

# Keeping the Faith: How College Life Affects our Youth

By Leah R. Lightman

Today, eighty percent of Jewish students in North American universities have never been to Israel, and seventy percent are not involved in Jewish groups.<sup>1</sup> What this means, says Richard Joel, the former president and international director of Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish

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Campus Life, is that many Jewish university students “have never experienced conscious Jewish joy and community.”

“They are without that ‘wow’ Jewish moment, like a *kumsitz*,” adds Joel, “and are therefore likely to assimilate, being lost to the Jewish community forever.”

But unaffiliated Jewish youth are not the only ones who are at risk. Even Orthodox students—with years of day school behind them—are in danger of losing their Jewish identities on cam-

pus. “Many Orthodox Jewish students arrive on college campuses with no fortifications to their existing directions and without a deep understanding of who they are,” Joel says. “They have gotten the ritual observances and *how* to do Jewish observance, but they do not understand *why*. They can compete in most areas and be ‘big man on campus,’ especially academically, since the dual curriculum has sharpened their study skills and helps them excel. Yet when it comes to their Jewish identities, only a small minority proudly owns them.”

Rabbi Uri and Julie Goldstein, representatives of the Orthodox Union’s Jewish Learning Initiative (JLI)—a

campus program for Jewish youth—at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), concur with Joel.

“There are Orthodox students who almost ‘sleepwalk’ through their *Yiddishkeit*,” say the Goldsteins. “Yet it is hard to inject vitality into someone who does not realize that he is apathetic.”

Many Orthodox youth who attend university have been in an Orthodox environment for most of, if not their entire lives. Thus, the university years are often a marked contrast to the years they spent in day school. On the campus, being open to a spectrum of viewpoints, no matter how and to what extent they differ from one’s own, is deemed a virtue. All ideas are acceptable in the name of “academic freedom.” Sex and drugs abound. Moreover, students often see being away from home as an opportunity to experiment without boundaries. And, for many, secular education is the focus, and Jewish learning and growth often stop.

It is for this reason that Rabbi Menachem Schrader, *rosh metivta* of Yeshivat Hamivtar, a post-high school yeshivah for Anglo students in Efrat, Israel, founded JLI. “We try to give [our students] as much as we can during their stay at the yeshivah,” he explains, “but there is a powerful sense that we got them from nowhere, and we’re sending them back to nowhere. It occurred to me that we could try to create a situation where that wouldn’t be the case.” His solution was to provide campuses with couples who would offer Orthodox students a wide variety of *shiurim* and activities within a Torah framework, to help them maintain their connection to Judaism.

Launched in the fall of 2000, JLI, which is partnered with the OU, Hillel and Torah MiTzion, is found on campuses throughout the United States. While all of the partners support the program, the OU provides the lion’s share of JLI’s \$700,000 annual budget.

“Our primary role is not *kiruv*,” says Rabbi Yehuda Seif, who along with his wife, Orit, head up the University of Pennsylvania branch of JLI. “We see our role more as maintenance...to

keep those [Orthodox] students in the fold rather than try to bring more students in.” [See sidebar on page 34.]

Many Orthodox students are exposed to ideas and situations that are antithetical to their upbringing and may not know how to cope with this. Rochelle Frankel of Queens, New York, who recently graduated from Columbia University in New York City, relates that in Literature and Humanities, a course that is part of the core curriculum, she had to read ancient texts, including the New Testament. “The course was a shock,” says Frankel, a graduate of the Stella K. Abraham (SKA) High School for Girls in Long Beach, New York. “If I didn’t know better, I would have fallen into the trap of ‘The Bible might be the thoughts of God but it was really written by people.’”

Rabbi Marc Penner, the founder and dean of Ateret Seminary, an on-campus Torah study program for women, tells of one student at Queens College who was required to watch the film *Pulp Fiction* and write an analysis of it for one of her courses. “She was horrified and felt that the project was a waste of time.”

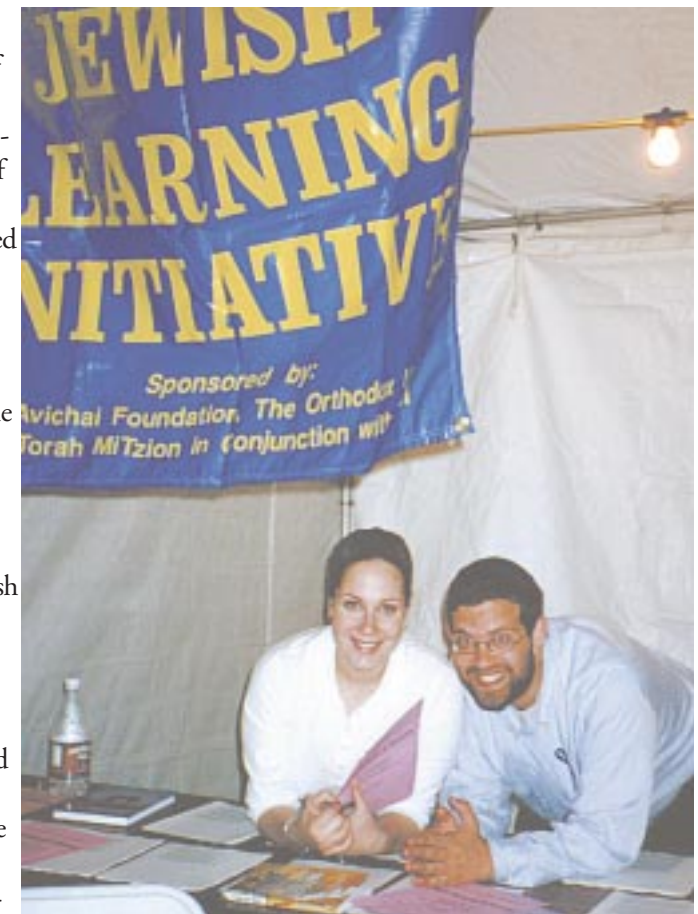
Jewish studies courses can present problems as well. “I majored in Jewish history yet carefully avoided certain courses, such as ancient Jewish history, which explores who wrote the Bible and how,” explains Yoni Kohn, who attended the University of Pennsylvania. “The university presents Jewish history as the story of the Jewish people within the context of the rest of world history rather than

within the context of the Divine,” he says. “It is a subtle yet important difference.”

Perhaps the most serious problem facing religious students involves the social life on campus. Coed dormitories and the overt sexuality on campuses can easily erode one’s sense of modesty and sexual morals. “I have a friend who sleeps on the floor in my room when her roommate’s boyfriend comes over,” says Frankel. “One reason I chose Columbia is because they offer the option of single-sex floors.”

“Students can’t withstand the pressures of [the] campus, especially male/female relationships,” says Rabbi Naftoly Bier, a *rosh yeshivah* of the Kollel of Greater Boston, Massachusetts, which conducts outreach to Orthodox students at local colleges.

If the situation on college campuses is, at best, not optimal for Jewish



“People from out of state have begun calling us; they are interested in coming to UCLA now because they hear there’s an Orthodox [presence on campus],” says Julie Goldstein who, along with her husband Uri, represents the Jewish Learning Initiative at UCLA. Photo courtesy of Rabbi Uri and Julie Goldstein

# Forbidden Fruit

After graduating from an Orthodox day school in the New York metropolitan area, Michael Schwartzman\* enrolled in Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland. Coming from an Orthodox family, Michael chose the university for its academic reputation and the small but active observant Jewish community on campus.

At the beginning of his second semester, Kathy, a strikingly attractive non-Jewish blond, asked Michael during a mathematics seminar, if they could be study partners. Initially, Michael hesitated.

“Raised in an Orthodox cocoon, I had had little, if any, interaction with the non-Jewish world,” explains Michael. “Nothing in my upbringing or education had prepared me for this.” They arranged to meet twice a week in the library. “I had always socialized with girls but this was exhilaratingly different. Kathy was from a totally different background, a California girl who grew up surfing in Malibu on weekends, yet we had lots to talk about. She made me feel comfortable and special.”

Michael and Kathy kept in touch over the summer, and when they returned to college in the fall, their relationship intensified. Michael continued to attend minyan in the morning, yet stopped going for Minchah and Ma’ariv. He began canceling meetings with his *chavruta*. “I was leading two lives. One was as an Orthodox Jew and the second, as a man falling in love with ‘forbidden fruit,’” says Michael.

After returning from intersession, Michael stopped going to morning minyan altogether, and amnesia about *negiah* set in. At the beginning of Michael’s senior year, Kathy broached the topic of their future together. Michael began a self-examination during which he began to come to terms with his actions having consequences.

“For all my fallen ways, I knew that I had been born and raised as an Orthodox Jew and that it meant everything to me,” says Michael. “I could not turn my back on it and, as great as Kathy was, I could not go on living the life of a hypocrite.”

Michael especially credits his first-year college *chavruta* for helping him. “When I was in the throes of making life-forming decisions, he became my sounding board and Jewish lifeline,” says Michael. “He introduced me to a compassionate rabbi in Baltimore, and slowly I began to reconnect with my Orthodox roots. By the middle of [the] second semester of my senior year, Kathy and I were history.”

After graduation, Michael told his parents about Kathy. Distraught, they supported his decision to defer medical school and go to Israel where he immersed himself in Jewish learning in a well-known yeshivah for *ba’alei teshuvah*.

“I am blessed,” affirms Michael.

\*not his real name.

growth, why don’t more Orthodox youth attend religious colleges such as Yeshiva University or Touro?

“When I’m asked whether one should go to YU, I say, ‘What does the student want?’” says Joel. “If the student wants an environment where he will be engaged in *limudei kodesh* for a large part of the day, then YU is the school of choice. If the student wants

an environment where *limudei kodesh* is not central to his day, then there are other schools with Orthodox populations,” says Joel. Such schools include, but are not limited to, Columbia, New York University, University of Maryland, Rutgers, Princeton, Boston University, Harvard, Brandeis and George Washington University.

Interestingly, affluence makes YU and

Touro non-options for many observant parents. “Prosperity can bring with it the perception: ‘We can have the best in every way, including a secular university education,’” explains Rabbi Schrader. “Many people perceive that if a secular education is part of a yeshivah environment and is not a focus onto itself, then it is second best,” he adds.

At the same time, other Orthodox youth look to save money by staying close to home and opting for UCLA, Brooklyn or Queens Colleges. “Whereas [a private college] can cost about \$23,000 annually, Queens College is about \$3,000,” explains Rabbi Penner. “The \$20,000 differential is hard to rationalize.”

Still other students choose secular universities because they do not want, in the words of some, a “continuation of high school.”

“I need a heterogeneous Jewish environment,” says Aviva Kiefer, a graduate of the Hillel Community Day School in North Miami Beach, Florida. “Rutgers has worked for me for four years. Orthodox and non-Orthodox [students] interact, agreeing to disagree.”

Similarly, Tova Smith of Lawrence, New York, who graduated from SKA in 2002, chose Brandeis University.

“I believe that I am growing Jewishly because I meet new people from backgrounds different to my own, and they challenge my beliefs,” says Smith. “I love it when nonreligious Jews or non-Jews ask me questions. It makes me revisit and rethink who I am.”

So what can be done to assure that Orthodox youth—who, for one reason or another, choose to attend secular universities—maintain and hopefully even grow in their Jewishness?

Some Orthodox day schools are beginning to prepare their students for the challenges of college life. For example, since Israel has become a major issue on campuses, high schools such as SKA and Hebrew Academy of the Five Towns and Rockaway (HAFTR) in Cedarhurst, New York, are adding classes on Zionism to their curricula. “We are so woefully ill-pre-

pared for the onslaught of propaganda....” says a day school graduate who has been on the front lines of the Israel controversy raging at Concordia University in Montreal.

“Kids today are undereducated in Zionism and the history of Zionism because for years, we took Israel for granted,” notes Dr. Tzipora Meier, assistant principal at SKA. “The new anti-Zionism took us all by surprise, so we are remedying this with education on the high school level.”

Schools are also encouraging students to attend a minimum of one year of yeshivah or seminary in Israel before starting college. The year of study helps students refine their skills in Jewish learning and, more importantly, enables them to form a more sophisticated Jewish worldview. “I’ve had calls from students in the middle of their first semester at college who were crying, ‘Rebbe, please get me into a yeshivah in Eretz Yisrael as soon as possible,’” says Rabbi Zvi Bajnon, principal of HAFTR High School. “And I do what I can.”

Seeking religious guidance is also fundamental. When Frankel has questions about religious matters, she will often consult with Rabbi Charles Sheer, the director of the Robert K. Kraft Family Center for Jewish Student Life at Columbia. “When I was at Penn, and questioned whether a course or a way of thinking presented in class was good for my Jewish ‘health,’ I called either a former teacher at Skokie [Hebrew Theological College] or [a teacher from] Yeshivat Sha’alvim,” explains Kohn.

Jewish learning during the university years is another vital component.

“Everyone that we speak to asks us if we’re doing *kiruv* on campus,” says Julie Goldstein. “But that was not the initial intention of JLI. It was to help students learn on an advanced level.”

Presently, JLI can be found on six campuses including Yale, Brandeis, Cornell, Brooklyn College, UCLA and the University of Pennsylvania. Were the funds available, JLI could easily triple in

size. According to Rabbi Schrader, the campuses are certainly open and willing.

Ateret Seminary is another example of an on-campus Jewish learning program. The seminary was founded in 1998 for Rabbi Penner’s former students from SKA who were returning from a year of study in Israel. Many women come back from Israel fired up about Jewish learning, says Rabbi Penner; he wanted to capitalize on their excitement.

Today, Ateret Seminary offers classes to over 130 women at Queens College, Brooklyn College, Staten Island University and Rutgers University. Ateret Seminary is under the auspices of Kesharim, which also has a men’s division, Netzach Dovid, currently serving seventy students at Queens College, Brooklyn College and Rutgers University.

Additionally, the Boston Center for Talmudic Research, a branch of the Kollel of Greater Boston, matches college students from Brandeis and MIT with *chavrutot*. Recognizing the importance of this endeavor, the local federation provides some financial support for the program. One of the oldest groups to have a presence on the campus is Chabad, which instituted Chabad Houses in the 1960s. Today, there are over sixty such houses on campuses throughout the US that provide social and educational programs for Orthodox and non-Orthodox students.

Aside from the intellectual and spiri-

tual benefits of Jewish learning, these programs also provide students with an ever-important *chevrah* (peer group). “I sought out daily minyanim—of which there was a choice—on the basis of which friendships I wanted to cultivate,” says Kohn. “Other people I know have not been as fortunate....I watched several guys begin their Penn years by attending daily minyanim, yet after a year or two on campus, their commitment waned... Some were even *michalel Shabbat*.”

Programs like these hope to counteract the trend toward religious laxity. And they are making a difference. At UCLA the Goldsteins arranged the first Purim megillah reading on campus in several years. They have come a long way from their early days of transporting *sefarim* in a suitcase and meeting students outside their classrooms for a learning session. Now they have their own *beit midrash*, and their Thursday night pizza-and-*parashah* class might even be more popular than *Friends*. “People from out of state have begun calling us,” Julie Goldstein says. “They are interested in coming to UCLA now because they hear there’s an Orthodox [presence on campus].” **IA**

## Note

1. According to Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life.



JLI students at Brooklyn College participate in a Tu B'Shevat seder. Photo courtesy of Rabbi Reuven and Nalini Ibragimov