Distinguished historian Dr. Mordechai Breuer recently completed a comprehensive study of the intellectual, social and institutional history of yeshivot, covering a period of approximately one thousand years. Below, Dr. Breuer outlines some of the pivotal points of his forthcoming book Ohalei Torah *(in Hebrew),* which is to be released this summer.*

The Yeshivah Through the Ages

An open-minded scholar venturing into the history of yeshivot cannot help but be struck by the great diversity of the yeshivot of past generations. Above all, he must withstand the impulse to assess the standard and quality of yeshivot of old by what would be deemed a model institution in more recent times. Different ages and traditions cherished different academic goals. To illustrate, let us examine various methods and curricula.

The Diversity of Yeshivot

Throughout history, different yeshivot had different curricula. In the early medieval times, for example, the Babylonian yeshivot studied Talmud to the exclusion of everything else. Deviating from this, the early Ashkenazic yeshivot (eleventh century) included other subjects such as the study and interpretation of liturgical poetry (*piyyutim*). In the years of transition from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern period, a movement aiming at including the study of kabbalah sprung up in Sephardic yeshivot. And in modern times both Chassidic and Mitnagdic yeshivot have reacted to the challenge of modernism by promoting the study of moral philosophy and *musar*. It is also important to note that yeshivah teachers—in particular yeshivah deans or *roshei yeshivah*—would regularly include some of their private scholarly preoccupations such as Tanach, Hebrew language and grammar, kabbalah or other subject areas in their lectures.

The yeshivah in Kelm, a stone building with arched windows with decorative leading. Photos courtesy of YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, except where indicated.

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Two modes of study alternated within the yeshivah: text critique and analysis (*peirush*) and subtle, text-free reasoning (*pilpul*).[1] This polarity goes back to the Talmud itself and is evident in the methodologies used by various commentators. Whereas Rashi was concerned with comprehending the particular text studied, the Ba'alei haTosafot focused on evaluating the text in light of other sections of the Talmud, a procedure that led to fine conceptual distinctions. (That the term *hachi garsinon* [this is the proper text] occurs in Rashi's commentary on the Talmud 1,450 times and is mentioned in Tosafot only 326 times, lends support to this thesis.) In the fifteenth century, Ashkenazic yeshivot tended to devote specific periods (either entire semesters or certain parts of the day) to textual analysis and conceptual *pilpul*.[2]

An important element in the history of Talmud study, which cannot be overlooked, was the decisive influence of outstanding teachers and deans, many of whom brought about epoch-making changes in the methods of study. A case in point was Rabbi Jacob Joshua Falk (eighteenth century) who announced in the preface to the first volume of his work that he decided to abandon the well-trodden ways of *pilpul* and preferred instead to analyze the Talmudical text critically and logically, making frequent references to Rishonim including Rambam. In fact, Rabbi Falk paved the way for the new methods of study that appeared in the last two hundred years. More recently, the outstanding Rabbi Hayyim Halevi Soloveichik (Volozhin, Brisk) revolutionized Talmud study with regard to both curriculum (by concentrating on Rambam) and methodology. He devised and introduced new ways of judicial analysis and conceptual logic, concurrently interpreting the text of Rambam's *Mishneh Torah* so as to serve, apart from codification, as a commentary on the Talmud. The challenge to his students' intellects was enormous, and Rav Hayyim's *derech halimud* was an invaluable response to the *Haskalah*'s poisonous condemnation of yeshivot.

The Ashkenazic/Sephardic Dichotomy

A central point in the comparative history of yeshivot is the persistent dichotomy between Sephardic and Ashkenazic yeshivot. In Germany and France, for instance, Jewish philosophy was banned from the yeshivot (which was reflected by the lack of philosophical writings in the Ashkenazic world—other than ethical treatises—until well into the Early Modern period.) At the same time in Spain and to some extent in Provence, systematic philosophy (such as Rambam's *Moreh Nevuchim* and Rav Sa'adiah Gaon's *Emunot Vedaot*) if not taught from the pulpit, was eagerly pursued by the more gifted among the students. Why the difference in Ashkenazic and Sephardic views? The answer lies in the divergent Christian and Moslem cultures in medieval Europe.

The culture in Christian Europe was imbued with theology and dogma. Moreover, to Jewish eyes Christian ideas and concepts seemed close to idolatry, if not idolatry itself. Compared to Jewish culture, Christian culture was considered inferior, and therefore, there was no incentive for Jews to compete with it. In Moslem countries, however, philosophy and the sciences were taught more or less independently from religion, and Islam was much less, if at all, tainted with what Judaism considers idolatry. The culture and civilization of Islam in Spain—which became totally Christian only by the end of the fifteenth century—and elsewhere, achieved a relatively high level, and Jewish scholars felt the need to confront and, to a certain degree, emulate the prevailing culture.

Studio portrait of a group from the Ponevezh Yeshivah.

Alternative Yeshivot

There were other significant differences between Sephardic and Ashkenazic yeshivot. For instance, there were—and still are—types of yeshivot that were widespread in Sephardic communities and only rarely found in Ashkenazic communities. One such yeshivah was the *yeshivat chachamim*, which was a study group of elderly, distinguished scholars. Interestingly, the earliest European documentation of this type of yeshivah stems from Ashkenazic (not Sephardic) sources. A famous responsum by

Sephardim viewed *pilpul,* which was widespread in Ashkenazic yeshivot, as being oversophisticated.

Rabbeinu Gershom Meor Haggolah[3] leaves no doubt that the "yeshivah" he referred to was a study group of accomplished scholars headed by several outstanding rabbis known to every Talmudic student of that period. Among those studying at the *yeshivat chachamim* of Rabbeinu Gershom were scholars from Provence and Spain who had presumably traveled to Mayence, Germany[4] for this purpose. Rashi's yeshivah was a *yeshivat chachamim* as well but was also attended by students of different age groups and levels of achievement. This is evident in Rashi's commentary on the Gemara where he makes certain statements seemingly mindful of less-advanced students.

While *yeshivat chachamim* survived in Ashkenaz in what was known as *klausen (kloysen)* [an institution for advanced scholars], in the Sephardic diaspora they continued to play an important role. To be sure, eventually many of these yeshivot of the elderly lost their high standard of learning as their students succumbed to rote, uninspired study.

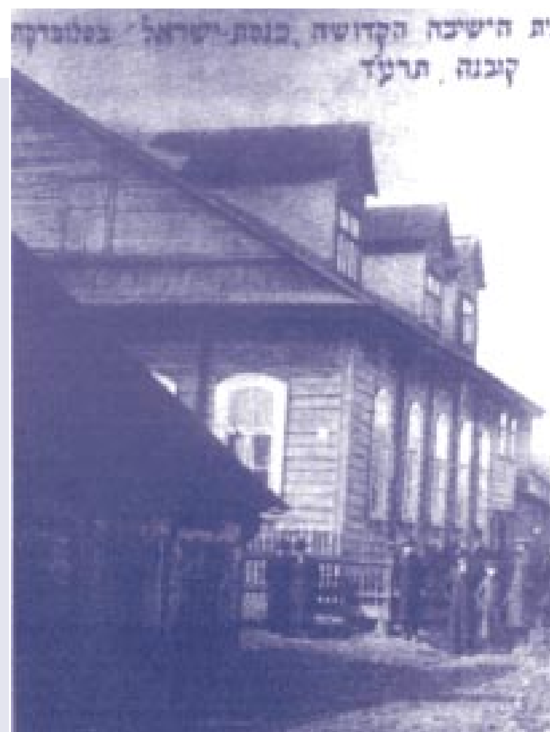
Another yeshivah model more typical of Sephardic communities was the *yeshivat boker* or morning yeshivah. A passage in *Berachot* 64a extols the custom of "leaving the synagogue and entering the study house." It was probably this custom of devoting some time immediately after morning prayers to Torah study that led to the widespread development of the *yeshivat boker*, which is still the rule in many congregations. Before attending to their livelihoods, students of the *yeshivat boker* would spend between one and three hours listening to a high-level lecture on Gemara, Rambam or *Shulchan Aruch.*

The earliest mention of a *yeshivat boker* is found in Rashi's writings where he states: "Originally there was a custom to stay on for an hour in the synagogue after morning prayers…and they brought their books…but [then] impecuniosity became widespread and they were dependent on gainful labor, and therefore this custom had to be discontinued."[5] According to Rashi, it would seem that the *yeshivat boker* was already considered a bygone institution in Ashkenaz during his time, however, it reemerged in subsequent generations. The term *yeshivat boker* itself is mentioned, to the best of my knowledge, only by Rabbi Tsevi Hirsch Ashkenazi.[6] Rabbi Ashkenazi clearly differentiates between a *yeshivat boker*, which is attended by *chaverim me'arayot gaveiru* (lion-hearted [prestigious] scholars) rather than *bachurei chemed*, younger students who arrive later in the day to study.

Torato Umanuto

In the Sephardic regions, *yeshivat boker* was the rule rather than the exception, as is evident by the number of Sephardic responsa throughout the centuries dealing with the concept of *Torato umanuto* (a Tamudical term denoting one whose main occupation is Torah study). Scholars who fit into this category were granted exemption from paying taxes and given priority in commercial dealings. A typical question discussed in the responsa is the following: Can a scholar who learns for several hours in the morning, opens his shop for a few hours, then shuts it and goes back to study for the rest of the day still be entitled to *Torato umanuto* privileges? Practically all of the responsa answer in the affirmative, following in the footsteps of Rabbi Meir Halevi Abulafia (thirteenth century) who decided that part-time study made a scholar eligible for the benefits of *Torato umanuto*, but stipulated that the income from his occupation should not exceed his elementary needs.[7]

The essentially Sephardic origin of this indulgent definition of *Torato umanuto* is confirmed by the fact that this subject is hardly mentioned in Ashkenazic responsa prior to recent times. Furthermore, Ashkenazic glosses on the relevant section of the *Shulchan Aruch*[8] rely almost exclusively on



Yeshiva Knesses Yisroel in Slabodka, 1914. Photo courtesy of Agudath Israel Archives

Sephardic scholars. Indeed, *Torato umanuto* is one of the few outstanding themes of yeshivah history found in abundance in Sephardic but not Ashkenazic sources. This seems to be based on the comparatively liberal Sephardic attitude regarding what constitutes Torah learning and their acceptance of intellectual pursuits outside of Gemara and *halachah* mentioned above. Moreover, it can be attributed to the Sephardic approach to Torah study that largely eschewed *pilpul*. The

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Sephardic ideal was to study Gemara in accordance with *halachah* and not to engage in fruitless hairsplitting.[9] Sephardim viewed *pilpul*, which was widespread in Ashkenazic yeshivot, as being oversophisticated.

It stands to reason that excessive *pilpul* leads to greater stringency when it comes to halachic decision-making. This is because the conclusions resulting from excessive *pilpul* are questionable; therefore halachic decisors tend to follow it to be strict but not to be lenient.[10]

The Sephardic tradition of yeshivah learning and life is at a distinct disadvantage compared to the Ashkenazic tradition. Sephardic responsa and novellae, with few exceptions, supply very little information on matters related to the internal organization and function of the yeshivot. (On the other hand, information about Sephardic *yeshivot chachamim* is available from the abundant rules and regulations drawn up by the various charitable founders of the yeshivot.) In the writings of Ashkenazic masters, however, there are many distant yet distinct echoes reflecting the lively, sometimes stormy, course of their sessions with their students. In contrast, Sephardic masters delivered their lectures in a more magisterial, impersonal style and their students acted in a more restrained manner. This again is reflected in the written discourses of the Sephardic masters, which only rarely refer to personal matters, names and details of yeshivah life.[11]

Milchamta shel Torah

This brings us to another observation concerning the relationship between teachers and students, two distinct groups upon whose cooperation the existence and functioning of the yeshivah depend. Although yeshivot differ in their attitudes regarding the status and rights of students within yeshivah life, the yeshivah, like most other educational institutions, is not essentially structured on a democratic system. Moreover, yeshivah masters are religiously endowed with a status that ensures their position of authority. Thus, theoretically, there can be no power struggle between masters and students, and yet there have been, and still are, ongoing struggles at various yeshivot which seem to have originated in a breakdown of the traditional balance of power between masters and students. A surprising finding of any study of yeshivot is the extent of student power over the ages. The root of this power lies in the nature of the teacher-pupil relationship that has existed in the Jewish study house since ancient times. While constrained to submit to the teacher's authority, the pupil is allowed, nay, expected to question the teacher if driven by a genuine sense of incongruity or curiosity. Talmud study is nothing if not dialectic, both as to the texts studied and the ensuing discussions in class, which frequently resemble a battlefield (*milchamta shel Torah*). Students rejoice in this free-for-all. Thus, in the thirteenth century a call went out from the yeshivah of Evreux in northern France declaring that some of the stringent laws governing students' obligations toward their masters should be suspended since the study of books had partly superseded oral teaching by masters. Subsequently, a shift of the balance of power in favor of the students became increasingly noticeable.

The rise of student power becomes plain from the beginning of the nineteenth century. Ashkenazic yeshivot, some with a student population reaching unprecedented dimensions, severed the traditional ties subordinating the yeshivah administrations to the local community councils, thereby making the yeshivot more self-sufficient. A growing number of assignments and responsibilities were taken over by stu-

The yeshivah building in Radin.

dent representatives, some of them appointed by the *roshei yeshivah*, others by democratic elections. As a result, students increasingly demanded a share, or at least a say, in the day-to-day management of the yeshivah. In times of crisis—economic, administrative (faculty appointments), even educational (such as during the introduction of *musar*)—students' grievances were apt to erupt into something approaching open revolt. (The introduction of *musar* was controversial since it valued moral over intellectual excellence. In Telz, for example, the students' aversion to *musar* forced the yeshivah to close for a few months.)

The Contemporary Scene

The revival of yeshivot after the Shoah is truly phenomenal. Never before in Jewish history have so many students filled the "tents of Torah." Many of these "tents" are now stately and spacious buildings, alive with the din of young people engaged in vehement disputation, none of whom bear the least resemblance to the tragic yeshivah student depicted in Chaim Nachman Bialik's *HaMatmid*. (That the growth of yeshivot in Israel is only marginally influenced by the deferment of military service is corroborated by the tremendous growth of yeshivot in the US and elsewhere.) Additionally, there has been an upsurge of *kollelim*, which in Israel seem to have become the normative framework for married alumni of yeshivot.

Yet as welcome as the growth of yeshivot is, it exacts a price: it is a case of sacrificing quality for quantity. Since the average student is no genius, the yeshivot tend to promote mediocrity, uniformity and diminished student creativity. This may sound like a tendentious exaggeration, however no lesser an authority than the Chazon Ish is reported to have stated that present-day yeshivot have managed to do away with ignorance (*am ha'aratzut*), but at the same time also with excellence (*gadlut*).

Despite this, yeshivot have done unquestionably well in achieving what has, in fact if not in theory, become their chief educational aim: to immunize the largest possible number of students against the dangers to religious life. As a matter of fact, depicting the yeshivah as a shelter (*miklat*), a fortress (*mivtzar*), a bulwark (*chomat magen*) and a veritable Noah's Ark has become a mainstay of yeshivah propaganda ever since the rise of secular streams in modern Jewish society. Concurrently, yeshivot have sought to isolate their students as much as possible from the world outside their "four ells." Thus even while some critics may think the time has come for yeshivot to reconsider some of their methods, they, for the most part, agree that in a troubled world, the yeshivah presents a rock of strength and stability. JA

Mir Yeshiva, Poland, circa 1930s. Photo: David Turkel Collection, courtesy of Agudath Israel Archives

Notes

1. For a fuller discussion of *pilpul* see my entry in *Encyclopedia Judaica* under "*Pilpul*."
2. See e.g., Rabbi Israel Isserlin, *Terumat Hadeshen, Pesachim uKhetavim*, no. 237.
3. Ed. Eidelberg, no. 32.
4. We know this from manuscripts that Rabbeinu Tam had in his possession. *Sefer Hayashar,* responsum no. 46.
5. *Sefer HaPardes*, 305f.; cf. *Tosafot Berachot* 11b s.v., *shekevar*.
6. Resp. Chacham Tsevi., no. 1.
7. Responsa Rema, no. 248. This responsum first appeared in *Or Tzaddikim*, Salonika, (1799); new edition: (Jerusalem, 1972); a verbatim copy appears in *Teshuvot HaRosh*, no. 15, 8; cf. *Yad Rema* on *Baba Batra* (Jerusalem 1992), no. 82.
8. *Yoreh Deah,* no. 243, cf. Shach and Be'er Haggolah ad loc.
9. See Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef, resp. *Yabia Omer*, preface to vol. I, citing b. *Bava Kamma* 92a: *shemateta alibba dehilcheta*.
10. Cf. Rabbi David Tsevi Hoffmann, resp. *Melammed Leho'il*, preface.
11. The great Rabbi Meir Halevi Abulafia, mentioned above, leaves us completely in the dark about the identity and manner of study of his own masters, see I. *Ta-Shema*, in *Kiryat Sefer*, vol. 43 (1968), 572; cf. my paper in the Jacob Katz Jubilee Volume (*Perakim Betoledot Hachevra Hayehudit* etc.) (Jerusalem 1980), 48.