

## Answering Orthodox Assimilation on Campus *By Harvey Blitz*



Israel and the requirement to study non-Jewish texts such as the New Testament.

In many cases the immorality on campus is certain to shock even students who are comfortable in the outside world. This is particularly true of those who reside in dormitories, where privacy and sexual modesty are practically unknown.

Exposure to other ways of thinking tends to offer more challenges. Regrettably, there are cases of young men and women arriving on campus as Orthodox Jews and leaving four years later no longer observant.

A fine story in this issue of *Jewish Action* describes some of the resources available to Orthodox college students, including a new OU program of which I am particularly proud—the Jewish Learning Initiative (JLI). As part of the OU's mission of responding to needs in our community, JLI was inaugurated in 2000; the program places young rabbinical couples on campuses to serve as teachers, guides and role models. I want to express my deepest appreciation to Rabbi Menachem Schrader of Efrat, Israel, the primary force behind the establishment of JLI.

The program is now thriving on six campuses across the country. Through providing Jewish learning at the highest levels, advising and bringing Orthodox students together under one roof for everything from *shiurim* to social activities, JLI couples do an extraordinary job of fulfilling the goals of the program. Additionally, they

work to break down barriers between Orthodox and non-Orthodox students by providing a welcoming atmosphere for all.

But six campuses is only a start. As Gil Perl, a teaching fellow in Judaic studies at Harvard University, and Yaakov Weinstein, a Ph.D. candidate at MIT, emphasize in their pamphlet, *A Rabbi's Guide to Orthodox Assimilation on University Campuses*,\* "Our community must realize that to succeed in such surroundings [the college campus] is a monumental task requiring the utmost inner fortitude sustained over four of the most impressionable years of a young adult's life."

JLI responds beautifully to that challenge. I would like to share with you a statement from Daniela Cohen, a graduating senior at Yale, which was passed along to me by Yale's JLI representatives, Rabbi Jason and Meira Rappoport.

*Although JLI has only been at Yale for three years, I would now have a difficult time picturing the Yale Jewish community without it. I became observant my freshman year of college, and when our first JLI couple arrived the following year, I immediately perceived that a large gap had just been filled. The addition of a full-time Orthodox presence dedicated to Jewish learning led to new classes and programming as well as a new vigor in all activities of the Orthodox community.*

*I have also been continually impressed by the ability of the JLI couples to relate to members of the larger Jewish commu-*

*nity, boosting dialogue between students of different observance levels while allowing observant students to practice and believe with confidence.*

*Additionally, the couples we have had during my time at Yale have been some of the most dedicated, thoughtful and inspiring individuals I have ever met. Spending time with them and their families, whether in classes, informal conversation around Hillel or Shabbos meals at their homes, has been invaluable to me in my efforts to learn and grow spiritually in a largely secular context.*

*I feel very fortunate to have had such wonderful teachers and mentors during my time here at Yale.*

We at the OU feel fortunate as well to be able to provide young college students with an effective way to cope with the challenges facing them on secular campuses. **JA**

\*To read the pamphlet in its entirety, visit [www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~perl/pgindex.html](http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~perl/pgindex.html)

College is intended to be a challenging experience, bringing students to new and more advanced levels of learning and preparing them for post-graduate education or the job market. For many Orthodox students, however, the college years present unique difficulties, when after years of yeshivah education, both in the United States and Israel, they suddenly find themselves on secular campuses.

Difficulties might include classes being given on Yom Tov or late Friday afternoons during the winter; major events such as football games taking place on Saturday; the presence of faculty members who may be unsympathetic or even hostile to Judaism and