



## 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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parking lot of the university library; or on Shabbat afternoon, when I don't get a chance to sleep because I'm busy with multiple *chavrutot* and *shiurim*; or over spring break, when I opt to volunteer in Israel with Maryland Hillel's Alternative Spring Break program, I'm proving them wrong.

One of the prevalent myths about dorm life is that it is hard to be *shomer mitzvot*. But this misconception has no basis at Maryland. According to university policy, all students must sign roommate agreements at the beginning of each semester, specifying what they would and would not accept in their rooms. Once the roommates come to an agreement, they must live up to it, or they will be penalized. This policy makes it easier for religious students to feel comfortable in the dorm.

At Maryland, many of the Orthodox students on campus live in the same

cluster of buildings. Students request this area because it is closer to the Hillel building, which houses the kosher dining hall, the shul and the *beit midrash*. My first Shabbat in the dorms I was pleasantly surprised to find a sign put up by the non-Jewish

Friday afternoons in my dorm often feel like camp, with so many of the female students walking back and forth between one another's rooms, trying to figure out what to wear or how to style their hair.

Because these buildings are so Jewish, we sometimes forget that others live there, too. Last year, a few weeks into the spring semester, an observant female student hung an "Asher Yatzar" (prayer said after using the bathroom) sign outside of the restrooms. Around this time, a group of male students took it upon themselves to post Shabbat candle-lighting times on the bulletin board. Ultimately,

there were complaints by some of the non-Jewish residents that they felt "dominated" and "pressured" by all the Jewish signs in the halls. While we never intended to offend anyone, and promptly removed the signs, we later reflected on the irony that it was the

resident assistant explaining the Jewish practice of not using electricity on Friday nights and Saturdays, and requesting that non-Jewish residents help out by turning on lights in the bathrooms or stairwells if they happen to be off.



It's uplifting to look around the University of Maryland and see Jews learning Torah in all areas of the campus.

## ANTI-SEMITISM ON CAMPUS—AN EASY TARGET

*Student David Elmaleh discusses how the college campus has become a hub of anti-Semitism*

**S**houting, anti-religious slurs, evil glares and anti-Semitic rhetoric often get thrown my way as I walk through the halls during one of the countless anti-Israel demonstrations at York University. Am I a walking target? I often wonder if I am drawing a bull's eye for myself when I dress in a way that identifies me as a Jew on campus. Indeed, the distinction between anti-Zionist and anti-Jewish is becoming increasingly blurred.

In several cases, these rallies have deteriorated into soapboxes for Jew

bashing. I have been called names and been insulted for simply wearing my *kippah*. One day, while hurrying to a class, a few individuals stopped me in the hallway and began berating me about Israeli policies.

The campus newspaper has not been very helpful; it consistently presents editorials and articles that blast Israel, while very few pro-Israel pieces make it into the paper. Last year, after the fatal terrorist attack at the Mercaz HaRav yeshivah in Jerusalem, a York student wrote an op-ed for the campus paper entitled



*Anti-Semitism on campus is undoubtedly on the rise, and campus groups are growing bolder each day. Pictured above: a counter-demonstration to a pro-Israel, pro-peace event at the University of Texas at Austin. The pro-Israel event was sponsored by the University of Texas Hillel.*

*Courtesy of the University of Texas Hillel and ADL*

non-Jews who felt out of place in the secular college dorms.

In seminary, one of my teachers advised me to “never learn Torah in a college library,” referring to all colleges, even Jewish ones. He felt that if one approaches Torah in the same way she approaches history, literature or philosophy, she will eventually lose sight of the intrinsic beauty within Torah, and come to view it as another subject, or “just another piece of ancient writing.” With all due respect to this rabbi—he’s very well known and venerated in Israel—I wholeheartedly disagree. It’s uplifting to look around the University of Maryland and see Jews learning Torah in all areas of the campus. On the third floor of the main library, for example, is the Jewish studies section. Books are filed under the call letters “BM,” which we Jewish students jokingly say stands for “*beit midrash*.” There are rows and rows of books, running the gamut from traditional *sifrei kodesh* like Tanach and Tal-

mud to obscure medieval Torah commentaries to modern works on contemporary Jewish issues. It is not unusual to find, in this section, students engaged in stimulating discussions with their *chavrutot*. This wonderful resource at the university is something that should be taken advantage of, not avoided.

This semester, the Heshe & Harriet Seif Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus (JLIC) couple at Maryland, Rabbi Eli and Naomi Kohl, started a student *kollel* in which students learn Torah either five or ten hours a week. To commit to learning ten hours a week, in addition to having a full course load and homework, is very difficult. But the fact that so many students choose to do so is downright inspiring. That students choose to learn Torah—despite a lack of time and despite it not being mandatory—means they personally feel the importance of learning and actually want to do it.

Recently, I ran into an old friend of

mine at a wedding. She’s attending a local seminary that offers a BA upon the completion of its two-year program. I told her about my life at Maryland, and she said to me, “I don’t understand how you’re still *frum*. If I was living on campus at a secular university, I would not be religious today.” There were a few things I wanted to say to her, but I decided to make a simple point: her comment proves the high caliber of the observant students at Maryland. In a place where no one is watching over us or making us do anything, not only have most of us not lost faith or given up, but we have actively made the choice to grow and to continue to strengthen our commitment to Judaism. ■



Courtesy of Beverly Kramer

“Jewish Attack Not a Surprise,” which defended the massacre and called on continued resistance in order to end the occupation in Gaza. Jewish students of all walks of life felt outraged and hurt that their paper had printed such a hate-inspired editorial. It sparked intense debate among all factions of students, and, as usual, Jews were targeted.

Below is my response to the op-ed.

Upon reading the article “Jewish Attack Not a Surprise,” I was angered, frustrated and disappointed. At what price should freedom of speech be protected? Attempts to incite hate and demonize a minority group on campus are by no means welcome and should not be allowed to continue. The author [of the article] justifies the massacre of eight defenseless and unarmed students by stating that they were learning in a school that is connected to the Israeli military and that its graduating students are contributing to the fighting in Gaza. I wholeheartedly disagree with her analysis of the situation in Gaza. However, her opinion is her

*prerogative, and not my primary concern. I take issue with her justification of the “Jewish attack.”*

*I spent some time learning in the Mercaz HaRav yeshivah. . . . If somebody had walked up to me in the [York University] library while I was studying and shot me in cold blood, would the author justify that as well? Or perhaps she was referring to the*



Anti-Israel demonstrators at the University of California. Courtesy of ADL

*hundreds of other Jewish students who have studied in similar seminaries before commencing their studies at York? Openly condoning a brutal, heinous and targeted attack on defenseless Jewish students because of their religious and political affiliations threatens the prospect of cohesiveness both abroad and here in our university.*

*Specifically targeting vulnerable civilians is never acceptable, and such justifications have no business in a university that prides itself on its diversity, acceptance and global interest in human rights. University newspapers . . . should not be used as a vehicle . . . for those who wish to incite hatred and hurt an important minority group on campus that greatly contributes to the academic and social aspects of York.*

*My response never made it into the paper. I wonder why. . . .*