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WITH SHLOMO YEHUDA
RECHNITZ

JEWISH COLLEGE STUDENTS

AT

RISK!

How College Is
Hazardous to Yiddishkeit

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HITLER'S
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PHOTOS OF
WARSAW'S JEWS

NEW
DEVELOPMENT
IN CROWN
HEIGHTS ATTACK

REMEMBERING
RABBI SHMUEL
KUNDA

A WIDOW
FIGHTS
TO ADOPT
A CHILD

THE SECOND
AND THIRD
PRESIDENTIAL
DEBATES

Harvard, as well as other Ivy League schools like Yale and Princeton, ended up instituting a new admissions process that looked at enough details of an applicant's life to figure out if they were Jewish or not. The move worked, at first: By 1933, the percentage of Jews had moved back down to 15 percent. The admissions process has basically remained the same, but there's no longer an attempt to keep the number of Jews low in universities. Jews are, instead, ubiquitous on college campuses. For most students, college comes at a time when they are questioning their identity. For Jewish students, that can pose a danger to their Jewish identity, too.

For nonreligious Jewish students, there has been outreach on campuses since 1969, when the first Chabad House at a college campus opened in Los Angeles. Other organizations involved in outreach have expanded over the last decade, including MEOR and Aish HaTorah.

But it is not just nonreligious students who need people reaching out to them on college campuses; there are plenty of Ortho-

By 1908, the Jewish population of Harvard had risen to seven percent of the total. In 1922, Jews already made up a fifth of the freshman class. Professors, students, and supporters were dismayed. The Jews? (Catholics and public-school attendees were two other formerly under-represented groups whose numbers had grown due to the new rules, also leading to consternation.)

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HARVARD UNIVERSITY WAS IN TROUBLE. THE PROBLEM? THE JEW. The number of Jews admitted to Harvard had been steadily increasing. In 1905, the university had accepted a standardized entrance exam as the basis for acceptance, which meant that intellectually capable students, regardless of their family's wealth or prestige, had an increased chance of getting in.





Lunchtime study group at Brooklyn College's Hillel Center

students in college who need help maintaining their *Yiddish* at the highest levels possible while they study.

The *charedi* world (at least the men) has largely been insulated from the effects of college because of the efforts of *gedolim* like Rav Aharon Kotler, *zt"l*, and others. Rav Aharon made college off-limits and therefore generally a non-issue for *charedim*.

Even among those *charedim* who do end up in college classes, a high percentage attend institutions where there is a Jewish atmosphere, with separate classes for men and women at the undergraduate level, like in Touro College or (to a smaller extent) Baruch College. At Yeshiva College and at the Lander College program at Touro College, the students spend part of their day in *Yeshiva*, and even when they are in secular studies they are never far from the *beis midrash*.

But in the Modern Orthodox world, attending college is practically a given, and Orthodox colleges are not the only choice. The number of Modern Orthodox students in college is several times as large as the total enrollment of Yeshiva University and

Touro; most Modern Orthodox students are in secular programs.

But what does it mean to be a *frum* kid on a secular campus?

In 2006, a study by the Avi Chai Foundation found that Jewish students on campus were twice as likely to become less observant than to become more observant. How is that danger being dealt with among Orthodox students?

Having never attended college, I wouldn't know first-hand. So recently I clambered onboard buses and trains to get a feel for the places where Orthodox students take shelter, within the immoral and alien world of the college campus.

INREACH

At one point in history, colleges were thought of as places of pure study.

John Henry Newman, in a famous essay on the idea of the university, rattles off a series of beautiful descriptions of what he thinks such an institution should be like:

"[A] place of concourse, whither students come from every quarter for every kind of knowledge."

"The place to which a thousand schools make contributions; in which the intellect may safely range and speculate...."

"[A] place where inquiry is pushed forward, and discoveries verified and perfected, and rashness rendered innocuous, and error exposed, by the collision of mind with mind, and knowledge with knowledge."

John Donne summed up the idea: "The university is a paradise. Rivers of knowledge are there. Arts and sciences flow from thence."

Whether these lofty ideas were true in their days is debatable. But in the modern age, rivers of alcohol are just as likely as rivers of knowledge to flow on campus. An Australian study that came out earlier this year found that more than a third of Aussie college students were drinking at hazardous levels. Various other problems, including drug-abuse and depravities of all sorts, are present in abundance on college campuses, as well.

To get a feel for how the Orthodox community is handling these problems, I recently headed to Manhattan, to the fourteenth floor of the office building at 11 Broadway, to meet with Rabbi Steven Burg, the managing director of the OU, and Rabbi David Felsenthal, who is now in charge of the OU's NextGen and was previously alumni director of NCSY, the OU's program for high school students.

NextGen is the overarching division within the OU that includes the Taglit Birthright Israel program, which brings Jewish kids on a tour to Israel; an NCSY alumni follow-up program; Heart to Heart, a grassroots program where Orthodox students reach out to their peers on campus; a young professionals program; and the program that I was there to talk to them about: the Seif Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus, or JLIC, which puts Jewish couples on college campuses to help the Orthodox students with their *Yiddishkeit* needs.

In the past, universities were seen as dangerous to *Yiddishkeit* because of the heretical ideas espoused there. I asked the rabbis whether that was still true: Is the major problem the intellectual challenges to *frumkeit*, or the hedonism on campus?

Rabbi Burg was clear. "I think that the intellectual issues, in today's generation, are much less. College today is about getting a job. You don't find people wandering off because of *hashkafic* reasons. You find people wandering off because of *taavah* reasons. *Shemiras hamitzvos* is difficult; *sedarim* are difficult. A lot is going on around you."

He said that parents aren't well educated about what is happening on college campuses. For example, while intermarriage may not be a common problem, interdating is. Drugs, including the newest recreational drugs, are another.

"We often will have a student from a regular Jewish day school background come in for the Shabbos meal on Friday night," Rabbi Felsenthal said, "and we'll ask him to make *Kiddush*, and he'll say, 'You don't want me to make *Kiddush*. I'm going to a bar right afterwards.' And we'll say, 'Yes, we *b'davka* want you to make *Kiddush*.'" He grimaces at the idea.

To give that type of student help in fighting off the environment, as well as provide an environment fostering further growth for students who are maintaining their *Yiddishkeit*, JLIC was formed in 2000. Since then, the organization has expanded greatly.

"We have couples on 16 campuses," Rabbi Felsenthal (who is affectionately known in the halls of the OU as "Rabbi Dave") told me, "where we're servicing about 4,000 Modern Orthodox kids, as well as all of the NCSY alumni, which is about 10,000 kids on just those 16 campuses. We're expanding next year to Queens [College] and [the University of] Guelph, and we'll probably have similar growth the next year. We have 30,000 NCSY alumni on college campuses altogether.

"We firmly believe in the highest quality model possible. We place a married couple on campus because we find that there are very few female role models. Any Jewish females on campus are usually not a very traditional, family-type of role model. Our couples are very intellectual, very capable of giving very powerful *shiurim*. The women are not just staying home; they're out there giving classes, interacting one-on-one, counseling, making connections, and spending a significant amount of their time on campus. On some campuses, the female is the lead staff, and is full-time, while the husband is three-quarter-time, but usually it is the husband that is full-time and the wife is three-quarter-time."

The program is based in the Hillel Houses on campus. The JLIC program is a partnership with Hillel, which allows the OU to avoid duplicating the infrastructure that Hillel already has in place.

Widespread Jewish programs on campus don't go back much farther than 2000. Kesharim, a program founded by Rabbi Sholom Axelrod to provide Torah lectures for Orthodox students on campus—now present on nine campuses—dates back only a little before JLIC, to 1998. So the work has really only just begun.

IN THE 'HOOD

I have to admit: the shwarma looked good.

I was sitting in the Hillel at Brooklyn College, listening to Rabbi Reuven Boshnack give a *shiur*. An ideal way to attract college students is through food, and about ten young men were having a free *fleishig* lunch while listening to Rabbi Boshnack explain a dispute in the *poskim* about the proper pronunciation of the word "Lhaneach" in the *brachah* before putting on *tefillin*. (Rabbi Boshnack, who has written a translation of the *Sfas Emes* on Chumash and a *sefer* on the Maharal, eventually tied in some kabbalistic ideas, suitably translated for the students, into the question of whether a *kamatz* or *pasach* should appear in the *brachah*.) Obviously he was trying to appeal to a broad group of students, some more serious than others.

The rabbi had offered me lunch as well. But I felt that munching and trying to cover the story were somehow incompatible. Still, it looked good.

Brooklyn College is different from many other campuses in the JLIC network. You turn off the vibrantly ethnic bustle of Flatbush



Brooklyn College

Avenue and approach the college complex: The Hillel House lies in between that bustle and the actual campus on the corner of Campus Road and the eponymous Hillel Place.

The college is located in the center of one of the largest Jewish communities in the world, just two blocks from the Avenue J shopping district. It also is a commuter campus; no *frum* students are in a dorm there. The students at Brooklyn College are in the middle of an area that is heavily Jewish.

But the Boshnacks, who are starting their sixth year at Brooklyn College, have found a need to develop their own miniature community for the students, who often need *chizuk* even in the middle of the New York Jewish world.

Both give *shiurim* (she's given on *halachos* of hair-covering this year; he gives several, including one he describes as a combination of *lomdus* and *fleishigs*) and bring in other speakers, but their work goes well beyond that.

They run an assortment of different social events, with separate ones geared for students from different backgrounds. Fifteen couples have gotten married because of events where men and women can meet, but the Boshnacks also serve as *shadchanim* for more traditional students. They have given many *chossan* and *kallah* classes (somewhere around 40 by Rebbetzin Boshnack and 20 by the rabbi) and answer *shailos* after marriage. And, although Brooklyn is a commuter college, the Boshnacks have created a Shabbos *minyan* for students, including many married students, in the Kingsway Jewish Center, which includes a *kiddush* ("Sushi," said Rebbetzin Boshnack. "You always have to feed them.") as well as invitations to Shabbos meals at the Boshnacks' house.

The Shabbos before my recent visit, 100 students packed into the Boshnacks' house for an Oneg Shabbos—the Boshnacks' apartment, actually. The students that I speak to about this seem to have had a blast, despite the crowd size.

All of these activities have created a community in the mid-

dle of Brooklyn for students who otherwise might feel lost. A young man named Hillel who I meet in the Hillel dining room/rec hall tells me that even though two of his sisters attended Brooklyn College, he had no idea that he would find the sense of community that he has found there. Other students I spoke to were also enthusiastic about the community that they have found on campus with other Jewish students.

Still, even that community is a matter of concern. It is, after all, a mixed campus, with both young men and women using the facilities of the Hillel House together, though the Boshnacks maintain separate *shiurim* for men and women.

The Boshnacks also keep a connection with students who have left Brooklyn College, in myriad ways. (The number of *simchos* they go to is staggering. "I had my first *sandakaos* last year," said Rabbi Boshnack, laughing.)

A large part of what the Boshnacks see themselves doing is acting as role models. Both are college trained themselves (he attended Yeshiva College and she attended Stern College for undergraduate school, staying in *frum* environments) and hold masters degrees (she in education, he both in education and mental health counseling), so *frum* students can't tell them that they don't understand the college world. Yet they are advanced in *Yiddishkeit*, as well.

Rabbi Boshnack says that they have a message for the students they meet: "There's a way to be a *ben Torah* and go to college and make it through. It's possible to be an *ehrllich* Jew, even aspire for *gadlus*, though you are going to college. Don't give up."

(Rabbi Boshnack also works as a mental health counselor, including in private practice, which has obvious relevance to dealing with college students.)

He and his wife said that the biggest problem for *frum* college students at Brooklyn College is *yi'ush*, or apathy.

"Whatever" is a prevalent attitude," said Rebbetzin Boshnack.

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THE MODERN ERA, RIVERS OF ALCOHOL ARE JUST AS LIKELY AS RIVERS OF KNOWLEDGE TO FLOW ON CAMPUS.

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“We try to show them that *Yiddishkeit* is not ‘whatever.’ Rabbis Boshnack said that many students feel that the *yeshivos* they attended before lost interest in them when they went to college, and they feel like failures. He and his wife are here to help them see themselves in a different light.

He’s also interested in making sure that *rebbeim* from *yeshivos* know that he is available for their *talmidim* who are in Brooklyn College.

“If they know that they have students who are going to college, even if they *l’chatchilla* don’t approve, they should be prepared.

“I just met a *rebbe* last week who told me, ‘I have a couple of *talmidim* there. They could really use someone for *hadraachah* [guidance].’ He took my business card.”

DROPPING OUT

But *yirush* is not the extent of the problems that young Orthodox men and women are having on campus.

Rabbi Meir Goldberg is the rabbi for the MEOR *kiruv* program at Rutgers University. His task is to bring unaffiliated students closer to Torah observance. But he says that he has seen a need

for *kiruv* professionals to reach out to estranged *frum* students.

He told me that there are both a JLIC rabbi and a Chabad rabbi at Rutgers who

are involved with Orthodox students. “They do a great job. But they can only deal with a certain number of students,” he said. “Usually the

ones who are going to take up their time are the ones who are more interested in getting involved. Those end up getting taken care of by the rabbis.

“But a number of the students who come in from Modern Orthodox high schools are looking to fall out and leave. So those kids aren’t looking to get involved.”

Not only do they not get involved, their *shmitras hamitzvos* falls away.

Rabbi Felsenthal of the OU explained that a parent may have no idea about their child’s behavior.

“When the kid only has to come home a few times a year, it’s easy to put the *yarmulke* on and *shuckle*.”

He said, “When the kids come home, the parents have no idea. They act like they always did. But when they go back to campus, they chose to go to a campus away from home because they really don’t want to keep anything. There are really many of those kids



Rabbi Jonathan Shuman at Penn

THE RISK

To visit a campus removed from Jewish population centers, I took a train from New York to Philadelphia and made my way to the University of Pennsylvania.

Much of the urban center of Philadelphia has a burned-out look, but the university is located in an airy, green part of downtown, just over the river from Center City.

Penn, as the Ivy League university is often called, is located in a quintessentially American city. But when I arrived at the Hillier House, the British had arrived, in the person of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the current chief rabbi of the UK. As I later found out, Rabbi Sacks had been contacted a number of years before by a student leader at the school, who requested that he visit. Though

who, on campus, are nowhere to be seen in any of the Jewish programs, and their parents don’t know what’s going on.”

Rabbi Goldberg has suggested that it may be *kiruv* rabbis, using the tools of *kiruv*, who may have the most effect on these students. But there is a catch: These students can’t be placed together with secular students in the *kiruv* programs that are being run. The secular students are moving towards *Yiddishkeit*; these Orthodox students are moving away from it. One *kiruv* rabbi even told me that this type of Orthodox student will actively attempt to keep people from becoming *frum*. That problem is why many of the *kiruv* programs have shied away from dealing with this type of student.

Rabbi Goldberg suggested that the overwhelming majority of the time slots in the schedule of a *kiruv* rabbi be spent with the secular students, but that something like ten percent of the time be spent with formerly Orthodox students.

“I’m talking about spending a half an hour a week, or a half an hour every two weeks, with a student from a Modern Orthodox background. You won’t have him all the time when the secular kids are there. You’ll invite him once every two months or once every three months.”

The OU’s Rabbi Burg said that some of the work has to be done before the student arrives in college.

“I used to think that college would take these kids and make them not *frum*. I began to sense that a lot of these kids weren’t internalizing *Yiddishkeit* in high school. It’s what I’d call the plague of being socially Orthodox. You’re Orthodox because your friends are Orthodox, and your family is Orthodox, but when you can step out of that and go to campus, you can shed that.

“So in certain ways, it’s not actually the campus; it’s not having given the student the foundation before that.”

Rabbi Goldberg told me that many of the students who are falling away come from homes in which *shmitras hamitzvos* is not being treated seriously by the parents, either. He said that while most segments of the Orthodox world are very strong in their *Yiddishkeit*, some communities have been hit by a plague of laxness in *halachah*. Students from households like that will naturally develop problems with their *Yiddishkeit* in college.

the student in question had already moved on, Chief Rabbi Sacks was finally visiting.

The crowd he was speaking to, which numbered somewhere around 150, was obviously a mix, with many of the male attendees wearing knitted *yarmulkas*, a few wearing black velvet, and quite a few without any *yarmulkas* at all. The women were similarly diverse. Still, Rabbi Sacks gave a strongly Orthodox speech to the group.

Several students challenged him on his talk during the subsequent Q & A period, and it was clear that some had a less-than-Orthodox viewpoint. But being a chief rabbi, a frequent media interviewee, and a member of the House of Lords gives you a good deal of experience in parrying antagonists, and Rabbi Sacks answered diplomatically.

I had come to meet the JLIC rabbi at Penn, Rabbi Jonathan Shulman. He needed to drive Rabbi Sacks back to his hotel after the speech, but when he returned, we spoke while Rabbi Shulman had a late lunch in the Hillel cafeteria.

Rabbi Shulman described his various tasks to me. One major object of his was to maintain the sense of community for all the students. That had included getting involved when the apartment building dorm that most of the Orthodox students lived in (he indicated it out the window, across the lawn in front of the Hillel) was threatening to change its housing rules in a way that would have broken up the Orthodox group.

At the same time, he was adamant that the students themselves were vigorously involved in organizing the community. He said that students viewed negatively the idea that the JLIC rabbi was there to keep them from “falling away.” Instead, he said, they saw him as a necessary ingredient in a community, in the same way any community would require a rabbi.

Rabbi Shulman told me that out of 10,000 undergraduates at Penn, a quarter were Jewish, with around 250 of those Orthodox. He said that parents and students would specifically choose Penn because of the strong Jewish nature of the school, and he claimed that because Penn was being chosen specifically for its Jewishness, there were fewer students who dropped out of *Yiddishkeit* at Penn than there might be at a state school.

He told me that he had to appeal to both very serious students who would come to a regular *shiur*, as well as those who needed to be connected to via a basketball game several times a week.

All in all, Rabbi Shulman was one of the least pessimistic rabbis about the experience of students on campus. He said that if a student was trying to choose between YU and Penn, he would definitely not counsel against choosing YU. But he said that he



STUDY FOUND THAT JEWISH COLLEGE STUDENTS WERE TWICE AS LIKELY TO BECOME LESS OBSERVANT THAN MORE OBSERVANT.

has seen some students benefit from the need for independence in their *Yiddishkeit* that they have at Penn. “I’m definitely not pessimistic about the spiritual state of the students at Penn,” he told me, though he acknowledged possible dangers.

However, most of the rabbis I spoke to were less sanguine. One told me that if his child would attend a secular campus, he would be shaking the entire time. Another, involved in *kiruv*, told me angrily that I should demand from those involved with Orthodox students what they were doing to keep their *hashkafos* straight in the atmosphere of moral relativity on college campuses. All rabbis agreed that commuter schools like Brooklyn College or Queens College, where students go home every night, have the lowest potential for danger of any secular college. (Of course, they are less prestigious than colleges like Penn or other Ivy League schools.)

Rabbi Felsenthal told me a story about an NCSY alumnus to illustrate the difficulties that could be faced, even by a committed student.

“She was a public school student from Manalapan—extremely bright. She went through NCSY, and then went straight from public school to *Michlalah* [a seminary in Yerushalayim]. Then she went to University of Pennsylvania this fall, to the engineering school. When she got to campus, as prepared as she was, she was blown away. She was having issues with her dorm and her roommates and what was going on around her, and she just started floundering. The JLIC couple was the rock she could hold onto, so that when I

visited, there she was, doing great, going to *shiurim*, learning, happy. And then she told me, ‘Rabbi Dave, if not for this JLIC couple...’”

Not all parents are well-informed about the Jewish facilities on campus. All of the rabbis that I spoke to said that they are happy to be resources for parents; Rabbi Boshnack speaks at *yeshivos* every year where he believes there will be students coming to Brooklyn College, to inform them of the options for the students once they are on campus.

Certainly, there is an absolute condemnation of any sort of college from most *gedolim*. And everyone must recognize that to enter a secular college in these hedonistic times is a clear hazard to a student’s *ruchniyus*, a sort of Russian roulette with their *Yiddishkeit*. All Jewish parents need to be cognizant of the risks they are taking with their children’s lives. The students, too, should educate themselves about more than just trigonometry and grammar before they head to a college. They first need to learn about the dangers they are subjecting themselves to. ●