

VOICES *from* the **CAMPUS**



One-quarter of the students who come to secular college as Orthodox Jews report that they have changed their denominational identity while at college.... Two out of three Jewish college students change their level of Jewish observance during their college years. Notably, they are almost twice as likely to decrease their observance as they are to increase it.

(Avi Chai Foundation, "Particularism in the University: Realities and Opportunities for Jewish Life on Campus," Report, Jan. 2006)

What's it like to be an Orthodox student on campus these days? What are the particular spiritual challenges? The opportunities? While the statistics above are rather grim, they do not reflect the whole picture. To get a broader sense of the realities facing Orthodox youth on campus, we asked three students—all of whom are involved with the Orthodox Union's Heshe & Harriet Seif Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus (JLIC)*—to speak openly and honestly about their personal struggles and triumphs.

**The Orthodox Union, in partnership with Hillel, administers JLIC, a program that helps Orthodox students navigate the college environment.*



ENCOUNTERING ORTHODOXY

Despite my growing interest in Judaism, my exposure to Jewish people and to the Jewish religion was limited—until university.

By Joshua Reback

I was at Rutgers University when I got my first real exposure to Orthodox Judaism.

Growing up in southern New Jersey, I never knew there were Jewish enclaves not too far from my childhood home. I most certainly had never had a group of Jewish friends my own age, much less Orthodox ones.

In 2005 I entered university, and for the first time I had the opportunity to interact with Jews from all sorts of backgrounds. I got involved in Israel activism. I attended all the Heshe & Harriet Seif Jewish Learning on Campus (JLIC) programs and served on the Hillel student board twice. In fact, I was so active in Jewish life on campus that at the Hillel awards ceremony last year, the execu-

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Joshua Reback is a senior at Rutgers University, majoring in Middle Eastern studies and linguistics. He will be attending Yeshivat HaMivtar in Efrat next year.

RELIGIOUS AND ISOLATED ON CAMPUS: A PRICE WORTH PAYING

Though I proudly wear my kippah and am thus identifiably Jewish, I often keep my religious life to myself.

By David Elmaleh

Being a religious Jew on campus is an isolating experience. Despite the ongoing learning programs, daily minyanim, kosher food and the 24/7 availability of Rabbi Aaron Greenberg, the Heshe & Harriet Seif Jewish Learning on Campus (JLIC) educator at York University in Toronto, the challenges persist. If anything, after three years as an undergraduate student at York and one semester at its affiliate law school, Osgoode Hall, the plethora of philosophical, social and practical issues I confront have become progressively more difficult.

The pressure to be like everyone

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David Elmaleh grew up in Toronto. He received his BA in business and economics from York University in 2008, and is currently pursuing his JD at York's Osgoode Hall Law School.

RELIGIOUS LIFE AT MARYLAND

One of the prevalent myths about dorm life is that it is hard to be shomer mitzvet.

By Beverly Kramer

“Why on earth would you want to do that?” was a common response I got when I told my seminary friends my plans for college. I was going to the University of Maryland, and planned to live in the dorms. By contrast, most of my friends were going to Jewish universities, or staying at home and attending community colleges. More than a few people tried to convince me not to go, insisting that I would be much happier at a Jewish institution, or worse, that I wouldn’t be able to maintain my religious identity in such a “spiritual desert.”

I’m not finished with school, and my story is far from written. However, I like to think that I’m proving them wrong. Every morning, when I attend Shacharit with more than fifty *frum* students; or in the evenings, when I gather with others for Maariv in the

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Beverly Kramer is a junior at the University of Maryland. She grew up in Savannah, Georgia, and attended Shalheves High School for Girls in Baltimore, Maryland, and Darchei Binah Seminary in Jerusalem.

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tive director compared my arrival at the campus Hillel to a “kid coming into a candy store.” How right he was!

My dad, the grandson of Galician Jewish immigrants who came to the United States before World War I, had grown up in Brooklyn. My mom, from a Catholic family in Philadelphia, had converted to Judaism via Philadelphia’s most prominent Conservative synagogue the year before she married my father. From what I have gathered, she kept *taharat hamishpachah* (the laws of family purity) for some time, was familiar with *berachot* and had a good understanding of the Jewish holidays. Unfortunately, she relapsed into Catholicism sometime before I was born. Thus I was raised with an awareness of my Jewish heritage, but it was intertwined with Christianity: We celebrated Christmas, Chanukah, Easter and Passover.

It was only in high school that I began seriously questioning my religiously schizophrenic background: If Christians saw in their main figure messianic salvation, and Jews fundamentally disagreed with this and

with all the subsequent ideology built around that figure, how could anyone possibly agree with both ideologies, both religions? What business did I have celebrating two completely contradictory sets of festivals?

I started feeling guilty receiving gifts for both Jewish and Christian holidays. Why receive gifts in celebration of something I didn’t understand?

Why observe two holidays at the same time that directly contradict each other?

Judaism’s intellectualism appealed to me. I tried deepening my connection to my Jewish roots, but I had no community and a limited background. So I contacted the local Conservative Renewal synagogue, and started attending functions there regularly.

At Rutgers, I pursued Middle Eastern studies and studied Israeli history. I enjoyed taking classes on Israeli politics and the history of Zionism. Learning about the debates surrounding Zionism’s ideology and issues of nationalism, as well as assimilation during the European Enlightenment, gave me insight into the origins of the progressive Jewish denominations I’d acquainted myself with. I was troubled to learn about the Reform movement’s resounding support for Jewish assimilation in its early years. If Reform Judaism deserved examination, all the more so did the Conservative movement, with which I was more familiar. I sympathized with Conservative Judaism’s origins—it had broken away from Reform Judaism for renouncing Jewish tradition and law. But the Conservative movement I knew did little to preserve the Judaism that had existed prior to the European Enlightenment. It seemed that it too saw its salvation in meshing Judaism with the predominant Western culture. Consequently, I eventually rejected it as well.

Thus, I began thinking about Orthodoxy’s approach, and realized I had never given the movement much thought. In light of the other Jewish denominations’ position that they are progressive and up to date, I had always believed that Orthodoxy was out of touch.

I knew that any move I made toward Orthodoxy would have to be on strong foundations, and not simply because I was disillusioned with the other denominations. I began associating with a small group of Modern Orthodox students on campus. I attended *shiurim* given by Rabbi Ori Melamed, then the JLIC educator at Rutgers. With his straightforward and blunt teaching style, Rabbi Melamed let me be direct in my questions. We had many discussions on ethics, Jewish law and Israeli politics. I also got involved with a *kiruv* organization on campus called Maimonides Jewish Leadership Fellowship. Rabbis Meir Goldberg and Yehoshua Lewis of Maimonides gave classes on philosophical topics and addressed various conflicts between traditional Jewish philosophy and modern Western culture. All of these rabbis gave me the opportunity to ask questions and helped cement my religious foundations.

In time, my doubts dissipated and I grew to understand and accept that a great collective revelation had taken place at Mount Sinai. Furthermore, I accepted the notion that an Oral Law must have accompanied the Written Law. I made intense efforts to challenge Orthodoxy’s main tenets in order to lay an authentic foundation for my beliefs.

But my background caught up with me. Eventually, I discovered that Orthodox Judaism does not accept Conservative conversions. I began discussing with Rabbi Melamed the possibility of having an Orthodox conversion.

Many individuals who come from a background such as mine are frustrated when forced to reconcile their previous definition of a Jew with the halachic definition. But whenever someone asks me if I felt “offended” or “slighted” by the fact that I wasn’t considered Jewish by Orthodox standards, I say no. My reasoning is simple: If I accept the principles of halachah, how can I vehe-



Following his dip in the mikvah, Joshua Reback’s college friends threw him a surprise conversion party. Courtesy of Joshua Reback

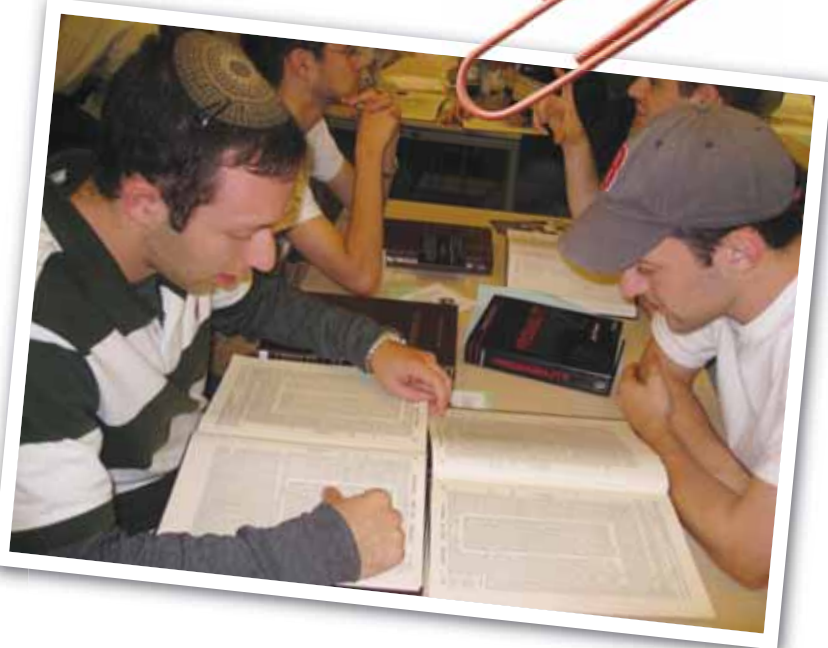
mently oppose the same halachah that states my status is questionable?

It was a question of personal ethics; I had to be consistent in my beliefs.

Some of the non-Orthodox rabbis from my past challenged the attitudes of the Orthodox rabbis with regard to my conversion. They asked me questions such as, "Why would you observe laws that many people your own age don't observe?" and "Why should the standard [for conversion] be set so high? Shouldn't the standard be as high as that which the overall community sets for itself, what community members expect of themselves?"

But I realized that these rabbis misperceive the conversion process and inadvertently deceive themselves. It is not that conversion simply prepares a would-be convert to live among Jews, but that it prepares him to lead the lifestyle that is incumbent upon all Jews. There are ideals that all Jews must strive for, irrespective of the fact that so many of us fail to attain those goals or even to acknowledge them in the first place.

My Orthodox conversion took place in October 2007, under the auspices of the Beit Din L'Giyur in Bergen County, New Jersey. It is now almost two years since my conversion, and I am grateful to have found my roots at Rutgers. Ironically, I learned how to live life as an Orthodox Jew on the college campus, a place not known for being conducive to living a halachic lifestyle. For



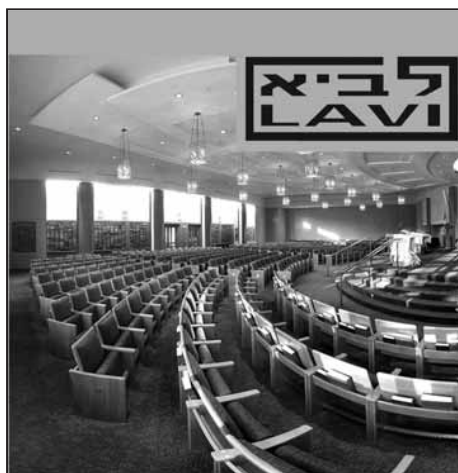
Students learn Gemara in a university library. Courtesy of Adam Teitcher

me, and I'm sure for many others, the college campus is an appropriate place in which to grow spiritually, where one can, to paraphrase the Sages, "be a leader where there is none."

My campus is one where I see Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews respecting each other. It is an open Orthodox community that maintains its religious standards thanks, in no small part, to the tremendous efforts and resources provided by JLIC. That openness has garnered respect for the

observant lifestyle where it might not have existed before, and has strengthened one of the largest and fastest-growing Jewish student centers in the country.

I urge the Orthodox world not to discourage campus life, but to support and strengthen it. There is a true opportunity here to make an impact on the thousands of Jews who would not otherwise encounter authentic Jewish philosophy, laws and values, and, most importantly, those who observe them. ■



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