or December 9, 1928 - will go down in history as an event of double significance. That occasion marked the official opening of the first Jewish institution of higher secular learning, and simultaneously the unlocking of the doors of the new Yeshiva building. It is difficult to determine the relative importance of the two events. At the ceremonies of the day it seemed that the opening of the College was the all-important event. But those close to the Yeshiva and to Orthodox Jewish life realize that our removal into new quarters is of at least equal significance to American Jewry; for in a larger, more wholesome atmosphere we can expect that the Yeshiva will develop a healthier, better equipped leadership in Jewish affairs. With the expansion of the Yeshiva, its influence will become greater, and we can confidently hope for a new turn for the better in the affairs of traditional Judaism in this country.

The new building was a great improvement over the facilities the yeshiva had been using on the Lower East Side. In fact, students apparently considered the old quarters detrimental to their spiritual development. In an article entitled "Let Us Dedicate Ourselves" one reads

Though some of us are more dollar-bent than others, we all attach higher significance to spiritual values. Those acquainted with the Yeshiva student know how deeply he is interested in social problems, and that he can truly proclaim nihil humanum mihi alienum est. It is the function of the Yeshiva, then, to develop these faculties, to broaden our understanding of Judaism, to create within us a balanced spiritual background that will give us sufficient courage and assurance to wage our battle for Judaism successfully.

Numerous unwholesome forces have been at work in the Yeshiva that have hindered the realization of this purpose. Undoubtedly our physical environment has been greatly at fault. Our old building with its broken benches, shattered windows, heat in June and freezing in December, and its complete lack of athletic equipment, offered little to inspire the Yeshiva student with a zeal for study; and he was not compensated by the factors in surrounding life, that spurred the European Yeshiva bochur despite his [bread and salt] meals. The East Side, even with its beneficial effects in bringing the Yeshiva student closer to Jewish life, nevertheless had an uncanny influence upon many a student. The cosmopolitan composition of the student body, while tending to enrich each student's background, has hindered unity in our ranks. The heavy tax upon the student's time, especially if he is forced to support himself, leaves little room in his schedule for analysis and observation of Jewish life.

The reader may be surprised at the inclusion of the Latin phrase nihil humanum mihi alienum est (nothing human is foreign to me) by this writer. The fact of the matter is that at least two years of Latin were part of the standard high school curriculum for many years, at least up until the late Fifties.

Attitudes Toward Torah Study at RIETS in 1928

What were the attitudes of the RIETS students toward Torah study? The selection below from the front page of this issue of Hedenu gives us some insight.

HASMADAH IN THE YESHIVA

Several years ago, upon the suggestion of Dr. Revel, a group of boys remained in the Shul daily to study Talmud after the official Yeshiva hours. That handful of volunteer students has now grown into a class of about forty or fifty who remain daily at their Talmud until five and six in the afternoon. And a late visitor at the Shtibel near the Yeshiva will find our boys there nightly until eleven and twelve.

The hasmadah among our students has increased tenfold under the guidance of Dr. Revel. And for this we are thankful - that we have learned to realize the significance of study.

I presume that most of the boys learned until 2 or 3 in the afternoon and then went to college or worked. One of the reasons that Dr. Revel gave for founding Yeshiva College was so that the students at RIETS who wanted to attend college could remain in a Jewish environment while pursuing a college degree.

Rabbi Shimon Shkop

Harav R. Shimon Yehudah Hakohen Shkop (1860-1939) traveled to America in 1928 to raise funds to alleviate the difficult financial situation of his yeshiva in Grodno, Yeshiva Sharei Torah. Rav Shkop became a rosh yeshiva at REITS after the sudden passing in 1928 of Rabbi Shlomo Polachek (1877-1928), known as the Meitscheter Illui. Rav Shkop taught for one year at RIETS. The extremely high regard in which he was held by the students at Yeshiva is evident in the following article from the Editorials page.

RABBI SHIMON SKOF [sic]

The past few weeks have indeed been eventful ones for the students of the Yeshiva. With the dedication of their new House of Study, an added impetus has been given to them in their desire for knowledge. Especially is this noteworthy when they twice a week "drink in as if with thirst" the words of the Rosh of the Yeshiva of Grodno, who is among them as a most pleasant visitor. Unprecedented eagerness to digest the [insights] of the venerable Gaon has been

displayed; and even hours after he has left his lecture pulpit, his thoughts are heard echoed near the walls of the synagogue. Every studious heart is aglow with the light kindled by Rav Shimon and all marvel happily at the simplicity with which the depths of his interpretations and views are sounded to all listeners. His benign and stately countenance draws all to the fountain of the Torah and it is hoped sincerely that he will be among us for a long period of time. May Rav Shimon continue to enlighten us with his torch of knowledge and inspire us with his saintly presence in our midst!

Chanukah D'var Torah by Rav Avigdor Miller

The Hebrew part of this issue of Hedenu contains a number of divrei Torah by the students at RIETS. The most well-known author in this issue is Rav Avigdor Miller, zt"l. Rav Miller came to RIETS in 1925. In 1928 he was a member of the first entering class of Yeshiva College. However, in 1932 he left to study in Slabodka, shortly before the college's first graduation and therefore never actually graduated from Yeshiva College.

Rav Miller's contribution cannot really be classified as a d'var Torah. It is more a piece of inspirational writing about Chanukah. I can only speculate that he was motivated in part by the fact that he and the other boys in the yeshiva had moved into the dormitory of the new building shortly before Chanukah. It was certainly a far cry from the quarters that he and the others were used to on the Lower East Side. Harry Steinberg, another member of the first entering YC class told me that when he arrived at RIETS in 1927 he shared an apartment across from 302 East Broadway with Rav Miller and eight other boys. "We were two boys to a room. Two of us even slept in the kitchen!" he recalled.

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