Inside Out, Outside In: 
Yeshivat Chovevei Torah’s Open Orthodoxy 
Transmitted, Absorbed, and Applied

Katherine Light
Masters Thesis
Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies
Brandeis University
Advisors: S. Barack Fishman
J. Sarna
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In the context of seminary education, the dynamics of teaching and learning take place in and are influenced by their relationship to the 'larger enterprises' of the school’s mission and culture, the religious traditions that look to the school for future religious leadership, and the public realm in which those religious traditions negotiate their futures.

Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination, pp. 35-36

To the field of Judaic Studies: You need more sociology.
To the field of Sociology: You need more research about Jews.
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Introduction

Both my research subject and I cope with the precariousness of innovation, what Nancy Ammerman (1997) calls the “liability of newness.” Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School (YCT; Chovevei), a young institution, is still exploring the dimensions of training and applications of its guiding philosophy, Open Orthodoxy; I experience the liability of newness through being the first social scientist (and a student at that!) to research it. Because there had been no prior academic research of YCT, in order to understand both context and content, my work had to be comprehensive. I had to build the broader research foundation in order to have a platform from which to engage in more specific inquiry. In addition to the lack of research on YCT, research on rabbinical schools and seminaries in general, is sparse. Much of my work, therefore, is timidly speculative as I try to make sense of situations and data that do not have the benefit of clarity that can come from established theoretical frameworks.

I studied YCT through the lens of sociology of religion, combining, in particular, Robert Wuthnow’s concept of public religion with Erving Goffman’s theories on front and back stages (explained in the theory section.) The general field and the theories provided a framework through which to understand the people in the yeshiva, their education, and how the two work in tandem to first develop in private and then apply in public YCT’s guiding philosophy of Open Orthodoxy. Theories of clergy education explicated by Charles Foster and his colleagues shed light on the processes of teaching and learning in theological seminaries.

Yeshivat Chovevei Torah’s core values (stated below) delineate Open Orthodoxy, but the term itself begs for exploration. On the surface, Open Orthodoxy may appear to be awkward or even contradictory. How can Orthodoxy, known for maintenance of the most rigid boundaries of any movement in American Judaism, be open? What does open mean in relationship to
Orthodoxy? This one term lends itself to copious amounts of questions and I don’t doubt that many readers will wish that I had specifically addressed them all. In this thesis, however, I present Open Orthodoxy as a collection of values that guides a process of education which takes place both inside and out. Open is a place, Open Orthodoxy is a philosophy and a process that interact with the individual and public in both private and public ways. To my knowledge, no one else has ever combined Wuthnow and Goffman within sociology of religion, but if they have, they have not done so in order to study a rabbinical school. My intention was not to be sui generis, I simply allowed the data to speak for themselves. This thesis is what they said.

Research Methodologies

I studied Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School because I felt that it needed to be done for to enhance the field of sociology of religion and for the sake of the American Jewish community. I felt an obligation as a student of social science to use my entrée and innate interest to conduct this research. As an institution that professes openness, they welcomed me; because it is an Orthodox institution, I felt comfortable since it is part of my Jewish world. The students are my peers; this is the type of person with whom I am friends. We are part of the same Modern Orthodox world and speak the same language – the only major difference, which ended up ultimately not being much of an issue, is that I’m a woman. While I was welcomed as a researcher, I would not have been allowed to matriculate. I don’t aspire to be a rabbi anyway – I want to be a sociologist.

YCT is a young institution that is small enough to study nearly entirely (which I have not done here, but would have attempted if I’d had more time), embodies a fresh approach to established rabbinic education, and touts a philosophy of openness that potentially challenges the boundaries of Orthodoxy. YCT was ripe for research, so I decided to see what I could do.
conducted my research in two phases. During the fall of 2007, I spent the better part of three weeks in the yeshiva in order to get a feel for the daily and weekly schedules and understand both how and what the students were learning. During the spring of 2008, my research was episodic as I observed students in the field and studied different ways in which the students translated what they learn inside YCT into the public sphere.

As a devotee of grounded theory and since YCT had never previously been studied, I entered the field with a set of paradigms instead of theories. After my initial research, however, and discovering the applicability of Wuthnow’s and Goffman’s theories, as presented in Producing the Sacred: An Essay on Public Religion and The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, respectively, I realized the necessity of a broader study and developed the second phase of my research, the application of Open Orthodoxy in the open.

I allowed the research conditions to dictate my research methodologies. Because of the small population size at YCT, I opted for solely qualitative methods as opposed to a mixed approach. My research methodologies served two purposes: first, to provide me with legitimate, usable, clear data for my report; and, second, to give voice to YCT, an institution that has been the subject of both warm praise and vitriolic condemnation by print media reporters who have rarely, if ever, entered the yeshiva. I implemented four elements of qualitative research: observations, interviews, focus groups, and open-ended response questionnaires, explained below.

**Observations.** My primary battery of questions included the following: What is going on, why, how, and based on what values? The more time I spent in the field, the more specific questions I developed and the more I drew on internal comparisons to make sense of the larger picture. At YCT, I attended and observed almost all of the morning classes and nearly all of the afternoon
classes. When I was not observing classes, I sat in the *beit midrash* [study hall] and observed the students learning. In the spring, I observed the students outside the yeshiva. I did not observe the students’ once-weekly process groups as those are confidential.

**Interviews.** I entered the field with interview protocols/scripts for members of both administration and faculty. My goal was to understand the larger picture of faculty members’ backgrounds, roles, and goals. My questions began at a personal level and then moved towards the professional. My goal was to understand how they arrived at YCT, the role that they play in the operation of the yeshiva, and how their classes fit in with the larger philosophy of Open Orthodoxy.

**Focus Groups.** I conducted five student focus groups at YCT (a total of 14 students, approximately 1/3 of the student body). Through my questions, I hoped to develop for myself, and for the participants through their own self-reflection, portraits of the students based on personal identity factors and the ways in which they interact with Judaism, their institution, and their goals. The first four focus groups were with students from each class year; the fifth was with participants from the American Jewish World Service (AJWS) trip to Ghana. Each was held during a lunch break at YCT.

**Questionnaires.** I developed open-ended response questionnaires at the end of my research period in order to poll disparate pockets of people with whom it would have been nearly impossible to coordinate a focus group. Through this medium, I asked quite a few students and community members about the nature of and motivations behind their involvement in specific YCT initiatives and programs. I synthesized the responses to develop more complete pictures of programs that I had largely observed first-hand. This method also allowed me to give voice to YCT’s public audience, an extremely important component of Open Orthodoxy.
All research is an intervention and being the sole woman in classes at an Orthodox rabbinical school is not a recipe for anonymity. Once I developed a rapport with the students and faculty, however, I was just another body at the table taking notes. My presence, also, when compared with the massive cameras and microphones of the organization filming a documentary at the yeshiva, became all the more discreet. Perhaps the most productive outcome of this research endeavor, aside from everything that I have learned in terms of methodology and information, has been the professional relationship that I have developed with YCT and the ability that I now have to conduct further research with them and in the yeshiva. Starting with this year’s graduating class, I hope to undertake a longitudinal study of the processes and challenges of operationalization of Open Orthodoxy and YCT’s core values as the students move into the field and more fully interact with the public sphere.

The Research Site

Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, a Modern Orthodox rabbinical school founded at the end of the twentieth century, is a product of its times. As Nancy Ammerman writes of that period, “The voluntary religious system in the United States allows for the possibility of religious innovation by creating a space in which religious entrepreneurs can promulgate their messages, in which religious collectivities can organize to pursue their goals (261).” YCT was developed in this atmosphere and based on the philosophy of Open Orthodoxy.

Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School, founded in 1999, was born of a series of conversations between a son and his father. The son, who at the time attended the rabbinical program at Yeshiva University, felt that, according to Rabbi Dov Linzer, he wasn’t receiving

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“any engagement with the issues of modernity that he needed as a future rabbi.”

His father, Rabbi Avi Weiss, already an activist in the Modern Orthodox world, took action. With his colleague from Yeshiva University, Rabbi Saul Berman, Rabbi Weiss developed the ideational foundation of YCT in response to the need in the Orthodox world to engage modernity. In 1996, Rabbi Weiss developed Meorot, an evening learning program. Meorot, according to Rabbi Dov Linzer, dean and rosh yeshiva (head of the yeshiva), was “a fellowship program. At that time it was more geared towards rabbinical school students . . . to be supplementary, but . . . that was the germinating seed that morphed eventually into YCT.” The students met on a weekly basis to discuss and study how what they were learning in their classrooms and beit midrash interacted with the outside world. The program was a participatory act of consciousness-building both for the students who attended as well as for the administration, who wanted to eventually move beyond a small program into a full rabbinical school. Meorot, which still exists in name, has since evolved into a supplementary, extracurricular program for college students and recent graduates. However, early on, the program was also a testing ground for Rabbi Weiss’s then-nascent ideology of Open Orthodoxy. As Rabbi Avi Weiss, one of the founders, explains, “It is open, in that our ideology acknowledges, considers, and takes into account in varying ways a wide spectrum of voices. It is Orthodox, in that our commitment to halakha is fervent and demanding.”

The creation of YCT represents an activist approach to public religion, the development of an ideal that Orthodoxy Judaism should not remain hermetically sealed and that one’s faith-philosophy should guide that person’s representation of his or her religion in the public sphere.

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2 Unless otherwise noted, direct quotes from faculty and administration come from interviews conducted in October and November, 2007.
3 See Chapter 4 for current information about Meorot.
Philosophies cannot hold themselves up; they need structure in order to survive, and hope to have an impact. Thus, for Open Orthodoxy to even start to be effective, it needed an organization. Roof (1993) distinguishes between spirit and institution: “Spirit is the inner, experiential aspect of religion; institution is the outer, established form of religion.” Once Rabbi Weiss had the spirit, the Open Orthodox philosophy, he further developed YCT’s structure. He and Rabbi Berman hired a business consultant who, according to Rabbi Linzer, “helped us do planning in the starting of the yeshiva and told us to develop a mission statement and core values.” YCT’s mission is to “inspire and professionally train rabbis to lead the Jewish community and to shape its spiritual and intellectual character in consonance with Open and Modern Orthodox values and commitments.” The goal is not just to teach, but motivate; not just to lead, but shape. YCT operationalizes this mission through the application of its core values:

1. Inspiring a passionate commitment to the study of Torah in all its rich forms and the scrupulous observance of halakha [Jewish law].

2. Cultivating yir’at shamayim—i.e. spirituality, God-consciousness, piety, and ethical sensitivity—and integrating it into all learning, religious practice, and worldly pursuits.

3. Encouraging intellectual openness, questioning and critical thinking as essential components of one’s full service to God (avodat Hashem).

4. Affirming the shared covenantal bond between all Jews. Promoting ahavat Yisrael [love of the Jewish people] and actively pursuing positive and respectful interaction of all Jewish movements.

5. Recognizing the need to enhance and expand the role of women in talmud Torah [religious learning/studies], the halakhic process, religious life and communal leadership within the bounds of halakha.

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6. Recognizing *Eretz Yisrael* [the Land of Israel] as our homeland and affirming the religious and historical significance of the State of Israel for all Jews in Israel and the Diaspora.

7. Affirming the shared *tzelem Elokim* [image of God] of all people, our responsibility to improve the world and our capacity to be enriched by it.

8. Living our personal, family and public lives guided by the highest ethical and moral standards, reflective of *yosher* [straightforward; straight and narrow] and *kiddush shem Shamayim* [sanctification of the name of Heaven].

Rabbi Linzer attests to the initial staying-power of the values: “those core values, maybe they changed a little bit in nuance . . . here and there, but they are basically [still] the same.” In the early years of the 21st century, YCT welcomed its first class, just two students; the following year, YCT drew seven students. YCT’s vision has gained weight and substance as the school and student body continue to grow, expand, and produce an increasing number of emissaries to transmit Open Orthodoxy in the public sphere.

**Theory**

In his work *Producing the Sacred: An Essay on Public Religion*, Robert Wuthnow presents a new theory of public religion. Whereas previous definitions of public religion have been in terms of civil religion, “. . . the use of God language with reference to the nation (130),”6 Wuthnow takes a different approach. Wuthnow begins by defining public religion in terms of three publics: the public as people (i.e. “the public”); the public as openness, accessibility, and “out in the open” (i.e. public parks; public concerts); and, the public as duty and responsibility (i.e. public official) (8).7 To apply Open Orthodoxy as a type of public religion to this framework, Open Orthodoxy is for the public – Orthodox Jews, non-Orthodox Jews, non-Jews; Open Orthodoxy is open, “out in the open,” and accessible, and Open Orthodoxy promotes responsibility for itself.

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7 Ibid.
and others (i.e. self-preservation and other-preservation.) All three of these definitions of public are consonant with Open Orthodoxy and YCT’s core values, stated above.

Wuthnow bases his theory of public religion on assessment of five different organizations and the ways in which they produce the sacred. None of the five organizations is a theological seminary, much less a rabbinical school. Nonetheless, his dichotomies and definitions, with some minor adjustments, apply to YCT. Wuthnow explains his evaluation criteria as follows:

The chief question we then want to examine . . . is what sort of contribution these religious organizations make. What expressions of the sacred do they bring into the public sphere? And how do their organizational characteristics and their location in the society enhance, delimit, or shape the nature of these expressions (19)?

Applying these questions to YCT: What sort of contribution does YCT make? What expressions of the sacred does YCT bring into the public sphere? How do YCT’s organizational characteristics and location in society enhance, delimit, or shape the nature of these expressions? In answering these questions, Wuthnow states, “. . . conceptions of the sacred are very much a function of the institutions that produce them (124).” He states, as well, that “. . . religious organizations are never just reactive but are also dynamic, creative entities in themselves . . . (19)” The character of the organization necessarily informs the nature of what it produces and how. Additionally, though public religion is the product of a specific social context, but it is not isolated. That context “becomes a significant feature of its content as well (39).” Public religion, in this sense, interacts with and is shaped by the public.

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8 Wuthnow defines the sacred as something produced. He defines the sacred as “the symbolic frameworks that are set apart from everyday life, giving a sense of transcendent, holistic meaning (3).” The production of the sacred differs from the production of religion in that religion is believably produced through organizations and systems while the sacred is a matter of emotional or spiritual responses to situations, events, or experiences (2). Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
Wuthnow identifies clergy as the main purveyors of public religion and aides in sacred encounter. He writes, “Clergy . . . although they play a very important role in producing public religion, their roles differ depending on the organizational context in which they occur (7).”\(^{13}\) YCT is a clergy training program, so the groups of people are faculty and students. The faculty is nearly all clergy, but not in the pulpit sense – they are educators who happen to be ordained. The students are largely being groomed for the pulpit, but they don’t yet have that status, either achieved or ascribed.

Thus far, Wuthnow’s theory can be applied to Yeshivat Chovevei Torah – YCT is an organization, it is unique, it produces religion (Open Orthodoxy) that has the capability to produce the sacred or facilitate sacred experiences, and its “clergy” transmit the produced or in-process sacred to the public sphere. However, one major element is missing. Wuthnow does not adequately address the private sphere. He notes the private sphere as being competition for the public, but does not fully address it in an educational context as the training ground for the clergy who then go out to disseminate the religion outside. In regards to YCT, the private sphere, the yeshiva, illustrates just as much about Open Orthodoxy as the manifestations of the philosophy in public.

In order to answer questions about what happens inside, we turn to Erving Goffman and his work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Goffman utilizes the analogy of a theater to describe his theory on social interactions. He divides forums for interaction into two primary spheres – the front stage and the backstage. Conveniely, Goffman labels “as ‘front’ that part of the individual’s performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance (22).”\(^{14}\) The front stage is the scene of the

\(^{13}\) Ibid.

performance by the actors in view of the audience. Goffman delineates the various roles from the perspective of an actor:

Taking a particular participant and his performance as a basic point of reference, we may refer to those who contribute the other performances as the audience, observers, or co-participants. The pre-established pattern of action which is unfolded during a performance and which may be presented or played through on other occasions maybe called a “part” or “routine” (15-16).\textsuperscript{15}

The front stage act is choreographed; the actor spoon-feeds the audience a certain image or perception.

In contrast, the backstage is the location of reality, where the actors are out of the public view. The backstage is more than a simple refuge away from the limelight; it is where the actors and directors prepare the performance. The space is busy and complex. Goffman, in great detail, describes the backstage:

A back region or backstage may be defined as a place . . . where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted . . . It is here that the capacity of a performance to express something beyond itself may be painstakingly fabricated; it is here that illusions and impressions are openly constructed. Here stage props and items of personal front can be stored in a kind of compact collapsing of whole repertoires of actions and characters. Here grades of ceremonial equipment . . . can be hidden . . . Here the team can run through its performance, checking for offending expressions when no audience is present to be affronted by them; here poor members of the team, who are expressively inept, can be schooled or dropped from the performance. Here the performer can relax; he can drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character (112).\textsuperscript{16}

The backstage is a comprehensive place that provides all of the elements necessary for developing a multi-faceted performance, whether by team or individual. The backstage is the

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
development site for fabrication, but it is also the location of the truth behind the acts. It is also where teams develop solidarity and cohesion.

The theories and examples presented by Foster et al. (2006) in their work *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination* explain many aspects of the internal workings of the yeshiva, particularly those not addressed by Goffman. According to Foster et al., YCT is responsible for producing graduates who are “agents of meaning, identity, and action in religious communities and public life (364).”\(^\text{17}\) This definition speaks directly to the goals of Open Orthodoxy. In order to make this philosophy a reality, Foster et al. present

three ingredients in the education of clergy that make comprehensive frameworks of meaning, identity, and action in clergy practice possible: (1) the primary role of canonical texts in the education enterprise, (2) the development of social practices of meaning-making, and (3) the formation of a *habitus*, or embodied worldview, with corresponding forms of character, or *paideia*, among its members (364).\(^\text{18}\)

They describe clergy education as a complex system that addresses the whole student, not just the intellect, and the larger process of education, not just the content. These goals necessitate, as they write, “more than teaching students a particular way of thinking; it requires that those ways of thinking be linked constructively with ways of being and doing. In this linking we can see in clergy education the necessary interdependence of the cognitive, practical, and normative apprenticeships of professional education (22).”\(^\text{19}\) Through these systems of education, ranging from the standardized text to the creative pedagogy, seminaries nurture the students’ pastoral imaginations. Dykstra (2004) defines the pastoral imagination as “a way of seeing into and


\(^{18}\) Ibid.

\(^{19}\) Ibid.
interpreting the world that shapes everything one thinks and does.”

In applying the language of Goffman’s theory to Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the *beit midrash* and the classrooms are the backstage; the public sphere outside the yeshiva is the front stage. The students and faculty are both individual actors and team members. Inside the yeshiva, they rehearse and prepare for the performance that is Open Orthodoxy. Goffman’s definition of backstage as the training ground for the presentation of self and performance adds a necessary component to the analysis of YCT and Open Orthodoxy based on Wuthnow’s theory of public religion. Foster et al. and Dykstra’s theories supply a way of understanding what happens inside the classrooms and throughout the learning and teaching processes. None of the theories fully explains the inside-to-outside process of teaching, learning, and applying Open Orthodoxy, but in tandem they provide a sufficient framework for understanding and analysis.

**Structure**

The format of the thesis follows the process of developing, learning, and transmitting Open Orthodoxy from the private sphere to the public. Each section addresses a different aspect of the YCT experience and education, from personal journeys to public interactions, noting core values and applications of social theory throughout.

**Historical Background and Contemporary Context**

Chapter one places YCT into the historical context of American Orthodox Judaism. The history, from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day, frames significant events in Orthodox Judaism within the language of open and closed. The vocabulary choice clarifies the contemporary position of YCT in the narrative on its own linguistic terms. The terms refer to the

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inclination of Orthodox Jews and Orthodox Judaism, as either one corpus or a split body, to interact with the general American society and each other. Though the terms may be simplistic, the analysis of events takes into account that nothing is ever easily defined and that, more likely than not, Orthodox Judaism throughout history has more accurately existed on a spectrum ranging from open to closed. A sociological analysis of the contemporary place of YCT follows the history.

The Place and its People

In order to ultimately understand Open Orthodoxy as a produced public religion, one must first look at the personal origins of its adherents and transmitters and the institutional environment. This section defines YCT on the inside in terms of the place and people. The section begins with a description of the physical space of the yeshiva, primarily the *beit midrash*, and continues with descriptions and analyses of the people of YCT, the faculty and students. This section explores who the people are based on educational background, the journeys they took to arrive at YCT, and the complexities and variations in elements of personal identity. The segment ends with an extended analysis of language usage in the yeshiva as indicative of institutional and personal identities as well as necessary professional aptitude. Analyses center primarily around theories of identity and identity development with special attention paid to the role of choice and the adoption and application of symbols.

Open Orthodoxy Inside

This section describes YCT, to use Erving Goffman’s terminology of performance, as the “backstage,” the place where, through pedagogy and curriculum, the students are trained in Open Orthodoxy and groomed for the public sphere. This section begins by defining YCT as a “professional yeshiva” and continues by explaining how. The first two subsections present
prayer and spirituality as formative aspects of the YCT education. Subsequent segments illustrate what happens inside the classes, both traditional text-based (yeshiva) classes as well as the afternoon (pastoral/rabbinic) classes. As with other sections of the thesis, data are from both in-class observations, interviews with faculty, and focus groups with students. Data from and analysis of each element of the curriculum give a comprehensive view of not only the YCT courses but what they mean vis a vis Open Orthodoxy. Primary theories cited in analysis deal with the roles of clergy, place of pedagogy and curriculum in teaching an ideology, different types of learning and teaching styles, and phases of organizational life.

Open Orthodoxy Outside

Based on the assumption that Open Orthodoxy cannot function inside a closed space, this section explores the ways in which YCT students and faculty apply Open Orthodoxy to the public sphere. As opposed to the previous section, this segment analyzes YCT students and faculty as purveyors of Open Orthodoxy, actors on Erving Goffman’s front stage, and clergy of Wuthnow’s public religion. This section begins with a segment about a lecture given by a YCT faculty member on the issues of internal versus external personas and the multiple roles of the rabbi. Subsections are divided into three areas: education, religion and social action. Each section presents a different case study. They represent different public spaces, different ways of interacting with the public and public sphere, and different ways of translating Open Orthodoxy into the open.

Conclusion

The conclusion, utilizing Goffman’s and Wuthnow’s theories, illustrates and analyzes select elements of the progression of Open Orthodoxy from the personal to the public spheres through a process of education towards that philosophy.
Acknowledgements

This thesis would never have been completed if not for the help, guidance, and encouragement of many people. First and foremost, I would like to thank Rabbi Dov Linzer and Ruthie Strosberg Simon for granting me access to YCT. Thank you also to all of the faculty and students not only for welcoming me into your institution but for giving up your free time to participate in interviews and focus groups. Thank you, of course, to Professors Sylvia Barack Fishman and Jonathan Sarna in the Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies at Brandeis University for allowing me to take on such a large project and giving me the space and funding to explore. Thank you to Professor Wendy Cadge in the Department of Sociology who guided me to theories and introduced me to my new love, sociology of religion. Thank you as well to Professor Sharon Feinman-Nemzer, who, the day after my defense, directed me to Educating Clergy, a crucial, seminal wealth of information. Special thanks to Wexner Graduate Fellowship Class XIX and the Judaic Studies section for all of your feedback, support, and enthusiasm. Last but not least, I have to acknowledge Rebecca Cutler, my best friend and sounding board, whose sage advice and pointed questions kept me going.

K. Light
Cambridge, Massachusetts
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Notes
Except for Rabbis Avi Weiss, Saul Berman, Dov Linzer, Chaim Rapoport, and Yitzchok Adler, all personal names have been changed to protect the individuals’ anonymity to the greatest extent possible.

All names of organizations, institutions, and places are authentic.

Non-English words are largely translated within the text of the thesis. A complete list of all Hebrew, Aramaic, and Yiddish terms can be found in Appendix A.
Chapter 1
Historical Background and Social Context

In order to understand Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School’s context within contemporary American Orthodox Judaism, one must first consult history (albeit briefly – this is a sociological study, after all.) The history of Orthodox Jews and Orthodox Judaism in the United States began, if by name only, in the nineteenth century and has been evolving ever since. To use the language of YCT’s philosophy of Open Orthodoxy, Orthodox Judaism can simplistically be described along a spectrum ranging from open to closed. These terms do not speak to the intricacies and nuances of communal development, but they provide a basic dichotomous structure through which to understand developments in Orthodoxy and how YCT fits into the timeline of American Judaism.

Early Orthodox immigrants to the United States did not label themselves as Orthodox. They were traditional Jews because that was the way that they lived their lives. These Jews represented an openness to America and American culture by virtue of having uprooted themselves from either rural or urban ethnic enclave communities in Europe to move to the United States. Heilman (1982a) explains,

To be sure, those Orthodox Jews who decided to come to America before the great migration of 1881 and after were already a self-selected group. Their willingness to uproot themselves from the large Jewish communities in Europe in favor of the small American one was an indication of at least a latent openness to change.¹

Fueled to a certain extent by Emancipation and the rise of progressive Judaism in Germany in the mid-nineteenth century, American Judaism began to take shape. Jonathan Sarna (2004) comments that “Orthodox” became the term of choice or Jews who opposed Reform in the

1840s . . . (87)”² The definition of Orthodoxy as “that which is not Reform” represents a closing phase. Names become a significant marker for Orthodox Judaism as it defined itself internally and developed guidelines for whom and what it considered to be authentic or sufficiently Orthodox. In sync with the nomenclature closure, Orthodox Jews – closed in their definition of themselves as a unit – opened to the American landscape of religious institutions when, as Sarna (2004) states, “. . . in 1852 recently emigrated Jews, mostly from Lithuania and Poland, established New York’s first East European Orthodox synagogue, the Beth Hamidrash . . . (101)”³

The closed orientation continued to develop as Orthodox numbers grew as a result of continued Eastern European immigration. Gurock (1996) gives an overview of the 40-year immigration phase:

. . . during the 1880-1920 period, those among the migrating masses who were sincere in their religious commitment aspired, under the guidance of their own rabbis from Russia and Poland, to transplant to these shores an Orthodoxy that resisted modernity and acculturation and was unqualifiably opposed to other forms of Judaism that were trying to reach immigrants and their children (xvi).⁴

The traditionally-oriented Jews of Eastern Europe came to the United States largely out of economic and political necessity. Any openness was based on need; otherwise, they intended to largely close their community in order to preserve traditional Jewish life. Again, organizations often signify simultaneous security in maintaining tradition and openness to participation in American organized religious life. Previously, Sarna (2004) highlighted the synagogue; here, Samuel Heilman (1982b), comments on a school:

³ Ibid.
In 1886 Yeshivat Etz Chaim, a school which hoped to provide advanced Torah study for European immigrants who had already mastered the subjects taught in the small one room Jewish schools responsible for primary religious education, was organized in New York. Unlike yeshivas in Eastern Europe from which most of the immigrants at the time came, this school also provided a basic elementary secular education for its students. Indeed, it had been established by a number of parents because they felt that the Makhzikei Talmud Torah, until then the dominant Orthodox Jewish school, was neither sufficiently advanced in Jewish studies nor willing as they were to include even rudimentary secular studies in its curriculum.

Yeshivat Etz Chaim’s creation illustrates two elements of openness: first, the recognition that one could not live in a society and remain cut off from it, and second, the ability of a grassroots movement to impact institutional-level change. Though Etz Chaim may have been relatively open and progressive in comparison to other institutions, the founders did not want to secularize or diminish traditional text study, but rather add a component of general studies to the comprehensive religious studies curriculum.

The turn of the twentieth century marked a significant shift in American Jewish demographics with the sustained stream of Eastern Europeans as well as the on-going establishment of religious institutions. American Judaism continued to split into liberal and conservative wings with the Reform movement the first to formally establish itself. The Orthodox Union was founded in 1898 to protect traditional, Torah-based Judaism from the Reform movement and rabbis which they considered to be a threat. On a practical level, according to Gurock (1996), the Orthodox leaders “fought against blue laws, protected the rights of Sabbath observers, advocated the modernization of Jewish education techniques, and argued that they, far more than the uptown Reform forces, had the best Jewish interests of the

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immigrants at heart (10).”\textsuperscript{6} This appears, externally, to be a closed tact; however, the more conservative faction of \textit{fin de siecle} American Orthodox Judaism, the Agudath ha-Rabbanim (established in 1902) charged them with being too open. They believed that “the Orthodox Union was a poorly disguised agent of Americanization which preached a synthesis of Jewish and American methods and values which threatened the continuity of the faith (10).”\textsuperscript{7}

American-trained rabbis, though closed in their focus on their own communities, bolstered the general openness of Orthodox Judaism. The Rabbi Isaac Elhanan Theological Seminary (RIETS), established in the late nineteenth century just before the Orthodox Union, transformed with the needs of its students. Initially, according to Gurock (1996), Orthodox men already ordained as rabbis in Europe utilized RIETS as a \textit{beit midrash} (house of study; study hall), and not as a training seminary. RIETS opened up more and more based on an influx of American-born sons of immigrants who, in 1908, went on strike to demand “a broader, more systematic secular curriculum, instruction in the English language and ‘in the art of public speaking’ as well as in the ‘softer’ Jewish disciplines of Hebrew literature and Jewish history (29-30).”\textsuperscript{8} Still, though, many of the students attended RIETS as just a yeshiva and not a rabbinical training program.

The inter-war years signify a closure of Eastern European immigration and the opening of Orthodox Judaism to increased Americanization. English-speaking, RIETS-trained rabbis led the acculturation of Orthodoxy. In response to this opening up to American influence, the Agudath ha-Rabbanim closed itself even more, deepening the separations between the open and closed factions within American Orthodoxy itself through an organizational split between the two factions. Gurock (1996) illustrates the situation as well with the response:

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid.
... in the 1920s, a new generation of American-born and/or trained rabbis entered the fray. These modern rabbis neither shared the East Europeans' negativism toward Americanization nor consistently deferred to their elders... For Agudath ha-Rabbanim members the emergence of a new group of English-speaking Orthodox rabbis was undoubtedly a source not only of consternation but also of embarrassment. Ironically, these rising leaders were products of an institution [RIETS] which the Agudath ha-Rabbanim had been instrumental in founding and maintaining... (28).  

The Agudath ha-Rabbanim distanced itself from both the institution and the rabbis, which they believed had allowed too much of the American seep into American Orthodoxy. Earlier, Orthodoxy had defined, separated, and largely closed itself off from more liberal streams of Judaism. During the inter-war years especially, though, Orthodoxy began to split internally between those with a more open orientation to Americanization and those who were more closed.

The post-World War II movement towards increased religiosity and religious affiliation began, according to Sarna (2004), in the late 1930s “as a form of spiritual resistance to Nazism and anti-semitism (274).” This amplification, however, did not necessarily signal growth for Orthodox Judaism. As Sarna (2004) explains, “Orthodox Judaism was actually losing ground... While in 1950 it still claimed more adherents than any other branch of Judaism, the bulk of its members were old, and even if they called themselves Orthodox, their level of observance was weak (278).” Orthodoxy was weakening, in some respects, because the open orientations of its adherents had translated to reduced religious observance, particularly as a result of suburbanization, as illustrated here:

The suburban ethos, with its dependence on the automobile, its sprawling and widely spaced nuclear-family homes, its religiously mixed residential patterns, and its embrace of modernity and personal freedom, ran counter to Orthodoxy’s traditional emphases...

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9 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
on fidelity to Jewish law and maintenance of a close-knit community. Strict preservation of the Sabbath (including its ban on driving), strict observance of the dietary laws, and strictly enforced inequalities between men and women in the synagogue seemed to many incompatible with the freewheeling suburban lifestyle (289-90). 12

Orthodox Judaism lost many adherents to the Conservative movement during these years because of Orthodoxy’s seeming incompatibility between strict traditionalism and the idealized American lifestyle. Orthodoxy only truly thrived in suburbs with significant Orthodox populations and particularly Orthodox identities such as Brookline, Massachusetts and Teaneck, New Jersey. 13 The openness of suburbanization and the closed – or rather close-knit – communities survived in these environments, but struggled elsewhere.

As Americanized Orthodox Jews increasingly opened up to and participated in mainstream, secular life, the post-War refugees from Europe moved in the opposite direction. Motivated by a strong desire to recreate what had been lost during the Holocaust, the survivors established communities of preservation. Sarna (2004) provides the example of Hasidic (belonging to a mystical, charismatic stream of Judaism originating in Eastern Europe) Hungarian refugees who “transformed the Brooklyn neighborhoods of Williamsburg, Crown Heights, and then Borough Park into citadels of faith on the model of East European Hasidic courts (296).” 14 They closed themselves off and created ethno-religious enclaves for themselves. Though their responses may not have been as drastic, American-born Orthodox Jews likewise felt the gravity of the loss of the rich traditions of European Jewry and adapted their lives accordingly. As Sarna (2004) writes, “. . . some felt that they could take no chances with modernity; the specter of further losses to the Jewish faith brought on by assimilation

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12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
overwhelmed them. Others . . . considered the maintenance of tradition part of their responsibility to those who had perished (306).” 15 Post-War American Orthodoxy was tugged from both directions – towards the secularized, suburban, American dream lifestyle on one hand, and the staunch reclaiming of religious life that had been destroyed in the Holocaust, on the other.

Since its establishment in 1948, the State of Israel has featured prominently in American Judaism. When Israel won the Six Day War in 1967, American Jews and Judaism became increasingly Zionist. In the minds of American Jews, Israel changed from a state of refugees to a symbol of Jewish power. This pride meshed compatibly with the ethnic pride movements in the United States and paved the way for Jewish revival: “In an era when so many other racial and ethnic groups were taking public pride in what made them distinctive, and when Evangelical Protestantism, Buddhism, and Islam were emerging into public consciousness, the revival of Orthodoxy seemed consonant with the times (327).” 16 For Orthodox Jews, this revival was both religious and social and cemented Modern Orthodoxy as a legitimate religious stream. American (Modern) Orthodox high school graduates increasingly spent a year or two studying in Israeli yeshivot. 17 In Israel, they both studied religious texts and accustomed themselves to more traditional lifestyles in which one’s Judaism was not merely one element of identity, but central and definitive of an entire lifestyle. This closing-in-order-to-open trend increased the American Orthodox population through the ba’al tshuva “phenomenon.” As Sarna (2004) comments,

. . . in the last decades of the twentieth century it added thousands of young new members who, while not born Orthodox, became known as ba’alei tshuva, penitent or returning Jews, parallel in some respects to “born again” Christians in Evangelicalism. Many of these new recruits . . . were former members of the counterculture . . . and now sought meaning in the texts, trappings,

15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
and rituals of traditional Judaism. . . Orthodoxy received an infusion of new blood and an injection of youthful self-confidence (326).\(^{18}\) By closing themselves in their own communities and exploring their identities, for even just a short period of time, these (primarily young) Orthodox Jews opened their religion to the public sphere.

As Modern Orthodoxy came into its own in the latter decades of the twentieth century, the more conservative elements of traditional Judaism likewise better defined themselves. In response to what they perceived as the openness-caused corruption of Orthodox Judaism, they closed their enclaves even more. As Weiss (1997) comments, ". . .the Orthodox Right is wary of virtually all innovation, fearful that it will lead to a breakdown of \textit{halakhic} [Jewish legal] norms."\(^{19}\) The Orthodox right’s closed approach to Orthodox Judaism has led to an increasingly closed orientation in certain elements of Modern Orthodoxy, including Yeshiva University’s RIETS, long dubbed the “flagship” institution of Modern Orthodoxy. Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School emerged into this environment at the turn of the twenty-first century. The philosophy of Open Orthodoxy guides the institution. They pervasively utilize the language of openness, yet claim to maintain a firm \textit{halakhic} and traditionally Jewish orientation. Many segments of Judaism have experimented with combinations of the traditional and progressive before and, more often than not, have not been able to sustain the tension and end up moving decidedly one way or the other. American Orthodox Judaism, in particular, has long been characterized by the struggle between closed and open; Open Orthodoxy, though, with its various definitions of “open,” blatantly exposes that dichotomous tension. Will YCT be able to maintain the tension, or will there be a tipping point, either from an internal or external source?


Will certain issues, such as a woman’s right to Orthodox ordination, cause an internal split and subsequent external rearrangement of Orthodoxy? Perhaps YCT will become a new point of alignment for other elements within American Judaism. The more adherents a philosophy has, the stronger it can be and the more likely it will be to survive.

Nine years after its founding, YCT is carving out a place for itself in the mainstream of American Judaism. However, within Orthodoxy, YCT has had a more difficult time defining its place and, more significantly, being accepted by the Orthodox establishment. Boundaries in Orthodoxy, as established by those people, institutions, and texts with ascribed status in the community, define what is acceptable, unacceptable, *halakhic*, and non-*halakhic*. As Foster et al. (2006) write,

> Institutions that train clergy are acutely aware of various accountabilities under which they operate. They develop and implement programs that must be attentive to denominational ordination processes and standards, to theological and doctrinal frameworks, to the hierarchies and policies of religious and church bodies, to their own institutional history and ethos, to disciplinary and academic standards of higher education, to their understanding of divine will, and to the people and contexts that define the purpose of their students’ future ministry (375).

Neither YCT nor Open Orthodoxy exists in a bubble. They are subject to their contexts both historically and socially. Since its inception, YCT has had a tense relationship with Yeshiva University’s RIETS. This strain and competition between the institutions are not likely to dissipate overnight and thus provide a ripe opportunity to learn about American Orthodox Judaism and observe, in real time, the open-closed dichotomy and whether or not there will be a tipping point. Some people may claim that the tipping point already happened with continued acerbic statements from Rabbi Herschel Schachter, refusal of the Rabbinical Council of America

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20 As I observed during my time spent particularly in Washington Heights, the tension between the institutions does not translate at all to interpersonal stresses between students of the two institutions. Perhaps these positive relationships will have a trickle-up impact on the larger debates.
to accept YCT rabbis into its organization and the organization’s likewise refusal to recognize conversions performed by YCT rabbis.\textsuperscript{21} In response to having their RCA membership application ignored for four years, YCT’s founder, Rabbi Avi Weiss, with Rabbi Marc Angel, former head of the RCA (both men maintain membership), formally established the Rabbinic Fellowship in 2008. This represents an organizational response to an organizational problem. Their goal is “not to compete with the RCA but more broadly to counter what they see as a rightward shift in the Orthodox community and the centralization of the rabbinate.”\textsuperscript{22} This organization will give Orthodox rabbis a new venue for Modern Orthodox leadership without asking them to give up RCA membership.\textsuperscript{23} In this way, the Fellowship is similar to the original extracurricular Meorot program which exposed interested RIETS students to Open Orthodoxy. 2008 may prove to be a seminal time in the history of Orthodox Judaism, YCT and Open Orthodoxy.

Open Orthodoxy is interpreted as pushing the boundaries by promoting interaction with the larger world. As per its public outlook, Open Orthodoxy is not just for private consumption; it is not meant to be insular. The boundary-creators in the more conservative wing of American Orthodoxy fear that interaction with non-Jews, and even non-Orthodox Jews, promotes leniency in halakhic observance and potentially non-compliance with Jewish law and customs. Open Orthodoxy challenges the right-wing Orthodox establishment in that it believes in the tangible possibility of upholding a halakhic lifestyle and living with an open outlook to the rest of society. Ironically, YCT’s position may be best illustrated by Foster et al. (2006) who cite the handbook of for field education at St. John’s Seminary: “if we know who we are, we are not threatened by

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
others; if we accept who we are, we accept others; if you don’t know who you are, the dominant culture will define you (144).”

YCT expresses that it is possible to be simultaneously Open and Orthodox, representing the contemporary incarnation of the age-old dialectical struggle between open and closed orientations of Orthodox Judaism.

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Chapter 2
The Place and its People

Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School, through its philosophy of Open Orthodoxy, maintains an external, public orientation. However, in order to understand why the institution and ideology function in this manner, one must first look inside – to the yeshiva, faculty, and students. This section explores the meanings of space and the intricacies of identity development and self-definition. In the language of Erving Goffman, this segment represents the off-stage and backstage for both the people and their institution. In the language of Robert Wuthnow, this is the private sphere, the foundation necessary before an organization or an individual can even begin to transmit religion in the public sphere and to various public audiences.

Section 1: YCT as Physical Space

James Hopewell (1987) writes that “a dwelling not only simulates its environment, performs tasks, and supports the life of its inhabitants, it also conveys meanings (20).”¹ All of these elements hold true for YCT’s space, a place that serves many functions, is a home of sorts to many people, and conveys meaning to many more than those who pass through its doors. YCT, similar to many other rabbinical schools, is in New York. This location is important. Being in New York makes YCT a player on the field of American rabbinical schools, provides access to major Jewish organizations and a substantially-sized Jewish community, and is a desirable place for students to live, interact with other Jews and young adults, and have their Modern Orthodox identities reinforced. Though its reach is broad, YCT as a physical entity is confined within the boundaries of a very small space. Unlike the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary which Foster, et al. (2006) describe, “Massive trees on spacious grounds with landscaped gardens provide a parklike setting for the campus, which includes Garden Court, a comparatively new

cluster of stone buildings housing classrooms, offices, and chapel, and, across a ravine, a student apartment complex (44).”² In stark contrast, YCT is a collection of rented, multi-functional, plainly furnished rooms of various sizes, a far cry from an idyllic campus. According to the language of Erving Goffman (1959), YCT’s physical space is its backstage, the contents of which define the whole. He writes, “Here stage props and items of personal front can be stored in a kind of compact collapsing of whole repertoires of actions and characters. Here grades of ceremonial equipment . . . can be hidden so that the audience will not be able to see . . . (112).”

YCT’s main room is the beit midrash (study hall); the few classrooms are on a different floor. The beit midrash is packed – a veritable imposed synthesis of needs and limited available space. Bookcases line the circumference of the single room, while five foot-long tables, piled high with more books, fill the center. The bookcases are arranged in chronological order, beginning on the eastern-facing wall with the Zohar and other Kabbalistic [mystical] works that deal with the time prior to creation. The Tanakh (Bible) section is next, followed by the Talmud, early and late commentaries, contemporary halakhic decisors, and finally, next to the front door, the miscellaneous section. The selection of books reflects the diversity of YCT’s curriculum – the open exhibition and utilization, by students and faculty alike, of both conservative and progressive texts in a single Orthodox institution.

The tables in the center of the room serve multiple purposes. Each student has his own, designated spot (approximately ¼ of a five foot-long table), his makom kavua (shortened to makom; literally, set or permanent place; mekomot in plural). There, he keeps his sfarim (books), shtender (book stand), photocopied pages, notebooks, a stash of non-perishable food items, and either a water bottle, coffee mug, or both. The students likewise have many of their own books.

They purchase their own copies of books required for classes; however, the library is well-stocked with spares and reference volumes. The students spend the vast majority of their time at their *mekomot*. At his *makom*, the student learns both alone and with his *chevruta* (study partner). Once the day begins, the chairs at the tables will all be filled.

As the main yeshiva space, the *beit midrash* also has a kitchenette of sorts. This multifunctional area on the southern side of the room houses the refrigerators, microwaves (one for dairy foods and one for meat), a toaster oven, a coffee maker, a water cooler, the *hefker* (free-for-all, left over food) table, and the ever-useful cabinet of office and first aid supplies. Perhaps the most prominent facet of the kitchenette is the top of the refrigerator. The top of the refrigerator is covered in cereal boxes. Each student provides his own meals and cereal is the nearly universal breakfast choice. A large jar of peanut butter and an equally large jar of instant coffee crystals break up the otherwise solid wall of colorful cardboard boxes. Students stuff their lunches, containers of milk and humus, and variegated snack foods inside the refrigerator.

There are two offices next to the kitchenette – the first is that of the Director of Student Services. This person is in charge of everything non-financial that has to do with the students. The other members of the YCT staff work as close as a few blocks away or as far away as the Midwest (the director of placement and the director of admissions). The second office belongs to Rabbi Dov Linzer, dean and *rosh yeshiva*. The back wall of the *beit midrash*, between the late and contemporary commentaries sections, is home to three computers for student and faculty use, a large photocopy machine, and a printer. There is a porch outside the north-facing side of the room. Three doors, each with a prominent sign warning about the highly flammable nature of the

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3 According to Helmreich (2000), the *rosh yeshiva* has many functions. He is a scholar, a member of stature and leader in the community, embodies the values of the institution, teaches classes, sets curriculum, and works with institutional hierarchies including a board of directors (65-76). Helmreich, William B. 2000. *The world of the yeshiva: an intimate portrait of Orthodox Jewry*. Hoboken, N.J.: Ktav.
flooring material, open onto the porch. The porch has two long wooden tables and several chairs. The students use this space to learn, eat, and talk on the phone. When the weather is pleasant, faculty members sometimes conduct class outside. Back inside, at the front of the room next to the entrance door on the eastern side, is the aron ha-kodesh, the holy ark, where the Torah is kept and where people stand to lead prayers. As Heilman (1983) writes, "[a]s the Talmud itself puts it: 'In the place of study, there one should pray (9)." Like values and mission of Open Orthodoxy, YCT’s physical space embodies a synthesis of function – praying, learning, and eating.

The sounds also contribute to the general atmosphere of YCT’s physical space. The noise exists in different layers: chevrutot learning together in pairs or the occasional threesome; faculty learning either by themselves or helping students; the buzz of the copy machine on one side of the beit midrash and the hum of the refrigerator and gurgle of the water cooler on the other; pages turning; and the rustle and thump of books as people look for just the right passage in just the right tome. The beit midrash is active during seder (order; chevruta learning time.) The students put the same activist energy into learning Talmud and halakha as they do into other aspects of their lives. The students are deeply engaged in their studies, whether loudly or quietly, alone, or in chevruta. The sounds of seder are comparable to any other contemporary yeshiva and indicate that YCT takes learning seriously and passionately. Students don’t just study the texts, they engage the texts, searching within the pages for answers and more questions. The process of engagement is not silent and thus neither are the students or the space.

Section 2: Moreinu Rabbeinu, YCT Faculty

Though the administration and curriculum committee set the general course of study, the faculty is ultimately responsible for direct education. They are the transmitters of curricular content and

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5 Literally, “our teacher, our rabbi”
role models. They must both teach and embody the values of Open Orthodoxy. YCT’s faculty hale from across the spectrum of traditional Judaism, from liberal to ultra-Orthodox. As a Modern Orthodox institution committed to openness, it is not surprising that the faculty’s backgrounds are different from each other, albeit within a narrower spectrum than the students’. All of the faculty members grew up in strongly Jewishly-identified homes. Some attended public schools, others attended day schools, and still others attended yeshivot. Some, but not all, spent a year or more studying in Israel. Nearly all of the faculty went to college and some have doctorates. They all have teaching experience.

As evidenced by interview and observation data, each faculty member is a seeker; he or she is looking for religious meaning in his or her life. Though the faculty range in age from their thirties to their sixties or seventies, through their seeking they all reflect aspects of character traits of baby boomers. In his work *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation*, Wade Clark Roof (1993) explains the general generational shift from objective to subjective relationships, to religion. He states that there is a

\[ \ldots \text{strong emphasis on self in contemporary culture and the related shift from objective to subjective ways of ordering experience.} \]

Boomers have grown up in a post-sixties culture that emphasizes choice, knowing and understanding one’s self, the importance of personal autonomy, and fulfilling one’s potential – all contributing to a highly subjective approach to religion (30).6

Regardless of age, the faculty members live in an introspective, self-focused time and culture. The faculty members were looking for something in Judaism and/or in their professions. These searches led each of them to YCT either of their own volition or because they were recruited. Since finding YCT, they are able to continue seeking synthesis, if they choose to do so, through

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internalizing YCT’s core values and adopting Open Orthodoxy, while facilitating the searches of their students.

YCT, as an institution, likewise seeks to define and carve out a place for itself in Orthodox Judaism, as described briefly in the previous chapter; the faculty reinforces and strengthens this synthesizing process through modeling the values and mission of Open Orthodoxy in the *beit midrash* and classroom. Charles Liebman (1968), in his comparative study of three American rabbinical schools (Hebrew Union College, the Jewish Theological Seminary, and Yeshiva University’s Rabbi Isaac Elhanan Theological Seminary [RIETS]), outlines the relationship between teachers and students and the traits that educators must transmit. He summarizes the needs of the students and the corresponding desirable characteristics of the rabbinic/religious role model:

> . . . if the Jewish religion is a total way of life, if it encompasses the very essence of a man’s humanity, then it must be lived. And for this the student needs exemplary figures. What qualities must such a figure have? Probably three: he must be a significant thinker, pious, and perhaps as a corollary, demonstrate a real concern for people, students in particular (63).7

According to student opinion, YCT’s faculty models behaviors in synch with Open Orthodoxy and the core values of their institution. The faculty members are both authority figures and role models. They are practitioners of *paideia*, a system in which educational institutions and faculty not only provide “knowledge and technical skills essential for contributing to an increasingly complex world but also . . . form the character of their students (vii).”8 A respondent in Jackson

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Carroll’s (1997) study of Christian theological seminaries explains the feeling of encountering role-model teachers:

> When I go into a class and I see a professor standing before me that not only knows his stuff or her stuff, but also has a level of commitment to the Lord God that just emanates from their lives, you sit there and you go, ‘Gosh, this is really wonderful!’ Because I can learn from them academically and also from the whole life aspect (79).”

The students at YCT have similar responses when asked about their teachers. They see the educators as prototypes of both the Jews and the professionals they seek to be. As Ron, a third-year student, comments about the YCT faculty,

> They're both very compassionate, very caring, and extremely knowledgeable. At the same time, they can balance the weightiness of halakha with the weightiness of human experience. That's a real testament to how I think a rabbi should be.

The rabbis bring these qualities into the *beit midrash* and the classrooms with them, creating a complete educational experience of lived values, knowledge acquisition, and practical application.

**Section 3: YCT Students’ Educational Backgrounds and Experiences**

The YCT student body is uniform in its lack of uniformity, particularly noticeable in the variegated educational roots of its students. YCT trains Orthodox rabbis to serve more than just Orthodox communities and congregations. The yeshiva is in the business of molding Everyman’s Orthodox rabbi, a challenge to the tendency of many Orthodox rabbis who only serve their own communities or people who are willing to join their communities. The students’ backgrounds, beginning with their educations, reflect characteristics of their future community members. The

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9 Ibid.
10 In this section, unless stated otherwise, all direct quotes from students come from observations and focus groups conducted during October and November, 2007.
goal of YCT makes this diversity not only acceptable, but also an asset for employment in various settings and with a variety of different populations.

YCT students come from a plethora of educational backgrounds – from secular, public school educations at one end of the spectrum to traditional yeshivot at the other. Most students, however, fall somewhere in between. In terms of Jewish education, as a collective, they attended Reform, Conservative, community, and Orthodox day schools as well as afternoon or Sunday supplementary programs. One student, Joel, displays nearly all of the academic diversity of YCT students in his personal story:

that’s where I went from kindergarten to 7th grade, I went to this Lubavitch day school . . . [then] Solomon Schechter and I was there for a year and a half finishing 7th and 8th grade, which was a pretty big difference. . . . So, it came time for high school and I had the option of either a Jewish day school or a yeshiva or public school. And, I said I wanted to play football and see what it was like, so I went to public school. I did that for 2 ½ years . . . Somewhere in the middle of junior year, I just kind of started deeply missing the learning aspects and religious aspects and feeling like my life was pretty shallow, the life I was living. So, I decided I was going to go to the yeshiva and I did. So then, I went for a year and a half to the yeshiva and that was really great.

Some students also had active Jewish informal educations. Many belonged to Jewish youth groups or attended Jewish summer camps when they were growing up. One YCT student, Jonah, went to the same camp for ten summers. During college, some students were active in their campus Hillel and in Torah-learning programs. Some students also had supplementary Jewish educational experiences with a private tutor or chevruta. Whatever Jewish educational experiences the students had, all impacted their lives. As Wade Clark Roof (1993) writes, education is not just an experience, it is also a predictor. In fact,

[education is probably the best single predictor for a range of attitudes and values, such as racial tolerance, anti-Semitism, egalitarian and gender roles, alternative lifestyles, and tolerance of]
nonconformity of various kinds. And the same holds for traditional religious belief, of worship attendance, and of participation in organized religion. . .(52)\textsuperscript{11}

Despite their diversity of early educational experiences but perhaps because of their exposure to the varieties of Jews and non-Jews, YCT students all ended up in the same rabbinical seminary, they all found and were accepted to YCT.

YCT students largely, though not exclusively, attended secular universities. YCT students studied a variety of subjects including, but not limited to, political science, international relations, art, literature, history, and hard sciences. The college years are a time of personal growth and ethnic and religious exploration, regardless of a person’s culture. Wendy Cadge (2005) describes the comparable situation of Buddhists: “A few people at Wat Phila [a Buddhist Temple] also spoke about constructing their achieved identities as a result of learning about Buddhism in college in the United States and realizing that it was ‘theirs’ but they did not know much about it (159).”\textsuperscript{12} Whether as a continuation of earlier education or a search for something in their pasts, many students took classes in Judaics and Hebrew language, displaying that identity searches can also include elements of the intellectual and academic. One student, Jonathan, majored in Judaic Studies as a matter of coincidence. He explains, “I majored in political science until a certain point when I realized that I was going to have enough Jewish studies classes to get a Jewish studies major as well. . . . It was convenient, but it was also telling of where my interests were leading.” In other avenues of Jewish learning, some students learned Torah throughout college with a \textit{chevruta} or rabbi, or as part of an extra-curricular program. YCT students were also active in their non-academic lives: some of the students went on

birthright israel trips either as participants, staff, or both. Many students participated in community service or social activism programs, both Jewish and not. One student, Noam, founded a food pantry.

One of YCT’s core values is “Recognizing Eretz Yisrael as our homeland and affirming the religious and historical significance of the State of Israel for all Jews in Israel and the Diaspora.” Not surprisingly, Israel and Zionism play a role in the lives of all YCT students. To contextualize, Modern Orthodoxy, in many ways, is consonant with and has many of the same values and beliefs as religious Zionism. Religious Zionists range from settlers living in caravans in the West Bank to politically liberal Orthodox Jews who will not travel outside the green line. From an ideological standpoint, American Modern Orthodox Jews fall within the centrist to left range of Religious Zionism.

Many American Modern Orthodox Jews study in and visit Israel. All of the students at YCT had an extended learning experience in Israel. Before entering YCT, students all spent at least one semester if not several years learning in either a university or yeshiva there, as is typical for American Orthodox Jews. As Koby, a first-year YCT student comments, “I went to Israel for one year. Pretty standard.” While several of the YCT students went to Israel for a year following high school, many others went either during or after college. The typical YCT student, if his experience was an academic study abroad semester, studied at a major university. If he went to a yeshiva, he most likely went to one with a Modern Orthodox and/or specifically religious Zionist orientation that would have had ideologies, beliefs, and student populations similar to that of

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13 Religious Zionism, originally called “Mizrachi,” seeks to integrate Orthodoxy with ideals of Jewish nationalism. Rav Avraham Yitzhak haKohen Kook (Rav Kook), appointed by the British as the first chief rabbi of Palestine, was the “spiritual father” of religious Zionism. Rav Kook “viewed the return of the Jews to the Holy Land as a stage toward the coming of the Messiah and the reestablishment of the Temple, and he claimed that even nonreligious Zionists who were helping build the Jewish state were doing God’s work (13).” Religious Zionists are active in Israeli government and society, but since the assassination of former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995, their ranks have become increasingly fragmented.
YCT. Experiences in those yeshivot socialized YCT students in both Torah learning as well as general religious-Zionist and Modern Orthodox ideologies. This learning experience also gave the students the knowledge base that especially those from public school backgrounds did not have.

The Israel experience and education literature\(^\text{14}\) uses medical terminology in describing the effects of an Israel educational experience; that is, the students are being inoculated with Jewish education and religion so that when they re-enter secular, American society they won’t assimilate. Ilana Blumberg, in her work *Houses of Study: A Jewish Woman among Books* (2007), explains the dual intention of a year of study in Israel:

> When our teachers and rabbis and some of our parents pressed us toward Torah study in Israel, they spoke of it as though it were its own good. But underneath that thought however the adult consideration, half spoken, half secret: perhaps a year of intensive Jewish study might succeed in blunting the future temptations and dangers of unadulterated secularity . . . (xiv)\(^\text{15}\)

The Israel yeshiva year, a year spent in a hyper-concentrated Jewish environment, is a significant component of the cementing of socialization of young Orthodox Jews. According to Wade Clark Roof (1993), “. . . the years of youth and early adulthood are a critical period for learning about the larger society; memories arising out of the intersection of personal and national history during these years live on in our lives (3).”\(^\text{16}\) In many ways, a year or two spent in yeshiva is an investment towards a life of religiosity.

As Rabbi Blum, a member of the faculty who is particularly interested in identity, elaborates, “As you would expect, a lot of [YCT students] went to study in Israel after high

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school. . . . To what extent did their identity foreclosure occur then? . . . that’s the goal of many of the schools, to get somebody in and to see to it that they don’t come back until their identity is solidly in place.” In Israel, synthesis of lifestyle is easier. Orthodoxy thrives outside in the public sphere, for better or worse, not just inside a yeshiva, synagogue, or private home. In Israel, observant Jews participate fully in society. They can eat out in any of the multitude of kosher restaurants, their children can attend public schools that teach traditional Judaism, Jewish religious holidays are national holidays, and Hebrew is an official state language. Elsewhere, what would be an enclave culture is, in Israel, largely normative and accepted. The life-ways of an observant Jew in much of the State of Israel do not set him or her apart or display his or her status as a member of a religious minority, as they would in the United States. As Heilman (1982a) sums up, "...many of the Orthodox Jews who do make their lives in Israel seem to have less of a feeling of difficulty with shuttling between tradition and modernity." 17 This reinforcement means that, as Foster, et al. (2006) state,

Eventually, practices are so ingrained in habits and dispositions that not only are they extended over time and through generations, but also, as they are tested by new conditions and circumstances. Ideas and procedures, they are renewed . . . They become the structures of expertise and the resources for improvisation in meeting new and unexpected challenges (27).18

Through extended exposure and in an environment of reinforcement and normative, reified Orthodox lifestyles, a student’s sense of self may reach a level of stability. This stability will allow him to not just feel authentically Modern Orthodox, but to ingrain that identity in himself and be able to convincingly present that persona to others. At this point, he may decide that he wants to pursue further study and more fully participate in Modern Orthodoxy through seeking

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leadership roles. Israel’s importance is central to many students’ decisions to enter rabbinical school. As Sam, a fourth-year student, states, “during my years in Israel, I sort of flirted with the idea of continuing to learn and maybe rabbanus [the rabbinate].” According to YCT students, educational experiences often profoundly impacted their decisions to pursue rabbinical careers.

**Section 4: Student and Faculty Journeys to YCT**

As Rabbi Linzer writes in a YCT publication, “We believe that in the context of a true religious search no questions are off-limits. Students are taught that intellectual honesty and struggle, when coupled with humility, and respect, is a key component of religious growth.”\(^{19}\) As in Modern Orthodoxy itself, finding and seeking are a dialectic in which everyone at YCT – students, administration, and faculty – engages personally. Open Orthodoxy, as a process and philosophy, promotes an activist approach to religion, an orientation which often includes dynamic seeking. Though each person is looking for something personal and unique, s/he has found YCT. This dialectic is part of a journey. Bethamie Horowitz (2003), in her seminal work on Jewish identity, defines the role of the journey in Jewishness and individual Jewish experiences,

> The term “journey” encompasses how Jewishness unfolds and gets shaped by the different experiences and encounters in a person’s life. Each new context or life stage brings with it new possibilities. A person’s Jewishness can wax, wane, and change in emphasis. It is responsible to social relationships, historical experiences and personal events. It is worth noting how this concept of journey differs from the more typical Jewish self-image of the “wandering Jew,” in which the Jewish people are forced to wander from place to place, holding fast to their own fixed identities through a changing environment. In contrast, the journeys . . . are about voluntary movements of a continuously evolving self interacting with a changing environment (vi).\(^{20}\)

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The students at YCT have all been and continue on identity-shaping journeys. As Rabbi Kaplan, a faculty member, explains his journey and that of others, “I think it was just a long process that a lot of people in their life go through – you start out growing up in one particular community and a particular way of life and then you start questioning and you search and you read and you meet people . . . Philosophically, it’s a long journey.” YCT sees value in these experiences and Open Orthodoxy treats them as an asset for future work.

Each in his or her own way, the founders, members of the staff and faculty, and the students all experience(d) this process as described by Horowitz and Rabbi Kaplan. For the founders of YCT, Rabbis Weiss and Berman, their seeking began when they perceived a need in the Modern Orthodox community and its educational establishment. They sought but did not find what they wanted, so they themselves founded YCT. The faculty members, often engaged in both professional and personal searches, subsequently found YCT. The students likewise had their own paths to the yeshiva. Wade Clark Roof (1993) describes the seeking process for baby boomers though it applies to students and faculty alike, regardless of age:

Members of this generation are asking questions about the meaning of their lives, about what they want for themselves and for their children. They are still exploring, as they did in their years growing up; but now they are exploring in new, and, we think, more profound ways. Religious and spiritual themes are surfacing in a rich variety of ways . . . (4) 21

For the administration and faculty, their search materialized into a religious institution; for the students, a new educational and professional training opportunity.

For the students, this dialectic of finding and seeking is perhaps no more evident than in their decisions processes that lead them to attend YCT. Each student has his own particular

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reason for applying, whether spiritual, intellectual, or professional. Micah’s decision to enter YCT was not tied specifically to a career goal, but rather to academic objectives:

having been in day school for twelve years, I probably had three gemara classes and zero halakha classes, so I had like a Jewish education that had nothing to do with classical Jewish literature. . . . I’d never had the opportunity to study primary sources, so that’s why going to yeshiva seemed like a good idea to me because I had a huge gap in my knowledge.

Similar to Micah, Jonah decided to come to the yeshiva for an aspect of knowledge acquisition. As he stated in a focus group with classmates, “My decision to come to yeshiva was a decision to engage halakha.” Jonah’s is a goal of process and involvement, a desire to be in dialogue and to struggle with Jewish law. Halakha was a factor for another student, Koby, as well, who decided to pursue rabbinic training based on several different factors: “just in general, my desire to work with people and the fact that I’ve always cared a lot about my relationship with God and I’ve always had a very halakhic way of understanding that kind of comes together with the idea of doing semikha [rabbinic ordination.]” For Koby, semikha synthesizes his definition of Judaism as people- and law-oriented and the way he lives his life.

Joel, a student in his final year in the yeshiva, loves learning and articulated that passion as specifically tied to his decision to pursue the rabbinate: “sometime after shana bet [year two] in Israel, I realized that I just love Torah and I love being in that [yeshiva] environment. . . . So, I started thinking about rabbinical school.” Like Joel, Jonathan thought of the yeshiva in terms of professional training. His decision to apply to and ultimately enter YCT was a positive career move that was likewise tied to learning, an activity he enjoyed. He explains,

I sort of came to a realization as a result of summer employment in DC that that was not what I wanted to be doing, that I wanted to be doing something with the Jewish community. So then that sort of seemed to dovetail with “oh yeah, I like learning, I should keep doing that too.”
While *semikha* for Jonathan is the end goal, for Robert, it is a necessary qualifying step for a larger career goal: “I knew that I eventually wanted to run a high school at some point. I had some vague notion that it would make sense for me to, for a variety of reasons, get *semikha* . . .”

Though many of the students come to the conclusion themselves to pursue a rabbinical education at YCT, others are strongly influenced by YCT faculty and staff, alumni, or their friends. One student, David, who had been debating whether the yeshiva was right for him or not, describes his interactions with the *rosh yeshiva*:

I called Rabbi Linzer and said “I really think I want to come, I’m willing to give it a shot, YCT!” And I said “do you think I should take a year off, spend a year in Israel first . . . and just learn . . .?” And he said “no.” He said “if you want to be an Orthodox rabbi, you should come here.” It was like a no-questions-asked . . . it was a very amazing statement . . .

David’s comment illuminates themes expressed nearly universally in focus groups: the YCT application and admissions process is very positive and involves personal, one-on-one conversations. In this way, YCT’s Open Orthodoxy is practiced and modeled externally during the recruitment and application phases.

In keeping with the philosophy of Open Orthodoxy, YCT’s staff and faculty are not only very receptive of students who seek them out, but also recruit potential students as well. According to their advertisements, YCT is looking for students who have open minds, both secular and religious educational backgrounds, and leadership potential. The following is an anecdote about the Director of Admissions who actively sought one student in particular whom he’d met in a social situation. That student, Robert, shares their interactions:

I was at a Shabbat lunch with [the Director of Admissions] at a mutual friends’. . . And we started chatting and he said sort of half-jokingly, "have you ever thought of going to rabbinical school?" And I said "no, it's not really what I'm looking to do." And he kept
pushing me a little bit, and I was like "no, no, no." And over the next couple of months he sort of kept after me and eventually, I said, "ok, let's talk."

It doesn’t always take an administrator to influence a potential student to apply; sometimes, the presence of an alumnus of the yeshiva is enough. For example, the Hillel campus rabbi at Jonathan’s college had that effect. As he describes, “he was a very positive influence and I could relate to him, but I can’t say he like pushed me . . . [but] he made it easier. . .” Ari, a third-year student, likewise encountered a YCT representative on a college campus; however, his situation is different because the representative had been YCT’s founder, Rabbi Weiss. The two spoke and, as Ari relates, “We had a very nice time, a very nice conversation. He told me to think about [coming to] YCT at the end of the conversation.” Rabbi Weiss effectively implements YCT’s standard procedure in recruitment – one-on-one conversation, as related in anecdotes by two fourth-year students:

Alan: Rabbi Weiss, whom I’d met a couple of times . . . said “you know, we should definitely talk.” And, at one point, I talked, and then two days later I was here. It was very, very quick.

Joel: Rabbi Weiss . . . sat down with me for two hours and asked me what are my dreams, what are my goals, why do I want to be a rabbi. So, I told him my goals and he said “those are my goals too, those are my dreams too.” . . . it was pretty impressive stuff, and I was . . . sold on that.

The faculty, staff, and alumni actively pursue students through career fairs and publicity, but their presence and undivided attention, even for a short period of time, can sometimes be just as effective of a tool in recruitment.

Peers are also hugely influential in students’ decisions to enter YCT. Noam, a fourth year student, states, “I came here more because there were guys that I knew here who I wanted to be with.” Another student, Alan, had been influenced by one friend in particular, that he knew from
his Israel experience. As he relates, “. . . YCT was always something that I’d thought of as a
great idea because one friend in particular, . . . whom I knew from before, from yeshiva in Israel,
he and then other people I’d met through him, I knew this was a brilliant place.” While this
student heard about the general nature of YCT from his friends, the influence of the next
student’s friend was strong enough to prompt him to apply. As he states,

   a good friend of mine, who is at YCT now, was starting to think
   about rabbinical programs and he called me up and said “you know,
   I visited YCT yesterday and it was an amazing experience.” . . . I
   was really excited to hear about this. . . I was just really excited. I
   filled out my application and was accepted to the mechina
   [preparatory] program the first year.

Peer influence and pressure are consonant with the trends of word-of-mouth publicity and one-
on-one recruiting conversations. This is the openness of Open Orthodoxy as applied to
admissions.

   The actions of strangers are likewise influential about decisions to apply to YCT. This is
particularly evident when students share their experiences applying to Yeshiva University’s
RIETS, overwhelmingly YCT applicants’ other option. Even if they ultimately decided to accept
YCT, YU had been a real possibility for many YCT students who were glad to have two Modern
Orthodox institutions from which to choose. As they relate, the following students who explain
that they chose YCT over YU did so because of inter-personal interactions with students in both
institutions. Joel explains his experience:

   I went to RIETS first. . . . I knew tons of people there from Israel,
   but it was like, I walked into the beit midrash and nobody looked
   up. Nobody smiled . . . then, I went across town [to YCT] and . . .
   [a] guy who graduated last year bounced out of his chair and he
   was like “Hey! Who are you? How are you?” Shaking my hand,
   and a bunch of people, everyone smiled.
Joel was struck by the friendliness of the other students and their welcome of him, a stranger, into YCT and their community. Ron, a third-year student, also describes a similar experience when he was deciding between the two schools. He states,

So then it came down to YU and YCT. I applied to both. I had met with both and ended up deciding for YCT... every person I met at YCT really liked it... At YU, at least at that time... you ask them how they like it there and they shrug their shoulders... I didn’t want to be in a place where the people don’t like it or aren’t excited to be there.

The students seek out and find not just a school but an ethos of openness based on the philosophy of Open Orthodoxy, a place where they can both be challenged and comfortable. As Jonah, a first-year student describes, “The key reasons why I came here were because this is a place where I could be very honest and share what I was thinking, and all my challenges, all my problems. And lay it all out on the table and thereby develop that into something meaningful.” YCT’s core value of “Encouraging intellectual openness, questioning and critical thinking as essential components of one’s full service to God (avodat Hashem)” allows Jonah and other students to engage with challenges in the framework of the yeshiva, its philosophy, and its curriculum. Finding YCT allows the students to develop syntheses of identity yet keep seeking. The students who seek out YCT and matriculate, as discussed later, already share the institution’s values. The students’ seeking is part and parcel of their engagement with YCT and their preparation to encounter the world outside the walls of the yeshiva, the communities which they will one day serve.

Section 5: Objectively and Subjectively Defining the YCT Student

There is no standard, composite sketch of a YCT student, as Rabbi Blum comments. Compared to his own experience, this is highly unusual. He relates,
where I went, there were images of what the correct yeshiva boys were and none of us doubted what they were. We did not have any arguments or discussions about what the correct identity for a *rav* [rabbi] was or what the correct identity for a *bocher* [student] in the yeshiva was. I, the wildest of them, me, I was considered wild with a graduate degree, I still agreed along. There was no debate about that. Not that we all were that person, but who that person was, was not debatable.

YCT is different from the yeshiva that Rabbi Blum attended; YCT students are different from Rabbi Blum’s former classmates. To a certain extent, YCT’s core values and mission of Open Orthodoxy both seek out and attract a diverse student body.

When asked in focus groups to describe the typical YCT student, the vast majority of YCT student participants could not give a conclusive answer. Initial responses were usually along the lines of “there is no typical YCT student.” More than any other aspect of the research, this question prompted dialogue between students. Two third-year students discuss the question as follows:

Ron: One of the things that defines YCT is that we're not typical. No one has the same story. But I guess that is it. . . everyone has some story . . .

Robert: The typical YCT student is atypical.

Another group of students define the typical YCT student by pointing out one of their own who seemed to not fit the still-undefined mold:

Jonah: Koby, being one of the few representatives of the entire YCT [student body] who went to K to 8 Jewish day school and then Jewish high school and undergrad, how do you feel?

Koby: I’m the most typical?

Micah: No, you’re the least typical for YCT.

In this snippet of conversation between Jonah, Koby, and Micah, they establish the norm of educational backgrounds as not having had solely Jewish educational experiences. Aside from
being atypical, YCT students largely define themselves in three ways: diverse, open, and sensitive. These three terms appeared repeatedly during student focus groups as well as throughout observations in classrooms and the *beit midrash*.

Diversity in paths, stories (as mentioned above by Ron), and experiences, in the aggregate, partially define the typical YCT student. Robert describes this diversity in terms of personal background, “We are so diverse in our backgrounds, in our personal viewpoints, our worldviews . . . it may be that it's because so many people come from so many backgrounds.”

Steven M. Cohen and Arnold Eisen’s (2000) research on Jewish identity points out that “Strongly Jewish childhoods, for all that a Jew may wander from them for a time, are a very good predictor of actively Jewish adulthoods (14).” Not all of YCT’s students had those strong Jewish childhoods, but they did have positive experiences, as Micah explains,

I’d say that . . . almost all the guys in the yeshiva have sort of hybrid religious personalities. And, everyone’s sort of in a place of religious growth and identity shift, but had like a positive past and is unwilling to break with it. . . . [and] is unwilling to totally break with what they had in the past and that sort of leaves room for healthy compromise or potential to synthesize positive aspects of the Judaism they grew up with a more *halakhic*, traditional orientation.

The students arrive at YCT with the diversities of their personal histories – diversity in educational and religious backgrounds, personal and group experiences, and so on. Those diversities are what led them to the school in the first place, because at YCT these things are normative. What Cohen and Eisen (2000) say of their own research subjects accurately describes YCT students: “The pasts they remember, the places they have been, are in their view indispensable to their own understanding of where they are right now . . . (15)”

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23 Ibid.
They are all students at YCT in the same classes, studying the same curriculum with the same teachers. They adjoin knowledge, information, and understanding from their past experiences with those they gain at YCT. YCT, as an institution, nurtures and reinforces its core values which are largely consonant with the diversity, openness, and sensitivity that the students bring into the institution and into their studies. The certain aspects of their identity and selves that are nurtured at YCT become what define the students as an aggregate. Jackson Carroll (1997) describes the process of cultural development in a Christian seminary; it applies to YCT as well. He writes, “Students are formed by the seminary’s culture as they interact with it and with others in the seminary context, which functions as a plausibility structure for nurturing and sustaining the culture’s shared meanings and symbols (268).”\(^{24}\) This is a social process of acculturation. YCT also nurtures the process of synthesizing its values with specific, generally activist, character traits.

According to Jonathan, students express certain elements of diversity through their choices of activities. He is careful to state that involvement in the activities is not what makes YCT students diverse; rather, their participation in a variety of projects and programs highlights that variation. He explains,

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\ldots\text{everyone’s done similar types of activities, maybe not the same. And anything I haven’t done that I wanted to do, someone in the yeshiva has done. }\ldots\text{ Like, there are people who have done camps and youth groups and staffed birthright trips and led missions and done the Israeli army and I feel like there aren’t an infinite number of things that people in this general part of the Jewish community do and especially in this age bracket. }\ldots\text{ Everyone, I think, or most people, fall into the very active }\ldots\text{ people have already had communal leadership or a taste of communal leadership that’s propelled them forward.}
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To Jonathan, YCT students are fairly uniform in their activism, but diverse in specifics. For these and other reasons, YCT becomes a meeting ground for engaged young adults; students are not just classmates, they are members of each other’s activism networks as well.

While Jonathan bases diversity on activity, Sam, a fourth-year student, interprets diversity in terms of religious affiliation. He compares the current students with past classes:

> [The student body] may be a little less diverse that when we first started here, . . . I think in the earlier years, in their recruitment efforts, they were more apt to take people who didn’t fit in the Orthodox mold . . . That’s something I see, that people are much more traditionally [affiliating], in terms of the people coming in. But still, it’s a very diverse group of people . . .

Sam does not deny certain diversities of the student body, but observes for himself that the students are at least starting with more in common. YCT students affiliate Orthodox and are active in their commitment to halakha and halakhic leadership. Even if they, unlike the faculty, hadn’t grown up with that orientation, the students are socialized through the YCT curriculum and interpersonal relationships. In fact, YCT’s first core value is “Inspiring a passionate commitment to the study of Torah in all its rich forms and the scrupulous observance of halakha.” The students from Orthodox backgrounds essentially hone the Open aspect of Open Orthodoxy while the students from less observant backgrounds expend more energy on the Orthodox aspect.

YCT is known for its openness and the ethos and environment that it creates for engagement with synthesis processes. YCT is also very intellectually open, as stated in a core value: “Encouraging intellectual openness, questioning and critical thinking as essential components of one’s full service to God (avodat Hashem).” Again, Rabbi Blum draws a parallel between the YCT educational experience and his own stereotypically traditional yeshiva
education, this time based on intellectualism. He comments, here, on the specific nature of classroom conversations in this Open Orthodox institution:

This is a more open place intellectually. It doesn’t affect the courses that I teach, from my perspective, but I would say that the kind of conversations that exist in the classes that I do teach, students are places, where other Orthodox, I would have to assure them a million times that it was ok to say it before they would dare say it. They would not, certainly in any of the yeshivas I studied in, only a fool would have said it. . . . there are fewer restrictions on what you can explore and think about here or fears that we can’t bring things inside Yiddishkeit [Jewish culture] to make them work.

The open intellectual, questioning environment is analogous to the secular educational environments in which most of the students grew up. In college, they would have debated and argued with classmates and professors, pushing the boundaries of thought; at YCT, they have no qualms about doing the same. Intellectual openness isn’t limited to the occasional incorporation of a contemporary commentary into a lesson, it’s about asking the questions, taking shteigging (striving, growing) to the plane of collegiate, intellectual inquiry – though with an added component of awe and respect for the holiness and religiosity of the curricula and texts.

Open, inter-personal interaction is a significant component of they way YCT operates as a school. It is not surprising, then, that students who have sought out or been recruited to attend YCT share that characteristic. Koby describes the nature of YCT’s openness:

It’s a more open environment. It’s an environment where you get to really know people personally in a more real way. People are more open about sharing their thoughts and feelings and therefore you wind up getting to know people in such a way so that you feel like they are more open and caring, more so than people are elsewhere. So, it’s not really a difference with the people, it’s with the environment – it’s a more open environment, a more warm environment.

This welcoming environment, established and maintained by the philosophy of Open Orthodoxy, is nurtured by the students who are amenable to, appreciate, and buy into that ethos. The students
largely propagate the inter-personal openness, though every class has a group discussion ("process group") as part of the weekly schedule. YCT structures time to provide forums for open interaction, but students sustain the relationships outside those opportunities as well.

YCT’s openness is also manifest in the larger community outside the yeshiva – representing two of YCT’s core values, “Affirming the shared covenantal bond between all Jews. Promoting ahavat Yisrael and actively pursuing positive and respectful interaction of all Jewish movements” and “Affirming the shared tzelem Elokim of all people, our responsibility to improve the world and our capacity to be enriched by it.” As David comments,

I definitely think that at other rabbinical schools, people are entirely focused on their denominations and their communities. . . . I think there’s a struggle within the yeshiva about who the audience is going to be and what the priority is in terms of who are we serving, who’s our audience. There’re definitely students whose primary goal is to train as Orthodox rabbis to serve the Orthodox Jewish community first and with a real sensitivity and awareness of what goes on beyond the Orthodox community.

Openness, for David – and he would posit for YCT as a whole – is about how one interacts sensitively and compassionately with one’s communities and audience, without foregoing Orthodoxy. YCT’s audience, determined by their open orientation, is unusually broad for an Orthodox institution. Despite the size differentiation between the yeshiva and the public, YCT students still maintain the same dispositions, attitudes, and manners in their interactions. Koby discusses openness at the individual level: “The thing that I just personally observe that strike me as different about our yeshiva is that the people are extremely open and nice and kind here.” This statement echoes sentiments expressed by students during the admissions process upon meeting YCT students whom they describe as “happy,” “smiling,” and “welcoming.”

According to data from the focus groups, YCT students are sensitive. This specific term emerged independently in each focus group as the students attempted to describe themselves as a
group. As Ron, a third-year student, explains, albeit vaguely, “[We’re] sensitive to women's issues, sensitive to issues involving some of the more controversial things that we have. Definitely. Sensitive to difficult halakhah. Just more sensitive to things.” Though Ron points out generally-accepted areas of sensitivity, there was likewise no debate as to whether students at YCT were sensitive or not, but rather what was the source of that sensitivity. Jonathan suggests,

I feel like people here actually are more sensitive, more attuned – just like personality types. Like at the start, I think that is known to be a value of the community . . . I really see that with having gotten to know some of the people who’ve just joined. I mean, because you could say “oh maybe that’s something that the school inculcates in you and develops,” but people who come in have a base level at least, if not a particular sensitivity.

Jonathan sees sensitivity and other qualities of YCT students as intrinsic to the individual as well as the community. Sensitivity is also reinforced by virtue of being in an environment of sensitive people – administration, faculty, and students. Sensitivity is another example of the standardization of certain characteristics or personality traits in a group. For Ari, a third-year student, Rabbi Linzer exudes sensitivity, a characteristic that Ari explains as very positive. He states, “[he is] a model for thoughtfulness and caring and sensitivity with, in combination with an absolute masterful knowledge of text and halakha. . . He's just phenomenal.” The synthesis of sensitivity and halakhic stricture is an important model of Open Orthodox values for the students as they develop their identities as leaders and rabbis. As one student in Foster et al.’s (2006) study comments about a teacher, “[this particular educator] was, for me, an exemplar of Jewish life, and, as such, brought that to class. It was hard for me to separate who he is and what he stands for from what he teaches (184).”25 This is how many YCT students view Rabbi Linzer, as the embodiment of a philosophy and praxis which they value, a person worthy of emulation.

Though YCT students may find it difficult to describe themselves, they exhibit the characteristics of diversity, openness, and sensitivity. As stated in the focus groups, students largely enter with these traits, but are socialized to them further. As Peter Berger (1990) comments, “The success of socialization depends upon the establishment of symmetry between the objective world of society and the subjective world of the individual (15).” Whether acculturation to Open Orthodoxy is a result of the environment, the concentration of people with similar identities, or the promotion of YCT’s values, these aspects of identity are nurtured, flourish, characterize the students, and thus define the image of the institution.

Section Six: Choice and the YCT Identity

As described previously, students bring their diverse, unique backgrounds with them to YCT. Once inside, certain character traits are nurtured. Diversity coupled with socialized norms impacts identity, as Charles Liebman (1968) describes, “The environment, both in the formal and the informal programs, socializes the student to certain values – i.e., it brings about certain changes in his attitudes and behavior that make for a certain conformity in the student body (62).” The personal identity development process is not solely a matter of passive socialization, however. According to Rabbi Blum, YCT students have constructed their identities, similar to many people in contemporary society, through choices that they have made:

identity formation in a highly individualist culture is not identical to continuity and inherited identity. It’s a constructed identity and so that choice is at the center of it and so it’s more like a Chinese menu – people feel Jewish because they take from different categories that they recognize as Jewish activities or practices, but they don’t feel obligated to take from all of them and they don’t

feel obligated necessarily to take from the same category all the time.

According to Rabbi Blum’s parameters, YCT students have constructed, achieved identities. The root of their identities may be based on family heritage and lineage, but the substance of those identities is based on choice. As Walter Zenner (1985) comments, “While the vast majority of those who are born Jews still see themselves as Jewish in terms of an ancestral heritage, their Jewishness is being transformed into a preference, rather than an ascribed status (118).”

YCT students achieve their identities through choices that they make, the symbols that they adopt, and the socializing communities in which they live and participate.

In the Orthodox world, there are essentially two groups of people – those who were born and raised Orthodox (generally referred to as FFBs, Frum [i.e. observant/religious] From Birth) and those who chose to be Orthodox, the *ba’alei tshuva*. Foster et al. (2006) explain these categories as two of the seminary student typologies. They write, “Some students have had a lifelong immersion in a tradition; for them, the tradition’s roles and relationships, prayer forms and metaphors, texts and rituals are second nature. Some students are recent converts whose academic knowledge and religious background are often limited to a significant religious experience (101).” These two types exist side-by-side at YCT. However, as Micah, a first year student, observes, “. . . everyone here’s like *ba’al tshuva*. Most of them here didn’t grow up in a Modern Orthodox home and sort of came to Judaism in their own way. . .” Being a *ba’al tshuva* is unquestionably a decision to adopt a culture and lifestyle, it is

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29 Generally referred to as FFBs, Frum [i.e. observant/religious] From Birth.
30 *Ba’alei Tshuva*, literally “masters of return” are people who have chosen to “return” to or adopt an Orthodox lifestyle.
31 Foster, Charles R., Lisa E. Dahill, Lawrence A. Golemon, and Barbara Wang Toletino. 2006. *Educating clergy: teaching practices and pastoral imagination*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. The authors also cite a third category, the “seeker.” They define the seeker as those who “wander through the curriculum like tourists in a holy site (102).” I do not see seekers as aimless, wide-eyed wanders, but as people with clear goals and their feet firmly on the ground. For this reason, I did not include “seeker” in the list of typologies stated above.
an achieved identity. Wendy Cadge (2005) distinguishes between achieved and ascribed religious identities: “ascribed identities [are] the religious or spiritual identities people inherit at their birth and often develop through their childhood or young adulthood. . . . Achieved identities, on the other hand, are those that people may or may not construct, in response to the tradition of their birth or another religious tradition (157).”

Using this classification, ba’alei tshuva have achieved their religious identities.

Students born and raised in the Orthodox community, though, also have characteristics of ba’alei tshuva because they have made a choice to remain and actively engage their Judaism. As Cadge (2003) writes, “At different points in their lives, people choose to accept or reject their ascribed religious identities.”

Robert Bellah (1996) believes that people often make these decisions when they are young, an assumption that meshes with the YCT students’ own paths of discovery in early adulthood. He writes, “. . . the expectation is that at some point in adolescence or early youth, one will decide on one’s own that that is the church to belong to. One cannot defend one’s views by saying that they are simply the views of one’s parents. On the contrary, they must be particularly and peculiarly one’s own (62-63).”

The dimension of choice pushes people to take active ownership of their identities.

Identities are not merely a series of choices, though; identities are a collection of symbols which one had adopted and to which one has bestowed meaning. Herbert Gans (1991) describes the origins of specifically cultural symbols: “Ethnic symbols are frequently individual cultural practices which are taken from the older ethnic culture; they are ‘abstracted’ from the culture and

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pulled out of its original moorings, so to speak, to become stand-ins for it (500).”  

Gans describes symbolic identity as that which someone who is too far from the immigrant ethnic experience to have a genuine connection adopts and adapts to his or her life. Because people can no longer innately be ethnic, they use symbols and artifacts in order to feel ethnic. Because ethnicity is [now] constructed, people are free to choose the parts that they want, the parts that they find valuable, and discard those that they find distasteful. Mary Waters (1990) explains, “With a symbolic ethnic identity an individual can choose to celebrate an ethnic holiday and refuse to perpetuate a sexist tradition . . . (168).” These symbols, taken together, create what Cadge and Davidman (2003) refer to as a “tool-kit.” They write, “. . . the ways that people gather together various aspects of cultures, in this case religions, can be described metaphorically as individuals constructing their own tool kits, bags, or baskets from components of their religious traditions and their experiences in the world (11-12).” Symbols must be taken together, or melded together, in order for the person who has chosen them to comprehensively synthesize his or her personal and group identity. As Geertz (2000) writes, “. . . sacred symbols function to synthesize a people’s ethos – the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood – and their world view – the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order (89).”

YCT students, whether they grew up Orthodox or not, have chosen to adopt the symbols of Orthodox Judaism. To start, the students dress in the style fitting their identities as Modern Orthodox Jews and Modern Orthodox rabbinical students. Unlike their colleagues to the left,

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36 Ibid.
everyone at YCT wears tzitzit (ritual fringes) and a kippah (headcovering; yarmulke). As Diamond (2000) explains, the kippah is a significant marker of Orthodox sub-group affiliation: "The type of headcovering one wore made a statement about one's Orthodoxy. Religious Zionists, for example, wore colorful knitted ones, while more traditionalist Orthodox Jews preferred black velvet (109)." Murray Danzger (1989) elaborates by delineating the different dress codes of yeshivot and explaining their affiliations:

The ideal black hat yeshiva student wears a black suit, a white shirt with no tie, and a black fedora. In contrast, modern yeshiva students wear informal clothes – perhaps slacks and a sweater, perhaps even jeans and running shoes, a brightly colored or dark shirt, and a knitted skullcap (kippah seruga). . . . The black hat yeshivot are what has been called strictly Orthodox or traditional. The kippah seruga yeshivot are sometimes called modern (143).

YCT students dress in colors. Most of the students wear sweaters, button-down shirts, and khakis. If not for a kippah on top of his head and a bit of fringe sticking out at the belt, YCT students would be indistinguishable from the mainstream, American young adult male in business casual attire.

Food and eating are also symbols. It goes without saying that the YCT students keep kosher (observe Jewish dietary laws); however, as a collective inside the yeshiva, they have a certain penchant for pizza, humus and cereal (not mixed together). Danzger (1989) explains the complex social nature of kashrut: “The laws of kashrut limit the kinds of food one may eat, but their effect is to limit also the persons with whom one shares a meal, where one may eat, and where one may travel. This affects not only leisure and business contacts, but also relations with

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friends and family members who do not observe kashrut (27).”

Kashrut can be especially complicated for YCT students in the field who, though they may stress the public aspect of Open Orthodoxy find that they cannot share a meal with the public. The way in which one eats is also a symbol of identity. YCT students ritually wash their hands before eating bread and say the prescribed blessings before and after eating. These are normative elements of an Orthodox life.

Time is also symbolic. Judaism is a very time-oriented religion and YCT students live their lives according to this time schedule. Prayer, specifically, has a time schedule, as Danzger (1989) explains, “Halakha requires that every male pray three times a day, preferably but not exclusively in a synagogue (31).” YCT students pray thrice daily, observe Shabbat according to the halakhic timeframe, celebrate and observe holidays, including minor fast days, and participate in and perform lifecycle rituals on a religious clock. In Judaism, time often dictates ritual and ritual sanctifies time.

The students have acquired and developed linguistic symbols – the languages of learning, text, and the beit midrash. According to Peter Berger (1990), “Man also produces language and, on its foundation and by means of it, a towering edifice of symbols that permeate every aspect of his life (6).” Books accompany language and YCT students have a lot of books, a significant symbol of both Judaism and Orthodoxy. YCT students own a set of Talmud. They have books of commentaries written by early, late, and modern commentators. They have Bibles and biblical commentaries. They also have prayer books for both daily and holiday prayers, haggadot (books for the Passover seder), and megillot (scrolls, such as the Scroll of Esther). Many of them also have books on philosophy, Jewish history, lifecycles, and more contemporary issues such as

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42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
women’s prayer groups, global warming, and genetics. The Modern Orthodox bookshelf includes works by non-Jews and by non-Orthodox Jews. YCT students keep many of their books all together in the *beit midrash* at their *makomot*, visible symbols of learning and religious scholarship.

One’s home and where one lives are also strong symbols of religio-ethnic affiliation. YCT students have chosen to observe the strictures of *halakha*, actively do *mitzvot* (commandments), and live and participate in Orthodox communities. The students situate themselves in environments where they can observe Jewish law and maintain Jewish rituals in both social and personal contexts. As Micah notes, “All the people [at YCT] on Shabbos go to Orthodox *shuls* and live in Orthodox communities.” These communities do not just reinforce religious lifestyles, they also impact the lasting power of one’s ethnicity. A community is not merely a collective of individuals, it is an ethnic infrastructure, as Richard Alba (1990) explains,

> Ethnic neighborhoods are important not merely as visible manifestations of ethnicity, but also for their capacity to concentrate the institutions and cultures of an ethnic group, thereby keeping alive the sentiments and loyalties associated with ethnicity in adult residents and socializing a new generation to ethnic ways. . . . ethnic neighborhoods can be seen not merely as physical settings, but also as ethnic social structures (254-5).

Ethnic neighborhoods reinforce identity; thus, choices that YCT students have made about where they live reinforce their personal identities and facilitate their ritual observances as Modern Orthodox Jews as well as the collective identity of the community. Again, Alba (1990) states,

> If such structures exist and individuals who ethnically identify participate in them, there is some foundation for the elaboration of common expressions of ethnicity, which can distinguish members of a group from non-members and generate such feelings of a shared heritage as interpretations of group history, distinctive values, points of view, and rituals (208).

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46 Ibid.
In the greater New York metropolitan area, living in an ethnic or religious community does not necessarily shelter a person from diversity. Likewise, given that YCT students strive to live the philosophy of public Orthodoxy, they do not cut themselves off entirely from the larger world. YCT students largely do not live in total ethnic enclaves, but they do live in ethnno-religious neighborhoods such as Brooklyn, the Upper West Side, Washington Heights, and Riverdale, where their identities as Modern Orthodox Jews can develop and be nurtured through interaction with other Jews and with Jewish institutions and infrastructure.

School affiliation is also a strong element of the constructed identity. The students didn’t only choose YCT for the education or the camaraderie, they also chose it because they share the values of the institution. The students’ constructed Jewish identities, in addition to including the standard elements of *kashrut*, Shabbat, and Torah study, have an additional level of intricacy. As Rabbi Blum explains,

> . . . there’s the *kashrut* category and the Shabbat category and the learning category, and then there’s this category where there’s this kind of social action. They take it very seriously. That it’s on the list of HUC or JTS [Hebrew Union College or the Jewish Theological Seminary], it’s not surprising, but that it’s on the list in a Modern Orthodox institution it is.

The students’ constructed, Modern Orthodox identities are complex. They hold firmly to *halakha* and the Orthodox lifestyle, yet see nothing untoward or inconsistent about a deep commitment to the world outside the walls of YCT. In fact, Open Orthodoxy fosters this approach. The students are Modern Orthodox Jews living normative American lives, synthesizing the external with the internal. As Kimon Howland Sargeant (2000) observes, “Modern Orthodoxy accommodates the pluralism and structural differentiation of the wider society. . . Modern Orthodox Jews attend secular educational institutions, may have friends who are not Jewish, and generally have
occupations outside of the Jewish community (38).” Helmreich (2000) describes the synthesis from the inside, “they eat kosher food, abstain from work on the Sabbath, pray every day, and celebrate Jewish holidays as prescribed by Jewish law (53).” YCT students, as have their identity choices, have decided to seek a professional leadership positions. The rabbinate, the title of rabbi and the training, are significant symbols of ethnicity and cultural orientation.

Section Seven: Language as Identity and Implement

As discussed previously, language is an element of identity. At YCT, though, language is also an implement, a tool necessary for the profession of the rabbi. Language illustrates the complexities of identity navigation for an individual and his or her audiences. At YCT, as in other rabbinical schools and Jewish educational institutions, integration of multiple languages is a normative expression of Orthodox Judaism. The text of the Torah includes words borrowed from languages other than Hebrew. The Talmud is in Hebrew and Aramaic. Rashi, when he could not find the proper word or needed to be specific, used a term from his native French. The texts themselves are amalgams of languages; thus, the language of learning is as well. The languages of YCT define the institution, explain inter-personal dynamics, highlight dimensions of identity, illustrate social contexts, and position the yeshiva and its graduates in the Modern Orthodox milieu.

At its most basic level relating to a collectivity, language, according to Waters (1990), is “one of the cultural attributes that has the strongest effect in maintaining solidarity and integration in the ethnic group (116).” Both language choice and style of speech create an in-group, as Pierre Bourdieu explains, “. . . style [in speech] . . . exists only in relation to agents

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49 Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac, prolific 11th century commentator from Troyes, France; single most-cited commentator on Torah and Talmud.
endowed with schemes of perception and appreciation that enable them to constitute it as a set of systematic differences, apprehended synchronically (38-39).” 51 Through understanding the subtleties of language usage, members are inducted into a group, a group for which language is a determinant of membership status and status within that membership. Heilman (1983) applies these concepts to learning Talmud. He writes,

A speaker may wish to appear as a member of a local, parochial community on certain occasions, speak from within the bounded pages of the Talmud and its implicit world. On other occasions, he may wish to jump off the page, to identify with the cosmopolitan values of other worlds he inhabits (174).52

To illustrate, for example, in a YCT halakha class, the teacher bridges the two domains. He says, “L’ma’aseh – what does it mean to treat something as davar hashuv?”53 The lesson was about important objects and the instructor was bridging the text on the page to the outside world.

Language is also a social differentiator, especially when analyzed using the language of cultural capital, as Bourdieu has done. He writes,

. . . different speakers possess different quantities of “linguistic capital” – that is, the capacity to produce expressions apropos, for a particular market. . . . Hence differences in terms of accent, grammar and vocabulary – the very differences overlooked by formal linguistics – are indices of the social positions of speakers and reflections of the quantities of linguistic capital (and other capital) which they possess (18).54

Those who control language and meaning hold positions of influence. In yeshivot everywhere, power is highly correlated with how much a person has learned; how much a person has learned is often evident in his adroitness with the language of the texts. At YCT, students attend certain

53 i.e. Practically, what does it mean to treat something as an important thing/object?
classes based on skill level, but since *halakha* and *gemara* (commentary on the Mishna) classes are only a segment of the curriculum, the language aptitude gap does not hinder interaction between students.

Classes at YCT are taught in English with the exception of the weekly lecture on the Torah portion which is given in Hebrew. This is standard practice for any contemporary Orthodox yeshiva, however conservative, in which English is the primary language of the students. The boundaries between languages are porous. Students and faculty both regularly include terms in Hebrew or Aramaic in otherwise exclusively English sentences. Language reflects its environment and, at YCT, the environment and learning are multi-lingual. In an advanced *halakha* class, the teacher explains about spoons and *kashrut*. He says “it is a *davar assur* that needs *shishim* to *batel* it.”\(^{55}\) When Rabbi Kaplan comments in class that, “In terms of the formation of the Tosefos, it seems kind of *shvach,*” the students fully comprehend that he is discussing a weakly-formed argument made in a commentary. The faculty, and students to a less-developed degree, all share the same variegated language, a language likewise spoken in varying degrees in other *yeshivot* and institutions of Jewish learning. The peppering of sentences with Aramaic phrases and conjunctions pervades the atmosphere of YCT and reinforces its identity as an Orthodox institution.

Language usage indicates both institutional and personal history. As Heilman (1983) explains, “. . .some multilingual speakers may acquire the habit of speaking about a particular topic in a particular language partially because that is the language in which they were trained to deal with this topic . . . (176)”\(^{56}\) In a standard and simple vocabulary example, discussing his goals for officiating at a wedding, Eli says does not just want “to focus on the *hatan* [groom] and

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55 i.e. A forbidden item needs 60 times its mass to negate that element of itself that is making it forbidden.
“kallah [bride], but open it up to create a culture of spirituality.” Eli’s use of hatan and kallah indicate formal and social-based learning. He naturally integrates the words into his speech without giving it a second thought – he understands their meanings, but also knows that his audience (in this case, his classmates) does as well.

In addition to vocabularies, students’ pronunciations also vary, particularly based on their educational backgrounds. That is, the longer a student spends in Jewish educational environments, the more likely it is that he will have an extensive Jewish-language vocabulary or developed a certain affect to his speech. Given the diversity of the YCT faculty and student body the open orientation of the institution, mixtures of Sfardi, Mizrachi, “Ashkenisraeli,” Ashkenazi, and yeshivish, among others, are to be expected. In such an environment, no one has totally pure pronunciation. This amalgamated language and is an integrated norm of the environment and does not aurally faze anyone.

The occasional Aramaic, Hebrew, or Yiddish phrase is common; however, a uniqueness of YCT students lies in their ability to create multi-lingual words when none other can be found. For example, in an upper-level halakha class on kashrut, a student used the term “ta’amagenic” (a combination of the Hebrew word ta’am which means taste or flavor, and the suffix genic) to describe the ability of a spoon to produce flavor. This internal language of YCT is completely functional because the students have been socialized to the vocabularies of learning and text. As Nancy Ammerman (1997) explains,

> Because language is a basic orderer of reality, we can expect any group that spends time together to develop ways of talking about the experiences its members share. They will develop distinctive

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57 Each type of pronunciation represents a geographical orientation of the practitioners – Sfardi pronunciation comes from primarily northern Africa and southern Europe; Mizrachi designates the Middle East; Ashkenazi is western, northern, and eastern European (broadly defined); Ashkenisraeli denotes the Israeli accent of people from European countries; and yeshivish varies based on the yeshiva but generally signifies a variation on the theme of Ashkenazi with the inclusion of a lot of Aramaic and Yiddish.
words and phrases for the objects in their environment and for the events of their calendar. They will develop shorthand ways of alluding to ideas, people, and significant happenings in their history. Learning the group’s jargon is part of becoming a member (60). 58

These foreign languages are not foreign to them and the linguistic boundaries that would cut people off from group membership are a non-issue because of the high level of internal literacy at YCT. The language capabilities of YCT students also give them entrée into the broader worlds of yeshivot and Orthodox Judaism. Coupled with university or graduate school level mastery of English, the students can become competent conversationalists across a significant portion of the spectrum of American Judaism.

The cadence of voices is nearly as significant as the content of speech or a conversation. The gemara nign, a sing-song cadence for reading gemara, is the traditional sound of European Talmud learning. Heilman (1983) observes the seeming incongruity of the language personas of learners:

People whose speech outside of class was in perfect American English during class sounded like immigrants from Europe. Their syntax became fractured; their cadences were marked with the distinctive rise-fall of Yiddish and gemore-nign... Through their speaking, I believed I could make out the duality of their lives as modern Americans and traditional Orthodox Jews. 59 (13)

Gemara nign, like the language and vocabulary of the texts, must be learned. Once it is learned, though, people need not use it. At YCT, in fact, gemara nign is, as Heilman suggests in the above passage and Rabbi Blum explained in his theories on identity choices, an element of identity duality. In the process of negotiating identity, people choose either to employ the nign or not based on personal preference and learning style. In an environment in which nign was

pervasive and that is all that students heard, they would certainly adapt the cadence. Just as with other aspects of learning – whether religious or secular – students pick up the habits, vocabulary, and body language of their teachers and classmates. At YCT, the faculty themselves don’t necessarily use a *gemara nign*, so it is natural that the students would follow that example. Vocabulary and cadence mark both YCT and its students as definitively Modern Orthodox.

Vocabulary, pronunciation, and affect communicate YCT’s institutional identity, explain dynamics of interaction between faculty and students and students and each other, and illustrate YCT’s diverse student body. Language competence is a prerequisite for any profession; therefore, competence, if not fluency, in the languages of the yeshiva are necessary for an Orthodox rabbi. A Modern Orthodox rabbi, though, must also be able to communicate with the public in the public’s language, to translate the text and Orthodoxy in a Jewishly diverse public sphere. Language is not just text or the words that emanate from someone’s mouth; multi-lingual facility is fundamental for any Orthodox rabbi. Language can also be a boundary marker. A YCT student’s command of Hebrew, Aramaic, or Yiddish may disadvantage him in more conservative yeshiva environments even if it does allow him access to more liberal communities who place more value on English oratorical ability, for example. In the world of the Orthodox yeshiva, language and learning grant access and ascribe stature. YCT students, if they are committed to serving all Jews, will have to be broadly linguistically competent – to a greater extent than students in any other yeshiva or rabbinical school.
Chapter 3
Open Orthodoxy Inside

The previous section addressed the inside of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah as place and people; this section addresses the inside of YCT based on the curriculum. In order for YCT students to be practitioners of Open Orthodoxy, they must be trained. This segment explores the various aspects of both the formal and informal curricula – the subject areas and the faculty role models – in order to explicate what Open Orthodoxy looks like inside and how it is initially transmitted to the students. This is Goffman’s backstage, the training ground where the actors, the students, learn their parts and develop solidarity with their classmates and adherence to the ideology. In the backstage, as Foster et al. (2006) describe some of the complexities that Goffman’s theory (which more closely relates to theater, not religion) leaves out. They comment on the pedagogical nature of classroom performance and the varied nature of stage dimensions: “both seminary educators in their classrooms and their students in their future roles as clergy choreograph local enactments of religious tradition in the concrete, ever-changing circumstances in which they find themselves. . . . The performance of seminary educators from this perspective significantly shapes the future professional performance of their students (173).” ¹ The educational experience also shapes the students’ pastoral imaginations as part of their development internally as public figures. As Dykstra (2004) writes, “Our imaginations are also deeply affected by our educations, by those powerful formative influences that gave us the words we use in our everyday life and work; the stories, images, concepts and metaphors that now frame the ways we interpret our everyday experiences.” ²

performances in the classroom, the backstage, so that the students will know how to perform when they enter the public sphere.

**Section 1: Professional Yeshiva**

As Robert Wuthnow (2004) writes, “. . . the professionalization of clergy has been encouraged by wider shifts in the occupational structure of modern societies toward professionalization of major segments of the work force . . . (74)”

According to Rabbi Linzer YCT is a “professional yeshiva,” which he defines as follows,

> [YCT is] both a yeshiva and a rabbinical school. As a yeshiva, we have made our *beit midrash* a place of Torah where our students can deepen their knowledge of Torah in an environment which cultivates spiritual and religious growth. As a rabbinical school, we have created a rigorous, four-year professional curriculum linked with mentored internships, combining the best of the theory and practice of the rabbinate.

This orientation is necessary in order to create the best-trained pulpit rabbis, central to the mission of the institution. Just like a traditional yeshiva or *beit midrash*, YCT provides its students with high levels of instruction in traditional, Jewish legal text and establishes what it considers to be high standards in broad areas in its plan for training what it sees as the ideal Modern Orthodox rabbis. Foster et al. (2006) define the dimensions of a professional school. They explain that “professional schools are hybrid institutions. They are part of the tradition of cognitive rationality . . . They are also part of the world of practice, emphasizing the craft of know-how that marks expert practitioners of the domain. And they operate with the inescapably normative knowledge contained in the identity of being a particular kind of professional (5).”

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As a professional yeshiva, YCT is a hybrid institution, combining the practical with the visionary in pursuit of the creation of an ideal type of rabbi. Just like other theological seminaries, YCT’s curricula boasts a strong professional training component which includes instruction in pastoral counseling, officiation skills, and community activism. Students are also groomed for the public sphere through field education programs which, as Foster et al. (2006) comment, are “generally designed as a bridge between seminary and . . . sites of clergy practice. Their purposes originate in the mission of seminaries – a mission shared by other professional schools – to educate leaders for service to various publics (296).”6 YCT redefines the boundaries of and between traditional *yeshivot* and contemporary rabbinical schools, not only in form but also in ideology. As Rabbi Linzer comments, “like-minded people – primarily myself and Rabbi Weiss – when we got together to create the yeshiva, we both felt that there was a need to create a yeshiva that was both about professional training but also had a different vision. . . . It’s not about Modern Orthodoxy, it’s more about openness.”7 Open Orthodoxy guides YCT’s curricular goals, which the founders hope will shape the students into compassionate transmitters of Judaism in general, and Open Orthodoxy in particular.

Rabbis, as conduits of religious meaning and shapers of Jewish experience, are also professionals and must fill a variety of roles. Their positions are multi-faceted and their responsibilities are diverse. Marshall Sklare (1985), in his study of Conservative Judaism, delineates the multiple roles of the rabbi:

> First, they serve as clerics – as an arm of the state which has empowered them to perform certain rituals and requires them to record these ceremonies. . . . many rabbis feel that in their capacity as rectors, or administrators, they require specialized training. Since they give counsel, guidance, and assistance to

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6 Ibid.

7 Unless stated otherwise, all direct quotes come from observations and interviews conducted in October and November, 2007.
individuals in meeting the crises of life, the rabbis function as pastors . . . Also of significance is the fact that although they head their own families, the functionaries are in a sense members of many families. Assuming the headship of congregations, in a psychological sense they serve as fathers. Lastly, since the spiritual leaders are personages of some consequence in their communities and are given membership on various boards, semi-public bodies, and agencies in the field of social welfare, they act as parsons (177-8).8

Each of these jobs – cleric, rector, administrator, pastor, father, spiritual leader – has several dimensions. Nancy Ammerman (1997) elaborates on just the functions of a pastor:

Pastors . . . are often at the center of the relational web of the congregation. They serve as gatekeepers, recruiting new members and introducing them to the people who will become their friends . . . In times of distress and celebration, the pastor is often present as comforter and interpreter (53).9

A pastor must be effective at building personal relationships as well as be a knowledgeable professional. These tasks become even more pronounced when coupled with the philosophy and imperative of Open Orthodoxy. YCT recognizes that training rabbis to fill such complex professional positions requires several different departments within the institution. As Foster et al. (2006) write about Protestant theological schools, “the seminary administration and faculty identified distinct tracks of study according to specific skill-sets and ministerial roles . . . (237).”10 The YCT administration and faculty couple the profession-dictated curricular areas with a multifaceted educational approach.

As stated in the previous section, the faculty employs the pedagogical model of *paideia*, role modeling and embodiment of elements of YCT’s vision of the ideal Modern Orthodox rabbi.

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Their teaching methodologies, though, are more complex and structured than simply allowing students the opportunity for emulation. Foster et al. (2006) define the practice of clergy education as the “pedagogical imagination.” They write that “Through the exercise of their pedagogical imaginations, seminary educators envision pedagogical events to draw students into ‘existence possibilities’ for their future clergy practice in the interplay of disciplinary and professional knowledge, skills, habits, and dispositions (30).”\(^{11}\) In this way, the goal is the education of the whole person for the breadth of the clergy role. The future clergy member should not just have knowledge but should integrate different knowledges into his or her full self. Foster et al. (2006) delineate the role of the professional educator in developing and nurturing the clergy member. They explain,

> The exercise of the pedagogical imagination involves teachers, at a minimum, in making decisions about (1) what to teach from all that could be taught; (2) how to engage students in what they intend for them to learn; (3) how to assess the extent to which students learn what was intended; and (4) how to negotiate their sense of obligation to the expectations of students, to traditions of knowledge, and to the religious communities that will be receiving them as clergy and leaders in ministry (30).\(^ {12}\)

The faculty members as pedagogues are responsible for the entire process of education from deciding the curriculum to imagining how the students will be able to personally engage with and apply it in the field. The educators should “want students to develop a relationship with the subject while at the same time becoming agents of that subject through their professional roles in academic and religious communities (31).”\(^ {13}\) Teaching is a collection of deliberate, goal-oriented acts coupled with a curriculum reflective of the institution. There is no single, definitive YCT pedagogy or pedagogical method, though each faculty member teaches his or her subject towards

\(^ {11}\) Ibid.
\(^ {12}\) Ibid.
\(^ {13}\) Ibid.
the goal of creating the ideal, multi-faceted, integrated Modern Orthodox rabbi. Foster et al. (2006) comment that “In the context of seminary education, the dynamics of teaching and learning take place in and are influenced by their relationship to the ‘larger enterprises’ of the school’s mission and culture, the religious traditions that look to the school for future religious leadership, and the public realm in which those religious traditions negotiate their futures (35-6).”

YCT follows a Jewish day school-esque dual schedule: limudei kodesh (holy/religious studies) in the morning and more secular, or professional, studies in the afternoons. As Steven M. Cohen and Samuel Heilman (1989) note regarding day schools in general, "Rejecting the insularity of the yeshiva Orthodoxy, the day school Orthodox have sought to synthesize - or at the very least syncretize - secular and Jewish learning (26)." From 9:15am to 1pm, YCT students study traditional Jewish texts (gemara in their first year or two, and then halakha in their final three years; one afternoon class in Tanakh is offered.) The students’ time is spent either in seder (i.e. the beit midrash) with a chevruta (learning partner) or in shiur (class). YCT’s morning curriculum is different than the standard Orthodox rabbinical program because of its focus on halakha, as Rabbi Linzer explains,

The span of our Torah curriculum, in depth, breadth and methodology, goes far beyond that of classic Orthodox rabbinical schools. First, we believe that true Torah study is not limited to the study of Talmud. While Talmud is studied intensively at YCT, halakha is the core of our curriculum. As future community rabbis, our students must be trained in the theory and practice of halakha. . . . Students also study responsa literature, rules of psak [halakhic decisions], and contemporary halakhic topics."16

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14 Ibid.
New students begin with text skills; then, as a student learns more, he progresses, each in its own year (the school as a whole is on a three-year cycle with these materials), to the laws of Shabbat, kashrut, and niddah (women’s impurity/family purity). These are the three subjects generally required for standard rabbinic ordination (i.e. they are tested on the official qualifying exam), the three topics that are of most concern to communities and community members. Both students and faculty members often refer to questions from the aforementioned subjects as “pots and pans halakha.” That is, practical applications and usages primarily in the home.

The goal of the morning, traditional text program is to develop talmidei hachamim (highly-learned scholars) and poskim (halakhic decisors). As Rabbi Linzer elaborates, “Our goal is to create knowledgeable, empathetic poskim who are skilled in the art of halakhic decision-making, who are sensitive to the human condition and to life circumstances, and who use mature judgment in rendering halakhic rulings.”¹⁷ This means that the students will ideally have advanced levels of Jewish textual knowledge and express facility in understanding, deconstructing, explaining, teaching, learning, and drawing from those sources. In fact, one of YCT’s core values is “Inspiring a passionate commitment to the study of Torah in all its rich forms and the scrupulous observance of halakha.” By establishing the expectation of knowledge at elite levels, YCT both sets high internal standards and also seeks to shape how the larger, general community perceives and understands the school. YCT students need to be broadly trained at advanced levels, because, as Rabbi Kaplan explains, “I don’t think that we know for sure eventually what’s going to be a bigger challenge for the rabbi – to answer pots and pans questions or to really address the big philosophical issues that plague the modern Orthodox world.” He elaborates on the types of training needed for specific aspects of the rabbinic role:

¹⁷ Ibid.
giving them the tools to *posken* is going to prepare them for the pots and pans part of the job; teaching them how to learn *gemara*, *rishonim* [early commentators], and engage the tradition, *sugiyas* [a section including one narrative arc] in a real sophisticated way, hopefully is going to provide them the tools to engage and address the bigger meta questions which *halakha* helps you address, but not as much as learning *gemara* and *rishonim*. So that’s one part, and secondly, . . . in terms of personality, a YCT rabbi needs to be a *talmid hacham* and the model is the way *talmidei hachamim* have been understood through the ages, someone who really knows Torah. And *gemara* is the primary tool to get that, to create really solid *talmidei hachamim*.

Professionally, the students need to be prepared for whatever they might encounter in terms of Jewish law outside the building’s walls; the students have to not only understand text on the page, but also comprehend how it relates to the real world outside the yeshiva. They will be a step closer to qualified for those tasks if they master the text.

During the afternoons, the students learn, theoretically, how to apply what they study in the morning *shiurim* to real-life situations. Students attend classes in pastoral counseling, lifecycle event officiation, community organizing, and social justice. Each class involves traditional text, though often more contemporary commentaries are added to the mix. The classes specifically help the students transition between roles – from being inside the yeshiva to being outside in the community. Jackson Carroll (1997), in his study of two Christian theological seminaries, explains this process of translation and transference of information through a quote from a student at Evangelical Theological Seminary: “You are not only getting your academics and learning to process an exegesis, and how to preach, and all these other little elements that will give you an edge so you can do your ministry effectively, but it’s being able to apply that stuff within the community (79).”18 Foster et al. (2006) describe this educational approach as “pedagogies of performance” wherein “seminary educators emphasize the interaction of

academic and religious expectations for effective leadership in clergy practice (157).”¹⁹ YCT students, in order to model public Orthodoxy by example need to understand how to take what they study and enter effectively into public space.

When YCT students graduate, their titles will be “rabbi,” but their education will have been much broader in traditional text than those to their left and their training in the professional career aspects will be much richer than those to their right, as expressed widely by members of the faculty. YCT has to be a professional yeshiva in order to accomplish its mission of producing the ideal Modern Orthodox rabbis who are steeped in textual, practical-professional knowledge and are open and serve all of klal Yisrael (the community of Israel, i.e. all Jews), not just the Orthodox community. If they can attain mastery in all of these different curricula, the YCT student will truly be able to serve every Jew. Faltering in any given area, though, may mean the loss of a certain audience or the discontinuation of access to an element of the public sphere.

Section 2: The Place of Prayer at YCT

As with all yeshivot, professional or not, the day begins with prayer. YCT commences with shacharit, the morning prayer service, at 7:45 am. One student is the designee to open the front door of the building that houses YCT. Another student takes it upon himself to wait in the lobby for anyone who arrives between 7:45 and 8:00 am, when the building officially opens and the doors are unlocked by a security guard. The prayer service is held upstairs in the same room in which the students study, the beit midrash.

Even though YCT is exclusively a men’s institution, the school is prepared for women, should they want to attend prayer services. Whether a woman is present or not (generally the latter), a student will string up the lace mechitza (divider between men and women’s prayer

spaces) across the width of the room thus creating an *ezrat nashim* (women’s section.) This is an internal actualization of part of YCT’s core value of “Recognizing the need to enhance and expand the role of women in *talmud Torah* [learning], the *halakhic* process, religious life and communal leadership within the bounds of *halakha.*” YCT creates an open, welcoming space: if an Orthodox woman (or one who does not feel the need for egalitarian prayer) should happen to stop by and wants to pray, she should feel comfortable doing so. As Rabbi Blum explains, the *mechitza* is an example of YCT’s feminism:

[YCT is] a place that decides to put up a *mechitza* in their *beit midrash* every time they *daven* [pray] even if there’s no woman present because if they don’t do that, they’ll be creating a space that a woman will have to push herself into. Some guys might be there and then she’d come in there and she’d feel –, so it [the women’s section] has to sit there empty so that any woman who walks in knows she has a place to go. There’s not going to be, it’s up when there’s not a woman in the *beit midrash*. . . . we’re expecting you if you wish to come, there’s a place for you already.

In numerous contexts outside of YCT, female friends of mine have commented – without my asking – about how nice it is that YCT students set up a *mechitza* each time the group prays, and how genuinely welcome that makes them feel.

In less observant circles, men would stop at the sanctuary entrance to cover their heads; for these students, however, *kippot* are a requisite element of their wardrobes and are worn all the time. Before the prayers begin, all of the men don *tefillin* (phylacteries) and those who are married also wear a *tallit*, a prayer shawl. Many men keep these items in the *beit midrash* for the duration of the week since this is their most frequented prayer space. On Fridays, they take the items home with them to use in their synagogues.

After they have put on their *tallitot* and *tefillin*, the men begin to *daven* the beginning of the morning service. They can only get to a certain point, though, if their goal is to pray the
complete service. A minyan (quorum of ten adult men) is required in order to say certain prayers – kaddish, barchu, and the kedusha – and to read from the Torah. “The thing that bothers me the most,” one student comments, “is the poor showing at shacharit.” On two mornings in one week, a minyan develops by 8:00; on one day, it takes until 8:10. Though ten men are required, it is customary to not literally count those who are present. In order to avoid this taboo, many people will number “not one, not two, not three,” and so on. When “not nine” men are present, one of the students calls the downstairs door monitor, who likewise is decked out in tallit and tefillin and is going through the prayer service on his own, to come up and join in order to make the quorum. It is especially important to “make a minyan” on Mondays and Thursdays, the two weekdays designated for reading from the Torah. This specific Thursday, it is a problem.

At 8:40 Thursday morning, when shacharit has finally finished (ten minutes late) and the students should have been eating breakfast, those present, including Rabbi Linzer, hold an impromptu meeting in the middle of the beit midrash. A minyan isn’t forming until late – what should be done? On Monday, they had decided that if they start five minutes later, the problem would disappear; that hadn’t worked. With Rabbi Linzer serving as moderator, the students toss out recommendations: Should there be a rotation? Sign-ups? Someone to personally ask who would be attending? One person suggests having designated people each morning, an idea which another student strongly opposed on the grounds that “it shouldn’t be an issue that YCT doesn’t have a minyan.” Another student realizes that they are, in fact, getting a minyan every morning, just not on time. He states that “if the five late people came on time, it would be fine,” to which someone else provides a method for ensuring this. He suggests that YCT and the students fund a carpool from Riverdale (where several of the students live) in order to guarantee four or five men each morning. One of the students has a car anyway – those riding could help pay for gas and
YCT could chip in for tolls and parking. Someone else suggests that each student be asked individually about his commitment to the minyan and the reasons he is or is not able to attend. The meeting ends with these two recommendations: a way to get to the root of the attendance problem and a way to provide a sufficient number of people. Rabbi Linzer says that he will speak to the appropriate people in the administration about the funding and the students continue on to breakfast. The day after the meeting, a minyan convenes by 7:55 am – still not on-time, but closer.

Rabbi Blum notes the ways in which YCT falls outside the boundaries of traditional yeshivot in regards to minyan. He compares the situation at YCT to his own experiences:

In a regular yeshiva, you never have to worry about whether you’re going to get a minyan in the morning, but here you do because maybe they have other things to do with their lives, they have to prioritize. And also, wife’s got a bad headache and they have to get the kid off to school, they have to wait for the babysitter. Or they just plain don’t, I don’t feel like going in this morning. I’ll go in for the beginning of seder. That would have been unthinkable where I was.

Missing minyan in the morning may not be normative behavior in an Orthodox yeshiva, but for men taking more active roles in the home and with childcare, it is standard in regards to family and gender roles in the twenty-first century. Within this group of men, their active participation in the roles of husband and father are not only expected, but explicitly stated in the yeshiva’s core value of “Living our personal, family and public lives guided by the highest ethical and moral standards, reflective of yosher and kiddush shem Shamayim.” “Cultivating yir’at shamayim—i.e. spirituality, God-consciousness, piety, and ethical sensitivity—and integrating it into all learning, religious practice, and worldly pursuits” is also a core value; however, generally speaking, the students’ priority is family and not the minyan – 180 degrees opposite of Rabbi Blum’s experience. Though this shift in gender roles is a huge step forward for feminism,
making a *minyan* is still an issue. How will priorities be balanced? Surely there could not be an Orthodox yeshiva that doesn’t have a *shacharit minyan*.

On a theoretical level, prayer is not just about providing a prayer space for women and making sure there is a quorum. Prayer builds community. Emile Durkheim writes that religious ceremonies “set collectively in motion; groups come together to celebrate them. Thus their first result is to bring individuals together, multiply the contacts between them, and make those contacts more intimate (352).”

Out of obligation to attend *shacharit*, those who are able *de facto* develop a fraternal bond by virtue of participation in collective ritual. Not only is prayer about community, it is also about God, as Richard Bellah (1996) states in *Habits of the Heart*:

> Worship calls to mind the story of the relationship of the community with God . . . Worship also reiterates the obligation that the community has under taken, including the biblical insistence on justice and righteousness, and on love of God and neighbor, as well as the promises God has made that make it possible for the community to hope for the future. Though worship has its special times and places, especially on the Sabbath in the house of the Lord, it functions as a model or pattern for the whole of life. Through reminding the people of their relationship to God, it establishes patterns of character and virtue that should operate in economic and political life as well as in the context of worship (227).

Prayer has the potential to be both a social and a socializing process and an identity former; however, in Judaism one cannot fully pray an entire service without ten men – ten men that YCT has a difficult time getting to attend *shacharit*.

**Section 3: Spirituality at YCT**

In terms of prayer, education, and the school’s general environment, spirituality is a benignly pervasive, yet highly contested, element of the Open aspect of YCT’s Open Orthodoxy. As

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Rabbi Linzer writes, “We strive to nurture the inner religious, spiritual, and emotional dimension of each student’s character . . .” 22 Joel, a fourth-year student, explains the tension:

I guess that I’m one of the spiritual people in the beit midrash and I think that there’s very few spiritual people and I think everyone’s overly intellectual. And I’ve heard the same, vice versa from the intellectuals, that everyone here is so overly spiritual and the makom [place/space] is not like a place of intellectual pursuit.

Even while students argue and struggle about the role of spirituality at YCT, spirituality or spiritual options exist within the curriculum in the form of a spiritual writing workshop and the occasional spiritual retreat or spiritual component to a program. This trend is consonant with what Foster et al. (2006) acknowledge: “Much of the attention to spirituality and to spiritual formation in contemporary seminary education occurs outside the classroom (259).” 23 As such, spirituality and spiritual programming are generally atypical for yeshivot, especially those that strongly promote intellectualism.

Following the High Holidays in the fall, after classes had resumed, the students participated in sessions on spirituality taught by a visiting rabbi from Israel. A couple weeks later, a small group of students meets during breakfast to discuss how to apply more of what they had learned and to better infuse spirituality into the YCT experience. The issue at hand is not whether or not there should be more spirituality at YCT, but rather how and when to fit it into the schedule. As Jonathan, who convenes the meeting, states, “I guess the purpose of this little discussion is to think about ways that we might create a little more of that [spiritual] space on a bit more regular basis in the yeshiva. And I would say the caution is that if you do it too often, it becomes less meaningful . . .” The group, casually assembled around an open box of pastries, discusses both structure and content.

In terms of structure, the students toss around ideas – forty-five minutes to one hour per week, twenty minutes once a week in the mornings, in the evenings, one hour once or twice a month, fifteen minutes scheduled on your own time, etc. As Jonathan comments, “Yeah, it takes some time. The . . . thing that I really took away from the workshop was that you have to make the time, you have to kind of set it aside a little bit as sacred otherwise . . . it’s hard.” These students are committed to finding a time, or at least a time frame, though their conversation evolves into the realm of format, as illustrated by their conversation:

If we do it weekly, maybe we could do something that is consistently shorter, like 15 or 20 minutes every week to sort of develop that sensitivity and have longer sessions, maybe that someone prepares – people prepare stuff on their own and spend some more time and do that every . . .

That works . . . Have that regular thing going on and have an hour session every month, every three weeks.

That’s a nice idea, actually.

That could work.

It’s a nice idea. I think because there’s also a sense of build-up as well coming in. We have sort of these weekly proto-sessions, but they’re not indeterminate. You know, they’re not going to particular highlights. You know, once a month for an hour we can incorporate an amalgamate of things that are going on and that can . . .

In that way also, if you miss one of the shorter sessions – assume that we’re all busy people. We all would love to be there for every set of three short sessions and the larger, culminating one but we may be only able to be there for two or so . . .

Give it a theme for four week’s work. So maybe the theme for spiritual chevrutas and then the next week is like God and text and then the hour-long thing is a big thing about God.

Oh God.
The students are committed to the idea of increased spirituality and, through dialogue, their ideas build off of each other in search of a common decision.

The context and content of the students’ discussion are also revealing. Firstly, the place: the students are meeting in the middle of the *beit midrash*, the locale of intellectual study of text as well as the main prayer space. Morning *seder* hasn’t officially started, but students are beginning to arrive. The students at the meeting are in the middle of the room, not side-lined in the least for their interest in exploring the spiritual, but neither does everyone who walks in the door join them. The students’ participation is voluntary and those who’ve chosen to participate engage actively in the conversation. In terms of curricular content, spirituality in practice is not standard in most Orthodox rabbinical schools. Many *yeshivot*, YCT included, offer classes in *hassidut* (spirituality and mysticism); however, those classes are text-based and intellectual. Though the material may lead students to subjectively explore their own spirituality, the explicit course goals are objective acquisition of facts. For a committee on spirituality to form and attract nearly a *minyan’s* worth of interested students is a testament to YCT’s openness and innovation as a Modern Orthodox institution and to the students’ initiative to actively apply its values to their experience.

Ultimately, the students decide on a format of spiritual *chevruta* sessions scheduled at each *chevruta* pair’s convenience with one larger event every month or so. This model and the goals of increased spirituality in the yeshiva and more opportunities for personal spiritual growth stated at the outset of the gathering reflect some of Foster et al.’s (2006) findings regarding the role of spirituality in seminaries. The researchers discerned two uses of small groups for the purpose of enhancing students’ spiritual formation: “small groups can be used to create a space in a busy seminary calendar to tend to students’ spiritual growth and they can center the spiritual
life of the seminary community, thus contributing to students’ spiritual development (281).” 24

Towards the end of the meeting, students begin discussing content and what they want to personally get out of a group-based spiritual experience or program. Two students’ thoughts are as follows:

Eli: Is there any commonality about what spirituality means/what people are interested in studying/encountering in terms of spirituality? For me, I would say sensitivity to the world which is greater than I am. That’s my simplest worry. In my head, I mean to contrast that to working on self-improvement. I think of that as close to and often confused with the my-mine spirituality. This is not, for me, focused around working on my midos [qualities, attributes] per se, although I certainly need that. But, I’m thinking about heightening my sensitivity to that which is beyond me.

Asher: We’ve already talked a lot about connectedness, connectedness to people and to God. And, for me, that’s the essence of spirituality, is feeling connected and it’s more of an emotional than an almost like doing – it’s not about whatever mitzvah you can think of that I do, that I don’t do, that I should be doing, it’s more about how I feel connected to God.

Each student has his own definition of spirituality and spiritual needs. Though spirituality may not be part of the yeshiva curriculum, YCT is a conducive environment for seeking and exploring spirituality. If someone doesn’t feel spiritually fulfilled, he can convene a meeting, as Jonathan does with like-minded classmates, and work for change.

Following the meeting, Jonathan will report back to Rabbi Linzer who will inform the curriculum committee of the ad hoc spirituality task force’s decisions. As Robert Wuthnow (1994) comments, “Religious hierarchies, by their nature, seldom produce anything that evokes deep-felt wonder or a sense of being in subjective contact with the sacred (78).” 25 On the contrary, at YCT, the hierarchies welcome student input and nurture collaboration. In this way,

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24 Ibid.
spirituality becomes part of the learning experience and ethos of the school, while also supporting and promoting student leadership initiative.

**Section 4: Curriculum – Traditional Text**

As in *yeshivot* and Jewish learning institutions the world over, YCT students spend the first half of the day engaged in *limudei kodesh* (holy studies.) In his first one or two years (depending on whether or not he spends a year in the *mechina*, or not) the YCT student studies Talmud.\(^26\) During this time, the student builds his skills in reading and understanding both the structure and content of the text. For the next three years, the duration of his time at YCT, the student studies *halakha*. Each student is assigned to a class based on his skill level and facility with the texts. YCT’s *limudei kodesh* curriculum is standard for any Orthodox rabbinic training program. The students thoroughly cover the laws of Shabbat, *kashrut*, and *taharat hamishpacha* (family purity). YCT’s curriculum is on a three year cycle; this year, the students are studying *kashrut*.

From 9:15 am until 1pm, the students engage in one of two activities – *seder* or *shiur*. In *seder*, they either learn or review the text alone or in *chevruta*. For this, they sit in the *beit midrash* at their *mekomot*. Each student has at least one *chevruta* from his class. Murray Danzger (1989) defines *chevruta* as “an intellectual ‘buddy system’ (278);”\(^27\) Foster, et al. (2006) define the *chevruta* approach to learning as “structured dialogical study . . . [a] relational practice (48).”\(^28\) The goal of the *chevruta* is to learn and understand the text through interacting with it and with the person sitting on the other side of the table. As Samuel Heilman (1982a) explains,

\(^{26}\) “A typical page of the Talmud consists of a Mishna, a statement of a law or custom, and some dissenting opinions. In the Gemara the opinions are elaborated on, examined, and compared to related and contradictory rulings . . . The Mishnah itself is in Hebrew, the Gemara in Aramaic . . . (169)” From Danzger, Murray Herbert. 1989. *Returning to tradition : the contemporary revival of Orthodox Judaism*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

\(^{27}\) Ibid.

Hayim Volozhiner (1749-1821), disciple of the Vilna Gaon, invented what has since developed into the *chevruta* learning method. Heilman describes,

> His innovations as a teacher were in the yeshiva world of Talmudic study where he initiated what became known as the “khavruse” style of learning in which a small group of three or four students reviewed the texts together and became united intellectually and emotionally through their scholarship.\(^{29}\)

The texts are conversations between learned people and across centuries; the students engage in these conversations, with these figures, and in their debates primarily through *chevruta* study. Heilman (1983) elaborates on the dynamic interaction of this process:

> In the cultural performance of *lernen* [learning], men follow prefigured paths where they express and act out Jewish beliefs and ideas suggested in or by the texts they review. They digress with their fellows and in an inter-subjective way cue, echo, and amplify the tradition in new ways while exploring the contemporary in light of the tradition. They reach out and bond themselves to the people in and of the books they study; and as they vitalize the text, they revitalize those ties, making sense of their Judaism (109).\(^{30}\)

The process of learning Torah is a dance with the text. Foster et al. (2006) describe a process that “that can blur the relationship among past, present, and future. As partners in dialogue, students of the ancient rabbis [shift] back and forth between memory as retrieval to memory as dialogue; from reason as critical evaluation to reason as imaginative engagement with voices past, present, and future (93).” The students actively dialogue with each other, with the texts, and with the faculty.

> Teachers roam the *beit midrash* while students learn, providing guidance and help. During the designated time for *seder*, when they are not checking in with and helping their students, teachers also review the texts and plan lessons. This is different from a standard theological seminary or clergy training institution where, “If students want to probe an issue

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from class in greater depth or talk about a difficulty they are having in class, they are typically invited to meet the instructor during office hours (51).”

This institution, as described by Foster et al. (2006) is modeled on the university; YCT is modeled on the yeshiva. As a result, the beit midrash, not the lecture hall, establishes a more collaborative learning environment. In fact, each limudei kodesh teacher (including Rabbi Linzer who also has an office) has a makom in the beit midrash where he learns and may store some of his books. In addition to being references for the students, the teachers’ presence in the beit midrash creates a sense of intergenerational continuity in the pursuit of knowledge and reinforcement of the culture of the beit midrash.

Teachers call for shiur, the formal lesson, when their students have spent adequate time preparing the materials. Shiurim are generally held in a seminar classroom and last anywhere from thirty minutes to two hours in length. Each teacher “gives shiur” differently; but, nevertheless, the lessons have much in common. In all shiurim, the teachers and students review the text studied during seder. Heilman (1983) describes that the learning process of both seder and shiur: "can be divided into four primary steps or moves: recitation, translation, explanation, and discussion (6)." Shiur is comparable to any lecture or seminar class in a university setting, but with different subject matter and holy reverence for the texts.

In shiur, the teachers both impart knowledge and find out how much the students learned in seder. It is not uncommon for the class to cover only part of what the students prepared, especially given the variety of opinions and interpretations of the text and commentaries. The students bring their questions from seder into shiur. Sometimes, they need clarification on a term, as illustrated by Jonathan’s frustration with seemingly multiple uses of the word erev: “Use

English! Friday night or Friday afternoon?!” At other times, the students dialogue with each other to try to find clarity about a concept. In the following exchange, the advanced skills class discusses a complex text about the status of cooked chicken:

Rabbi Kaplan: When you have a piece of chicken, it’s no longer a bird.

Gabe: My mother doesn’t say “we’re having pieces of chicken for dinner,” she says “we’re having chicken.”

Sam: But we don’t posken by your mother!

In this way, the students are engaging in what Heilman (1983) calls contemporization, “rationally reinterpreting the seemingly archaic so as to make it appear in harmony with contemporary ideals and consciousness (226).” As part of their pedagogy, the teachers relate the text to the broader world in order to aid learning and model Open Orthodoxy’s synthesis of halakhic observance and contemporary reality.

YCT approaches education collaboratively in terms of content and pedagogy towards the goal of comprehensive training and education. As Foster et al. (2006) write, “The pedagogical issue at stake for clergy education centers on the progression of students from the inexperience of novices to the exercise of expertise in bringing both professional knowledge and skill to bear in specific pastoral, priestly, or rabbinic issues and situations (320).” Not only do faculty members draw comparisons between the situations in the text and situations in the modern world, they also bring in guest speakers, go on field trips, and look to experts in different fields. YCT’s openness, in operation in the classroom, translates to an almost inter-disciplinary methodology. Rabbi Linzer, who teaches upper-division halakha courses explains this method through a comparison between YCT and a more stereotypical Orthodox institution. He illustrates,

33 Ibid.
Here are some differences: number one, the disciplines we’re willing to introduce. . . . Something like Shabbos and *kashrus* . . . when there’s an interesting issue about the history of *halakha* and how certain issues might have evolved over time and we can bring in an academic article to talk about that or to talk to that point. Or by Shabbos, if we’re dealing with issues of hot water on Shabbos, we’re going to bring in somebody who’s going to talk about boilers and hot water heaters and so on. Some of it is purely intellectual, historical issues, some of it is very pragmatic, but definitely bringing in other disciplines.

This non-standard approach gives students a broader understanding of traditional, text-based topics and how they apply practically in the contemporary world. The tactic brings the outside into the yeshiva to achieve deeper understanding of the subject at hand. This approach, as Rabbi Linzer further explains, is not just applicable to specific words and aspects of text, but to broad concepts as well. He states,

> . . . it’s not just bottom line, it’s not just the *sugiyot* in the *gemara*, we’re building the conception models. It really tries to do everything – following the models from the *gemara* through the *rishonim*, through the *Shulchan Aruch*, through contemporary *poskim*, so seeing the sweep so it’s very comprehensive. We read *tshuvot* [*legal responsa*] inside and we, in addition, see how *halakha* evolves and moves over time and it’s not a stagnant thing, but we see how it interacts with the real world. It’s comprehensive. It appreciates the art of *halakha* . . .

Grounded in text but enhanced by information from other disciplines, this approach seeks to ensure that traditional Judaism remains relevant in the contemporary world. In a yeshiva, it is standard for someone to use the word “inside” to describe the text on the page.34 Students and teachers alike look or go inside the texts. Rabbi Linzer takes his students outside the text in order for them to more completely understand what is inside. Temporarily relating to the text

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34 In contrast, according to Foster et al. (2006), Dianne Bergant, an educator at Catholic Theological Union uses the terms “in front of” and “behind” the text. “In front of the text” means that there are many different ways of interpreting a text and the readers’ own interpretations fill the dimension of the front. “Behind the text” describes “the social location of those who are . . . depicting God (60).” Foster, Charles R., Lisa E. Dahill, Lawrence A. Golemon, and Barbara Wang Toletino. 2006. *Educating clergy: teaching practices and pastoral imagination*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
externally allows the students to productively contemporize which they will have to do when they work outside the walls of the yeshiva. For Rabbi Linzer and the rest of YCT’s curriculum committee, this is how they operationalize openness in their classrooms.

The students appreciate the comprehensive, synthesizing approach to learning *halakha*. Jonah, a student in Rabbi Linzer’s *halakha* class, comments on why he enjoys and values both the subject and the pedagogy:

I’m loving *halakha*. . . I think what I love, what’s intriguing is the urgency of it – the fact that learning is not just . . . theoretical, but because it’s so concerned with what’s going to happen tomorrow, how you’re going to eat lunch today, that’s there’s something so much more real about it . . . I feel that I’m learning, gaining skills, getting new tools everyday. Just some of the aspects, it’s real – how I can live my life as a religious Jew, how I can help other people live their lives . . .

Jonah is an active participant in the dynamism of YCT’s broader, open approach to teaching *halakha*. This method, inclusive of details, enhances the learning experience and makes the subject more relevant to his life. Jonah’s experience attains the goal of learning, as Charles Liebman (1968) states, “Ideally, study of Talmud becomes an immersion into *halakha*, which lies at the heart of Judaism. . . . it is an act of devotion as well as study, and may generate both emotional and intellectual religious commitment (22).”

YCT students are being trained to be rabbis and have very public roles in communities. They need to be able to relate text to their communities and to the issues facing their lives and the lives of others, to identify and struggle in the dialectic of Modern Orthodoxy while remaining dedicated to the text on the page.

Section Five: Curriculum – Skill Development

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36 For more information about curriculum integration, see the section in Chapter 4 about the Teaching Rabbinic Literature Conference.
Advanced learning is grounded in basic skills. Students enter YCT with knowledge of how to read and comprehend a page of *gemara*. Many learned this skill, at least in the abstract, during their years of Jewish schooling; many more learned and/or expanded their skills during their time studying in Israel. For those students with weaker backgrounds, YCT offers a one-year *mechina*. During this one year, students focus on just *gemara* skills. To better cement those skills, the students will continue learning (there are two options, one basic and the other advanced skills) during the following year for their morning class, though they will join the rest of the student body in the regular professional training program in the afternoons. The *mechina* is taught by one member of the faculty, but overseen by Rabbi Kaplan. Rabbi Kaplan self-describes his roles at YCT as follows:

I’m in charge for I would say 90 to 95% of the *gemara*-related *shiurim*. That can mean anything. . . . basic *rishonim* skills to a more advanced *rishonim* skills, . . . to a *bekiut* [faster-paced, review] *shiur* that I teach in the afternoon. And, last year we also had a very traditional Brisker [a certain study method] *shiur* which I taught. . . . and I’m the director of the *beis midrash* program. But, every now and then, I’ll also teach kind of . . . different electives. For example, this year I teach a class on *minhag* [customs of] Pinsk on Fridays. I taught a class on *hassidut* for two semesters. I teach occasional classes on history, on Jewish history which is my second interest. But, usually, my primary responsibility is *gemara* and then occasionally, I also teach a class on theodicy. . .

Rabbi Kaplan and his various classes are ubiquitous at YCT; nearly every student has at least one opportunity to study with him.

Rabbi Kaplan, a favorite among the students, is an animated teacher. His voice fills even the largest classroom. He speaks at varying speeds in English punctuated by Hebrew and Aramaic, and peppered with the occasional Yiddish phrase. His use of a *gemara nign* (cadence or tune) is not limited to reading the text; rather, the cadence of his voice changes with his level of excitement about the subject matter. He writes on the whiteboards and walks around or paces
in the classroom. He moves between the table and the board, sometimes stopping to sit in his chair or perch on an armrest while listening to a student. Reflective of his body language and teaching style, the students comment, he brings the text to life in the classroom. As Micah, a first-year student, comments, Rabbi Kaplan . . . “takes the most random text . . . and he makes it into this epic battle between values and he turns like these random *shakla v’taryas* [rabbinic exchanges] into these philosophical debates between the rabbis.” Rabbi Kaplan teaches in this manner because, for him, the text is alive – the people, the situations, the contexts – all of them exist and are fair game for interaction. He learned this technique from observing his own teachers. As he explains,

In some ways of course, I model my own teaching on teachers that I had myself growing up and especially those that were very successful and those that I liked very much. . . . I just introduced the Ran [a commentator] at the end of the class and whenever I talk about the Ran, I remember that *rebbe* [rabbi] that taught me Ran. And he was just this amazing teacher really infused in me a love for *rishonim* and a love for Torah.

Rabbi Kaplan’s enthusiasm and love of the text is contagious, but in order to experience this liveliness, the students have to understand the words on the page. Rabbi Kaplan is patient with his students, but he pushes and challenges them to not just translate the text but to really comprehend what the text is saying – who is speaking to whom in what context and why. As Rabbi Kaplan says, “a doctor needs a stethoscope . . . to be a good doctor and a rabbi needs the *gemara* . . .” As Robert, a third-year student, comments, “Rabbi Kaplan's *gemara* class had a lot of impact, just in terms of how to read text. He really just opened it up to being much deeper . . . I already knew it was rich and deep, but learning with Rabbi Kaplan, it was so much richer and so much deeper.” Rabbi Kaplan prods the students to engage more with the text and the commentators, to explore the intricacies. He will often speak to the text or about a personality in
the text as though the person is sitting in the room. One gets the sense that the *rishonim* are genuinely Rabbi Kaplan’s close friends. He asks the class, “What’s bothering the Rashbam [in the text]?” He continues, “[Rashbam’s] problem is *chutzpah* [gall]! What was he thinking?” Then, he asks Rashbam directly: “Who are you? What gives you the *chutzpah* ...?” Rabbi Kaplan dialogues with the tradition, students, and text all at the same time, without leaving the classroom.

Rabbi Kaplan’s *shiurim*, at their cores, are about building skills. He employs a method that he affectionately calls “Kicking Humpty Dumpty.” The students first, with his guidance, translate and deconstruct the text in *chevruta* during *seder*. During *shiur*, he takes the text apart further, explaining specific words and phrases and how they fit into larger pictures and contexts. He actively “kicks Humpty Dumpty” and, with the students, examines the minute shards. As a class, they put Humpty Dumpty together again. At the end of the *shiur* or the end of a particular unit, the students haven’t merely glued pieces of shell back together, they have developed deeper understanding of the text and its intricacies. Robert, who intends to teach after receiving rabbinic ordination, has learned both text and pedagogy from Rabbi Kaplan. He says,

> in terms of a teacher, I’d never thought of it in these terms, he has this ... you have to be able to explain it to the guy on the street. So taking something that's that complicated and being able to explain it to the guy on the street has helped me in terms of, or I think it will help me a lot when I go back to the classroom and have to teach again.

Rabbi Kaplan’s pedagogy is a process through which students not only gain important skills but also ultimately develop weightier comprehensions of the materials. Rabbi Kaplan teaches his students basics, gives them firm foundations for textual exploration. Motivated out of love for the text, he leads the students deeper, igniting both interest and passion for the written word.
Students carry the passion and skills from Rabbi Kaplan with them through all of their subsequent years and more advanced classes at YCT.

Section Six: Technology as Curricular Aids in the Beit Midrash and Classroom

Rabbi Kaplan pushes his students to understand the complexities of the gemara; technology pushes YCT and the rest of the Orthodox world in learning. In the contemporary era, people regularly download podcasts of shiurim and lectures onto their mp3 players. The year 2005 even saw the birth of the “Shaspod,” an mp3 player with pre-downloaded daf yomi (Talmud page per day) lectures. Technology is making an impact in Torah education, and YCT is an active participant. In the standard yeshiva or beit midrash of yore, bookcases, tables, and even chairs would be overflowing with large tomes of Talmud. The volumes would be opened up on any empty surface, sandwiched between a student and his chevruta. Next to the specific book of study would be other books – books by more commentators, reference books, and books of midrash. Blumberg (2007) describes the idealized scene:

[The term] yeshiva conjured rooms filled with long tables, men of all ages sitting on either sides of the tables, studying with each other, reading the Talmud aloud, debating its meanings, engaging in a lifetime practice that could be sustained without a teacher, though independent study alternated with shiur, rabbinic lessons about the material prepared (xvi).37

In shiur, it would be the same, each student with his book and the teacher with his. The beit midrash and classrooms look different now. Books still fill and overflow nearly every available surface, but they have been joined by digital voice recorders, cellphones, and laptop computers.

Nearly every student at YCT totes a laptop around. During break times, taking full advantage of the wireless network, they peruse newspapers, check sports scores, read and write email, post to their blogs, and go on Facebook. During seder, the students primarily use books,

but their laptops are important reference tools. Everyone in YCT has an on-line subscription to either Bar Ilan or Spertus. Bar Ilan, labeled “The Global Jewish Database” is a goldmine for Talmud questions, answers, and texts; Spertus is similar. The students use these resources frequently, looking up passages, checking citations, and cross-referencing texts. During shiur, many students take notes on their laptops. Not everyone takes his computer into the classroom, though many do. They have the sefer, any handouts, and their laptop. The laptop has become a necessary tool for the university student and thus the YCT student as well.

The Bar Ilan software has impacted the nature of learning in the classroom. It is not uncommon for teachers to request that students look up something on the software. The teachers do not bring laptops to class; however, if they want to check or reference a text from a different book than the one they has brought, they will not hesitate to use the software. At one point, during a shiur in the lifecycles curriculum, Rabbi Linzer asks Ron, a student in the class, to bring up a supplementary text using Bar Ilan. Once Ron finds the text, Rabbi Linzer reads directly from the screen. Whereas once a scholar needed to rely on his own memory or the memories of his classmates or teacher to find a text, now he can merely use the search function. Searching on Bar Ilan and Spertus alleviates the necessity of a good memory, saves time, and introduces students to new texts that they may not otherwise have encountered in their normal course of study. This technology is expanding the boundaries of access to text and materials thus enhancing the breadth of learning at YCT. Over-reliance on technology, though, could potentially harm the revered yeshiva culture and reduce the level of text recall skills that a rabbi needs – either that or save the backs of students who would no longer have to carry several heavy volumes with them all the time.

Section Seven: Curriculum – Pastoral Counseling
In the morning, religious studies classes, the students learn Jewish law; in the afternoons, they learn about Jewish people. These segments are the two components of curricular synthesis, the Open and the Orthodox, together. Charles Liebman (1968) describes the traditional and multifaceted roles of American rabbis, roles that still hold to this day:

The seminaries conceive the rabbi as knowing the Jewish textual tradition and, secondarily, as having some basic skills in preaching and officiating at religious and quasi-religious functions. Third in importance is his ability to do minimal counseling, and perhaps to recognize serious psychological problems in his congregants (107).38

Pastoral counseling is a strong component of YCT’s identity as a “professional yeshiva,” and a strong component of what makes the institution uniquely open. A strong pastoral counseling program has been important to the founders of YCT from its inception. Dr. Geller, a clinical psychologist, was recruited by Rabbi Berman, co-founder of YCT, to shape and direct the pastoral counseling program. According to Dr. Geller, no other seminary or clergy training program of any faith39 in the United States dedicates as much time to pastoral counseling and professional training as YCT. She explains, “when you look at any other school, any clergy school, what amount of time they’re allotting to what subjects tells you a great deal. Now, I’ve been to conferences across all religions . . . and nobody has the amount of dedicated, mandatory time that we do to pastoral counseling, nobody, Christian, Jewish, whatever.” YCT’s program is unparalleled. As such, it is also new for the students who, though they may have taken psychology classes in college or even graduate school, never previously approached the subject in a Jewish context. Michael, a third-year student, comments on the newness: “A number of the

39 Certainly no other rabbinical school offers as much pastoral counseling training as YCT; however, I was not able to check other seminaries.
professional development things have been influential on me, in particular counseling classes – thinking about things from a psychological standpoint is relatively new for me . . .” This innovative curricular aspect is one of the draws of YCT. As Noam, a fourth-year student, explains, “I came here . . . because of the pastoral counseling. . . . of the different things that rabbis do, that’s one of the most important for me, so I wanted to go to a place where I would get taught that.”

As Dr. Geller explains, the goal of the pastoral counseling program is two-fold: First, she wants the students “to be literate . . . basically competent in recognizing the major syndromes of human existence and either know how to deal it in a couple of short-term interventions themselves and know how to refer. . . . my goal is basic competence and literacy in these matters.” Dr. Geller does not expect the students to be professional psychiatrists or social workers, but they need to develop a degree of aptitude. Second, Dr. Geller wants the students “to know who they are and why they’re being rabbis and what’s touched off in them.” She further explains, “people go into the rabbinate, they want to be nice, they want to be helpful, and they get a lot of difficult and demanding stuff. I want them to be able to create firm boundaries between themselves, their private lives, their rabbinic work. I want them to have a sense of fraternity, not isolation.” While participating on a panel at a conference many years ago, Dr. Geller realized, through listening to the stories of rabbis from different schools, that being a rabbi can be a very lonely experience. Therefore, it became extremely important to the school that the students feel a real sense of community. Open Orthodoxy transmits Orthodox Judaism to the outside world. The students, the transmitters of openness, also need to care for themselves internally.
From the beginning, Dr. Geller and Rabbi Weiss instituted process groups to aid in the development of camaraderie and provide a psychologically supportive environment for the students. Students develop strong camaraderie within YCT through process groups. One morning a week, the students meet in their grade classes to discuss, with a professional, any concerns that they have or challenges that they face. As Dr. Geller explains, “They all have their own, dedicated person who stays with them and is paid and comes once a week for four years and talks about with them or facilitates whatever they want to talk about. And there’s no reporting . . . the group is supposed to take action. . . .” More than being merely an aspect of a larger curriculum, process groups send an important message to YCT students. As Dr. Geller says, “The point is that that is saying ‘this is important. What’s going on for you as people, whether it’s religious struggle or administrative struggle or fraternal rivalry or hatred or whatever, or love or who knows, matters. We take it seriously.’” This approach, where process groups are not just a forum for airing grievances, hugely impacts the general ethos and environment of YCT. Process groups, though private, open students up to each other and to the faculty, something that is very positive for community-building. Dr. Geller describes, “. . . in terms of the guys feeling comfortable about saying ‘look, I’m having a rough time,’ . . . And that’s a big deal; nobody is ashamed . . . It lends an entire atmosphere to the place which I think is really important.” In caring for the students as people, YCT ultimately cares for itself as a community. YCT is able to effectively transmit openness because it is, itself, open in this way.

Though the process groups are extremely important in developing the rabbinical students as human beings, the classroom experience develops them as future professionals. The curriculum for the pastoral counseling program is both broad and deep. During the course of one year, students study a plethora of topics. The entire curriculum lasts four years, with the first and
second years dedicated to skills-building and information while students in their third and fourth years spend more time out in the field. Dr. Geller explains the initial part of the first year curriculum:

There’s a lot on basic interviewing skills. . . . how to be with a person and shut up and listen; how to manage your own anxiety; how to deepen a conversation; how to ask for relevant, pertinent information about specifics – a lot of that in the first year. . . . Now, we’re moving into specific syndromes or states of distress so now we’re doing like the difference between neurotic and psychotic states and then . . . ADHD. And then I do two units on depression and suicide. . . .

These subjects are foundational, in much the same way as the text skills that Rabbi Kaplan teaches. The curricular topics are serious and reflect the range of issues which the future rabbis will encounter during their careers.

YCT’s administration and faculty, including Dr. Geller, believe that it is best to learn from the experts of each field. Therefore, Dr. Geller brings in guest lecturers on a semi-regular basis. There are certain topics, as Dr. Geller explains, in which she does not have significant expertise to teach the students at the level that they need. For example, she describes,

. . . Jews in prison. What do I know about Jews in prison? I have a patient in prison now, but that’s one guy. So, I have a guy come in . . . who has worked in the Delaware prison system and he teaches about Jews in prison which may not be a large number, but in every shul there is somebody who has been in prison, going to prison, come back from prison.

Though Jews and prison may be somewhat of a subversive topic, it is still a reality in the Orthodox community. Dr. Geller, in responding to the question of whether or not there are boundaries in the topics she is allowed to cover in class, replies,

No, definitely not. I don’t think we can cover everything because of time. There are certain subjects I’d say we’ve done short-shrift on, like maybe issues of the disabled or something like that, but I try to do a little of that, you know, touch on. I can’t be
comprehensive, but I get the guys to know it at least was mentioned once. So, there’s definitely nothing that we wouldn’t talk about.

Dr. Geller is given free range in topics for classes and lectures – everything is acceptable because everything is relevant to Orthodox Jews and Orthodox Judaism. This is Open Orthodoxy applied in the classroom to curriculum.

In addition to utilizing the best and most knowledgeable speakers on the broadest of pastoral counseling topics, Dr. Geller also employs what she believes to be the most appropriate pedagogical methods for each lesson. In particular, Dr. Geller describes “... student involvement is critical. ... role play is critical. I think that immersion in the full experience of the subject matter is critical. I think getting students to solve problems now, that they’ll have later, is very important.” Student role playing is a crucial component of the pastoral counseling educational experience. It helps the students develop and hone skills of sensitivity and understanding. Through playing a variety of roles, students develop sensitivity and compassion for the Other.

Dr. Geller presents scenarios that students are likely to encounter once they enter the rabbinate. In one class, students recap a situation in which a college student, “Josh Cohen,” approaches his campus Hillel rabbi about bringing his non-Jewish girlfriend (“Jenny”) with him to a Jewish student meal. Dr. Geller first reiterates the check-list for dealing with any situation: assess the urgency, determine the priority levels, and answer the questions “Where are you in the story?” and “How can you and your experiences connect to the story?” The students determine that there are several issues in this one situation: firstly, “Josh Cohen” is a kohen (a descendant of the priestly caste) and is halakhically disallowed from marrying someone who does not have two Jewish parents. Secondly, the meal is an issue. For many meals, welcoming non-Jews is not an issue; however, meals like a Passover seder are halakhically limited to participation by Jews.
Thirdly, the students are concerned about honesty. They want to be honest with “Josh” about his status as a kohen as well as issues of inter-faith dating; however, they do not want to scare him away. Jonathan believes it’s important to develop a relationship with the student for the sake of developing a relationship. Scott asks, “How do you sensitively bring up that issue?” David, who would arrange a series of meetings with “Josh” says “It’s ok to be clear.” Though the students may not reach conclusions or even a consensus, their exposure to and pre-professional engagement with counseling topics with specifically Jewish scenarios is already more than their peers enrolled in other seminaries.

Pastoral counseling is an innovative addition to a halakha- and gemara-focused Orthodox rabbinical school curriculum. As Dr. Geller herself states, “My classes are probably the most out-of-the-box of the semikha program.” The curriculum deals with problems that future rabbis will face in their lives, careers, and communities. Perhaps certain topics are taboo, but it does not mean that Orthodox Jews are immune or unaffected by them. As Dr. Geller says, the Orthodox community deals with a special situation in that

There’s more stigma and shame in Orthodoxy because there’s so much more community-watching and there’s more community, and therefore more a sense of “what is the community going to think?” People are very concerned about the impact on the larger family, the marriagability of their kids and that kind of stuff. So, I think there’s much more shame and stigma. That’s a big thing.

Addressing taboo topics in professional, productive, educational ways is a necessary element of career training in application of the values of Open Orthodoxy for future community leaders and rabbis. The pastoral counseling curriculum allows students to address topics head-on in a safe space so that when they do enter the public sphere they will be more prepared.

Section Eight: Curriculum – Lifecycles and Jewish Thought
Orthodox Jews, across the spectrum of observance, order their lives on Jewish calendars and Jewish clocks. In *Habits of the Heart*, Richard Bellah (1996) explains how time is different for religious communities because it includes an element of the sacred.

The day, the week, the season, the year are punctuated by an alternation of the sacred and the profane. Prayer breaks into our daily life at the beginning of a meal, at the end of the day, at common worship, reminding us that our utilitarian pursuits are not the whole of life, that a fulfilled life is one in which God and neighbor are remembered first (282).  

The daily, weekly, monthly, and annual YCT schedules reflect this attention to the sacred and ritualistic. Students don’t just participate in different activities at different set times, though. As rabbis-in-training, they must also learn how to facilitate sacred time and events for others. Thus, in their third and fourth years at YCT, as part of the afternoon curriculum, students study the Jewish lifecycle. As Ari, a third year student, explains, these courses complement the general curriculum and integrate several elements:

In terms of also the curricular aspects, the . . . diverse approach to issues, textual, psychological, sociological, political, all of these kinds of aspects are built into the curriculum. The lifecycles curriculum, which we're in right now, third and fourth year is particularly impressive in that way. We deal with the same issues in a psychological perspective, a ritual perspective, and a textual perspective, and it's really great.

This curriculum is an enriched synthesis of the different aspects of a YCT education, the texts and the people-skills.

Lifecycles classes, which, as Rabbi Linzer says, “go through cradle to grave teaching the *halakhic* issues,” also augment student pulpit and chaplaincy internships. YCT’s lifecycles program is unique on two fronts: first, in that it exists at all and second, in its attention to detail regarding both *halakhic* issues and real-life scenarios. According to Rabbi Linzer, “In a normal  

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semikha program do they have lifecycles? Forget it, they don’t even teach it. They don’t even really teach much more than *Yoreh De’ah*\(^{41}\) . . . And, to have [lifecycles] as a standard part of the curriculum is unheard of.” As with other aspects of the YCT educational experience, the lifecycles curriculum is multi-dimensional in order to maximize rabbinic training. Rabbi Linzer explains the collaborative content: “we also integrate it . . . you have the *halakha* piece of it, you have the [officiating] piece of it. How do you do a naming ceremony? How do you do a *bris* [ritual circumcision], a *bar mitzvah*, etc.? . . . And you have the pastoral piece about it, and dealing with people . . .” Lifecycles classes are the juncture of Open and Orthodoxy, standard *halakha* and the more pioneering pastoral counseling.

*Machshava*, Jewish thought, is the other aspect of the lifecycles curriculum. According to an article by a faculty member, YCT’s approach to Jewish thought is one of dialectic and synthesizing. She writes, “. . . philosophical ideas are studied together with *kabbalistic* approaches, rabbinical materials are studied with *hasidic* psychology, and religion is studied with modern Jewish theology.”\(^{42}\) This curricular component is largely taught by Rabbi Blum. Rabbi Blum attended public school in the United States and then went on to learn in Israel where he received rabbinic ordination. Upon returning to the United States, he pursued PhDs in both clinical psychology and philosophy. Rabbi Blum, according to his credentials, fulfills the requirements to be among the elite and synthesized, of Modern Orthodoxy – he is both a rabbi and has a PhD, thus proving that he has excelled according to the standards of both parochial and secular society. Rabbi Blum only teaches at YCT part-time, but his expertise is very important for times when, as he says, “you needed both a rabbi and someone with psychological training.”

\(^{41}\) *Yoreh De’ah* is one section of the *Arba Turim*, Rabbi Jacob ben Asher’s compilation of *halakha*. *Yoreh De’ah* deals with non-calendrical issues such as circumcision, marriage, charity, mourning, and others.

\(^{42}\) Roi, Biti. 2006. "YCT and Jewish Thought." *Darkhei* 3.
Rabbi Blum brings his dual credential into the classroom. His classes, as he explains, “address the issues of the development of spirituality and spiritual consciousness. . . . they fit into the meaning development portion of the curriculum. So, most of what I tend to teach is in the sort of machshava area has to do with ‘what’s the meaning of -- ?’” Rabbi Blum’s pedagogical approach is both interactive and informative. He engages the students in conversations that are rooted in text but relate to their personal lives and worlds. These conversations are geared towards “self-development and self-discovery.” Rabbi Blum approaches the classroom with the assumption, as he states, “that I have something to contribute to the conversation that the students do not.” His demeanor, though, is not condescending. Rabbi Blum utilizes his knowledge of Jewish text in some places more than others, as he explains,

I’ll take little more advanced guys and do some section in gemara with them. But we do that so they can see what the method would be like for reading the gemara as a human document, speaking to the problems of human life. It’ll be just more intellectually rigorous . . . It won’t be so much of a discussion.

Rabbi Blum synthesizes halakha and machshava with the students so that they develop the skills to do the same on their own. As Modern Orthodox Jews, they live their lives in dialectic, so it makes sense that their learning would be a fusion as well, one that can be translated into their futures as rabbinic professionals. Foster et al. (2006) write that “The capacity to imagine ways of linking resources from one’s religious tradition to the human and spiritual needs and expectations of congregations and communities is a central feature of effective clergy practice (68).” As Open Orthodox practitioners-in-training, the students need to learn how to fuse written text and heritage with the lived world. Rabbi Blum’s pedagogical approach aims to achieve that.

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Rabbi Blum has two sets of goals for his students, one knowledge-based and one meanings-based, much like his curriculum. As he states,

The goals I’ve formulated are the acquisition of basic information about areas of Jewish thought, but again, I have a wide sense of what that is. Second . . . is the formation of their own approach to what it is to Jewish texts that they study and to the Jewish life that they are supposed to be supporting as rabbis and to their own development as religious Jews.

His informational goals are relatively similar to those of the other faculty, whether part of the limudei kodesh or pastoral counseling set. Rabbi Blum delineates his other goal for the students in terms of what they need in order to be high-quality rabbis. He explains,

I think rabbis need to be able to use the resources of Jewish tradition to help people create . . . meaning in their lives in what they regard as Jewishly meaningful ways. Since that’s at the heart of what I do, I think that’s one of the reasons it belongs in the training of rabbis. Rabbis that are not able to help people to use inherited sources to create Jewishly meaningful or humanly meaningful lives, I think are not good rabbis. . . I think developing rabbis . . . should be challenged to think about the questions of meaning and spirit in their own lives. But challenged in a way that allows them to preserve their dignity and sense that they have not failed because they haven’t achieved all that they can imagine. . . the third thing I would say is, people studying for the rabbinate need somebody on their side who cares about them and will speak with them in a way that puts them as the most important, what’s good for them.

Rabbi Blum is deeply concerned that the students are doing what is best professionally and most meaningful personally. Success is also important, but success without meaning, according to Rabbi Blum, is not successful. Like other faculty members at YCT, he is concerned for the whole student. Through the machshava aspect of the lifecycles curriculum, Rabbi Blum cultivates students who live and work in a synthesis of professional role and personal fulfillment.

Section Nine: Curriculum – Social Action
According to the Jewish mystical tradition of *Kabbalah*, there are thirty-six righteous people and God preserves the world for their sake. The people’s identities are not known to even themselves, so it is incumbent upon everyone to act as though he or she is a member of that group. A guest lecturer at YCT shares this teaching with the entire student body before afternoon classes begin. He points to the students in the room and asks “Are you one? Are you a *lamed-vavnik*?” Social action and community activism are significant components of YCT’s philosophy of Open Orthodoxy. In fact, “Affirming the shared *tzelem Elokim* of all people, our responsibility to improve the world and our capacity to be enriched by it” is one of the yeshiva’s core values.

YCT combats what Bellah (1996) refers to as a “crisis of civic membership” which is “expressed in the loss of civic consciousness, of a sense of obligation to the rest of society which leads to a secession from society . . . Its sense of a social covenant, of the idea that we are all members of the same body, is singularly weak (xviii).” YCT, in this regard, is a force for change. In addition to having administration and faculty who, themselves, are social activist role models, YCT’s course schedule incorporates classes on social justice, including a community organizing class added to the curriculum requirements as a result of student initiative.

The afternoon social action class is just one element of a larger course of study for second year students. On Tuesday nights, the class attends an inter-seminary (Hebrew Union College, the Jewish Theological Seminary, and YCT) course on community organizing, taught by a social activist and professional community organizer. Generally, approximately 15 to 20 students attend the class, but the particular session that I observe is different – it is a training course for how to lead a house meeting. According to the instructor, a house meeting is a group conversation with the goal of unearthing new, potential leaders in order to strengthen grass roots

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44 the letters *lamed* and *vav* in Hebrew add up to 36, hence the name “*lamed vavniks*”
social justice movements. House meetings, which mesh well with YCT’s open orientation, place a good deal of importance on getting to know people and their stories in order to strategize to address communal concerns. The instructor, herself an Orthodox woman, couches her house meeting methodology in the Jewish tradition of story-telling. With the students, she makes a list that includes the Passover haggadah, reading the Torah, reading Megillat Esther (the scroll/book of Esther) on Purim, and the significance of agadah (legends/stories) in relation to halakha. Before breaking into smaller groups for mock house meetings, they collectively define a house meeting as not therapy, a focus group, a survey, or a listserv.

The small groups divide and scatter. I join a group facilitated by the instructor that includes two YCT students, Nate and Jay, and four students from the other two schools, both men and women. The ground rules include the following: speak personally, listen carefully, suspend judgment, don’t present an action plan, keep comments short, and use a story format. The participants are asked to remember that a house meeting is a public conversation. Everyone is asked to share two stories, the first relating to the topic of health care and the second about what keeps him or her up at night worrying. After everyone had shared a story about each topic, there is time for open questions and discussion. The participants appear to share readily, though they may not have known each other previously. The entire exercise, including a short debriefing session, lasts 30 to 40 minutes, at which point the groups reconvene.

The larger group of 32 students fills a huge horse-shoe table set-up. The students from different schools sit together and everyone partakes of the chalav Yisroel46 pizza dinner, provided as the “frumnest common denominator”47 dining option for a group of rabbinical

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46 Literally, Jewish milk; a halakhic classification for kosher dairy products supervised by a Jew.
47 Frum means observant or religious. Orthodox Jews will often refer to following the strictest interpretation of halakha or custom as the “frumnest common denominator.” The thinking is, to give a food example, that if the most strictly observant person in the room will eat the pizza, everyone else will be satisfied and comfortable as well.
school students. Had I not known who they were, the YCT students would have been indistinguishable from nearly all the other male students around the table. Facial hair, or the lack there of, is no indication of affiliation and nearly every man in the room is wearing a kippah. Outside of their own institution, in social justice and community work, YCT students largely blend in with their colleagues from other schools. This class is an opportunity for YCT students to actualize and synthesize two values of openness from their school – social justices and klal Yisrael, or allying with other elements of the Jewish community on issues of common interest for the betterment of the Jewish people. This is public Orthodoxy applied to the broader Jewish community, but starting at the microcosmic level of a class. The evening course is a safe place to start, being neither controversial in subject matter nor taking away time from beit midrash study. The students from different seminaries can collaborate on social justice issues whereas they would not, for example, easily be able to pray or study gemara together.

Section Ten: Educational and Professional Goals

The jobs of clergy are variegated and multi-dimensional; the rabbi’s responsibilities are vast and broad. Foster et al. (2006) illustrate this breadth through the example of a rural Christian pastor. They write,

> With his installation, the congregation and community expected him to engage a wide range of personal and public issues through traditional clergy roles of preaching, teaching, caregiving, counseling, and organizing. Even in the most apparently private of interactions, as between pastor and hospital patient, he would be drawn into the increasingly public realms of family, medical staff, congregation, and community (20).48

The rabbi likewise needs to be trained to fill these positions, both public and private. YCT addresses these roles through the goals that the institution and faculty have for the students. As

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Rabbi Weiss writes, YCT has two broad goals for its graduates, to serve klal Yisrael and to carry out the mission of YCT. Initially, operationally, this goal meant that students would become pulpit rabbis. Though there may be slightly more diversity at this point in time, YCT students, according to focus group data, still largely aim for the pulpit. As Alan, a fourth-year student articulates, “. . . at YCT, with probably some exception, but the overwhelming majority of people and the understanding of people here is that they’re here to become practicing rabbis in some way.” YCT students are interested in pulpit careers, but with a particular slant based on the values and mission of YCT – the same values that the students themselves reflect – diversity, openness, and sensitivity. Jonah’s goal is to essentially transport the positive aspects of YCT, its vision and values, into communities. He explains,

The most immediate and clearest [goal] is that I really, what we call Orthodoxy in the space of this yeshiva, I really like and I really feel that it can add meaning to people’s lives and make them better people. . . . I’d really like to go out to a pulpit and to start living that life and to be able to have a community and help the community build something where they can both be connected to halakha, be connected to tradition, and be connected to God and yet not have to compromise on either their values or their brains or their emotions or their being. The things are there, I think they can all be incorporated into meaningful religious experience and I would like just to start helping people realize that one town at a time.

One manifestation of those values is to meet people where they are religiously and to facilitate positive Jewish experiences. As Jonathan articulates, “I think every person here wants to devote their lives to making some type of religiously meaningful experience for people. . . .” In their searches to make meaning, YCT students are not willing to compromise on their religious observances and adherence to Jewish law; however, the value of openness changes their potential audiences. Micah and David, who are not in the same class, each explains his goals as follows:

Micah: Part of what I want to do is open an Orthodox *shul* for non-Orthodox Jews somewhere in the Midwest. I think that would be amazing.

David: . . . I would really actually be interested in doing community work in a synagogue . . . an Orthodox synagogue that tries to create meaningful experiences for a broader audience. I guess that could take a number of forms, but that’s what I see myself doing.

Joel did not specify the religious affiliation of his future congregation, but did state, “I’d like to be a pulpit rabbi in a community that is just completely friendly and inspiring and where everyone feels welcome.” The students want to apply Open Orthodoxy because they believe that its values are beneficial for American Jews and American Jewish communities. Their rosy outlooks, though, do not take into account factional tensions and complex realities of communities that may not want an Orthodox rabbi, or that may want an Orthodox rabbi, but not one who intends to serve more than just the Orthodox community. The students’ positive attitudes, though, reflect how much they value Open Orthodoxy and trust in their own aptitude to be Everyman’s Orthodox rabbi.

YCT students are also interested in education, in spreading the values of YCT in both formal and informal educational settings. Robert specifically wants to be the principal of a Jewish high school. Koby, though, would rather be in the classroom, as he explains, “My big dream goal . . . is to teach Jewish philosophy in high school and to . . . develop the curriculum and really guide the whole thing.” While Robert has a specific position and Koby has a specific field, Micah’s motivation is different. He states, “I feel like I have an ethical imperative to teach, so in some capacity I should be in the classroom. I feel like I owe it; it’s not so much a choice as it’s a *hova* [need/responsibility] . . .”
YCT likewise recognizes the importance of teaching education as a subject. The administration, too, is seeking to broaden the professional training curriculum to address the variegated needs of future rabbis. As Rabbi Linzer states, “one thing we have to do better is more rigorous . . . educational training. We certainly emphasize the pulpit and we don’t want to compromise the prioritization of the pulpit but we have to do better because even pulpit rabbis will sometimes do teaching in the schools and so on.” Rabbi Linzer’s statement echoes that of Donn Morgan, a faculty member at Church Divinity School of the Pacific. Foster et al. (2006) quote him as saying that “all his students had one thing in common: ‘when they leave here,’ they will all ‘be involved in teaching.’ Even ‘those who aren’t ordained,’ he observed, ‘have still been seminarians and will thus be perceived as experts . . . and will have some teaching role, whether formal or informal.’” 50 Being a teacher, in whatever capacity, goes with the territory of a seminary education, regardless of the denomination or faith tradition. The public will ascribe the status of teacher whether the person has been specifically trained or not. It is in the best interest of the institution to provide basic instruction so that students will be able to effectively share the information that they have learned during their residency at the school, especially crucial for YCT as a newer institution. For YCT’s faculty, in terms of their own pedagogy, they constantly seek pedagogical methods to enliven the texts they teach, engage their pupils, and ensure that they create and nurture the ideal Modern Orthodox rabbi. Since there is no formal education curriculum, faculty role modeling in the classroom is all the more important.

The faculty and administration at YCT have many goals for the future rabbis. In the classrooms, their goals are for the students to acquire the skills and sensitivities to adeptly relate and synthesize text with the human condition and the larger world. The administration also has

set the curriculum and goals. The faculty’s job is to educate the students and prepare them to be *talmidei hachamim* and *poskim*, highly learned scholars and religious decisors. All of these roles are part of a students’ professional persona and pastoral imagination. These goals are particularly necessary, Rabbi Linzer believes, at a time when people don’t feel qualified to make decisions when they live in fear and self-doubt in relation to religious hierarchies. He explains,

... it’s a major, major issue not even in right-wing Orthodoxy, but in standard Modern Orthodoxy, the issue about empowerment and this whole issue about ... how laypeople certainly can’t make decisions for themselves, even rabbis can’t make decisions for themselves, and all the decisions have to come from the roshei yeshiva and the gedolim [“the greats”] and so on and so forth.

Local *poskim* are necessary to combat this type of hegemony.

In focus groups, though, none of the students explicitly states that his goal is to be a *posek*; however, they recognize it in their assessment of YCT’s goals for them. As Jonah explains,

[Rabbi Linzer is] creating *poskim*; he’s creating people that can decide *halakha*, create people who can be leaders, and I appreciate that, I really like that they speak up to us, that the goal makes me feel empowered and powerful.

Jonah takes on the challenge of becoming a *posek* openly and feels strengthened by that goal.

Koby, on the other hand, struggles more with his future role and questions the legitimacy of the aim:

The idea that Rabbi Linzer is training us to be *poskim* to me seems almost ridiculous. Like, I know, that at the end of four years, my knowledge of *halakha* is not going to be that vast because it’s four years! ... So, it’s so interesting that he’s saying at the end of four years ‘you’re going to be a *posek*’ and I said ‘no I’m not,’ and he said ‘yes you are.’ And, as much as I got from it, you know, if that time comes, when I call with a *shyla* [question], he’s going to say ‘what’s the matter with you, I trained you to handle this yourself.’ I don’t feel like, I don’t know, I’m very torn on that. So, I guess that’s impacted me a lot because it’s a brand new issue that I really
need to think about. . . I’m kind of forced into making a choice as to what I actually think about halakha now, and how do I define halakha, all these sorts of things.

Through operationalization of its professional goals, YCT is not just training rabbis, it is training critical thinkers and leaders. The pastoral counseling and lifecycles curricula train students to be compassionate activists in all aspects of their lives; their relationship to halakhic decisions should be the same. Halakha, though, is law and requires a specific set of text skills and a significantly high level of knowledge. The students can treat the subjects in similar ways, but the sources of information are different. Likewise, traditional Orthodoxy still measures the quality of a rabbi by his knowledge of halakha. In order to gain legitimacy with that aspect of American Judaism, YCT students will need to demonstrate those skills; other strains of Judaism will appreciate and value different aspects of the Open Orthodox training more.

Though students may be hesitant about the weightiness of being a posek and of professional activism, they largely believe that YCT needs to be more assertive. Jonah frames the issue in terms of a hesitant attitude towards the future. He says,

. . . there’s a tendency to become more conservative; people don’t want to rock the boat, and they want to build up their reputation before they go off and do those big things that they’re going to do. I think the yeshiva needs to be more out there – it needs to be more assertive, both in its values, both saying it, writing it, being it, living it . . .

Jonah views YCT’s reticence as a security measure that, by not being more activist, is in dissonance with its mission. David provides a reason why this may be the case: “My impression of YCT right now is that there’s a real attempt to fit the mainstream and to be subversive and nuanced very quietly, to keep those things under the radar so that it’s accepted in public and sort of with broad acceptance of YCT rabbis.” David continues by pointing out that there is no reason for YCT to be afraid of not being accepted. He brings an example:
When you consider the small position of Orthodoxy in the greater scheme of American Jewish life, about 100 rabbis...the argument that “well, we’re still growing and we have to get legitimacy before we do anything radical” doesn’t seem to apply... Because we have a proven track record that guys can get jobs in community day schools and Orthodox synagogues. They’ve gone anywhere they want – they’re at Hillel campuses, community day schools...

Thus far, YCT’s Open Orthodox rabbis have been accepted by communities and have been successful in finding employment and establishing themselves securely in community leadership roles. The students believe that now is the time to more fully realize YCT’s values through activism.

How will the students more fully apply YCT’s mission and the values of Open Orthodoxy? The students in focus groups believe that YCT’s openness is the most powerful root of activism in terms of learning and the rabbinate. Though it is not a widely-held opinion at YCT, two students mention women’s ordination as natural conclusions of openness. As one student states,

I’d like to see the yeshiva... have women given semikha here. That’s a specific manifestation of a lot of the angst that a lot of the people feel here, a lot of the disconnect that I think the yeshiva...I don’t know when as soon as possible is, I don’t know if it’s next year or if it’s in five years or ten years, but the sooner that they come, the more clear and the more powerful I think the voice of the yeshiva will be.

Another student mentions a way to perhaps moderate the shock of this bold move. He suggests,

I would say, ... if there were a woman’s semikha program, to not split the beit midrash with the guys, but to have two floors of a building and have like a beit midrash for women and a beit midrash for men. Therefore, it’s a less-revolutionary impact on the culture of the yeshiva...

Though this voice may be more moderate than the first, suggesting women’s rabbinic ordination, even if viewed as an outgrowth of YCT’s openness, may be too bold of a move for a new
institution and would move the yeshiva beyond the pale of accepted, standard Orthodoxy. A third student provides a more temperate solution. He believes that openness ought to be not a matter of who is admitted, but rather in terms of career goals:

Part of me wants this yeshiva just to . . . open the *beit midrash* up for people who want to learn, do the four-year *semikha* program and let people do what they do afterwards and just really be open about it. Say “we have faith that the Torah is meaningful to people – come find meaning, and when you leave, go do something about that.”

Though based on a philosophy of openness, instituting this suggestion could fundamentally change the nature of the institution from being a synthesized professional yeshiva to a two-track system of rabbinical school and yeshiva. Would the broadening of career goals diminish YCT’s effectiveness in creating the ideal Modern Orthodox rabbi? Would they be able to succeed in two or more tracks, especially if, according to student perception, the institution is still so timid?

Newness is an extremely salient issue, though the students may have a different feeling of time than the faculty. Nancy Ammerman (1997) presents two organizational theory approaches, the population ecologists and the institutionalists. She writes that “Both frameworks note the ‘liabilities of newness’. . . Organizations are much more likely to die in the first years of their existence than after they have gotten established. While population ecologists locate those liabilities in deficient resources, new institutionalists locate them in the lack of legitimation (46).”51 Though a nascent organization may not survive past its first days or years, Ammerman (1997) continues, “Once established, however, there are powerful forces that create inertia in organizations. Population ecologists see that inertia coming from the efficient and predictable use of resources, while new institutionalists see it coming from established internal cultures coupled with legitimated patterns of interaction with other similarly constructed organizations.

At this point, less than a decade after its inception, YCT’s administration and faculty are still on tenterhooks regarding inertia; the students have more confidence in the lasting power of their yeshiva. YCT’s conception of the “ideal” and the administration’s and faculty’s focus on high standards of achievement in a broad array of areas, in addition to a belief that these goals are best, may also be an attempt to mask some of their uncertainty as a new institution. Regardless, though, Foster et al. (2006) comment that seminaries “are the primary settings for the intentional, disciplined, and sustained cultivation of the imaginative capacity for engaging in complex and rich professional practice (22).” This means that if YCT’s administration wants to have “Renaissance rabbis” for American Jewish communities, the seminary in general and YCT in particular, is where they must necessarily be trained.

The YCT curriculum, through its many subject areas, aims to train its students to be well-rounded rabbis. To return to the frame of Erving Goffman’s language, in the backstage, the students are groomed for their roles by faculty members who are specialists in their field but also understand the complexity of parts which rabbis necessarily play. Richard McCall, according to Foster et al. (2006), identifies four “features of performance” that are particularly applicable to the backstage training of clergy for public roles: “(1) the script of performance, (2) the performer and the audience, (3) the means or manner of performance, and (4) the telos, or desired end, of performance (167).” The script is the text of the curriculum; the performer is the student and the audience is his future public; the means or manner are the ways in which the student presents himself and the philosophy of Open Orthodoxy; and the desired outcome is the effective and

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52 Ibid.
consistent transmission of the values of Open Orthodoxy that has a positive impact on society. YCT’s goal is a high level of integration and absorption of Open Orthodoxy by their students to the extent that even though they may originate as learned, will become ingrained as the students’ pastoral imaginations. YCT teaches to the embodiment of its mission. The different aspects and forms of the YCT education reflect the yeshiva’s core values and philosophy; the faculty’s approaches teach integration in the YCT backstage towards the purpose of students’ transmission of Open Orthodoxy in the public sphere.
Chapter 4
Open Orthodoxy Outside

The previous sections addressed Open Orthodoxy from the inside – the institution, people, and curriculum of YCT. Open Orthodoxy, though, is not meant to stay indoors. The core values promote activist approaches to learning, ritual, communal participation, and ethical lifestyles. The YCT faculty brings in outside examples, contemporizes materials, and invites guest speakers in order to prepare the students to encounter real world situations. The students are being trained to become pulpit rabbis, an inherently public role. Open Orthodoxy would not be named as such if it was meant to stay indoors. Open Orthodoxy is a type of public religion, as defined by Robert Wuthnow. As such, it is a produced cultural form that addresses three categories of publics – people, openness and accessibility, and responsibility. Clergy, or in the case of YCT, rabbinical students are the primary propagators of Open Orthodoxy as they exercise their pastoral imaginations and move the yeshiva’s philosophy outside of the beit midrash and into the public arena.

Part 1: Negotiating Roles
One day after lunch and following mincha, Rabbi Blum addresses the entire student body. The students are assembled at their mekomot in the beit midrash, everyone facing front. This is YCT’s mussar1 shmues (ethics chat) a weekly, 30-minute lecture about life and the rabbinate. In Erving Goffman’s (1959) terminology, this is “staging” or “shop” talk wherein “. . . talkers talk to their friends about what will and will not hold the audience, what will and will not give

1 The “Mussar movement was a renewal movement among the Jews of Lithuania in the second half of the nineteenth century. Its goal was to reemphasize the ethical aspects of Judaism and to ward off the inroads of Chasidism, which it was feared could lead to another spiritual disaster like the Shabbetai Tzevi [a false messiah] affair, and Haskala (the Enlightenment), which threatened to secularize Judaism. The Mussar movement failed to take root among the business people for whom it was intended; instead it came to be incorporated in the curriculum of many Lithuanian yeshivot (16).” From Danzger, Murray Herbert. 1989. Returning to tradition : the contemporary revival of Orthodox Judaism. New Haven: Yale University Press.
offense . . . (176).”2 Today, Rabbi Blum is talking about balance and the related, difficult issues that “will dog you throughout your whole rabbinic career.” He begins with a few questions for the students to ponder: “How will I balance myself – who/what I want to be and what others want me to be? How do I set my own agenda?” Within a language paradigm, Rabbi Blum is discussing Walter Brueggemann’s concept of bilinguality. That is, “. . . people of faith in public life must be bilingual. They must have a public language . . . And they must have a more communal language . . . (6)”3 Neither of the roles is private, but each impacts the way in which the person must view himself in light of his status as a rabbi.

Image is a highly salient issue at YCT, a school striving to define itself and a student body of individuals striving to do the same. Rabbi Blum prepares the students to be external beings, to pay attention to George Herbert Mead’s “generalized Other”4 and to realize that “Who we are as people matters to the people with whom you interact.” Whether they see themselves as figures of authority in the community or not, other people will see them as such; other people may only see the title “rabbi” and not the person behind it. Pierre Bourdieu expresses this relationship between title and person: “To institute, to assign an essence, a competence, is to impose a right to be that is an obligation of being so (or to be so). It is to signify to someone what he is and how he should conduct himself as a consequence (120).”5 As Rabbi Blum points out, though, congregants and community members are not the only interested parties. Family members and spouses also will want attention. As Rabbi Blum says, “sometimes other people want our approval. . . . we matter to them, you’re a special person to them.” Rabbi Blum presents

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this concern as a positive aspect of caring, an aspect at which he believes YCT has excelled. He even says that there is a big, hypothetical sign over YCT that says “guess what?! We’re thinking about you!” Rabbi Blum works, through his own roles, to ensure that YCT provides a nurturing environment for its students, a place where they can struggle with the complexities of private and public lives and roles.

Rabbi Blum invokes the metaphor of a web. Everyone is part of a web and being part of a web means that each person has a responsibility to the next and cannot be selfish, even while maintaining boundaries. This web that the students are developing at YCT will aid them in their professional careers. They will likewise be in communal webs and will feel huge pulls from other people. They will find themselves in situations where they have to be concerned about marit ayin (seeming deception). Charles Horton Cooley’s theory on the looking-glass self, for these students, is very real. Before they act, they must think through the three steps: how they imagine that others perceive them, how they imagine that others judge them, and how they feel.6 For a rabbi, his personal, internal identity is under public scrutiny. Rabbi Blum gives the example of a rabbi going to a movie theater or not wearing a suit jacket, two things that are perfectly acceptable for the average Modern Orthodox Jew. However, for an Orthodox rabbi, the issue can be stickier – maybe he shouldn’t go to the movies, maybe he should always wear a suit jacket. There are expectations of proper behavior; there are certain types of “conduct [that are] unbecoming to a rabbi.” Rabbi Blum reminds the students that they always need to remember “that you teach Torah, that you’re a rabbi.” He equates being a rabbi to being a flight attendant – the students will have to take care of everyone even if they don’t care about everyone.

In the language of Erving Goffman, rabbis have a role to uphold. Goffman writes, “When an actor takes on an established social role, usually he finds that a particular front has already

been established for it (27).” Rabbi Blum gives a hypothetical dialogue snippet between himself and a student, illustrating Goffman’s point:

Student: Why can’t I lose my temper?

Rabbi: Because it’s a hillul Hashem [desecration of God’s name]. You can’t get a p’tur [exemption]; other people can get a p’tur.

Because they are clergy, society holds rabbis up to a different standard than the average person. Rabbi Blum teaches the students about those standards as well as the behavioral expectations. Charles Liebman (1968) writes,

The rabbi is the only figure in Jewish life who can command leadership, deference, even awe, by virtue of an ascribed title. Sociologists distinguish between ascribed and achieved status. Ascribed status inheres by virtue of the position held or the role performed, achieved status by virtue of demonstrated abilities. In Jewish community leadership, the rabbi alone has a title or position having ascribed status (5).8

Rabbi Blum warns them not to turn into the position, but also not to ignore it. Goffman writes that “When the individual does move into a new position in society and obtains a new part to perform, he is not likely to be told in full detail how to conduct himself . . . (72)”9 Through the weekly mussar shmues, Rabbi Blum prepares YCT students for their public roles so that they will not only know abstractly how to perform, but will be competent in their roles. Rabbi Blum is not advocating that students dismiss their personal identities or identities as members of the YCT collective, but rather to be mindful of the dimensions of living the philosophy of Open Orthodoxy in the public sphere. The outside is predictably vastly different from the inside world of the yeshiva.

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Part 2: Case Studies

In order to understand the ways in which Open Orthodoxy is applied, operationalized, and functions in the public sphere, we turn now to eight case studies. Each example falls into a primary segment of the YCT curriculum – education, religion, or social action. The cases present information about the values of the yeshiva and the ways in which students act out and transmit those values to other people and communities. Each case is a snapshot, but the composite illustrates the growing presence and applicability of Open Orthodoxy outside the walls of YCT as well as the ways in which YCT students interact with different publics. Each case undergoes analyses based on Erving Goffman’s theories of front stage and backstage and Robert Wuthnow’s theories on public religion. The publics and stages vary widely, but the values of YCT’s Open Orthodoxy, through the people of YCT as transmitters, are present, to varying degrees, in them all.

Section 1: Education

Open Orthodoxy, as related to education outside the yeshiva, takes on a variety of forms. The following examples – a conference presentation, a learning program and lecture for college undergraduates, and an afternoon religious school – showcase different ways in which the values of Open Orthodoxy are transmitted through teaching and educational contexts.

Teaching Rabbinic Literature Conference

The people of YCT take Open Orthodoxy into the public sphere in a variety of ways – as students of traditional texts, compassionate listeners, and community activists. The students translate Open Orthodoxy into the open by modeling the values of Open Orthodoxy subjectively in what they do and how they act. In this particular case, though, YCT’s dean, Rabbi Linzer, takes Open Orthodoxy into the public sphere objectively. His forum: the Teaching Rabbinic
Literature Conference at Brandeis University. The forum is public in that it is outside the walls of YCT, but it is still largely an inside crowd. Rabbi Linzer addresses a roomful of his colleagues, educators and administrators from a variety of different educational institutions, all of whom have chosen not only to attend the conference, but to attend his presentation instead of any one of the several other concurrent sessions. From a professional perspective, Rabbi Linzer addresses his peers. He is not, however, speaking to a roomful of Orthodox rabbis or even Orthodox rabbinical students. Rabbi Linzer’s presentation is followed by a response given by Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld of Hebrew College. Rabbi Linzer subjectively displays openness because he shares the podium with a non-Orthodox, female rabbi and speaks to a diverse, albeit highly Jewishly literate, audience. This foray into the public sphere, however, is largely objective.

Rabbi Linzer’s presentation is an act of back-staging, of inviting the audience to see what takes place in the yeshiva regarding curriculum. As he explains at the outset of his speech entitled “Learning to Wear Many Hats,” the administration “really learned by doing in terms of the shaping of the curriculum at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah and only afterwards was what we had done informed by educational theory.” They are able to develop in this direction because of their “shared vision, a commitment to collaborate, and a really wonderful collaborative relationship, preparedness to be constantly reflective on what we were creating, whether we were achieving our goals, and flexibility to make changes along the way.” In other words, the administration and faculty is open to change and development for the betterment of their school and the education of their students. Working in a relatively new institution, the administration and faculty are by nature creative, but their collaborative disposition prompts them to effectively utilize that creativity.

10 All direct quotes are from the presentation on Sunday, January 27, 2008.
To highlight the nature of the curriculum at YCT, Rabbi Linzer presents a theory by Lee Shulman (who happens to be in the audience.) Shulman’s theory addresses three areas of professional training, the habit of the mind, the habit of the hand, and the habit of the heart. Rabbi Linzer explains the theory: “the habit of the mind, teaching students how to understand content; the habit of the hand, providing the opportunity to practice what they learn; and the habit of the heart, instilling a sense of values and the commitment to service, or I could also say bringing the values of their profession into their service.” The content-practice-values triumvirate explains the different aspects of YCT’s curriculum and also illuminates the yeshiva’s stress on educating the whole student. According to Rabbi Linzer, YCT strives for balance in these three habits in the different professional roles of a rabbi: “a talmid chacham, a religious thinker, a halakhic decisor, a teacher, an educator, an inspiring officiator at lifecycle events, pastoral counselor, and a religious leader and a visionary.” Rabbi Linzer divides the different roles and their corresponding curricular disciplines by the three habits:

The mind: we think of the rabbi as a posek, as an educator, these are intellectual fields, the discipline is halakha and Gemara. For the hand, rabbi, the doing of the rabbi: lifecycle officiator, synagogue leader, this corresponds to professional skills, homiletics. Of the heart, this corresponds to someone who’s instilling values, a pastoral counselor, religious guide, source of inspiration, and the corresponding disciplines [pastoral counseling, machshava (Jewish thought), spirituality.]

The theory seems tailor-made for YCT’s curricular foci and broad professional goals for its students.

The theory is likewise applicable to one curricular component at a time and the ways in which that component is taught and applied. Rabbi Linzer, as a teacher of halakha, uses his own subject area as a case study. He explains that halakha, as a discipline, can be divided into the three habits:
mind, the intellectual, mastery of the Talmudic sources, the codes, strong legal and analytic skills. . . . then there’s the doing of halakha – the ability to analyze real cases, the ability to apply codified law to real cases, the knowledge and understanding of responsa . . . to appreciate how the responsa grapple with real-life messy issues, the knowledge of gray areas. And, most critically, . . . strong judgment skills. . . . The human component turns us to the habit of the heart – sensitivity to the subjective reality of the listener to know what answer’s appropriate to give, how one gives and answer, how to follow up afterwards . . .

In this way, the goal is not simply learning the subject matter, but the application of the subject to real life. YCT is in the business of developing rabbis. As such, as Rabbi Linzer explained, “the best way to teach gemara is obviously the question that we would ask, but the model is ‘how are we going to create the best type of rabbi, the best type of pulpit rabbi or Hillel rabbi or educator-rabbi . . .’” The “best type of rabbi,” then, is one whose mind, hands, and heart are integrated not only in that they have different roles based on different aspects of their jobs, but that they apply the different habits to each individual aspect. Gemara and halakha are habits of the mind, but their application in the public sphere requires habits of the hand and heart as well. YCT achieves some of this integration through horizontal integration of and collaboration between its different departments – pastoral counseling, professional skills, gemara, and halakha. The departments, created at the outset, address the different aspects of the job of pulpit rabbis. The departments are not monolithic, however, because the administration is “sensitive to the different dimensions within a given discipline.”

The pedagogy and different curricular aspects reflect the yeshiva’s desire for integration of the three habits. The students are trained to use all three habits in their learning and, as Rabbi Linzer explains, are tested in those areas as well. The tests are not about memorizing and regurgitating material. As he elaborated, “Our test questions were almost completely real-world situations, real cases, that they were asked to analyze and to show all work. There was not a right
or wrong, bottom-line answer. What we were looking for was how did they dissect the case, what judgment did they use to weigh the various opinions and to weigh the real-world reality in order to come up with a conclusion.” The students are tested on the application of what they learn in the classroom (mind), how they understand the material given the situation (hands), and how they apply their answer (heart). This method teaches the students, in simulation, about the intricacies of the rabbinical profession and the ways in which they are trained to function as halakhic, compassionate decision makers. Rabbi Linzer calls this “the practice of halakha.”

YCT’s educators realize that classroom learning and tests, no matter how comprehensive, still do not cover all necessary aspects of professional training. Therefore, the faculty also bring the outside into the yeshiva. When teaching the curriculum on niddah and taharat hamishpachah, as Rabbi Linzer explained, “We brought in gynecologists, halakhic experts from other communities, college teachers, yoetzot halakha [halakhic expert/advisor], mikvah [ritual bath] attendants, trainers of mikvah attendants, and rabbis who supervise their community’s mikvah and mikvah policy.” The faculty presents secondary sources as well, including sociological studies, a documentary film, and expert lecturers. YCT also organizes study days devoted to specific topics in the curriculum and themed weeks of study. These sources and resources are studied as texts. As Rabbi Linzer explains, they “were followed by roundtable discussions so that students could reflect and discuss with the rabbis how they might address such realities in their future communities.” Through people and content, Rabbi Linzer and the YCT faculty bring the outside into the classroom in order to prepare the students for the real world.

The real world of the rabbi is an integration of the different habits, but learning integration is different from living it. Rabbi Linzer presents juxtaposition as a way to integrate. He stated, “juxtaposing itself, integrating in terms of the flow of the day, is a significant mode of
integration.” In the classrooms themselves, integration is often taught through role-playing, as Rabbi Linzer explains, “we would have one student act as a congregant, another student as a rabbi, we would give them roles – you’re coming, you tell them this story. The rabbi has to respond, and he has to respond both pastorally and *halakhically* and with religious guidance – and then that would be critiqued.” As part of the active curricular approach, faculty and professionals model role playing in the form of a roundtable discussion, essentially exposing the students to each perspective from which they need to think when they make decisions. For example, as Rabbi Linzer presents, “Somebody comes with an issue . . . maybe we can solve it *halakhically*, but maybe somebody is offended because it goes against their sense of Jewish values. What if what the expert says goes against what *halakha* teaches or what Jewish values teach? And these would be cases that we would have and we would discuss with all the various experts in the room.”

The students also learn from role models, people who embody the three habits and the whole-rabbi ideal of YCT, people who “actually are an ideal integration of *halakhic* experts, community leaders, pastoral experts, integrated into one person.” The students need to see and interact with this person in order to understand how they should operationalize their educations and synthesize the different aspects of the YCT curriculum. The faculty realizes the perspective of the students, so in addition to being collaborative with one another, they listen to the students’ suggestions about curriculum integration. As Rabbi Linzer illustrates from his own perspective,

I naturally think of “how can I teach my *halakha* class better?” I have to force myself to think: “how can I use that to help make this student a better rabbi and work with other departments?” The students’ vantage point is totally different. The students’ vantage point is “how is this helping me to become the best rabbi I can?” They don’t think in terms of department, they think in terms of their final product of being the best rabbi and they think naturally in an integrated way.
For Rabbi Linzer and the rest of the YCT administration and faculty, being a rabbi means achieving integration in the habits of mind, hand, and heart. As Rabbi Linzer says, “being a rabbi [is] not just a collection of skills, it’s about being a certain type of a person . . .” That type of person is one who can integrate the different aspects of the YCT curriculum and translate them from inside the yeshiva into the real world.

Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld of Hebrew College responds to Rabbi Linzer’s remarks. She opens by saying that she is grateful “both for this particular opportunity and for other opportunities that we’ve begun to have to engage in exchange and dialogue with YCT, which is an institution we feel a lot of kinship with as well as being aware of the significant differences in our approaches to rabbinic education . . .” The differences between the schools, their curricula, and goals do not negate the importance of dialogue and collaboration between the two schools and their administrations. As Rabbi Cohen Anisfeld comments, Rabbi Linzer’s presentation “speaks to the incredible complexity of the role of the rabbi today,” regardless of affiliation. That complexity, she agrees with Rabbi Linzer, necessitates not just “creating integrated curricula but creating integrated human beings. . . . creating rabbis who are integrated human beings and who are addressing their congregants or the people they work with as integrated human beings.”

Beyond the pleasant sharing, Rabbi Cohen Anisfeld addresses three points of difference between the two institutions: the definition of an ideal rabbi, the issue of authenticity, and the development of priorities in rabbinic education. For YCT, the ideal rabbi is the pulpit rabbi. YCT was created as a training seminary for Open Orthodox pulpit rabbis, not so for Hebrew College whose students have a variety of career goals. Secondly, Rabbi Cohen Anisfeld addresses authenticity, something with which graduates of the trans-denominational Hebrew College struggle. YCT students also grapple with this issue, but not necessarily in terms of professional
identity. Their identities are of Orthodox rabbinical students and rabbis; however, they struggle with how other Orthodox rabbis, particularly those from more conservative institutions, view them and perceive them as legitimately Orthodox (or not). Rabbi Cohen Anisfeld also cited the issue of prioritization, which arose at Hebrew College during their curricular review. She says, “What do we want to do really well? We’re not going to be able to do all of this really well.” Rabbi Linzer does not address or even allude to this element in his presentation. At YCT, the goal is to train to the highest level in all areas of the rabbinic curriculum, though whether this is actually achieved or achievable will need to be determined in a longitudinal study of alumni.

Following Rabbi Cohen Anisfeld’s response, Rabbi Linzer fields questions from the audience. In response to the first question regarding practical training, Rabbi Linzer comments that YCT is in the process of developing a curricular orientation for students with a particular interest in education. In terms of internships, which he describes as “a major part of our training,” he clarified that YCT does not “send students out to posken. We try to bring that in, in a simulated way.” To the second inquiry about how to deal with difficult questions, Rabbi Linzer responds that they see those as golden opportunities for learning. He comments about how he would respond: “‘ah great, here’s a conflict! Halakha’s going to point you this way and pastoral and psychological are going to do it from this way – let’s do an integrated session on this!’ We bring in people to express both their differences in disciplines and to model integration.” Rabbi Linzer does not shy away from difficult halakhot but instead treats them as opportunities for practice in integration. Lastly, Rabbi Linzer answers a question about leadership training. He says, When we initially thought about creating leaders, I was . . . skeptical. I have grown to realize that certainly there are people who have natural talent, there are a lot of people who have talents that can be developed with the right type of training.” With all of the skills that YCT
teaches, if the students aren’t leaders or don’t have leadership qualities, they will not be able to forward the philosophy of Open Orthodoxy or the values by which they are trained.

The Teaching Rabbinic Literature conference gives Rabbi Linzer a platform for public relations work and from which he can teach the ideals and philosophies of YCT in the public sphere. Through his back-staging of the curriculum development and aspects of the YCT pedagogy, he explicitly and implicitly expressed the value of openness and dialogue. This conference provided an insider’s public sphere, a forum for people with similar educational goals hailing from different institutions to interact and learn from one another. Rabbi Linzer participates in this public sphere because he has a public role and is open to collaboration with and learning from his colleagues. This setting also does not challenge his status as a rosh yeshiva or lead to questions about the viability and/or applicability of Open Orthodoxy. The forum is, professionally, both benign and productive. The public sphere exists in shades of gray, each of which provides a valuable environment for transmitting and modeling the values of Open Orthodoxy.

Meorot

Meorot, as described previously, began as an enrichment program for Modern Orthodox rabbinical students. Currently, Meorot is a co-ed, once-weekly, evening learning program for college juniors and seniors and recent graduates. The program is meant to be extracurricular and is not a feeder for YCT. Guided by members of the YCT community – current students, alumni, and staff, the Meorot participants study topics of contemporary importance to Orthodox Judaism. Meorot provides an opportunity for the dissemination of Open Orthodoxy in the public sphere. However, in this case, the public sphere physically comes to YCT. The students enter into the YCT students’ exclusive space by literally sitting at YCT students’ established mekomot in the

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11 Hebrew for luminaries
beit midrash. In a strange twist of dimensions, Robert Wuthnow’s public religion crosses into the physical boundaries of Erving Goffman’s backstage. The YCT students and staff, without physically relocating, teach Open Orthodoxy through the structure and content of the curriculum and program, as well as through role modeling. They apply Open Orthodoxy to Meorot and the educations of the students. Meorot, perhaps more than any other YCT initiative, may blur the boundaries between the public and private spheres. In Goffman’s terminology, the participants are audience compared to YCT students, but become the actors when they alone occupy the stage that is YCT’s beit midrash. This section presents the application of Open Orthodoxy through the experiences of the Meorot students and guests.

The 2007-2008 Meorot class has 15 participants, both men and women. The gender approach reflects YCT’s core value of “Recognizing the need to enhance and expand the role of women in talmud Torah, the halakhic process, religious life and communal leadership within the bounds of halakha.” For the most part, the students hear about Meorot from their friends, past participants in the program. The Meorot students are diverse, as evidenced from just a cursory look at their university areas of study. Rafi, a senior, studies psychology; Todd, a junior, studies mathematics; Rachel, also a junior, studies religion; and Aryeh, who graduated a few years ago, studied economics and German. One educational commonality between the students, and between them and the YCT students, is that they all spent a year studying at a yeshiva in Israel. They didn’t study at the same institution, but all of the different yeshivot fall within the Modern Orthodox spectrum. The participants are either Orthodox or Orthodox-leaning, though this orientation may be a departure from the way they grew up. For example, Aryeh says,

I grew up . . . attending a Reform synagogue. From 1st through 7th grade, I attended Hebrew school on Sundays or after school. [In

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12 All information about participants comes from questionnaires administered during the first two weeks of April 2008.
college], towards the end of my sophomore year, I began exploring Orthodox Judaism, which has led me on a journey for the past 5 years. Today, I consider myself observant and I daven [pray] at an Orthodox synagogue. I do not necessarily consider myself Orthodox.

Aryeh participates in Orthodox life and Orthodox communities, but is not necessarily comfortable fully affiliating with the movement. Todd, on the other hand, relates, “I grew up going to a Modern Orthodox synagogue and my parents keep Shabbat and [kashrut]. I self-define as Orthodox.” Todd’s Orthodox orientation, based on his comment, is his own choice despite having been raised in that environment. Rachel, on the other hand, who grew up in religious Zionist communities and the Modern Orthodox school and camp network currently identifies herself as an “‘in-progress Jew’ . . . I am very much always thinking and rethinking my Jewish identity.” Their own explorations and decisions regarding their Jewish identities display the students’ willingness to engage and grapple with Jewish issues. The diversity in the identities themselves illustrates nuance in Modern Orthodoxy – a theme which many of the students encounter in their learning at Meorot.

Each three-hour Meorot session is divided into three sections, as one of the coordinators explains: “[the students] use preparatory readings of primary sources and academic articles and participate in lectures by highly esteemed rabbinic and academic scholars and then reflect on and critique in break-out discussion groups.” Each week, students hear from a different speaker and learn about a new topic – all of which are related to the Modern Orthodox world and society in general. Aryeh and Todd, respectively, list some of the topics that the group has covered over the course of the year: “rabbinic authority, feminism, science and religion, the year in Israel, Orthodox involvement in politics, and social justice,” “the use of birth control in Jewish law, the permissibility of women to write Torahs and megillahs [scrolls] . . .” The range of the subject
matter does not lessen the quality, as Rachel relates, “Whatever the topic was on a given week, I felt that I learned a great deal about that topic from a speaker who was a real Modern Orthodox leader in that particular field.” The curricular content reflects YCT’s core values of “Encouraging intellectual openness, questioning and critical thinking as essential components of one’s full service to God (avodat Hashem).” Like YCT, Meorot has no qualms about bringing in a variety of experts – the organizers are sustaining a high-caliber educational program; the lecturers need to be able to supply solid content and also be Modern Orthodox role models for the students. The diversity of topics and variation of presenters impacts Rafi, as he relates, “[I] learned to embrace other approaches to the text as well as a tremendous amount of exposure to many speakers I otherwise would not be exposed to.” Meorot provides a new setting for the students whose primary studies are within the context of a university classroom.

In addition to the speakers, the students find great value in the dialogue sections during which they discuss the topic presented that evening. Todd comments, “I appreciate more the discussions and opportunities to discuss issues which have let me think about ideas in a different way . . .” Sometimes the discussions focus on one specific topic; at other times, though, the students return to a larger theme. Rachel discusses values, a thread that runs through many of the sessions,

I think probably the most interesting discussion that I learned about, as well as learned the most from, was the discussion about the interplay between outside values and halakha. This topic reared its head in probably nearly half the sessions, and some of the speakers addressed it as well—are we allowed to have other value systems outside of halakha? Is halakha a value system at all? If not, where it the value system in Judaism? What values are in it and what are not? How do we incorporate those that aren’t? This is one debate that I have learned a lot about from Meorot and that particularly interested me.
The discussion sessions are safe spaces where students can explore, question, and grapple with their own beliefs and stances on issues. *Halakha* is foundational to Orthodox Judaism. The students are not questioning the authority of *halakha* and Jewish law, but they are engaging in discussions about its nature. Discussions about values speak to the fact that the students do not live cloistered, closed lives; rather, they engage with the world and are exposed to all manners of (Modern Orthodox) diversities.

Some of Meorot’s lectures are open to a limited public audience. Rabbi Chaim Rapoport’s lecture, based on his eponymous book, *Judaism and Homosexuality: An Authentic Orthodox View*, draws approximately fifty people – primarily Orthodox young adults, many of whom are friends of Meorot participants. Rabbi Rapoport, advisor on medical ethics to the Chief Rabbi of England, is spending one week, as he does every year, at YCT. Rabbi Rapoport doesn’t just teach, he also models best practices for navigating difficult *halakhic* dichotomies. Rabbi Linzer, as he related in his speech at the Teaching Rabbinic Literature Conference, believes that Rabbi Rapoport’s approach to homosexuality is “the most sensitive integration of ‘be true to halakha but also being as inclusive as possible pastorally, psychologically as can imaginably be possible within an Orthodox context.’”¹³ Mere mention of homosexuality already begins to push some boundaries in more conservative segments of Judaism. This is a subject generally addressed by those communities in whispers or behind closed doors – if at all. To the right of Modern Orthodoxy, denial is a common approach; within Modern Orthodoxy, however, and especially at YCT, they choose confrontation. This ethos contextualizes and encompasses Meorot.

Dinner, a buffet of cold salads and fish, is at 6:30pm; the lecture begins at 7:00. One of the co-directors welcomes the guests, explains Meorot, and introduces Rabbi Rapoport. When he

¹³ Rabbi Dov Linzer, Teaching Rabbinic Leadership Conference, January 27, 2008
speaks, Rabbi Rapoport stands at the podium in the front of the *beit midrash*. With a full beard and wearing a white shirt and black suit, he seems out of place in the room full of men and women in their early twenties who, from visual and symbolic perspectives, appear to be far more liberal than he. He may be more conservative than the assembled group, but he understands his audience. The second half of his time, he says, “will be a response to questions because I imagine that many of you here tonight have come not only to hear, but also to be heard.”

Rabbi Rapoport begins by presenting the *halakhic* stance on homosexuality. He states clearly that

The first thing there is to understand is that male homosexuality, male homosexuality congress, is forbidden by the Torah. And, in the case of anal intercourse, is a severe prohibition resulting, theoretically, in capital punishment such as with desecration of the Shabbos or other sins of equal proportion. And that female homosexual liaison is also forbidden. There is some debate amongst the authorities whether it’s forbidden *m’d’oraisa* [from/according to Torah law], Biblically, or *m’derabbanan* [from/according to rabbinic law], rabbinically, but it is forbidden.

Jewish law is fundamental to Orthodox Judaism; observing *halakha* sets Jews apart from less- or non-observant Jews as well as non-Jews. Rabbi Rapoport explains the halakha vis a vis Orthodox Judaism:

if it’s forbidden rabbinically, it is a prohibition as far as any Orthodox Jew is concerned. . . . those people who do not feel themselves bound, either by Biblical law or by rabbinic law would obviously not have a problem with these prohibitions. . . . from the Orthodox perspective – across the board of Orthodoxy – right-wing Orthodoxy, left-wing Orthodoxy – what’s common about us is that we are bound by the law

With this statement, Rabbi Rapoport reinforces the Orthodox stance and defines its boundaries. He also, though, acknowledges the diversity of Orthodoxy. He does not discount more liberal Orthodox Jews as non-Orthodox; he treats everyone the same by holding them to the same
standard. In terms of the halakha, though, he explains that means, practically, “that homosexuals are obliged to live a celibate life, unless of course they choose to get married to a member of the opposite gender which is not a recipe for marital bliss. And, it should not be recommended.” Homosexual intercourse, though, is not the only element of homosexuality.

Homosexuality is by no means a new issue; however, homosexual identity is. Rabbi Rapoport says, “the idea that a person is a confirmed homosexual – that means to say that his attractions are directed exclusively to members of the same gender and not to members of the opposite gender – appears as something which does not appear to have been discussed or known in generations bygone.” This identity, played out sexually, directly contradicts the halakha and presents a huge problem. Rabbi Rapoport discusses a variety of approaches for dealing with the issue. He mentions the different opinions of illustrious rabbis, opinions that, to today’s sensibilities are irrational, such as Rabbi Moshe Feinstein’s opinion that the source of homosexuality is the desire to rebel against God. Rabbi Rapoport does not intend to denigrate Rabbi Feinstein; he is simply explicating a generational difference in approach to finding synthesis between halakha and homosexuality. Rabbi Rapoport next presents the proposed solution of reparative therapy, about which he remains extremely skeptical regarding its efficacy as well as applicability to the Orthodox community. As he comments, “I do not want to rule out completely the possibility of change, but I am extremely far from convinced that this is something which is going to provide a major solution.” Rabbi Rapoport does not have a solution, but he does have a sensitivity to the struggle. As he explains,

I personally have come to the conclusion – which I know is not particularly satisfying, but it is at least truthful – and that is that there is no explanation. The Torah forbids it, it is forbidden, and for reasons best known to God, the Torah, halakha says homosexual congress is forbidden. Full stop. That’s the end of it.
It’s unfair in the extreme. . . . it imposes enormous challenges upon those who are of a homosexual orientation . . .

Rabbi Rapoport does not simply explain away homosexuality as something that can be fixed, nor does he discount the authority of the *halakha*. Recognizing the difficulty and confronting the situation brings the issue of homosexuality to the public sphere of Orthodox Judaism, a relatively new forum for serious engagement with the topic.

Rabbi Rapoport presents two approaches for dealing with the issue of homosexuality and homosexuals in the Orthodox community: alienation and acceptance. Ostracism, Rabbi Rapoport believes, is not a solution. As he says, “. . . if people feel alienated they won’t buckle under the pressure, they’ll just go somewhere else. They’ll go to the progressives, they’ll go to the non-Jewish places.” The standards for banishment, Rabbi Rapoport believes, are often hypocritical. As he states, “There are even heterosexual people who engage in all sorts of sexual sins – including premarital sexual liaison, extramarital, *niddah*, etc. etc. and we don’t ostracize them.” Thus, Orthodox communities must accept homosexuals, recognizing that they struggle with certain, very difficult issues. He addresses the audience in the first person plural on this topic, saying, “We must be sensitive and we must be compassionate and understanding and we must make sure that we don’t alienate such people from our midst. And that every Jew should be able to find a place within the Jewish community, within the Jewish home, within the Jewish *shul* . . .” This inclusive approach is consonant with YCT’s core values of “Living our personal, family and public lives guided by the highest ethical and moral standards, reflective of *yosher* and *kiddush shel Shamayim*” and “Cultivating *yir’at shamayim*—i.e. spirituality, God-consciousness, piety, and ethical sensitivity—and integrating it into all learning, religious practice, and worldly pursuits.” Rabbi Rapoport still holds to the *halakhic* dictates, but advocates sensitive engagement with the issues instead of running away or pretending that they don’t exist.
Rabbi Rapoport and his presentation represent openness to confronting difficult halakhot and recognizing the humanity of every person. Rabbi Rapoport does not come to preach to the audience or to provide an answer; he comes to teach and model his approach, an approach that holds fast to the halakha while dealing openly and compassionately with people. The halakha is challenging and some in the audience find it angering, but Rabbi Rapoport presents it as the cornerstone of Orthodox Judaism and, as law, it is binding. With this approach, Rabbi Rapoport expresses two of YCT’s core values simultaneously: “Inspiring a passionate commitment to the study of Torah in all its rich forms and the scrupulous observance of halakha” and “Affirming the shared tzelem Elokim of all people, our responsibility to improve the world and our capacity to be enriched by it.”

After Rabbi Rapoport answers a few questions from the audience, the group breaks for dessert followed by discussions. Some people go home, but all of the Meorot students and about half a dozen guests remain. The Meorot students go into their regular discussion session; the guests are invited to do the same with each other, facilitated by one of the co-directors of the program.

The co-director begins the session for the guests by saying that this is a “safe space conversation, anyone can say anything.” The participants, two women and four men, introduce themselves. They guide their own conversation, responding to certain aspects of Rabbi Rapoport’s presentation and to each other’s comments. Not all of the participants affiliate Orthodox, though most do. The discussion organically begins with the topic of education – when to teach children about homosexuality and what to do in the classroom when kids say that something is “gay.” The group agrees that teachers need to do a better job of addressing this issue. The conversation topic moves into their own school experiences which a couple of the
participants (it turns out they attended the same educational institutions, but were in different years) had found to be particularly lacking in sex education. The Meorot co-director frames the entire conversation, saying “I think part of Open Orthodoxy is creating a space where a conversation like this can take place. And being Orthodox, and being open to people and also open to our own reactions to issues.” With this, a couple of the participants begin discussing YCT. They express their desire to see YCT take a more activist stance and begin admitting gay men into the rabbinical program, though they recognize what’s at risk. As one person comments, “I wish they would be able to show courage . . . on the other hand, there are people going into communities and Chovevei Torah has to sell itself.” One participant, a couple minutes later, adds, “I like the idea of YCT existing as a place for this discussion to happen more than I like the idea of YCT going under . . .” This is a core part of YCT’s existence, that it is a place where people can hash out difficult halakhic issues. For now, according to the students, that’s worth preserving above other issues. As the conversation moves forward, the participants begin to discuss more of the details of the lecture. A couple students, for different reasons, find certain points difficult to reconcile and are skeptical that homosexuals can lead fulfilling religious and sexual lives as frum Jews. The conversation dwindles at this point as the Meorot students on the other side of the room finish their discussion and start leaving. The two participants who’d attended the same school continue talking about the finer points of halakha and Rabbi Rapoport’s lecture.

The visitors leave the discussion still audibly engaged in the subject and by the variety of views expressed. Meorot students have an entire school year’s worth of evenings like this. They learn about a variety of subjects, but they also learn about the intricacies of Orthodoxy, both objectively and subjectively. Rachel expresses that even though she has studied some of the subjects before, as a result of Meorot, she comprehends more of their intricacies. She says, “my
thinking about these issues has become much more nuanced. I feel I have been exposed to many ideas and points of view that I will now remember and factor in when I continue considering these issues in the future.” Along those same lines, Todd comments that he feels “more knowledgeable about opinions that disagree with mine and the range of opinions within Modern Orthodoxy. I also feel that I have more nuanced and complicated opinions about the . . . issues.”

For Rachel and Todd, Meorot deepens their understanding of the subtleties in varieties of Orthodoxy; Rafi, though, expresses that he has become more open. Rafi explains that he has been inspired to “become more open in the view of Judaism, not just Orthodoxy, more involved in social justice, and much more critical of ultra Orthodoxy.” Meorot impacts the participants on a variety of levels, but perhaps the one that is the most significant towards their goal of developing future community leaders relates to the networks created by the students. As Aryeh states, “Knowing that there is such a group of people who care as I do about these issues strengthens my commitment and desire to understand these ideas and to help deal with the issues that the Modern Orthodox community faces.”

Meorot is not YCT, but the program reflects many of the values of Open Orthodoxy – intellectual openness, commitment to halakha, and promoting women’s learning, to name a few. Meorot is also not a professional program like YCT, but it is cultivating community leaders. Since the program’s inception in the mid-1990s, Meorot has supplemented young adults’ educations with Open Orthodox perspectives. Though the students enter YCT, they represent the public sphere that is the American Orthodox community. Open Orthodoxy is transmitted through the experience of being inside and being somewhat exposed to the backstage that is YCT’s beit midrash.
Jewish Youth Encounter Program

In addition to learning, YCT students also teach. Adam, a third year student, translates Open Orthodoxy into the public sphere through teaching religious school. One afternoon a week, he teaches two classes – kindergarten/first grade and fifth grade. Adam teaches in a supplementary Jewish education program founded by Rabbi Weiss at his synagogue in the Bronx. The Jewish Youth Encounter Program (JYEP), from its inception, has been based on values of openness, non-judgmentalism, and positive, non-coercive Jewish exposure; thus, the students and students’ families do not need to be affiliated with an Orthodox synagogue, or any synagogue for that matter, in order for the children to attend. The mission of the program is to “instill Jewish values in children and strengthen Jewish values in families by providing accessible, meaningful, and authentic Jewish educational experiences for children and their families in safe, nurturing, stimulating, and sacred environments.” Tuition is minimal and a bus picks up children from their secular schools. According to the director, Nate, a YCT student, active recruitment is minimal (just a few advertisements a year); most families hear about the school by word-of-mouth. This is an outreach program with no agenda of synagogue membership or requirement of increase in ritual observance. JYEP is firmly based on the YCT core value of “Affirming the shared covenantal bond between all Jews. Promoting ahavat Yisrael and actively pursuing positive and respectful interaction of all Jewish movements.”

The 80 students currently enrolled in JYEP hale from a variety of geographical locations in and around New York and from families from various parts of the spectrum of Jewish affiliation. As Adam describes,

there’s really such a wider range in the type of family, some which are affiliated with the synagogue, . . . connected to Jewish life and holidays; blended [i.e. interfaith] families, [for whom] this is the

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14 All research conducted in March 2008.
only Jewish connection they have; . . . there is a student whose current family is Catholic . . . but her biological mother . . . was Jewish. . . . So, it runs the whole gamut.

This school practices openness through being non-judgmental in their admissions policy. JYEP, affiliated with and housed in an Orthodox synagogue, gives a certain perception of religious and ritualistic gravitas and traditionalism to the curriculum content. Adam explains the approach from his perspective:

I think a lot of people come here because they feel like this is one of the only – if not the only – Orthodox synagogue they can come to, feel like they can have their kids get solid Jewish exposure and not have to worry about any sort of judgment . . . a lot of them are coming from blended families, plenty of them are not halakhically Jewish, but given that this synagogue is open to considering broader definitions of what Jewish identity and is very concerned about being non-judgmental . . . [the families] really feel that they can come here.

JYEP opens up Orthodoxy to families who would not otherwise be exposed or welcomed by a halakhically stringent movement which would likely demand that they conform to Jewish law. The school is an example of the openness that Open Orthodoxy can achieve, but it is not Orthodox. Nevertheless, JYEP a valuable testing ground for someone like Adam as his YCT education prepares him to interact with the broader Jewish community from an open and welcoming standpoint.

By teaching in this school, Adam enters into a public sphere with an ideological foundation very similar to that of YCT. The school is physically outside the yeshiva, but translation of Open Orthodoxy from one location to the next is not necessarily a drastic feat. As a teacher, though, Adam’s role is different. In transitioning locations, he shifts from being an absorber of the philosophies of Open Orthodoxy to a transmitter. Adam entered teaching for practical reasons, as he explains, his decision “was motivated by feeling like it was a valuable
They needed teachers and I thought it was something that I at least could be fairly competent in. Also, for me, it’s an issue of *parnassa* [income; livelihood].” With a toddler at home and a baby on the way, the extra income is definitely a plus. However, he also “felt that I could help out [the school] and do something worthwhile.” One would assume that, because of their frequent exposure to Open Orthodoxy, YCT students would be actively recruited to teach in an open program. However, as Adam explains, this is not the case: “We’re sort of the last line. [The school tries] to get people in the community . . . we don’t get recruited because it disrupts the yeshiva’s schedule.” In this way, YCT prioritizes students’ learning over the propagation of Open Orthodoxy, a tactful move to ensure that upon exiting the yeshiva, the students have gotten the most out of their education and can most accurately and adeptly apply Open Orthodoxy.

Additionally, the Hebrew school also prefers to recruit community members (as opposed to students) because they have had more teaching expertise. As a case in point, Adam “just jumped in the classroom” without prior formal training in education. He and his classmates, though, have some experience, as he explains, “We’ve taught in the synagogues, given shiurim, helped in camps or running youth programs, that kind of thing, but it’s not like any of us are in education school . . .” Teaching in a religious school such as JYEP provides on-the-job training for the students, an informal educational outlet for what they study. It is also a realistic option for YCT students who haven’t had formal teacher training. As Adam elaborates,

I don’t know if we’d be able to [teach] . . . in an actual day school, we wouldn’t necessarily be eligible . . . In terms of the knowledge, . . . we know what we need to know. But, I think typically that in formal education they are probably looking for people with credentials . . . but I think we have the knowledge, in some cases more given that we’re in rabbinical school . . .

The informal education classroom provides a forum where YCT students can apply their formal, traditional, textual knowledge through a methodology based on Open Orthodoxy. The
opportunity, though, also highlights Rabbi Linzer’s previous statements that YCT needs to focus more on teaching students to specifically be educators.

Adam’s philosophy of education varies depending on his classes, though both are informed by the values of Open Orthodoxy, including “Living our personal, family and public lives guided by the highest ethical and moral standards, reflective of yosher and kiddush shem Shamayim.” Adam’s pedagogical approach, however, as he explains, was “derived based on having conversations with other educators in the synagogue and the community.” His goals for the kindergarten and first grade class center less on skill and more on experience. Adam is concerned with two things,

that they feel comfortable with things Jewish – even if I can’t succeed in getting them to read a line of Hebrew at the end of this, they won’t feel uncomfortable looking at a line of Hebrew; and the second is that they have positive memories when they think about Jewish ritual, Jewish holidays – they think about the fun that they had, the friends that they had, the positive experiences . . . That’s what I think about for the younger kids.

For the older students, Adam’s goals represent a dialectic of both growth-based comfort and discomfort. This perspective is his “bias about what’s compelling about Judaism.” Adam tries “to instill in them that their Jewish identity should be the thing that makes them think . . . it’s about getting them to think and then when I’m not trying to get them to think, it’s about the strong experiential [aspect] . . .” As opposed to his goals for the younger students, Adam seeks to challenge the fifth graders to engage with Judaism by analyzing their own thoughts, values, and perspectives within a Jewish construct.

In addition to guiding his philosophy of education, Adam aims to implant the values of Open Orthodoxy and his goals into his pedagogy and the content of his courses. His first class of the afternoon is the kindergarten and first grade group. Usually, there are 13 students; Adam is
the sole teacher. Today, there are only 9 students. The students meet in a starkly furnished basement classroom with one large window on the far wall. The paint on the walls is old and fading and a garbage can in the center of the room collects water from the leaky ceiling. The children gather around the large folding table close to a wall, some sitting in the adult-sized chairs, others standing, many walking around, and one temporarily hiding underneath the table as well. The students are continuously in motion and making noise, as six and seven year-olds are wont to do in the middle of the afternoon, especially after having been at school all day already. Adam realizes this situation and focuses primarily on lesson content, not decorum.

Today, Adam is teaching the students about the upcoming holiday of Purim. The students had made masks earlier to wear as or with costumes, have worksheets with key terms, and will also spend time coloring in pictures. Throughout the activities, though the room is noisy and the kids are disinclined to stay still, Adam nevertheless pushes forward with the lesson. He infuses facts about Purim observance and the story of the holiday into his steady monologue of asking the children by name to “focus,” “pay attention,” or “quiet down.” One of Adam’s goals is to expose the students to Hebrew. He uses lesson-specific Hebrew words repeatedly so that the students will not only understand the terms but will feel comfortable using them as well. The following interaction displays the content of Adam’s lesson and his pedagogy.

So . . . we celebrate Purim in a variety of ways. What did we unroll before?

*Megillah!*

The *megillah*. Very good. The *megillah*. The *megillah* is where we read the story of Purim, the story of Esther. We read it on the night of Purim and on the day of Purim. Shhhh. What else do we do?

Eat!

We do eat on Purim. What do we eat that’s special?
Shhh. We eat hamantaschen. And, do we eat just our own food or do we send food maybe to people? So, do we send food to each other?

Yes!

And what type of foods do we send to each other?

Hamantaschen!

Hamantaschen. What else?

Awesome food.

We send awesome food to each other. Do you know what that’s called in Hebrew? It’s called mishloach manot. So, what we do is we send each other really tasty food and we [proceeds to name nearly every single student in the classroom asking them to pay attention] – tell me about mishloach manot. What do we do? We send each other food, tasty food, and then do we give anything else to anyone on Purim?

Lollypops. Ice cream.

Ice cream would be a great gift.

Grape juice.

Grape juice – that’s a nice idea.

Can you remember if we give any other kinds of nice gifts to anyone on Purim? . . . We give gifts to whom?

To other people, different people.

We do give gifts to people, not just any people. We give gifts to the poor.

Oh, we give hamantaschen to them.

We give gifts to the poor so they can have their own festive meals otherwise it might be difficult for them to each without the gifts.
In this exchange, Adam’s aim was to remind the students of terms with which they should have been familiar: *megillah*, Queen Esther, *hamantaschen*, and *mishloach manot*. He also introduced the concept of *matanot l’evyonim* (gifts to the poor), though sans Hebrew. Adam is educating towards Jewish literacy both for the students and their families. As he comments about the coloring sheets they take with them, “You can take these home and decorate your house, make it nice and happy for Purim.” Even though the students only meet for a short time once a week, Adam does what he can to send the students home with their Jewish literacy, whether it is in vocabulary, factual knowledge, or artifacts.

Adam has a 15-minute break between the end of the lower grade section and the start of the fifth grade class. He uses that time to tidy up the one table and chairs, put markers and crayons away, take out the photocopies for the next class, and generally decompress. The fifth grade class calls for different pedagogical approaches and, of course, a more advanced curriculum. The age group, however, presents several challenges, as he elaborates, “[t]hey want knowledge and are invested in getting it, but are not willing to risk anything in terms of looking like fools.” As Adam explains, “with the fifth-graders, we’re trying to get them to start thinking in a more sophisticated way and every now and then it works out beautifully – we get into some really interesting discussions about “what does it mean when we ask ‘are the stories in the Torah true?’” Adam views these discussions as particularly indicative of deeper theological questions with which the students wrestle. For example, one student asked Adam, “do you think God is real?” “Do I think God is real?” he echoed. “Because I think God is just a belief,” says the student. Adam recognizes these snippets of conversation as significant in the spiritual development of his pre-teen students, but the curriculum necessarily focuses on fact-based content; theological discussions are welcomed as natural outgrowths of that, but the YCT core
value of “Cultivating yir’at shamayim—i.e. spirituality, God-consciousness, piety, and ethical sensitivity—and integrating it into all learning, religious practice, and worldly pursuits,” does not take precedence.

Adam’s fifth grade class only has four students, all girls. Compared to the kindergarten and first grade class, the students are just as noisy, just as easily distracted, and in terms of classroom management, he expends just as much energy trying to keep them quiet and focused. Because of the proximity of Purim, his lesson for the fifth graders is similar in content to that of the younger class. The students are going to be reading articles and learning about the values behind different aspects of the holiday. In typical fashion, Adam’s basic instruction turns into a longer discussion:

Adam: I want you to cull, that is lift out, what you think is the lesson in the article . . . so when Purim comes around on Thursday night, you’ll be able to make sense of what’s going on.

Student 1: I thought it started on Friday.

A: It is on Friday, but you have to remember on Jewish calendars the day begins the night before.

Student 2: What day do people go to the synagogue usually?

A: They usually go to the synagogue on Thursday night and also on Friday. . . .

Student 3: Do they go on both?

A: Some people go on both, yeah.

S3: OK good. I can’t do it on Thursday, so I’m going to have to do it on Friday.

A: Yeah, that’ll be fine.

This short exchange provides the students with the instructions for the assignment and also transmits Jewish literacy about dates and calendars, and teaches about holiday observance. Adam
does not mention to the students, none of whom are halakhically of age anyway, that it is required to hear the reading of the megillah. This is part of the non-coercive operationalization of openness; however, it is not Orthodox.

Adam also broaches the topic of mishloach manot with the fifth grade class. As was the case with the younger students though, whose conversation centered around different types of food, Adam’s conversation with the fifth graders deals with the larger issue of gift-giving and what it means for people on both ends of the present. Adam begins by introducing the character Haman and turns the discussion towards mishloach manot:

Adam: Haman was evil and wanted to kill Mordechai because he wouldn’t bow down to him. Here we say we can prevent the emergence of other people like that through giving gifts to them. How does this connect . . .? This is a question for everyone: How does being kind to one another prevent the emergence of people who want to destroy others?

Student 1: It teaches people to be kind so there will be no evil people like Haman.

A: So it does teach people to be kind, so it’s teaching by example. . . . What else? . . . What’s the connection?

Student 2: If everybody’s nice to each other, they won’t want to destroy each other. See how it works?

A: So that’s another good point: Why would you want to destroy people who are extremely nice? So that’s exactly the point – you wouldn’t want to. So why do we hope to accomplish by sending gifts?

S1: So people don’t to kill you.

A: . . . It’s about doing something nice for someone else, but it’s also about ourselves, about self-preservation. . . . It’s an interesting idea. . . . So that was one idea about sending mishloach manot.

This brief conversation excerpt displays several elements of Adam’s teaching. First, he presents his curriculum content goal – increased familiarity with the story of Purim, the main characters,
and giving *mishloach manot*. He then ties that basic information to the meta-issue of interpersonal relationships, kindness, and the alleviation of evil inclinations. Adam then mentions "teaching by example." Teaching by example is a significant component of Open Orthodoxy; it is non-invasive, non-coercive, and allows whatever audience exists to observe YCT students living the tenets of Open Orthodoxy as *halakhically* observant Jews with welcoming attitudes and non-judgmental approaches to working with Jews across the belief spectrum. In this exchange with the students, Adam disregards what he considers to be flip remarks (such as "So people don’t kill you") in favor of sticking to the main topic, *mishloach manot*. He knows how easily the students can derail a serious, content-based discussion and opts here not to indulge them.

The school, created with the value of openness at its core, provides a lucrative forum in which Adam can actively apply some of the values of Open Orthodoxy outside the yeshiva. Adam’s goals in teaching, pedagogy, and curriculum reflect YCT’s dedication to intellectual openness, serving the entire Jewish community, and inspiring learning. The school itself is not Orthodox, but the students and their parents interact with Orthodox Judaism by being in the synagogue’s building and interacting with Adam and other YCT students who teach there. The program, according to Adam, was “designed for kids who might not have any other Jewish exposure.” This school ensures that if the only Jewish experiences that the kids have are in these classrooms, that they are at least spending time in an Orthodox synagogue and interfacing with non-judgmental, sensitive Orthodox teachers. Though the school may not represent a true public sphere or front stage, it and Jewish educational in general provide important environments for the application of Open Orthodoxy outside YCT. Both Adam and Open Orthodoxy are the actors on the JYEP stage; the students and their families are the audience.
Section 2: Religion

YCT students apply Open Orthodoxy out in the open in the area of religion both as part of the yeshiva’s internship program as well as extra-curricularly. The following examples illustrate the different dimensions of Open Orthodoxy as specifically a public religion and Orthodox communities as public spheres.

Rabbinic Internship Student Pulpit

In his 3rd and 4th years of the program, every YCT student participates in an internship. More often than not, the students intern in synagogues, spending approximately one weekend per month under the mentorship of a congregational rabbi. The students may lead prayer services, teach a short class, or give a sermon from the pulpit. In addition, they accompany their mentor-rabbi as he goes about his regular business interacting with the local Jewish community, its organizations, leaders, and membership. The internship program is not only a component of every comprehensive professional training program, but at YCT it gives the students the opportunity to implement Open Orthodoxy in the public sphere from a religious perspective. YCT’s initial goal was to produce Open Orthodox pulpit rabbis. Though this goal is changing to incorporate a wider variety of applications of rabbinic ordination, the pulpit is still the central focus of YCT’s education. YCT has a network of North American synagogues and rabbis with whom its students intern. Some students intern in synagogues led by YCT graduates while others are mentored by rabbis who simply have a strong affinity for and belief in the tenets of Open Orthodoxy. The mentorship experience gives the YCT students the opportunity to learn from their future colleagues as both teachers and role models.

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15 All research conducted in February 2008.
Dan is a third-year student at YCT. One Friday morning a month, he makes the trip from New York to West Hartford, Connecticut. Dan is the rabbinic intern at Beth David Synagogue, a mid-sized, suburban, Modern Orthodox congregation in a primarily egalitarian Jewish community. Rabbi Adler is Dan’s mentor and the sole pulpit rabbi at Beth David. Dan is Rabbi Adler’s seventh YCT intern, making Beth David one of the few synagogues to have had an intern during nearly every year of the yeshiva’s existence. Rabbi Adler has never been to the *beit midrash* at YCT, but he is a firm supporter of the values of the yeshiva and the philosophy of Open Orthodoxy.

Rabbi Adler picks up Dan from the Hartford bus station in the late morning. From there, he takes Dan with him to buy groceries. Then, they stop in a food and gift shop which Rabbi Adler oversees as head of the Hartford Kashrut Commission, drop by the Beth David office for a few minutes, and lastly proceed to Rabbi Adler’s house. Rabbi Adler and his family live about half a mile from the synagogue in the same religiously diverse neighborhood as his congregants. His next door neighbor is a Protestant minister and their sons are friends. While preparing lunch, Rabbi Adler discusses the new Rabbinic Fellowship, a nascent organization founded by Modern Orthodox rabbinic leadership as an alternative to the Rabbinic Council of America which has ignored YCT’s accreditation application and refused membership to YCT-ordained rabbis.16 Rabbi Adler compares the Rabbinic Fellowship to the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA), which was created because demands for a women’s issues desk had been refused by the Orthodox Union. He comments that it is sad that a separate organization has to be created, but that he believes that it will be good for American Orthodoxy and he hopes they will be successful. These comments place Rabbi Adler in direct alignment with the ideologies of YCT.

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16 Refer to the latter part of Chapter 1 for more information.
Rabbi Adler is part of YCT’s efforts to not just train future rabbis, but also broaden the institutional landscape of Orthodox Judaism.

After lunch, while Rabbi Adler washes dishes, he and Dan get down to business. Dan will be delivering a *dvar Torah* during the Friday evening service. Rabbi Adler wants to go over it with him ahead of time. Dan presents the ideas that he had collected. He wants to speak about the time that he spent volunteering in El Salvador and how wonderful Shabbat had been after a week of physical labor. Rabbi Adler challenges Dan to tighten his message. He says, “You have to be able to render your message into a sentence – it can be a long sentence. . . . If you can’t say it, you don’t know it. So too with a *dvar Torah*, if you can’t articulate your point into one sentence, how can your listener? What are you expecting your *tzibur* [public/community] to get from it?”

One of the jobs of a rabbi is to teach; thus, it is important that the rabbi present his teaching points clearly so that they have the highest probability of resonating with the congregation. Rabbi Adler also encourages Dan to frame his *dvar Torah* from the perspective of the week’s Torah portion which discusses the Israelites’ building of the *mishkan* in the desert. Rabbi Adler focused on the theme of *melachah*, the creative work prohibited on Shabbat. He says to Dan, “*melachah* is the limit to HaKadosh Baruch Hu’s [God’s] mastery of the universe. Now in Central America, it took on a unique meaning for you because your creative energy is mental as a student, as opposed to someone whose preferences in life or whose lot in life demands that they be creative physically.” This message is important because the creative energy outlets of Beth David congregants are far removed from toiling in a field. Rabbi Adler feeds lines to Dan as an example of what he can add to his *dvar Torah*. He states,

> Shabbos can mean different things to different people, but in all cases it is still Shabbat. And you can look at an audience and say, “there are many different professions, vocations, interests reflected in a group of people, even if it’s a small group or if it’s a large
group, there’s always going to be diversity. For each human being, coming to Shabbat, we’ll be arriving at a common destination, but not necessarily from a common point of departure.”

On a larger level, Rabbi Adler acknowledges that communal diversity is par for the course; each person arrives at Shabbat and to Orthodoxy in a different way, a way that doesn’t detract from their experience, but rather diversifies the collective. Rabbi Adler relates the point of labor and creation to an even broader public in his comment about the verse “six days you shall do work.” He says that the phrase

\[ \text{Sheshet yamim teaseh melachah} \]

is actually the launching point for one of Mormonism’s important principles – that a person is responsible for his or her own self-destiny. If you want to accomplish something in life, you have to be engaged. \[ \text{Sheshet yamim teaseh melachah} \] [six days you will do creative work], you must be involved. You must be doing, you must be exerting creative energy, physical energy and then \[ b’yom hashvii Shabbat \] [rest on the seventh day].

Rabbi Adler is not averse to diversity in Judaism or to drawing comparisons with other faith traditions. This is part of the global dialogue in which Open Orthodoxy engages. Comparisons can also facilitate intellectualism, an exhibition of YCT’s core value of “Encouraging intellectual openness, questioning and critical thinking as essential components of one’s full service to God (avodat Hashem).”

On a local scale, in order for Dan to better understand West Hartford’s own Jewish community, Rabbi Adler arranges a meeting with the director of the local Jewish Community Center. Rabbi Adler begins his introduction of the JCC to Dan by saying that

[the director’s] job is one of the most difficult in the Jewish community. In fact, in many ways, it’s harder than a rabbi’s job . . . a synagogue has a spiritual identity if by nothing else than by virtue of its affiliation. . . . A JCC cannot protect itself by saying “that’s Orthodox and we’re not” or “we’re Orthodox and that’s not” because a JCC is everybody’s agency and the larger the tent needs to be, then the more tension there’s going to be.
The director presents some examples of tension that he deals with in his job. Neither he nor Rabbi Adler had been in the community when the JCC decided to open on Saturdays, though remnants of the debate still linger. The director explains a contemporaneously relevant point, however, the issue of kashrut. The director relates a conversation that had played out several times and illustrates different community dynamics and tensions. He says,

I had a group of laypeople involved on the kashrut committee who basically said for awhile that “when we do any community event, we’ll be under HKC [Hartford Kashrut Commission.]” But then they got to a point, “why should we be under HKC because they [i.e. the Orthodox] don’t come?” So, we’ll have a patron event and it will be with one of the HKC-sponsored caterers and “they aren’t here.” And I said “it’s not about who comes, it’s about who we want to come.”

In this way, the director touches on an important tenet of openness and the sensitivity required in the operationalization of religion in the public sphere. The JCC seeks to welcome people across the observance spectrum. In order to do so, they recognize the need for kosher certification. Their events are certified by the HKC so that as many people can feel comfortable attending as possible. As a parallel point, described in more detail in Chapter 2, during prayer times at YCT, they set up a mehitza to designate a prayer space for women. There are rarely women in attendance, but if they happen to stop by, they know that they will be accommodated.

One of YCT’s goals is to create and facilitate opportunities for positive Jewish experiences. The JCC director has the same orientation. He says, “I need to create very experiential, participatory Jewish experiences that are just exciting, engaging, and creative and fun.” This is both a business statement as well as a statement of principle, as he elaborates, “I believe that one of the most powerful tools for creating Jewish identity and Jewish community is association. So, a group of Jews coming together to do something secular is a group of Jews being together, so this becomes the Jewish neighborhood.” The director, in response to Dan’s
questions about programs and initiatives, gives details about the schedule and calendar of the JCC. Rabbi Adler adds that the JCC is vitally important because community programming “doesn’t happen if you leave it up to synagogues.” At the close of the conversation, Rabbi Adler addresses the relevance of the Jewish Community Center to the values of YCT and the philosophy of Open Orthodoxy, both for Dan’s benefit as well as the director’s:

Open Orthodoxy, the way I think Rabbi Weiss teaches it and preaches it is not only what you can get from people by being open, but what you can share with people by being open. Rabbinic literature is just chock-full of examples of where people recognize the mutuality of what it means to be part of a Jewish community. In my mind, this is the territory where that happens.

The JCC applies the Open part of Open Orthodoxy – the YCT core values of “Affirming the shared covenantal bond between all Jews. Promoting ahavat Yisrael and actively pursuing positive and respectful interaction of all Jewish movements” and “Affirming the shared tzelem Elokim of all people, our responsibility to improve the world and our capacity to be enriched by it” – to the Jewish community.

The next stop in the afternoon is the home of a Beth David family. During the meeting at the JCC, Rabbi Adler had received a phone call from the mother of three distraught boys whose dog had just been hit by a car. She is at a loss for what to do and thought that the rabbi might be able to help. Rabbi Adler, likewise at a loss for what to do, jokes on the way to the house about the diversity of the rabbinic experience. His countenance changes completely, though, upon entering the family’s home and meeting with the boys and their mother. The visit, just an hour and a half before Shabbat, is solemn. The boys, ranging in age from nine to thirteen, are justifiably sad and slightly taken aback that Rabbi Adler had brought two other people with him. Rabbi Adler speaks with the boys quietly. He asks them questions about happy memories that they’d had with the dog and how special human relationships with animals can be. He ends the
visit by drawing their attention to a text found the Shabbat afternoon liturgy about people and animals. He has the oldest boy, who recently celebrated his bar mitzvah, read the verse from the prayer book in Hebrew and the middle son read the translation in English. Rabbi Adler never equates the death of the pet to the death of a person, but mentions the necessity of allowing oneself to be sad and acknowledging the special bond that the boys had shared with their dog. He parts by thanking the mother for calling him and hugging each of the boys. Back in the car, he again chuckles about the eclectic nature of the rabbinic profession. Rabbi Adler handles the situation with sensitivity and understanding. He takes the time out of a busy Friday afternoon to provide comfort and a Jewish framework in which the boys can cope with their loss.

Shabbat comes in at 5:26pm. At the synagogue, between the kabbalat Shabbat and maariv [evening] services, Dan gives his dvar Torah, the one which he had discussed with Rabbi Adler. Dan speaks about his trip to El Salvador a few years ago. He talks about the intense physical labor – working in fields, clearing brush, digging, hoeing. The diverse group of rabbinical students on the trip worked six days, from Sunday through Friday. On Shabbat, they rested. Each person had his or her own concept of Shabbat rest and observance; they all came from the same tradition, though, that teaches that the seventh day is a day of rest. Dan had liked the point that Rabbi Adler had mentioned about creative work, but the work that he had been doing in El Salvador wasn’t necessarily creative. Thus, the message of creative labor did not work. Perhaps the point is that Dan, as an Orthodox rabbinical student, was applying his Judaism and living his Judaism out in the open, in the public sphere. He was doing physical labor, something rare and uncommon for the typical American Orthodox Jew. The gripping part of Dan’s message is the uniqueness of the experience and the sharing of that experience – that a person can be Orthodox and also dedicate part of his or her life to physical, community service,
something seemingly inconsistent with the daily life of most people he and the audience would encounter. In a traditional conceptualization, the *dvar Torah* is supposed to be about rest after a week of labor, but the audience isn’t necessarily interested in that. The audience is interested in the specifics of the experience, an experience that they hadn’t had.

Dan and I eat Shabbat dinner at the home of a Beth David family, a husband, wife, and three children, the oldest of whom is away at college. We are joined by two school friends of the family’s daughter and a young couple from the community who is expecting their first child. The group at dinner explains a lot about the Beth David community. First, it is family-oriented. This particular family, long-standing and active members of the synagogue membership, has a history of hosting visitors and rabbinic interns for meals. They are a traditional family that hasn’t always been traditional, as is the case with many families in the community. Their children all attend, or attended, Jewish day school, though their middle child, the daughter, currently attends a public high school. This evening, she has invited a non-Jewish friend over for dinner. The young couple is active in the synagogue community and serves on the board and social justice committees. Neither the husband nor wife grew up Orthodox, though that is how they both affiliate now. The Beth David community members are uniform in their diversity and accepting of people who are on journeys that lead them towards increased ritual observance and more active communal participation, indicative of how Beth David reflects YCT’s core value of “Inspiring a passionate commitment to the study of Torah in all its rich forms and the scrupulous observance of halakha.”

At dinner, we discuss the young couple’s forthcoming child, school, facility changes for the area Hebrew High School (which the family’s youngest child hopes to attend), and the daughter’s college plans. Surprisingly, no one asks Dan about YCT or Open Orthodoxy at all.
People talked about his trips to West Hartford and asked questions about his wife, but never probe into why he is in rabbinical school. Perhaps the YCT intern, whoever he happens to be, has become such a fixture in the Beth David community that the fascination is gone. Or, perhaps he had shared his story on a previous trip. After the meal, Dan, obligated as a kohen, leads benschung [grace after meals]. Later in the evening, the young couple comments about how inclusive he is because he uses the term chaverai (friends) instead of the traditional rabbotai (gentlemen) during the prayer.

Shabbat morning services begin at approximately 9 am. Just before the end of the Torah reading, Rabbi Adler announces that Dan will be teaching a short lesson on “the origin of prayer” for anyone who wishes to attend. This is the fifth such session that Dan has led, all of which have to do with prayer and take place during the morning service. Dan provides source sheets with Hebrew, Aramaic, and English. Seven of us – three women and four men – ranging in age from early 20s to late 60s, attend. A few in the group are active members of the synagogue. The people who attend illuminate Beth David’s openness – that a person with a more limited Jewish education can be active in the congregation and that the synagogue will provide learning opportunities for them, even if it means that people leave the sanctuary and the prayer service in order to attend. As evidenced by Dan’s sessions and the list of congregational events and programs, Beth David is committed to knowledge-based engagement, inclusion, and learning. Instead of ignoring gaps between knowledge and participation or pushing people away to a less-observant congregation, the synagogue welcomes them in and helps them learn and become more knowledgeable participants. This is how Beth David adapts openness, philosophically and programmatically. The mission is the same as YCT’s and Dan is able to apply what he learns in the yeshiva to open environment where people want to engage with text.
The discussion centers on texts that Dan has brought, all of which are about the sources of prayer – the actions of the forefathers and the order of the Temple sacrifices. During the text study, people question two points in particular. The first point is Dan’s translation of l’suach b’sadeh. He translates the phrase as “work in the field.” This translation is contested by two native Hebrew-speakers who say that the proper translation of l’suach is “wander,” not “work.” Dan does not support his word choice, but instead says “I don’t know, but I will check.” He says the same thing later on when the group has a question about a quotation from Jeremiah 7:16 mentioned at the end of a section of Talmud. People in the group say that it is incongruous and does not make sense in the context of discussing prayer and the act of reaching in prayer or reaching for prayer which had just come up previously. Dan has not pre-empted the question and has not brought a Bible with him to check the context of the quote. This phrase is a major point of discussion and engagement in the learning process. Dan handles several questions with further explanation of either translation of words or interpretations by sources that he has memorized. However, the session isn’t about him telling everyone what he has learned in school and trying to impress them; it is about facilitating a learning experience for others. People take turns reading and they are the ones to ask him questions. Dan only asks questions at the beginning, such as “What is the source of prayer in Judaism?” When the participants only state one, the forefathers, Dan does not add in the Temple sacrifices; however, he does present the texts and point out that the texts cite two bases for modern-day prayer. Dan’s manner is unassuming and under-stated, allowing plenty of space for the texts to speak and for the small audience to engage with the material and have a positive Jewish educational experience regardless of their knowledge level.

17 “As for you, do not pray for this people, or lift up cry or prayer for them, and do not intercede with me, for I do not hear you.”
The rest of Shabbat is relatively quiet. Following the morning services, Dan speaks with a variety of people individually, but does not address the congregation as a whole. Dan and I eat Shabbat lunch at Rabbi Adler’s house with several other people, including a guest speaker from Israel\(^\text{18}\) around whom much of the conversation focuses. *Mincha* (the afternoon prayer service) is at 5pm, followed by *seudah shlishit* (third meal), and then *havdalah* (transitional service out of Shabbat) and *ma’ariv* (evening prayer service.) Dan is called up to the Torah at *mincha* to say the blessings, but does not otherwise have a public role.

Pulpit internships expose YCT students to the lived world of American Orthodox Judaism. The monthly trips force them to apply what they learn inside the walls of the yeshiva – traditional texts, homiletics, pastoral counseling, etc. – to the outside; to apply public religion under the tutelage of a rabbinic mentor. The role of the pulpit rabbi is not restricted to the pulpit, analogous to Goffman’s front stage. During that Friday and Saturday, Rabbi Adler orientates Dan to aspects of the backstage of a community rabbi, intricate relationships within the Jewish community – institutional relationships between synagogues and the Jewish Community Center, and the relationships as counselor and teacher that a rabbi has with his congregants. Beth David, according to Rabbi Adler, is “an Orthodox synagogue; it’s not necessarily an Orthodox congregation,” a statement which combines aspects of YCT’s core values of “Inspiring a passionate commitment to the study of Torah in all its rich forms and the scrupulous observance of *halakha*” with “Affirming the shared covenantal bond between all Jews. Promoting *ahavat Yisrael* and actively pursuing positive and respectful interaction of all Jewish movements.” The openness of YCT’s values and philosophies accepts this reality and the inherent diversities of Jewish communities and seeks to help people grow through positive experiences and learning.

\(^{18}\) Like many Orthodox synagogues, Beth David is Zionist and integrates Israel-themed programming into its calendar. This stance is consonant with YCT’s core value of “Recognizing *Eretz Yisrael* as our homeland and affirming the religious and historical significance of the State of Israel for all Jews in Israel and the Diaspora.”
MigdalOr

MigdalOr is a progressive, Orthodox minyan (here: prayer community) in the Washington Heights neighborhood of New York City. Jewishly, Washington Heights is home to a heavily Orthodox community with strong institutional ties to Yeshiva University. MigdalOr is not a Yeshivat Chovevei Torah initiative per se, though many of the yeshiva’s students are active leaders and participants and the values of the minyan mesh with those of YCT. Thus, this self-proclaimed “progressive” minyan appears to go against two local trends: conservatism and large-scale organized religion. According to their website, MigdalOr’s mission is to create a warm, participatory environment dedicated to enhancing kavanah (devotion) and forward mindedness in tefillah (prayer), while working within the context of halakha (Jewish law). Building upon this paradigm, our goal is to foster a spirit of social action within the larger context of Washington Heights. We challenge members to take an active role in their religious expression. This includes, but is not limited to, more participation by all members of the community.20

Suzanne, one of the founders of the minyan expands on the mission statement with her guiding philosophy: “my involvement relates to my commitment to creating an environment where everyone who comes can feel engaged and connected. To me, this means that women should understand how valued they are to the community, converts and ba’alei tshuva are comfortable asking questions and leading davening, and everyone who comes feels that their voice is heard.”21 The MigdalOr mission statement and Suzanne’s own philosophy highlight several of the elements of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah’s mission and the core values of Open Orthodoxy: nurturing spirituality, strict observance of Jewish law, increasing women’s roles in religious life, and community activism. In terms of the theories of Erving Goffman, MigdalOr represents a

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19 Hebrew for lighthouse; research conducted March, 2008.
20 (http://migdalorminyan.com/WelcometoMigdalOr.php)
21 All responses come from questionnaires given during the first week of April, 2008.
front stage where YCT students and likeminded Jews can act out their values through religion. In terms of Robert Wuthnow’s theory, MigdalOr is a public forum through which the philosophy of Open Orthodoxy can be transmitted.

The initial idea for MigdalOr was born in a car on the way to a Bob Dylan concert. Three women in their 20s, members of the Washington Heights Orthodox community, Suzanne, Maya, and Elana were discussing the ways in which they were dissatisfied with the Orthodox establishment in their neighborhood. As Suzanne relates, “we all started complaining about our individual lack of commitment or enthusiasm for our current local shul.” Maya elaborates, “The one synagogue . . . left me cold. Women sit on the perimeter, and watch the show . . .” In addition to feelings of marginalization, Suzanne adds that “there were some values as well that we felt were missing in what already existed. We wanted to become more connected with the neighborhood . . .” The women took the matter into their own hands because, as Maya relates, “I think the three of us felt that there was a lot we wanted from our community that we could not get at the time, and we felt we could create it.” Their dissatisfaction morphed into action, as the women “decided that it was time in the Heights for a new type of minyan that would allow greater participation for all members of the kehillah [community]. We also wanted a place that felt more intense, but would appeal to creativity and allow for individual spiritual expression.” Luckily for them, they are not the first disenchanted, young, traditionally-oriented Jews to come to the conclusion that creating their own minyan would be a positive endeavor. Maya explains that “There were a lot of innovate models taking hold in the Upper West Side [Manhattan], [Washington] DC, and Jerusalem and we felt that the young post college scene that was taking root up here could really benefit from these alternatives.” With help, advice, and precedent from
older, established, independent minyanim, and a prime demographic at their doorstep, the women moved forward.

Eli, a YCT student, has been active in MigdalOr since just after its inception. Eli heard about the minyan around his neighborhood and got in touch with the founders. He relates, “They invited me to the planning meeting for the first minyan and I've been involved since then.” Many of Eli’s interests echo the motivations of the founders. He “had been interested in a more progressive davening option in the Heights and a more friendly, small prayer community, and one that sang more.” Additionally, his involvement in the minyan gives him the opportunity to be involved in a leadership role, which, as he notes, is “potentially useful towards a rabbinic career . . . think through halakhic and political issues.” Eli is a member of the leadership team, which Leah, likewise a member of the group, describes as “a group of 5-8 people who meet in person about once a month to make sure regular programs are running smoothly, address any issues, make decisions, and plan special events.” Maya takes leadership roles in terms of finding “locations, publicity, finances, and steering.” Suzanne, who has a more public role, is the “Head Gabbai – meaning working on assigning davening/dvar Torahs to community members and ensuring a smooth davening experience.” She also works on planning and grant research.” Eli often hosts meetings and, as he describes, “I am responsible for checking the email account and sending weekly emails. I am also involved in various ways occasionally in the financial end and the gabbai-ing end.” Eli also regularly leads maariv, the evening prayer service which a woman is not halakhically permitted to lead for a co-ed community.

MigdalOr serves a specific, progressive Orthodox segment of the Washington Heights community, but the board members and the minyan are not exclusive. Suzanne comments that though MigdalOr is committed to Orthodox values, “There is no group who should not feel
welcome.” Its welcoming stance, according to Wuthnow’s standards, is a sign of a public religion. Eli comments, “We'd like to serve a lot of populations. . . . We'd like to be attracting the liberal Orthodox segment of Yeshiva University [students] . . .” MigdalOr attracts participants by providing both prayer services every other Friday evening as well as an oneg [festive reception] and shiur on alternating weeks. On weeks when MigdalOr doesn’t meet and for all other prayer services, participants attend the large Orthodox synagogue in the neighborhood. MigdalOr, according to Eli, will also reschedule its events if they directly conflict with something at the synagogue and could be perceived as encroaching on the shul’s membership or major programmatic territory. MigdalOr does not want to be a full-service synagogue, but they do want to grow. Nevertheless, for their regular services and shiurim, MigdalOr already attracts crowds large enough to fill a mid-sized room in the local YMHA; however, Eli says, “we'd like to be serving even more [Washington] Heights Jews the more we get to know what they are looking for in [an] involved, active, Jewish community life.” In the meantime, several YCT students living in Washington Heights are active MigdalOr participants and supporters.

Each of the three YCT students surveyed heard about MigdalOr by word-of-mouth, one from a founder and the other two from their classmates. Their participation levels vary from Koby’s infrequent attendance because he is “rarely in the neighborhood for Shabbat” to Scott who defines himself as a “regular participant in services and shiurim,” to Jonah who attends “almost every prayer service, [has] lead prayers, and given the dvar Torah.” Many of their motivations for participating relate to intrigue and a dedication to progressivism within traditional Judaism. Scott began attending MigdalOr minyanim and shiurim because he was curious and then, as he explains, “because I liked the community, the singing, the people, the values it stands for.” Koby also began attending MigdalOr programs out of curiosity that he
participates in MigdalOr out of “commitment to making religious space more comfortable to women.” Jonah presents a broader view. He says that he participates because “Progressive and feminist values need to enter the Orthodox world, and MigdalOr is the vehicle for that happening in Washington Heights.”

MigdalOr, according to the YCT students, is important because it addresses several needs – communal, personal, spiritual, and feminist. Scott elaborates that MigdalOr “fulfills a communal need as it represents the progressive Orthodox community of Washington Heights; it fulfills a personal need insofar as it gives me a community whose hashkafa [opinion; ideologies] more or less directly coincides with my own . . .” Koby comments that “MigdalOr has a very spirited davening; therefore, it fills a major spiritual need. Also, allowing women greater access to synagogue leadership allows women to connect more easily to Orthodox worship.” Jonah adds that MigdalOr is “the only place for orthodox women to take a religious leadership role in the neighborhood.” Scott and Koby’s comments display that they see values of YCT and Open Orthodoxy playing out in the operation of the minyan. The founders’ ideologies and their initial conception of how to meet the needs that they perceived in the Washington Heights Orthodox community are working in practice. In addition to meeting the values-based ideals of the board, Jonah comments that MigdalOr meets the changing religious affiliation needs of the Washington Heights community as well. He explains that “the Modern Orthodox population . . . has continued to grow and many people who see themselves as more liberal have moved into the community. Until now, there was little way for them to express themselves either religiously or socially. MigdalOr provides that place.” Additionally, he states, “for some older, long-term residents of the Heights who have felt on the margins of the community for years, MigdalOr presents a warm, friendly environment for people to join.” MigdalOr’s open orientation to the
community establishes it, at least in theory, as an application of Open Orthodoxy and oriented towards the YCT core value of “Affirming the shared covenantal bond between all Jews. Promoting ahavat Yisrael and actively pursuing positive and respectful interaction of all Jewish movements.” The following two case studies illustrate MigdalOr programs, one prayer-based and one learning-based.

Migdal Purim

MigdalOr’s Purim day shacharit [morning] service and megillah reading draw about fifty people, including at least 8 current or former YCT students. The service is held in a mid-sized room on the ground floor of the Washington Heights YMHA annex. A 4.5-foot tall, purple chiffon, makeshift mechitza divides the room. At 8:40am, both the men’s and women’s sides are well-populated. All but one woman and two men are in their 20s to early 30s. As per the custom of the holiday, the majority of attendees have dressed in costume. Among the crowd: a fair trade banana, Abe Lincoln, a hippy, several frum cross-dressers, a gecko, and a cow.

MigdalOr values increasing participation, within the confines of halakha, of women in participating and leading prayer services. This allows for the implementation of two of YCT’s core values, “Cultivating yir’at shamayim—i.e. spirituality, God-consciousness, piety, and ethical sensitivity—and integrating it into all learning, religious practice, and worldly pursuits” and “Recognizing the need to enhance and expand the role of women in talmud Torah, the halakhic process, religious life and communal leadership within the bounds of halakha,” a woman, standing on the women’s side of the mechitza, leads psukei dzimra (introductory songs of praise) for the congregation. She wears a tallit and tefillin; one other woman has wrapped tfillin as well, though she is sans tallit. Given that it is a weekday, all of the men wrap tfillin and those that are married wear a tallit. The married women in the room cover their hair, a mark of
traditional Orthodox Judaism. Men lead the remainder of the prayer service. The service is fluid and entirely in Hebrew. People seem to know what is going on and when. No one calls out page numbers.

MigdalOr’s *megillah* reading is relatively egalitarian. The congregation maintains separate seating, but the readers, men and women, gather around the *megillah* at table in the front of the room, making sure to stay on the proper, gendered side. Men and women share the responsibilities of chanting the *megillah*. A man begins the reading with the obligatory prayer. Men and women take turns reading sections in the middle. A woman reads the last section and says the concluding blessing. All of the readers are fluent and make few, if any, mistakes. Most of the readers use standard, American-taught Israeli pronunciation although one reader, a woman surprisingly enough, uses a very *Ashkenazishe nusach* (pronunciation from Eastern Europe) that one might expect to hear from a cloistered yeshiva student. As mentioned previously, pronunciation says a lot about a person’s social, religious, and educational backgrounds – this group has spent a lot of time in Jewish schools.

A *seudah* (festive meal) follows *davening* and the *megillah* reading. People chat with each other; an outside observer can tell that they’re friends. About 30 people stay for the bagel brunch. People take down the *mechitza* and make room for several long tables in the middle of the room. Food and drinks (including both juice and wine) cover the tables. After ritually washing their hands before eating the bagels, people who can find seats sit, and those who can’t, stand around the periphery of the room. MigdalOr charges $8 for the *seudah*, but payment is by the honor system. An additional receptacle and three half shekels pieces sit next to the *seudah* cash box. The half shekels are for the traditional process of giving *matanot l’evyonim*. People leave larger amounts of cash and checks; the shekels are symbolic. People hang around talking
and eating for a long time. At one point, a few people start singing; others join in. The atmosphere is celebratory and friendly. The group says the festival grace after meals together and then a group of people stay to clean up. Clean-up involves actual work as well as a broom “swordfight.” The last people leave at about 12:30pm.

Migdal TOrah

Migdal TOrah, the minyan’s learning program, perhaps unknowingly showcases two of YCT’s core values: “Inspiring a passionate commitment to the study of Torah in all its rich forms and the scrupulous observance of halakha” and “Encouraging intellectual openness, questioning and critical thinking as essential components of one’s full service to God (avodat Hashem).” A member of the MigdalOr leadership team who is not himself a YCT student, coordinates Migdal TOrah, the twice-monthly oneg and shiur, but different people from the community volunteer their apartments for the event. This week’s hosts, a couple in their 20s, set up a table of snack foods, sodas, juices, and a hot water kettle for tea and coffee. They have arranged about a dozen or so folding chairs stretching the length of the dining area and living room. For about an hour, people trickle in, snack, and schmooze. With the exception of one middle-aged man, no one is over the age of 35. By 5:10pm, there is barely room to move and someone has left to go get more chairs from his apartment. A little after that, someone decides to move the coffee table. When the speaker begins, over 30 young adults are squished into folding chairs and onto the sofa.

The presenter for the afternoon’s shiur, is a member of the community, a man in his late 20s who lives in the neighborhood and has a strong background in traditional Jewish texts. He has prepared a bilingual, 11-page source sheet so that everyone in the audience can follow his lecture. He stands in the front of the room by the window and addresses the co-ed crowd. He speaks about women’s leadership and suffrage, an appropriate topic given the leadership role of
Esther in the previous day’s holiday of Purim. He begins with background texts – both rabbinic and Biblical – which essentially discount women as leaders because of the command to have a king, not a queen. In his section on medieval texts, the presenter supplies excerpts regarding the status of Deborah as a judge and a prophetess, wherein the latter role legitimates her in the former role.

The modern responsa are the centerpiece of the presentation. The speaker provides texts from Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, Rabbi Ben-Zion Meir Uziel, Rabbi Hayyim Hirschensohn, and Rabbi Moshe Feinstein. He likewise provides short biographies of the commentators at the end of the packet. Through this array of authors, the presenter illustrates the progression from disallowing women any role in the public sphere to recognizing their full participation in communities and not being able to legitimately deny their leadership. The choice of authors reflects the values of the Orthodox progressive community. Texts from Rabbi Kook and Rabbi Herzog, first and second Ashkenazi chief rabbis of Israel, and Rabbi Uziel, first Sephardi chief rabbi of Israel, reflect the centrality of Zionism and Israel in the community, consonant with YCT’s core value of “Recognizing Eretz Yisrael as our homeland and affirming the religious and historical significance of the State of Israel for all Jews in Israel and the Diaspora.” Rabbi Hirschensohn’s comments reflect the values of his adopted American homeland and sensitivity to Jewish interactions with modern culture. The texts from Rabbi Feinstein illustrate the centrality of women in community and society to a degree which makes prohibition of leadership roles sound absurd. As a whole, the texts reflect the values of the community because they are traditional in form and structure, progress historically, are presented in both Hebrew and English, deal with feminism and women’s rights, and are grounded in Jewish law. After the shiur, many
people troop across the street to the large Orthodox shul to daven mincha. MigdalOr does not have its own Torah scroll, necessary for certain prayer services, including mincha on Shabbat.

Jonah, Scott, and Koby are largely satisfied with the role that MigdalOr plays in their lives and the niche that it carves out in the Washington Heights community. However, their goals for the minyan reflect a desire for growth. Scott, who calls it “a second home,” hopes that MigdalOr “expands to include [Shabbat] morning davening . . . [and] that the community becomes more established . . .” Jonah echoes Scott’s desire for more prayer services and also states that the minyan “should be organizing more classes, perhaps social events, more service projects, be doing more bigger and louder.” Jonah wants MigdalOr to be a more forceful presence in the community, something that may be more easily achieved if participation increases. As he comments, “there are many more people in the community who might be interested in joining, and we need to figure out what the barriers are, and break them down.” In his comment, Koby addresses one potential way to break down some barriers, especially given the more rigid traditionalism of the Washington Heights community. He says, “I would like to make sure that MigdalOr remains committed to halakha in a serious way and helps create a culture of commitment.” Eli, also, as a YCT student and board member, comments that he would “like to . . . convince more people that [MigdalOr] is halakhic . . .”

As a group, the board members hope that MigdalOr will grow and expand. Their goals, though, reflect more of an organizational focus. They want to engage the community; not just be engaged, and ensure that the minyan survives, not just have a short-term existence. Maya’s goals contribute an element of feminist leadership, as she comments, “I am hoping to create a community of people that feel engaged in their prayer and in their community. A safe space for people to lead. A place for women to branch out beyond what has traditionally been their role.”
Eli is also interested in empowering “more regular attendees to try leading *davening* and speaking and getting involved in leadership;” though as a future rabbi, he also would “like to get more experience dealing with the circumstantial challenges (vicissitudes, if you will) of growing a community, especially a progressive one . . . [and] to continue getting experience working with a leadership team/board, which is valuable . . . [for] professional rabbinic life.” Maya and Eli’s goals of empowerment may be interpreted as running counter to the general ethos of Washington Heights’ large-scale, centralized, institutional Orthodox Judaism. Consonant with the practices of Open Orthodox adherents and leaders, MigdalOr is interested in facilitating personally meaningful religious experiences in a safe, creative environment. Despite its intentions, though, MigdalOr is still an organization. In stating her goals, Suzanne addresses the longevity of the *minyan*: “I think that my personal goal for MigdalOr is to get it to a place where it can be run as an independent organization. As Washington Heights is . . . a place of transience, I want MigdalOr to be able to be taken over and run after the current leaders are no longer around.” Suzanne explains the different elements and details necessary for institutional survival: “MigdalOr needs to become more organized financially and organizationally. This means applying for non for profit status, ensuring a stable means of support, and also finding committed individually who have the capacity to take on leadership roles in the community.” The board members have realistic concerns for the propagation of the *minyan* and are working even at this early stage to establish systems to ensure its survival.

The people involved with MigdalOr affiliate as Orthodox Jews. Their definitions of Orthodoxy, though, specifically Open Orthodoxy, illustrate where they see MigdalOr fitting in along the Jewish spectrum. As Leah comments, “[Open Orthodoxy] means embracing positive change while intensively respecting and perpetuating the *halakhic* system and *halakhic* practice.”
Eli, who spends his days engaged in learning Open Orthodoxy inside YCT, gives a broader definition and applies the philosophy to the public sphere:

It means feeling guided, but not crippled, by precedent. It means longing to reach out to and be in relationship with a wider variety of Jews. It means cultivating a Judaism which sees “serving the needs of its constituents” not as a bad . . . but as a potentially wonderful way of enriching Jewish life. It means placing great value on tefillah, talmud torah [education], hesed [kindness], and rigorous halakhic thinking, together with communal process and creativity.

MigdalOr was not founded as an Open Orthodox minyan; however, its values, goals, and membership reflect YCT’s mission and philosophy. MigdalOr is an informal testing ground for Open Orthodoxy, a way to see how the core values can realistically be operationalized in the open. MigdalOr’s practices are largely consistent with its values and goals, striving, if not accurately portraying, Open Orthodoxy in public. Though MigdalOr’s leadership team is rightly concerned with the more private matters of institutional survival, similarities between their written and actualized goals prove that the distinction between the front and back stages of training and action are not really so far apart. MigdalOr is not officially an outgrowth of YCT, but they benefit from each other and share values, ideologies, and members – all working towards the common goal of furthering and enhancing progressive, halakhic Judaism.

Section 3: Social Action

Social justice and activism are hallmarks of YCT. YCT students as well as the institution perpetuate a culture of Orthodox activism established by Rabbi Weiss. To use Goffman’s terminology, through social action, YCT exhibits a very bold stage presence. In Wuthnow’s language, Open Orthodoxy explores a certain dimension of the public sphere usually reserved for social service agencies. Additionally, one of Wuthnow’s definitions of “public” is responsibility, a particularly prevalent theme in social action initiatives. As he explains, “To speak of public
religion . . . is to suggest that individuals need to take responsibility for the good of their society . . . and that the public arena itself must reinforce this sense of responsibility among individuals and to whatever is sacred and transcendent about their collective values (11).”

**Uri L’Tzedek**

As Samuel Heilman (1983) cites from the Talmud, "Study is great in importance, for it is study that brings one to doing.” YCT students’ learning leads them to action. Through the development of Uri L’Tzedek, YCT students translate both the philosophy of Open Orthodoxy and the YCT model of learning into a social justice organization. Uri L’Tzedek, founded and coordinated by Noam, Ezra, Chaim, and Jonathan, meets once a month for a “beit midrash” in the basement of a large Orthodox synagogue in Washington Heights. The sessions draw upwards of 20 young adults from the surrounding Jewish community. Within the context of the *batei midrash*, the organization addresses a wide range of social justice topics from a Jewish perspective, combining texts, guest speakers, and a direct action component. For the first part of the session, participants learn texts in *chevruta*. During the second part, a guest speaker, an expert or social activist, gives a presentation about the subject. During the third segment, the participants brainstorm ways to take action and raise consciousness about the specific issue. As Naomi, an active participant, comments, “Our common identity as young Orthodox Jews serves as an advantage, because we are all ‘on the same page’ religiously and communally, which makes these meetings a safe space to express our views openly.”

Through Uri L’Tzedek, YCT students translate what and how they learn in the yeshiva into the larger world. Uri L’Tzedek has two audiences/publics: Orthodox, social justice-minded individuals.

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23 Hebrew for arise or awaken to justice; research conducted in October 2007 and March 2008.
young adults in Washington Heights and the broader community of Washington Heights, both Jewish and not. The organization seeks to impact both of these spheres, in as many dimensions as possible. Uri L’Tzedek, as an expression of public religion, seeks balance and consistency between the values learned inside and the values applied outside. While inside, the Uri L’Tzedek *beit midrash* participants learn not only subject matter, but core values of YCT and Open Orthodoxy – particularly intellectual openness and “Affirming the shared *tzelem Elokim* of all people, our responsibility to improve the world and our capacity to be enriched by it.” Their outside, public expression is guided by religious values. As Blu Greenberg (2000) writes, "In addition to a desire for change, there must also be a willingness to work for change." The following case represents two parts of a single Uri L’Tzdeek initiative that displays different forms of social activism and community interaction that are important to the organization and its participants and highlight the tenets of Open Orthodoxy.

**Clothing Drive**
One Sunday morning in mid-March, a group of Orthodox young adults in Washington Heights meets in a ground floor room of the local YMHA. They have come as part of the first-ever Uri L’Tzedek clothing drive. The first three people there are arranging the tables. They are preparing to sort bags of donated clothing. One table against the far wall on the right for men’s clothes, one on the left for women’s, children’s clothes and shoes on the table by the wall near the front, one table in the middle of the room for initial sorting, and one by the door for snacks. Ezra, the YCT student in charge of the program, brings in black plastic garbage bags with some of the donations. He then leaves with his borrowed truck to collect more. Two of the women gather the bags of clothing stored backstage in the YMHA’s auditorium. The tables begin to fill. The volunteers comment on the clothing as it is sorted and even try on some of the more bizarre items. Someone

has a camera and will post the photos on Facebook after the event. As the piles get higher and higher, the volunteers put the clothing into new garbage bags which they label based on gender and size. They also fill several bags for a woman in the neighborhood who lost nearly all of her possessions in an apartment fire. They save out the nicest medium sized clothes for her.

More volunteers and more clothing arrive throughout the course of the morning and into the early afternoon. Ezra returns with the truck nearly overflowing with bags. Other Uri L’Tzedek board members also make an appearance. Noam drops by to see how things are going, bringing a couple bags and helping for awhile. Chaim, on his way to the gym, spends time sorting his contribution. Jonathan stays for the longest and during the sorting process becomes attached to a particularly hideous coat which he takes home to use as part of his Purim costume.

Though five YCT students make appearances, including the four board members, a few young women from the area are the real people-power behind the clothing drive. The clothing drive represents the initiative of Uri L’Tzedek membership, the empowerment that they have through the organization, and either the innate or proscribed motivation that they have as a result of their involvement. One young woman, a hospital social worker, conceived of the project based on a need for clothing that she observed at her work. In addition to the hospital, which was primarily interested in men’s and unisex clothing, the coordinators arranged to make donations to two other organizations as well – one that accepts women’s clothing and one that would take anything in good condition. They publicized on-line, via listservs, informally, and by placing notices in and around their apartment buildings. Their advertisements were met with resounding success, as evidenced by the overwhelming number of bags of clothing they were able to collect. Unlike other clothing drives, the Uri L’Tzedek program is not interested in making profit from
the donations, but rather to meet a need for clothing in the larger community. Because of sheer volume, Ezra hires a livery service to deliver the donations to the three sites.

The following Sunday, a group of Uri L’Tzedek volunteers and a few YCT students visit FYI, Fresh Youth Initiative, one of the recipient organizations. Ezra, the event coordinator, contacted FYI to arrange the program. He explains, “I heard of FYI through meetings I had with other community leaders. When I mentioned I was looking for partners to do community building with, they suggested FYI.” According to their literature, FYI, founded in 1993, is “committed to providing youth with positive opportunities through community service.” Their mission is “to support and encourage the efforts of young people in Washington Heights to design and carry out community service projects, develop leadership skills, fulfill their potential and realize their dreams.” Though the target age range is 10 to 18, FYI is neither a childcare center nor a teen drop-in lounge. FYI is an organization (serving primarily the Dominican community) committed to instilling values of community, respect, and achievement through participation and increased leadership in service projects. FYI operates on an empowerment model for the students on both individual and communal levels. Some of their on-going programs include a sleeping bags project in which the students make and distribute sleeping bags to New York’s homeless, a food pantry and food distribution service, and a free clothing bank. Based on this information in their literature, Ezra “thought they'd be a good partner [for Uri L’Tzedek] . . . They seemed to be a serious, effective organization with a positive message and approach.” Ezra hopes the this collaborative program will “build two kinds of relationships: person to person, so there are people in both communities who have had positive, uplifting experiences with each other . . . [and] institutional relationships so people know who is doing
what in the community.” Ezra’s goals are guided by the values “of community, of giving, of curiosity and openness towards encountering the other.”

Though their reach is wide, FYI’s home base is a narrow, recently-renovated building in Washington Heights. The multi-storey building is vibrant and new. All of the colors, from the posters on the walls to the tiles on the floor, are bright and bold. The atmosphere, even on a quiet Sunday morning, holds the tension of anticipation. This is a place where creativity can thrive; this is a place people want to be. When they arrive, the Uri L’Tzedek volunteers split into two groups to tour the facility. A long-time, active FYI participant leads one group; a staff member leads the other. FYI participants, the few who are around, tag along. The tours snake through the building, showcasing all of the different parts of the facility and creating a composite sketch of an organization not only dedicated to serving the larger community, but also very focused on serving the students. Thus, in addition to the rooms set aside for storing sleeping bags, the food pantry, and clothing bank, FYI also gives a lot of space to the youth. FYI provides enrichment programs and opportunities through its small library and technology center, art room, creative writing workshop, and outdoor patio garden, to name a few. FYI also has a kitchen and dining area with plenty of healthy snacks. On more of the youth center side, FYI’s basement houses the requisite pool, ping pong, air hockey, and foosball tables – as well as an immense flat-screen television.

The organization’s motto – “FYI: Community Service is the Rent We Pay for Living on this Earth” – is painted in bright colors on the wall next to the television. The student volunteer hours and awards sheets – FYI’s pride and joy – are on the other side of the room. FYI keeps track of the volunteer hours, which are cumulative over the entire time a student is involved with the organization. At certain hour markers, the students receive awards ranging from an FYI t-
shirt to a trophy to eligibility to travel on an FYI-sponsored service trip. FYI instills the value of service at all levels and uses it as a tool to introduce students to different cultures, people, and geographic locations. As documented in their newsletter, the elite group of FYI volunteers went on a trip to Iowa to work on a farm – a very different, even foreign, experience for New York City kids. Through their programs and service projects, FYI develops the ethos of a family. This is a safe space and a nurturing environment.

After an icebreaker, the five FYI students, two youth service professionals, and nine Uri L’Tzedek volunteers, head outside. People work together rolling garment racks and a wagon filled with clothing a few blocks north to a sunny spot across the street from a large church. They set up the racks to prevent them from rolling and put out a folding table which is soon heaped high with coats. These are just some of the clothes collected during the Uri L’Tzedek clothing drive; FYI will give out more at a later time. A few of the participants take bilingual (Spanish and English) flyers announcing “Ropas Gratis, Free Clothes” and begin passing them out on the street corner. FYI believes in the importance of training students in communication; this provides one, albeit limited, public relations opportunity. Within about half an hour, the participants have given away 100 articles of clothing to people in need and to those who will send the items to family members in the Dominican Republic. The volunteers don’t just stand in the shadows, they interact with the public. Naomi reflects on her experience: “I had the opportunity to discuss politics with an elderly Dominican man who stopped by to find a new coat. We shook hands affectionately at the end of our conversation, and it was such a wonderful feeling knowing that I had made an actual connection with one of my neighbors.” For Naomi, the coat was the catalyst for making inter-personal contact. For the participants from both organizations, the clothing drive serves the same purpose – it is a forum through which the two groups of people can interact.
Back at FYI, Uri L’Tzedek volunteers join the FYI students and the staff member in their traditional feedback circle. After each service event at FYI, the students talk briefly about their experiences – if they liked the project or not, how it made them feel, any aspect that touched them particularly. People around the circle share how much they enjoy meeting and spending time with the people from the other group and how good they feel to have given away the clothes. One member of Uri L’Tzedek comments that it was exciting to see the process of collecting and sorting the clothes the previous weekend and then giving them out in the community today. The feedback session ends with a “respect circle.” Everyone crosses his or her arms, right over left, and holds the hand of the person next to him or her. First counter clockwise and then clockwise, people gently squeeze each others hands, look the person in the eye, and say “respect.” The FYI students say the organization motto, and everyone breaks for lunch.

FYI provides lunch for the Uri L’Tzedek volunteers. Kashrut, of course, is a concern. The FYI staff member assures everyone that he’s purchased “100% kosher salami and cheese.” Most people, uncomfortable with the brand of meat, end up making peanut butter and banana sandwiches in the end. During lunchtime, following a short, informal Latin dance lesson, Uri L’Tzedek members take the opportunity to dialogue with Joe, an FYI staff member. This is where the cross-cultural sharing really happens. The staff member asks the Uri L’Tzedek participants questions about Jews, admitting that he had been unsure what to expect when they visited. As a resident himself of Washington Heights, he mainly knows Jews as people who wear suits and hats and didn’t expect a group of young adults wearing sweatshirts with jeans and denim skirts. Jacob, a YCT student, explains the suits as almost a type of uniform for some observant Jews. Scott comments, “We’re looking forward to the day when we can bring the suit-wearers with us.” Then he asks, “How do Dominicans perceive Jews?” Joe replies that they just
see the Jews as keeping to themselves, except elderly men who talk to anyone. To counter that, Joe mentions that, contrary to general trends, he has actually had a more interaction with Jews than the typical member of his community. He describes that one of his father’s best friends was Jewish, that his “dad was a very open man.” As a result of that exposure and interaction, Joe didn’t grow up with some of the stereotypes common among many of the FYI students. Openness goes hand-in-hand with diversity, something that Joe and FYI value highly and instill in the students. He hopes that FYI and Uri L’Tzedek will partner together in the future to increase cross-cultural dialogue and for the greater benefit of their shared community. Joe believes that we “achieve eternity through the lessons we teach; those you teach will teach others.” After lauding Joe for his public speaking ability and motivation, the Uri L’Tzedek participants proceed to bensch. Afterwards, Scott translates the first paragraph of the prayer for Joe and the FYI students.

Walking back home afterwards, Uri L’Tzedek participants comment on how fantastic they think FYI is, how nice it was to meet the staff and students, and, unfortunately, how unlikely it is that frummer, less open people would not be likely to participate. Additionally, after the event, Scott and Naomi comment on their overall experiences with the clothing drive and FYI event. Their comments reflect their values and the goals of Uri L’Tzedek to use social justice work as an in-road for building communal relationships. Scott comments, “The clothing drive and FYI program was one of the best social justice events I have participated in – mostly because it effectively bridged two segments of a community . . . that have often too little to do with one another.” For Scott, building inter-community alliances has religious significance. He explains that it “is a poignant kiddush Hashem [sanctification of God’s name] to show others that Orthodox Jews are concerned about matters beyond their own community – and it is even more
beautiful that we did so in the spirit of being good and responsible neighbors and with the intention to learn from one another.”

The clothing drive and FYI event are not about self-gratification, but about building a mutually beneficial relationship between neighbors. Naomi echoes Scott’s comments. She says, “it was an important event not only for Jewish-Dominican relations in Washington Heights, but also for the Washington Heights Jewish community itself.” Naomi further relates, “I was amazed by the positive responses I received from my Jewish friends - people I assumed to be thoroughly uninterested in a clothing drive that involved our Dominican neighbors contacted me to praise the initiatives that Uri L’Tzedek had taken, and to ask if they could help.” This type of feedback convinces Naomi that, as she says, “we have the capacity to effect change on a greater scale within our Jewish community [as well].”

In the language of Erving Goffman, within the context of the batei midrash, Uri L’Tzedek’s founders and board members, Noam, Chaim, Ezra, and Jonathan, are the actors, the participants are the audience, and the stage is the Jewish community. However, in the case of the clothing drive, the Uri L’Tzedek participants become the actors. The FYI program falls outside of Goffman’s mold because one of the goals of the program is collaboration. Naomi reflects on the FYI event:

both sides interacted with each other in a manner that unfortunately does not often occur organically in the Heights. We both quickly discovered that we had a lot more in common than we would have ever realized . . . we all expressed genuine interest in continuing these activities, and I only hope that we can continue to build these relationships as strongly and genuinely as possible.

Thus, the participants from both groups are the actors and the (possibly unassuming) audiences are the greater Washington Heights communities. Uri L’Tzedek models the Open Orthodoxy of YCT in the vein of social justice and community activism. The clothing drive and FYI event
illustrate that the values of Open Orthodoxy effectively function in the open in terms of the Jewish and larger Washington Heights communities. Uri L’Tzedek draws enthusiastic participants and, Scott believes, “has a bright future – it’s expanding, interesting other communities. Hopefully it’ll go m’chayil l’chayil [from strength to strength].”

**San Diego Relief Mission**

During the fall of 2007, San Diego is burning. Wildfires and arson fires sweep the Southland, devastating the ecology, destroying property, and forcing “Well over half a million individuals evacuated their homes.” YCT’s response to the tragedy begins with one student’s email to the yeshiva listserv. His email describes the situation and encourages his classmates to take action. By the following afternoon, five students, with support, both financial and moral, from YCT’s administration, decide that they will go to San Diego. Action, literally being somewhere and helping on the ground, is a strong value at YCT, and one that is regularly modeled by Rabbi Weiss. The students internalize that value and it plays out in their lives. They take the Torah that they learn inside the *beit midrash* and translate it to the outside world. The students are living their religion and the philosophy of Open Orthodoxy as conduits for their work. Bellah (1996) comments, “For some, religion is primarily a private matter having to do with family and local congregations. For others, it is private in one sense but also a primary vehicle for the expression of national and even global concerns (219).” For YCT students, religion is the guiding force of their public action.

In preparation for the relief trip, on their own time before class, between *shiur* and *seder*, and well into the night, the students calls every relief organization that they can identify, starting

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with the American Red Cross. They call Jewish and non-Jewish, secular and faith-based organizations. One student, Jacob, originally from San Diego, is in touch with his home synagogue as well as with a YCT alumnus, a rabbi in the area. Jay, another student, has a cousin who works for Jewish Family Services in San Diego. He comments that “Through her, we came up with possible sites where we could be of assistance.” Nothing is firmly set, though, and, as Ezra relates, “We did a lot of research very quickly the days before and the first couple hours we were there – learning about the area, learning where the fires had done the most damage, then, most importantly, identifying and contacting people and agencies who were doing work that we could help with.”

Nearly everyone at YCT – students, faculty, administration, staff – give financially, quickly filling the plastic, gallon-sized milk jugs designated for fund-raising. The student trip, based on institutional core values of responsibility also prompts significant support from the yeshiva. As Jay comments, “. . . the rosh yeshiva and other faculty members contributed heavily (out-of-pocket), in order to pay for our airfare other traveling expenses. The yeshiva picked up the remaining tab.” News of the mission spreads quickly by word-of-mouth and students volunteer to travel to San Diego. For Jacob, it is a logical decision – this is his home community. Jay, too, feels geographical ties. He comments, “Being from Los Angeles, I was following the wildfires closely as well. I felt very strongly that I had a responsibility to help.” Jay isn’t merely interested in participating in the trip, he feels that it is a duty. Ezra cites three reasons for his participation:

One, I have experience coordinating volunteer efforts and I knew that it would be useful to the trip. Two, I thought it would be a meaningful opportunity to reach out and help others which is something I look for in my life. Three, I thought it would be an opportunity to be with people who are suffering loss and to learn
from those experiences so that I would be better equipped to deal with those situations as they come up in the rabbinate.

Ezra’s motivations are to help both his classmates and the communities in San Diego and also to enhance his rabbinic training. Ezra sees an aspect of his rabbinical career as inherently working with people, applying what he learns inside the yeshiva to the outside world. Through all of their instruction in the classroom and learning in the *beit midrash* and even an internship, nothing replaces on-the-ground training.

The students land in California on Sunday afternoon. They are met by the YCT alumnus and together survey the landscape. Their first stop is a Jewish retirement home in the town of Rancho Bernardo. As Jay explains the residents’ situation, “. . . it was not the fire itself that disturbed most residents . . . Rather, it was the emotional scars that the fire reopened that stung the most. Unable to drive and dependent on others for transport, life in a retirement home can feel solitary and secluded.”

Chaim relates, “one woman kept telling her story about being woken up at 4am and told “you have 10 minutes to put together everything you want.” The residents had little or no sense of what was going on during the evacuation. When the YCT students arrive, they are thrilled to be asked to tell their stories. “They were extremely loquacious about that, so happy to have a space to talk,” Chaim says. The presence of the YCT students, sensitive and compassionate listeners, comforts the residents.

On Monday morning, as Jay writes, the students “visited the consortium of governmental and non-governmental relief agencies and insurance organizations that pitched their tents at the Local Assistance Center (LAC) in Rancho Bernardo.”

Discovering an over-abundance of volunteers, they go across the street to a makeshift donation center. Jay describes the scene in the parking lot:

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30 Ibid.
Mountains of donated clothing, many of which were brand-new and carried designer labels stood off in one corner. Adjacent that, there were two rows of tented booths, with each booth being devoted to a specific category of items. There were sections for toiletries, cleaning supplies, kitchenware, hardware, cases of bottled water, canned foods, boxed snacks, toys for the kids, and books for everyone. . . . everything was freely given and free for the taking.31

As volunteers, the YCT students guide the victims of the fires from one booth to the next so that they can pick up the items that they need. As they walked together, the victims told the students their stories. Ezra relates, in full, his experience with “Harry,” an elderly Jewish man from the area,

Harry arrived at the volunteer tent and began speaking with some of the volunteers from the Church in LA. I was just to his left unloading some boxes. He noticed my nametag and called out my name. "Ezra," he said, struggling to hold back tears. "I lost my tallis and tfillin. Everything is gone." We hugged each other and started to walk. As we picked up toothbrushes, pillows and bottled water we talked about what he had experienced over the past week. "The phone woke us up at 5 in the morning, telling us to evacuate, but no one told us where to go," he said. "The sky was black, so black. I saw on the TV that the fires were moving west, so we drove to the coast. But then we had to evacuate from there!" He and his family were safe, but they had lost everything. He had watched his own house burn down on CNN. When he returned to the neighborhood that morning, there was nothing left. Photos, keepsakes, awards, and his grandfather's tfillin, tfillin from Europe that had survived the Holocaust. Harry grew up a yeshiva bocher in Brooklyn in the 30s, served in the military, and moved to California. He was scheduled to be on the search community for a new rabbi at his synagogue in Rancho Bernardo, and had grandkids in Israel. After helping him load his supplies into the car we hugged and he thanked me.

One of the core values of Open Orthodoxy and YCT is “Affirming the shared covenantal bond between all Jews. . .” Harry reaches out to Ezra because, just by looking at his name tag, Harry knows that this young man will understand the spiritual pain of his loss. Harry connects to Ezra,

31 Ibid.
but he also connects to YCT, to the values that prompted five students to travel 3,000 miles to help people they’d never met, and the battery of skills that they learn in pastoral counseling classes.

In addition to the Jewish community, the YCT students are dedicated to helping anyone in need. One of the core values of Open Orthodoxy is “Affirming the shared tzelem Elokim of all people, our responsibility to improve the world and our capacity to be enriched by it.” Putting that value into practice, the students make a trip to the Western Service Workers’ Union in a predominantly Hispanic area of San Diego. According to Jay, “the organization appeared to be in desperate need of volunteers and financial help.” 32 While many agencies and service organizations focus on their local neighborhoods, the Workers’ Union is particularly concerned with small, isolated towns along the California-Mexico border. “In the aftermath of the wildfire,” Jay writes, “the . . . communities were without power or running water.” Jacob, Jonah, Jay, Ezra, and Chaim partner with the organization to take supplies to the remote town of Potrero. Jay explains the process: “With the main highways shut down from fire damage, getting to . . . Potrero was a long two-and-a-half hour commute. Loading cartons of supplies into the two relief-trucks associated with the organization, our car, as well as two vans compliments of PBS, our caravan snaked its way through twisting country roads.” 33 According to Ezra, they transport “several hundred cans of water, food, toilet paper, blankets, etc.” to the rural area that is all but neglected by major aid organizations’ relief efforts. The residents are thankful for the donations, and the YCT students are thankful for the opportunity to help. Though photos from the experience show smiles all around as YCT students carry cases of water bottles and cans, Jay writes that “Our journey back to San Diego was subdued and pensive. . . . We thought of the

32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
huge outpouring of support for those victims. . . . We also remarked on the gaping disparity between the relief work done in a community like Rancho Bernardo and the near total lack of services provided to the residents of border towns . . .”

On Tuesday morning, Chaim drives into a San Diego neighborhood that has been all but decimated by the fires. Though he is already in the public sphere, Chaim goes a step further in applying Open Orthodoxy – he visits a local Christian pastor. Chaim takes the core value of working with all people, Jewish or not, to a professional level, seeking out and connecting with a colleague from another faith community. Chaim describes the scene of destruction on the pastor’s street: “Because of the nature of the fires, some things can get destroyed completely, but the house next door could be fine. So, this pastor’s house was fine and his next door neighbors’ was gone.” Before going into the pastor’s house, Chaim stops to see the neighbors, a couple who had moved to the United States from Europe a couple of years prior. They are standing in front of a heap of ash that had been their home. Chaim relates, “I went up to them and just stood there. I wanted them to know I was there. For the first time, even though I’ve been in rabbinical school and have been taking pastoral counseling classes, I had nothing to say. I just stood with them.” After standing with the couple, Chaim goes to speak with the pastor about resources and what is happening in his community.

In the middle of the day, Jacob, Ezra, Jay, Chaim, and Jonah visit a Jewish day school in one of the San Diego communities. They find the school through their contact, the YCT alumnus. The YCT students, who had been lifting and hauling boxes the day before, go to the school in order to talk. They put their pastoral counseling skills and the values of the yeshiva to work. Their goal is to create a safe, open space for the students to talk. As Chaim relates, “what we were amazed by was that there were hundreds of kids who had been evacuated from their homes

34 Ibid.
and had just gone through this traumatic experience and they were back in school.” The
impression of normalcy can be deceiving, however. “We just walked around and talked with
them,” Chaim says. He continues, “We had open conversations at lunchtime about their own
experiences and concerns they had.” In addition to casually discussing the still-unfolding events,
Jacob, Ezra, Jay, Chaim, and Jonah also talk with them about leadership and responsibility –
what it means to be in a place that has just been through a disaster and how they can help. The
YCT students provide a comforting presence at the school. In jeans and t-shirts, the group of five
is far from intimidating. They are representatives of YCT bringing Open Orthodoxy into this
community day school. Their goal is to serve the whole Jewish community, to go to the public
sphere to meet them, and to interact with and help them with compassion, but also to empower.
The YCT students, through casual interactions, are role models for the children of sensitivity,
activist Judaism, and communal responsibility.

The relief mission doesn’t last long, but the students make a difference, whether by
touching individuals or helping an entire town. The YCT relief mission is a bold statement of
public religion, the application of the values of Open Orthodoxy to a public sphere across the
country from the yeshiva. The students translate what they learned at YCT, particularly from
Rabbi Weiss’ personal example of traveling to places struck by disaster, and the pastoral
counseling curriculum, into the real world. They express the values of helping both their fellow
Jews and all people in need. In the language of Erving Goffman, the YCT students are the actors
who move from backstage of the yeshiva to the front stage of San Diego. Together with people
from other relief organizations, they act their parts as YCT rabbinical students – compassionate
listeners and eager volunteers. Their efforts are collaborative. They do not enter with a plan to
rebuild San Diego, they enter willing to help with and support the efforts of those who know the
community best. The relief mission publicizes the institution’s humanitarian and activist orientations. More people will know about and favorably view YCT because of the five students who went to San Diego. The students, too, give positive feedback. Ezra comments, “I felt proud to represent Chovevei.” The trip was a whirlwind; on Wednesday, the students are back learning in the YCT beit midrash.

AJWS Ghana Trip

A group trip to the developing world is not necessarily standard for an Orthodox rabbinical student whose life is traditionally centered in the beit midrash. Participation in an American Jewish World Service (AJWS) service-learning trip to Ghana, however, is consistent with the values of YCT and the tenets of Open Orthodoxy, particularly “Affirming the shared tzelem Elokim of all people, our responsibility to improve the world and our capacity to be enriched by it.” On this trip, the students interact with two different publics – students from other (non-Orthodox) rabbinical schools and the host community of Gbi Atabu, Ghana. According to Isaac, an AJWS staff member, the organization “works with 350 grassroots NGOs in 36 countries. [In terms of the] Gbi Atabu community, there is a specific NGO . . . and AJWS connected with them. [Of the 350], 15 to 20 grantee groups host volunteers and have capacity and need for short –term groups that do physical labor.”

For the past five years, AJWS has been coordinating and heavily subsidizing pluralism service-learning trips for rabbinical students across the mainstream spectrum of American Judaism. As Isaac comments, the program “almost never takes more than 4 students from every school, [in order] to get a balanced crew . . . there is no Orthodox quota, but a per-school quota; no movement quotas either, it’s more about campuses.” AJWS actively recruits from 8 or 9 rabbinical schools across the United States. According to Aviva, one of the coordinators of the

35 Research conducted in February and April 2008.
program, though, “at Chovevei, more than any other . . . the students really organically recruited one another there. It’s a small place . . . It seems like all the Chovevei students know about the program, many are interested in doing it, so it’s been a pretty successful word-of-mouth operation. . . .” And, as Isaac adds, AJWS continues to “get stellar candidates from YCT.”

The students go on the trip for of the uniqueness of the experience. Scott, who had been on several previous service-learning trips in both North and South America wanted to participate because he “had never gone on [this kind of trip] as a rabbinical student.” Alan goes for the “opportunities to do interesting, unusual, and unlikely-to-be-able-to-replicate-them things. . . . [and] to see a totally different place and see what happens there.” The uniqueness, for Jonathan, is not about being a rabbinical student or seeing a new place. Jonathan comments that he “sort of figured I’d go on this trip at some point . . .” and that Ghana “was somewhere I’d never go by choice, I would never vacation, so I felt like yeah I have to go, I have to go see that . . . it was like a contained space to have that foray into the developing world and see a little bit of Africa.”

The trip itself lasts ten days. The students pay $700 each plus additional for immunizations, mosquito nets, and extra food. The trip includes three major components, as described by Aviva, “study . . . work and interaction with the community.” These three components, determined by the education department, are standard for every AJWS trip, regardless of the participants. The study section, according to Aviva, is an established curriculum “for a range of audiences – we use the same curriculum for the high school program, college students, adults. There’s a range of texts – ritual texts, sacred texts, Jewish texts defined in broad terms, secular texts. We try to gear the conversation to the level of the group.” However, because the trip is for rabbinical students, Aviva explains, they also “do shacharit together every morning as a group. And, part of the learning component is that there’s a scholar-in-residence . . .” The
scholar for the trip, a Conservative rabbi from a large New York synagogue, teaches a few sessions. The group also hears lectures from, according to Alan, “a Cuban doctor. . . [who] was volunteering in a hospital there . . .” Jonathan adds that the group “also visited an NGO that was also doing AIDS work.”

The daily schedule, in terms of times, is set, though content often varies. The students in the focus group describe the daily schedule as follows:

So we would all meet at the main center, which was the big house at 6:45 for tefillah, shacharit in some form, led by a different seminary. . . So that was until 7:30 and then breakfast was until 8. And then 8, 8:15 we’d be moving out, getting water, getting ready for the day, or at least the morning, walk about five minutes to the worksite which was next to this large church. . . The worksite was a combination of actual working, sitting and speaking among our own group, playing with the kids, talking with community members there, local residents. . . Then we’d go back and have lunch. In the afternoon, we’d usually have some combination – though it was all very malleable – a class, maybe we’d go into town, visit an NGO, or went to a local healer’s clinic and have sort of off-time, that combination of things. Then after dinner, most of the time we’d end up having our own. . . we’d then come back for dinner and then have our own programming for the evening.

Sometimes they would do just like a check-in, see what’s going one, just go around and everyone gets 30 seconds. . . Like sharing our personal stories of social justice --

There was the drum circle. There were two drum circles that we went to.

There were also opportunities. I mean, we’d finish by 9 o’clock or whatever and some of us went to a local bar one night and then the church choir, which was a big thing.

The daily schedule is a patchwork of interactions – interactions between the students and each other and the students and the community. They relate to each other and the community in different ways at different times of day as guided by curricular requirements and schedule established by AJWS. The participants interact with each other through a variety of media,
including prayer, work, meals, dialogue, learning, and socializing. Their interactions with the host community are largely work- and social-based.

AJWS develops the daily schedule in order to meet their learning-working-interacting goals. The content of the days, though, speaks to a meta-level goal of the trip. As Aviva explains, “We want to engage future rabbis in thinking about how social justice . . . will be a part of their rabbinate. We want them to have a moving experience . . . to show them that.” One of the most important components of developing a meaningful experience is the location and the people and communities with whom the participants interact. The participants spent a good deal of time, according to Alan, “making cement and bricks and building and volunteering in the village.” During that time, the participants take time to play with children and talk with the adults. Alan explains, “It wasn’t like ‘now here’s your scheduled time to play with kids,’ but . . . many, many people from the village come out and helped and were building when we were building . . . it was valuable to talk with people and also because it was impossible for everyone to actually help all the time.” As Jonathan said, “. . . that’s your best opportunity for talking to people in an informal setting.”

Inter-personal dialogue is an important part of helping AJWS develop stronger relationships with the communities in which they serve. The goals of the program are broader, though, and seek to give the students a deeper understanding of the reality of the situation in the developing world. From an institutional perspective, Aviva expresses that

One of the dynamics that we often have on these programs is that you see a community that is vibrant and happy to see them, that wants to play with the Americans and a very common phrase that is said is that “they’re poor, but they’re happy.” A lot of what we want to do is challenge that assumption and ask participants to think about what they’re basing that perception on and how, even if that’s true, is that useful or important.
Sometimes it is necessary to interact with someone who is slightly outside the realm of the public in order to gain perspective on the true state of a community. The trip planners facilitate this experience when they took the students to meet a visiting doctor who diagnoses numerous new cases of HIV/AIDS each week. “And,” Aviva related, “there are two doctors for 50,000 people!” The participants also receive some backstage insight from the scholar-in-residence’s practicum on “what does it mean to be a social justice rabbi?”

According to Aviva, AJWS believes that its goals of serving, learning, and interacting, especially for rabbinical students, are best achieved in a pluralistic setting, “in a setting that’s diverse, in a context that can hopefully lead them to being a community or a network of people [with the same experience.]” Isaac takes Aviva’s comment a step further. He says,

[AJWS’ rabbinical student pluralism trip] is the singularly most powerful pluralism laboratory for rabbinical students that American Jewish community offers because it happens on no one’s own turf . . . we take everybody out of anything resembling a comfortable home base and put them on the ground in a developing country . . . force them to pray together and eat together . . . they confront from a somewhat destabilized position their own movements and the others . . . they have to figure out things in ways that are powerful and profound.

The students recognize the profundity of their situation, both the positives and negatives, and recognize as well the YCT value of “Affirming the shared covenantal bond between all Jews. Promoting ahavat Yisrael and actively pursuing positive and respectful interaction of all Jewish movements.” In commenting on what he perceives AJWS’s goals for the trip to be, Alan identifies “getting future rabbis to care about, know about the developing world and . . . getting us to have a pluralist network . . .” He further comments that the network “is good in itself but also helpful for advocacy . . .” Those goals may have been official, but Jonathan also notes another aim of the program. As he explains, “Productive discomfort. . . Boil it down . . it’s all
about productive discomfort on any level – on a religious level, being in Africa, being in different conditions, having to confront questions of wealth and responsibility and things like that, all the pluralistic stuff . . .” The YCT students participate in two public spheres of interaction – interaction with the host community, and interaction with their own pluralistic community on the trip.

While YCT is an Orthodox institution, as Scott articulates, it values “openness towards and learning from, other, not necessarily Orthodox, Jews.” This tact makes YCT an excellent option for AJWS, which, as Jonathan articulates, “want[s] to have Orthodox buy-in . . . it’s much more meaningful and they can sell there programs a lot more in a much more effective way . . . and have a greater impact if they can say ‘we took people from Orthodox to trans-denominational and everything in between.’” Despite YCT’s open orientation, though, the participants experience discomfort related to observance of halakha. As Aviva stated, “being that it’s a pluralistic endeavor . . . in terms of halakhic issues, it is hard for Orthodox students to participate. I think it’s not necessarily a problem for more liberal rabbinical students . . .”

YCT students’ self-described discomfort comes from three main sources: prayer, food, and Shabbat. In terms of prayer, for many of the YCT students, the day starts earlier because they daven before attending the group, egalitarian service. Since each school takes one morning to lead the prayer services, YCT students also take a turn. As Jonathan explains and comments about himself and his classmates, “I think we have the general perception that with . . . we were experiencing quite a lot more discomfort than everyone else, who maybe one morning they weren’t psyched about davening in a mechitza minyan, but they were willing to take one for the team for that half an hour.” Behind the scenes, the YCT students’ process for planning their turn to lead morning prayers for the group clearly reflects the value of Open Orthodoxy. They ask
themselves, as Jonathan stated, “are we trying to represent Orthodoxy? Trying to come off and do something that is representative of our values at Chovevei? Are we trying to do something that’s accessible?” The process is complex and the questions many. Jonathan explains his own realization: “I was there much less as a Chovevei person and more as like ‘this is an Orthodoxy that at least people can have a conversation with.’ I felt very strongly about that.” Though he did not put representing his school as his foremost goal in leading the group prayer service, he has absorbed and applied the openness of YCT’s philosophy and mission. As part of those values, though, the YCT students, who are committed to intra-faith dialogue, struggle to find a synthesis which allows them to maintain strict commitment to halakha. Their solution is to participate to the fullest extent possible and respect the religious choices of the other trip participants, while maintaining cognizance of boundaries that they do not cross.

In addition to prayer, kashrut is also a challenge for the YCT students. As Jonathan relates, lunch means “everyone having lunch and all of us pulling out packets of tuna and crackers and trail mix.” The issues with kashrut ran deeper than social awkwardness arising from eating different food. The trip had been advertised as “kosher vegetarian,” which, as Alan related, it was not really.

... they said it was going to be “kosher vegetarian” and then they gave the caveat that they’re not going to pay any attention to bishul akum [cooking by a non-Jew] or stam yeinam [wine produced by a non-Jew] and there may be some pre-processed vegetarian food in there... And when we arrived, we thought it was really still an issue of bishul akum and how to negotiate that, which was doable, and I thought, I was very confident that it was going to work out, but then it turned out that some of the ingredients in the kitchen... and then once it’s in the kitchen it ruins everything and you don’t know what’s been cooked in what and what other stuff may have been brought in. It was just not ok, not something I felt comfortable eating...
The YCT students subsist for the week on packaged food that they’d brought with them. As the students relate, the food issue would not have prevented their participation, but they wish that AJWS had been more forthright so that they could have brought more of their own supplies.

AJWS’ position on halakha on the trips, as Isaac describes,

is to create as much as possible a container within which pretty much any competent halakhically observant person could operate . . . unavoidably, there are complications of operating according to halakha in developing world that require a knowledge base to navigate. Hekshers [kosher symbols] are missing from food products, but there are leniencies to navigate that. We have the greatest number of problems when we take observant students who are less knowledgeable about halakha because they don’t know how to be flexible . . .

The YCT students are knowledgeable about kashrut and understand the stringencies and leniencies of the laws. Still, though, they conclude that the soundest tactic is eating their own food that they bring with them.

A good deal of group time is dedicated to discussions about pluralism and the ways in which the group can function Jewishly as a unit. In terms of morning prayers and kashrut, the YCT students are able to operate in the larger group by essentially doing their own thing. Shabbat, however, as a communal day of rest and religious programming, presents an obstacle for the students. The main conflict centers around the use of musical instruments, prohibited on the Sabbath according to Orthodox interpretation of halakha. The following exchange between Jonathan and Scott explains the situation and expresses their frustration at having had more than their fair share of productive discomfort.

Jonathan: . . . we had this discussion about musical instruments on Shabbat and there was someone who wouldn’t budge and insisted that that was essential to his Shabbos experience and felt like already we’d given up – even if you hadn’t gained from us giving up, we’ve already been put out quite a bit already. And so then it
felt pretty ridiculous to then try to compromise, which we ultimately ended up doing.

Scott: But it turned out not to matter. We ended up compromising that –

J: And one living space was instrument friendly and one wasn’t so then people had to leave one, so no one ended up using instruments on Shabbat.

S: That basically was because the one who was so gung-ho about instruments had to not be there for emergency reasons.

Though the conversations about instruments are ultimately moot, the YCT students’ frustration is palatable. They are the minority, even though several schools participate on the trip, as Jonathan says, “when it comes down to it, it was five Orthodox people and twenty non-Orthodox people.” And, it seems to Scott that “we were bending more frequently than everyone else . . . and it was frustrating when people didn’t really see that or recognize that, or feel like they had to budge at all.” Issues of difference and halakhic observance could have overwhelmed all conversation, but as a matter of policy, they are prevented from doing so. As Aviva states, “there’s a balance between how much do we engage the group and have it be a conversation, and how much do you say ‘we’ve come here to deal with social justice issues and it’s a pluralistic experience and we’re here to serve.’”

Despite the tension points for the Orthodox students on the trip, they still develop friendships with the other participants. In fact, as Alan says, “. . . the people that I got closest with were the people that I had the more difficult conversations with . . .” The students certainly go into the trip with some idea of the experience that would have been shared by previous YCT participants. As Jonathan relates, “I was also looking forward to meeting my peers on the trip . . . Not in the sense that pluralism is a crucial part of my life . . . But, as I had hoped, the caliber of person, just as individuals and people that share – besides how we happen to view Judaism – our
general perspectives on the world are very similar.” Pluralism is not a salient issue for Scott either. As he says, “to some respect, when you’re thousands of miles away in a foreign place, you bond through humanity as opposed to Judaism . . . you gravitate to people who you relate to on a personal level and then you realize that they’re not exactly like you religiously, but what does that matter, they remind you of your sister . . .” To further explain this point, Scott gives the example of the evening activity that the scholar-in-residence initiates and shares in his dormitory group: “We at ‘Little House’ had a real blessing of the group. One of the rituals that we would do every night was we would do kriyat shma al ha’mitah [recitation of the Shma prayer in the bed] together and it would be our way of . . . winding down and going to bed every night. . . And that space became a very comfortable social place for everyone involved.”

In addition to interacting with local community members, learning how to make bricks, and determining how to maintain halakhic stricture in a pluralistic environment, the YCT students also expand their own interests and worldviews. Alan comments, “I benefited enormously by the expanded horizons of seeing that place. . . I feel like I know more about the world . . .” Additionally, he stated, “It may be that I think more about doing stuff regarding some sort of global civilization project rather than specifically in the Orthodox community . . .” While Alan is impacted in terms of global humanity, Jonathan comes to realize some of the intricacies of the Jewish community. He explains, “I gained . . . whatever future professions or future contexts I find myself in – a lot of what I think about are sort of communal dynamics and what are the communal lines that we draw . . . I think gaining appreciation for that nuance and starting to think about those questions of responsibility and spheres of obligation and things like that . . .” On a personal level, Jonathan expresses, “it was important personally just because I feel like still I’m relatively sheltered from a lot of the pain and suffering and reality of the world . . . I need to
be able to see what are those questions that come out of the human condition like poverty and suffering – not just read about them, but interpret them.” Interaction with the public sphere impacts the participants on professional and personal levels. Additionally, for Scott, participation in the trip is ultimately a statement of identity – YCT’s and his own. He comments, “Chovevei is like ‘we send people to Ghana and that’s part of who we are.’ And I am somebody who would go to Ghana on a pluralistic rabbinical student delegation . . . that sort of defines you religiously from people who wouldn’t. There are people who fit outside of the box; there are people who cannot go on this trip.” As long as *halakha* can be maintained at least at the personal level, most YCT students will feel comfortable participating.

AJWS’s goals of learning, service, and interaction are not temporary. Participation in the trip requires commitment and, as Aviva comments, YCT “students don’t take commitments lightly, so the trip is something that they tend to take pretty seriously and do stuff afterwards.” The participants sign a contract that they are committed to “completing an evaluation form, speaking or teaching about the experience . . ., participating in a group project . . ., coming to a follow-up meeting . . ., and then just generally being an on-going member of the AJWS alumni group community.” The ever-growing alumni community, of which the participants are now members, includes 125 rabbis and rabbinical students. AJWS wants to promote social justice components of rabbinical school curriculums. Likewise, Aviva states, “it’s also PR for AJWS as an organization that has a specific goal, a mission . . . of moving the American Jewish community in a particular direction. And this seems to be really effective outreach to get people to move the American Jewish community forward.”

Through the AJWS Ghana trip, YCT students take Open Orthodoxy into two public spheres – the sphere that is the developing world and the sphere that is a pluralistic group of
rabbinical students. They transmit Open Orthodoxy, their public religion, through who they are in relationship to everyone else, how they present themselves within the group and to the broader Gbi Atabu public, and what they do ranging from Jewish observance to building bricks. As representatives of their institution, the YCT students are actors on the program-level front stage; their fellow participants join them as actors for the Ghana community-level front stage. Unlike other social service and activism endeavors, going to Ghana means leaving part of the backstage – the YCT *beit midrash* – back at home; however, Open Orthodoxy’s values travel well and the students’ back stage goes with them internally, showing itself when the students decide about *kashrut* issues and discuss prayer services.

These case studies display how Open Orthodoxy is applied to and operationalized in the public sphere in the areas of education, religion, and social action. Even within a given category, each case exhibits different ways that Open Orthodoxy applies and is applied. In Wuthnow’s framework, the students encounter a variety of publics under diverse situations and circumstances. Sometimes, the students actively seek out their publics; sometimes, the publics are assigned to them. The publics and audiences range from their peers in their own neighborhoods and synagogues to other groups of educators and rabbis to small communities in rural Ghana or San Diego County. In each case, the students’ interactions and efforts reflected YCT core values. Translating Open Orthodoxy out into the open tests the resilience of the core values and the efficacy YCT’s backstage education. The transition and translation are not flawless, though. As Lee Shulman (2004) explains,

> When student-professionals move out to the fields of practice, they find inevitably that nothing quite fits the prototypes. The responsibility of the developing professional is not simply to apply what he or she has learned to practice, but to transform, to adapt, to merge and synthesize, to criticize, and to invent in order to move from the theoretical knowledge of the academy to the kind of
practical clinical knowledge needed to engage in the professional work (553-54).\textsuperscript{36}

These forays onto the various stages prompt the students to act the parts they have rehearsed and improvise based on the specific situations. They need to not only apply their knowledge but know how to adapt what they have learned. They are no longer participating in classroom simulations. The ability to maintain openness and Orthodoxy in real situations tests both how much the student has learned as well as the strength of the philosophy and real-life applicability of the core values. Open Orthodoxy, by nature, demands interaction with, not just performance to, the world outside the yeshiva; the students’ classroom learning and field work experiences prepare them for their permanent roles as pulpit rabbis and prime the communities for more Open Orthodoxy to come.

Conclusion

Open Orthodoxy is the product of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School and the manifestation of its core values. YCT exists at a time in American Jewish history when Orthodoxy is becoming increasingly closed and bifurcated. Open Orthodoxy, even just in name, challenges this trend. As an institution, the yeshiva is a small physical space that houses an immense amount of diversity in terms of course content and people. The different aspects of YCT’s curriculum, the traditional text study and the professional rabbinical courses, synthesize through juxtaposition, inter-departmental collaboration, and the pedagogical imaginations of the faculty to train Open Orthodoxy’s ideal pulpit rabbi. Open Orthodoxy and the yeshiva’s core values are tested when they meet the public sphere. Through a variety of different scenarios and media, YCT students apply the Open Orthodoxy that they have learned both formally and informally inside the yeshiva, to endeavors and organizations outside its walls.

Public religion is the representation of a person’s or organization’s religion and interpretation of the sacred in the public sphere. Public religion is not the religion of the public sphere; rather, it is religion in the public sphere. Open Orthodoxy is, by nature of its mission statement and core values, a type of public religion. As such, according to Wuthnow (1994), “it is produced – it is the product of a complex system of organizations that expend resources to bring the sacred into a relationship with the social environment (151).”¹ Open Orthodoxy relies on YCT in order to be both produced and actualized; YCT relies on Open Orthodoxy to provide content and philosophical guidance for the institution.

As Wuthnow (1994) states, “cultural production is a process (28).”² YCT as a school, community, and curriculum collaborate in the process of creating Open Orthodoxy. The faculty

² Ibid.
and organizational ethos transmit the philosophy and core values of the yeshiva to the students who then translate Open Orthodoxy into the public sphere. The three main chapters of this thesis follow the production process from the inside of the yeshiva – the space, people, daily schedule, curriculum, and pedagogy – to the outside areas of education, religion, and social action. While Robert Wuthnow’s theory of public religion provides the vocabulary for a broader understanding of the philosophy, Erving Goffman’s theories of stages and performances explain the private sphere, the backstage, actors, and the preparation for the performance and transmission of Open Orthodoxy. The theories of Foster et al. (2006) and Dykstra (2004) frame and explain the educational content, process, and clergy persona end-goals.

**Place and People**

YCT is defined internally by its physical space. The indoor space is the backstage to Wuthnow’s public sphere. The *beit midrash* and classrooms are the private sphere of the public religion that is Open Orthodoxy. Goffman (1959) describes the backstage as a place where “stage props and items of personal front can be stored in a kind of compact collapsing of whole repertoires of actions and characters. Here grades of ceremonial equipment . . . can be hidden . . . (112)” Within the *beit midrash*, the yeshiva student’s backstage is his *makom*. This is where the student keeps the tools of the trade, his books, resource pages, and any other accoutrements. These are the physical settings wherein development, preparation, socialization, learning, and nurturance take place.

In the backstage that is the yeshiva, the students can be themselves. As Goffman (1959) writes, “Here the performer can relax; he can drop his front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character (112).” The students express their diversities through their personal histories, educational pasts, and the paths that they traveled to arrive at YCT. When they are inside the
yeshiva, they can still continue to actively formulate their personal, not to mention professional, identities. Through interpersonal contact and sharing a small space, the students and faculty interact and become a cohesive social unit. Goffman (1959) labels this a community, which, as he writes, “. . . implies a supportive set of interpersonal relationships that forge a common bond of identity and caring among people (44).”³ The students and faculty develop camaraderie as they shape the identity of YCT from the inside. As Goffman (1959) writes, “. . . persons who co-operate in staging the same team-performance tend to be in a familiar relation to one another (128).”⁴ Team solidarity is an asset for presentation of a philosophy in the public sphere, and it must necessarily be built from the inside out.

Open Orthodoxy Inside

The previous chapter defines the backstage as the physical space within which YCT is housed and wherein the students and faculty, through interactions as unique human beings, develop community. “Open Orthodoxy Inside” defines YCT’s backstage in terms of its daily schedule and curriculum. In this way, the backstage is no longer just an indoor, safe space, it is a training ground for Open Orthodoxy. As Goffman (1959) writes, “It is here that the capacity of a performance to express something beyond itself may be painstakingly fabricated . . . it is here that illusions and impressions are openly constructed. . . . Here the team can run through its performance (112).”⁵ This is the final stop before the student enters the public sphere.

The YCT day begins with prayer and continues with limudei kodesh – shiurim, and seder – during the first half of the day and practical rabbinics in the afternoon. YCT, according to Rabbi Linzer, is a professional yeshiva. As Wuthnow (2004) writes, “. . . the professionalization of clergy has been encouraged by wider shifts in the occupational structure of modern societies

⁴ Ibid.
⁵ Ibid.
toward professionalization of major segments of the work force . . . (74)\textsuperscript{6} Through this curriculum, YCT students are molded in what the administration believes is the image of the ideal, Open Orthodox pulpit rabbi. To be such, the yeshiva claims to train the students to also be talmidei hachamim, poskim, lifecycle officiators, pastoral counselors, and religious guides. The faculty teaches a broad array of subjects, both context and content, through different methods, including lectures and role modeling. The students learn what Goffman calls the rabbi’s “front,” the public image which the rabbi acts out. A student entering YCT knows what a YCT rabbi looks like professionally, just as Goffman comments, “When an actor takes on an established social role, usually he finds that a particular front has already been established for it (27).”\textsuperscript{7} Though they may not all have the same professional goals or believe that upon graduation they will be qualified to be halakhic decisors, for example, the students receive the same training, are socialized to the same core values and are prepared through the same curriculum to transmit Open Orthodoxy to the public sphere.

**Open Orthodoxy Outside**

In “Open Orthodoxy Outside,” Open Orthodoxy goes public. Both students and faculty transmit the philosophy into the public sphere. They enter different places and perform to and interact with different audiences. The students are trained to showcase Open Orthodox values. As Goffman (1959) writes, “. . . when the individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society, more so, in fact, than does his behavior as a whole (35).”\textsuperscript{8} While he performs, the YCT student is conscious of his role and behavior. He pays attention, as Goffman (1959) comments, to “the expression that


\textsuperscript{8} Ibid.
he gives and the expression he gives off (2).” 9 The diversity of situations illustrates the malleability of Open Orthodoxy and its ability to maintain its basic character regardless of the site and circumstances.

Wuthnow (1994) defines “public” in three ways: the public as people (i.e. “the public”); the public as openness, accessibility, and “out in the open” (i.e. public parks; public concerts); and, the public as duty and responsibility (i.e. public official) (8). 10 To use these terms, Open Orthodoxy, as an example of a public religion, is Orthodoxy of the public (people), Orthodoxy of openness and accessibility “out in the open,” and Orthodoxy of responsibility. The students apply Open Orthodoxy with these three characteristics in three primary areas – education, religion, and social action.

The education examples, Rabbi Linzer’s presentation at the Teaching Rabbinic Literature Conference, Meorot, and Adam’s classes at the Jewish Youth Encounter Program (JYEP) provide opportunities for Open Orthodoxy to be disseminated to various publics in various places. The conference presentation involves a presentation outside the yeshiva, but to an insider public, Rabbi Linzer’s colleagues in Jewish education. The Meorot program, which meets in YCT’s beit midrash, transmits Open Orthodoxy to Modern Orthodox young adults. Demographically, they may be very similar to YCT’s own students, but the Meorot participants do not receive rabbinic training and only visit the beit midrash once a week. When Adam teaches at JYEP, he uses Open Orthodoxy and YCT’s core values as conduits for dealing with diverse, non-Orthodox Jewish children. He utilizes his own identity as an Orthodox rabbinical student to be a role model for the students, but he does not otherwise transmit specifically Orthodox

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9 Ibid.
Judaism. All three of these examples, in their different educational forms, treat teaching as a responsibility to the professional, Orthodox, and broader Jewish communities.

The MigdalOr *minyan* and Dan’s student pulpit operationalize Open Orthodoxy as a religion in the public sphere. The student pulpit is an element of the responsibility that the yeshiva has to its students to provide them with practical, professional training. The internship formally places Open Orthodoxy outside the yeshiva thus making it more accessible to the Orthodox public, in this case, Beth David Synagogue. Dan also interacts with the Jewish public outside of the congregational context. The rabbinic intern is a symbol of Open Orthodoxy and as such, his presence as a representative of YCT, places Open Orthodoxy out in the open. MigdalOr, which would like to appeal to a broader segment of the Jewish population, primarily serves the more liberal Orthodox Jews in Washington Heights. The organization’s prayer services, classes, and programs are accessible and open, as evidenced by high attendance rates. MigdalOr’s founders and board members developed and sustain the *minyan* out of a sense of need in their local community and a realization that they have a responsibility to meet that need to the best of their ability.

YCT is known for its emphasis on social action; these three examples of the application of Open Orthodoxy – Uri L’Tzedek, the San Diego fire relief mission, and the AJWS Ghana trip – display how. Uri L’Tzedek, the only organization in the sample, was created and is maintained out of a deep sense of responsibility and commitment to two publics that exist next to each other, but separately in Washington Heights – the Orthodox public and the non-Jewish public. Uri L’Tzedek’s *batei midrash* present social justice issues to the Orthodox public through learning text and listening to speakers. Then, collaboratively, they apply Open Orthodoxy to the broader public through service projects such as the clothing drive. Uri L’Tzedek’s, as a manifestation of
Open Orthodoxy, is proactively accessible and “out in the open” because the leadership and participants believe it needs to be thus in order to fulfill its mission. The San Diego relief mission was based on a deep sense of responsibility to help those who had been hurt by the fires in the fall of 2007. The students’ public was mixed Jewish and non-Jewish, but it did not change their commitment to serve. Like Uri L’Tzedek’s leaders and membership, Jay, Chaim, Ezra, Jacob, and Jonah forcefully took Open Orthodoxy, in the form of the relief mission, into the public sphere. The Ghana trip participants took Open Orthodoxy thousands of miles further away from the *beit midrash*. The participants went out of a sense of curiosity and a desire to help. The annual program and institutional support from AJWS perhaps lessen the innate sense of responsibility prior to the trip, though during the trip the need for service is evident. The trip allowed the students to apply the tenets of Open Orthodoxy through their personal behavior to two different publics – the local public in Ghana and the pluralist rabbinical student delegation. In both spheres, the students wanted to make Orthodoxy accessible. As Jonathan commented about the YCT-led prayer service, “this is an Orthodoxy that at least people can have a conversation with.”

YCT students take the produced, public religion that is Open Orthodoxy and apply it to the public sphere. In some cases, the efforts or organizations themselves are exemplars of public religion; in other cases, they are the medium through which YCT transmits the values of Open Orthodoxy.

**Final Remarks**

In his theories on social interaction, Erving Goffman (1959) uses the language of performances. He describes two kinds of performances, real and contrived:

> We tend to see real performances as something not purposely put together at all, being an unintentional product of the individual’s
unself-conscious response to the facts in his situation. And contrived performances we tend to see as something painstakingly pasted together, one false item on another, since there is no reality to which the items of behavior could be a direct response (70).

The real performances are glimpses into a person’s genuine self and character while the contrived performance is sloppy, false representation. Both are still performances, but one is more believable. According to Goffman’s theory, Open Orthodoxy is a performance, however polished it may be, developed and rehearsed in the backstage and presented in the front.

According to Wuthnow (1994), public religion is produced in and for the people, the public sphere, and out of a sense of responsibility. Though the purview of public religion is open space, he comments that

. . . public and private can never be entirely separated . . . a public identity, or aspect of the collectivity in which one resides, can be internalized, becoming part of one’s personal self-concept as well. Conversely, people who share something intimate from their private experiences are externalizing that event, turning it into the shared history of the collectivity (10).

YCT students, trained in Open Orthodoxy inside in accordance with the core values and mission of the yeshiva, according to Wuthnow, cannot but help absorb the tenets of Open Orthodoxy into their own identities. Their personal identities, then, feed back into the collective enriching the breadth and depth of Open Orthodoxy. This is the personal forum of public religion. As Foster et al. (2006) comment, “. . . seminary education is both formative and transformative of persons and traditions of practice . . . (191)” The YCT education nurtures the extent of the students’ integration with Open Orthodoxy and their pastoral imaginations, allowing them to develop “the capacity to see beneath the surface, to get beyond the obvious and the merely conventional, to note the many aspects of any particular thing or situation, to attend to the deep meaning of

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things.” To conflate the theories, YCT students perform Open Orthodoxy. However, their performance is based on a genuine striving to achieve what the individual has internalized as an ideal and desire to present his institution in a positive light. In this way, YCT’s Open Orthodoxy is a public religion, operationalized in the public sphere, but its reach is also internal, profoundly impacting its practitioners and transmitters.

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Appendix A: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Yiddish Terms

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<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>agadah/ agadot</td>
<td>legends; stories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ahavat Yisrael</td>
<td>love of the people Israel/ the Jewish people</td>
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<tr>
<td>aliyah</td>
<td>literally, going up; being called to the Torah to recite the blessings</td>
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<tr>
<td>am Yisrael</td>
<td>the nation of Israel, i.e. the Jewish people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aron hakodesh</td>
<td>the holy ark where the Torah is stored</td>
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<tr>
<td>avodat Hashem</td>
<td>service to God</td>
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<tr>
<td>ba'al/ ba'alei tshuva</td>
<td>literally, master(s) of return; a designation for those who did not</td>
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<tr>
<td>bar mitzvah</td>
<td>a designation for a boy upon reaching the age of 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>batel</td>
<td>nullify</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beit midrash</td>
<td>study hall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bekiut</td>
<td>review or over-view</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bensch</td>
<td>recite grace after meals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bishul akum</td>
<td>cooking by a non-Jew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bocher; bochur</td>
<td>male yeshiva student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bris/ brit milah</td>
<td>ritual circumcision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chalov yisroel</td>
<td>dairy items produced solely by Jews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chaverai</td>
<td>friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chevruta</td>
<td>the system of two people studying the same text together (i.e. “we</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>learned this in chevruta) as well as the person with whom one</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>studies (i.e. “Jon is my chevruta”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chutzpah</td>
<td>gall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>daf yomi</td>
<td>page-a-day system of learning Talmud</td>
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<tr>
<td>davar assur</td>
<td>prohibited thing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>davar hashuv</td>
<td>important thing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>daven</td>
<td>pray</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>derabbanan/ m'derabbanan</td>
<td>from/ according to rabbinic law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>derekh</td>
<td>path; way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d'oraisa/ m'd'oraisa</td>
<td>from/ according to Torah law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dvar Torah</td>
<td>word of Torah; mini-sermon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eretz Yisrael</td>
<td>the Land of Israel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ezrat nashim</td>
<td>women's section</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>frum</td>
<td>observant/ religious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gabbai</td>
<td>coordinator of religious services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gedolim</td>
<td>&quot;the greats&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gemara</td>
<td>commentary on the mishna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>haggadah/ haggadot</td>
<td>book(s) of readings for the Passover seder/service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HaKadosh Baruch Hu</td>
<td>God; lit. The Holy One Blessed be He</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>halakha</td>
<td>Jewish law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hamantaschen</td>
<td>triangular cookies with filling eaten on Purim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>haredi</td>
<td>ultra-orthodox</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hashkafa/ hashkafot</td>
<td>opinions; ideologies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hassidish</td>
<td>of or pertaining to hassidism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hassidut</td>
<td>a mystical, charismatic stream of Judaism that originated in Eastern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>Definition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>havdalah</td>
<td>transitional service from Shabbat to the rest of the week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>heksher</td>
<td>kosher symbol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hefker</td>
<td>free-for-all; shared</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hesed</td>
<td>kindness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hilul Hashem</td>
<td>desecration of God's name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hova</td>
<td>need/ obligation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kabbalah</td>
<td>Jewish mystical tradition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kashrut</td>
<td>Jewish dietary laws</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kavanah</td>
<td>devotion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kehillah</td>
<td>community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kiddush HaShem</td>
<td>sanctification of God's name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kippah</td>
<td>yarmulke; headcovering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>klal Yisrael</td>
<td>all of Israel/ the Jewish people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>koach hatzimtzum</td>
<td>the power of constrictions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kohen</td>
<td>a descendant of the priestly caste</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kriyat Shma al hamitah</td>
<td>recitation of the Shma prayer in bed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lamed-vavnik</td>
<td>a righteous person, one of the 36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>limudei kodesh</td>
<td>religious/holy studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>l'maaseh</td>
<td>practically (speaking)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ma'ariv</td>
<td>evening prayer service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>machshava</td>
<td>thought/ philosophy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>makom kavua/ makom</td>
<td>set, determined space(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mekomot</td>
<td>set, determined space(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>marit ayin</td>
<td>seeming deception</td>
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<tr>
<td>matanot l'evyonim</td>
<td>gifts to the poor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m'chayil l'chayil</td>
<td>from strength to strength</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mechina</td>
<td>preparatory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mechitza</td>
<td>divider between mens' and womens' sections in a prayer space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>megillah/ megillot</td>
<td>scroll(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>melachah</td>
<td>creative work prohibited on the Sabbath</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meorot</td>
<td>luminaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>midos</td>
<td>qualities or traits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MigdalOr</td>
<td>lighthouse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mikvah</td>
<td>ritual bath</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mincha</td>
<td>afternoon prayer service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>minhag</td>
<td>custom or tradition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>minyan</td>
<td>prayer quorum of ten men; alternately, prayer community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mishkan</td>
<td>tabernacle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mishloach manot</td>
<td>gifts of food given on Purim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mitzvah/ mitzvot</td>
<td>a commandment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>moreinu rabeinu</td>
<td>our teacher, our rabbi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mussar</td>
<td>ethics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mussar shmues</td>
<td>ethics chat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>neshama/ neshamot</td>
<td>soul(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>niddah/ taharat</td>
<td>classification for a women who has her menstrual period; tractate of</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
hamishpacha  Talmud; family purity
nign  sing-song cadence or wordless tune
nusach  pronunciation; cadence
oneg  festive reception
parnassa  income; livelihood
psak/posken/posek/poskim  decision; decide; religious decisor(s)
psukei d'zimra  introductory songs of praise in the shacharit service
p'tur  exemption
rabbanus  rabbinics; the rabbinate
rabbotai  gentlemen
rav; rebbe  rabbi
rishonim  early commentators in the Gemara
rosh yeshiva  head of the yeshiva; dean
literally, order; denotes private, as opposed to shiur/class-based
seder  study
sefer/ sfarim  book(s)
semikha  rabbinic ordination
seudah shlishit  the third meal eaten on Shabbat
Shabbat  the Jewish sabbath
shacharit  morning prayer service
shakla v'tarya  rabbinic exchange; debates
shana bet  year two
shayla  question
shishim  sixty times
classification for a women who has her menstrual period; tractate of
shiur  Talmud; family purity
shmues  chat (sometimes written as shmooze)
shteiig  strive (in learning)
shtender  book stand
shul  synagogue
Shulchan Aruch  Jewish legal codes
shvach  cheap; poorly constructed
stam yeinam  wine produced by a non-Jew
a section of Talmud as determined by the flow of a certain subject or
sugiya  encompassing one narrative arc
ta'am  flavor
tallit  ritual prayer shawl
talmid hacham/talmidei  hachamim  literally, student(s) of the most learned; highly-learned students
Talmud  mishna and commentaries
talmud torah  education; learning
Tanakh  the Jewish bible, including the Torah, Prophets, and Writings
tefillah  prayer
tefillin  phyllacteries
tikkun olam  literally, repairing the world; more commonly, social action
Tosefos  a commentator/commentary
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>tshuvot</td>
<td>legal responsa; answers to halakhic questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tzedek/tzedakah</td>
<td>justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tzelem Elokim</td>
<td>the image of God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tzibur</td>
<td>public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tzitzit</td>
<td>ritual fringes attached to a four-cornered garment worn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uri L'Tzedek</td>
<td>arise/ awaken to justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yeshiva</td>
<td>a school for religious studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yiddishkeit</td>
<td>Jewish culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yirat Shamayim</td>
<td>fear of Heaven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yoetzot halakha</td>
<td>halakhic experts or advisors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yom Ha'Atzma'ut</td>
<td>Independence Day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yom iyyun</td>
<td>day of study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yoreh De'ah</td>
<td>one section of the <em>Arba Turim</em>, Rabbi Jacob ben Asher’s compilation of halakha. Yoreh De’ah deals with non-calendrical issues such as circumcision, marriage, charity, mourning, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yosher</td>
<td>straight-forward; the straight and narrow</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B: Works Cited


Greenberg, Blu. 2000. "Orthodox Feminism and the Next Century." *Sh'ma*. 


