Torah Lishma:

A Comparative Study of Educational Vision at Coed Yeshivot

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Robin Michael Cooke

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ABSTRACT

Torah Lishma: A Comparative Study of Educational Vision at Coed yeshivot

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Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
Brandeis University
Waltham, Massachusetts

By Robin Michael Cooke

A handful of programs in the USA, Israel, and across the globe serve students seeking personal enrichment through torah lishma – the study of Jewish text for its own sake – in a gender-inclusive environment. This paper explores the educational visions of four coed yeshivot – so called in light of their commitment to teaching traditional Jewish text to persons of multiple genders – based in Israel and the USA. The core research questions addressed by this project are: (1) What are the animating ideas which comprise the vision of each coed yeshiva? And (2) in what ways, and to what extent, do these ideas vary across the coed yeshivot?

Torah lishma programs typically assume minimal prior knowledge of their students and are not restrained by the need to prepare students for any particular profession or expertise. Consequently, I believe that decisions concerning teachers, students, and subject material may provide the clearest indication of the educational priorities of their host institutions.

This paper adapts and adopts a model of educational vision expounded by Jon A. Levisohn in “A New Theory of Vision” (2014), in which he draws an equivalency between an educational
vision and a set of animating ideas, ideas which “provide the motivation and guidance for practice.” It proceeds to present the educational visions of four institutions through the lens of five categories of animating ideas: ideas about Judaism, God, and Israel; ideas about human flourishing and the ideal community; ideas about subject areas; ideas about teachers and teaching; and ideas about learners and learning. My goal is to demonstrate the similarities and critical differences between these educational visions through an analysis of these animating ideas, and thus to illuminate the contours and intricacies of educational vision at coed yeshivot.

The primary conclusion of this study is that uniformity or diversity of animating ideas among the coed yeshivot is a matter of scale, rather than binary. Broadly, there are three types of relationship that can be identified between animating ideas: general consensus, which occurs when institutions share animating ideas, fundamental disagreement, which occurs when one or more institutions were animated by an idea which was rejected or ignored by the others, and mahloket leshem shamayim, which arises when institutions share two or more values which come into tension in some way, and elect different ways of resolving or managing this tension.

This study demonstrates some of the explanatory power of Levisohn’s model of a dynamic relationship between vision-guided Jewish educational practice and a sphere of animating ideas, namely: the mutually causative relationship between ideas and practice, the possibility of tension among animating ideas, and the categorization of animating ideas. It also reveals some shortcomings of this model: an overcorrection of Seymour Fox’s hierarchical model of educational vision, an inability to account for changes in vision introduced by factors other than educational practitioners, and a failure to account for variation in intentionality between institutions.
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Chapter One: Introduction

Purpose and core questions

A handful of programs in the USA, Israel, and across the globe serve students seeking personal enrichment through *torah lishma* – the study of Jewish text for its own sake – in a gender-inclusive environment. I shall refer to the group of institutions that offer such programs as the coed (coeducational) yeshivot, in light of their commitment to teaching traditional Jewish text to persons of multiple genders. We might think of the coed yeshivot as mission-driven in the sense that they are typically guided by a vision and values, determined by their respective leaderships, which permeate multiple aspects of the institutions including their educational practice.

In “A New Theory of Vision” (2014), Jon A. Levisohn draws an equivalency between an educational vision and a set of animating ideas, ideas which “provide the motivation and guidance for practice.”¹ Levisohn identifies seven categories of ideas which influence vision-guided practice of Jewish education:

- ideas about human flourishing;
- ideas about the ideal community;
- ideas about Judaism;
- ideas about learning;
- ideas about teaching;
- ideas about specific subject areas; and

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- ideas about the Transcendent.

These cumulatively form a Sphere of Animating Ideas, below, which both act on and are acted upon by vision-guided Jewish educational practice (via the mediation of educators).

![Sphere of Animating Ideas](image)

**Figure 1:** Sphere of Animating Ideas: Levisohn, Jon A. (2014). A New Theory of Vision. *HaYidion*, 33.

The core research questions addressed by this project are: (1) What are the animating ideas which comprise the vision of each coed yeshiva? And (2) in what ways, and to what extent, do these ideas vary across the coed yeshivot?

These core questions are approached through two secondary questions: What is the espoused vision of each institution? And what is the rationale for key educational policies and practices? By key policies and practices, I mean those concerning teachers/teaching, learners/learning, and subject material/curriculum – three of Joseph Schwab’s “commonplaces” of educational thinking\(^2\) and the elements which comprise Cohen, Raudenbush, and Loewenberg

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Ball’s instructional triangle,\(^3\) depicted below. Through an exploration of the rationale behind such policies and practices in the institutions’ *torah lishma* programs, we shall be better placed to both identify and understand their animating ideas across each of Levisohn’s seven categories.

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Personal connection

The catalyst for this research project may be traced to July 2014, while I was participating in the summer program at the USCJ (United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism) Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem. Having accepted an offer to study at the Pardes Institute for the 2014-15 academic year, I was offered an opportunity to remain at the Conservative Yeshiva instead. I consulted with Rabbi Joel Levy, the Conservative Yeshiva’s Program Director, who set out the key differences between the institutions as he perceived them. These included differences in faculty profiles, student profiles, curricula emphases, and ideological commitments. These distinctions (combined with my personal preferences) were a major factor in my decision to remain instead at the Conservative Yeshiva for the Year Program.

Since that time, I have become increasingly curious about the enactment of vision at institutions such as these. One phenomenon which interested me was the dual commitment to gender diversity and the study of traditional Jewish texts, which I felt may be in tension at some level, given that many traditionalist institutions of Jewish education do not admit women on the basis of Jewish law. Another was the tension between lofty philosophical ideas such as making Torah study accessible to all, and practical realities such as financial capacity.

Over the last four years, most of which I have spent living in Jerusalem and Boston, I have met a number of faculty, students, and alumni of the Conservative Yeshiva, Pardes, Hadar and SVARA. From them I have heard a variety of perspectives on the strength, coherence, and enactment of each institution’s vision. Especially interesting were conversations with prospective students who were either applying to or had been accepted to study at one or more of these

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4 See, for example, Sota 3:4 in the Mishnah and Jerusalem Talmud.
institutions. Through these conversations, I began to wonder about why each institution employed the faculty members and attracted the students that they do. Which demographic phenomena stemmed from deep institutional commitments and which were incidental? In what other ways did education at these institutions look different due to their distinctive ideological stances? And what obstacles existed to prevent the enactment of their commitments and ideals?

It is a challenge, if not the challenge, of vision-guided institutions to identify, articulate and enact their visions, although it is inevitable that vision and reality will never fully align. My hope is that a close investigation of the visions of the Conservative Yeshiva, Pardes, Hadar, and SVARA may shed some light on the ideas that unite and separate them. It is beyond the scope of this research to draw conclusions about the relative success of such institutions to enact their educational vision. Rather, my goal is to provide a rich description and analysis of vision as articulated by their leaders. I hope that my research will help prospective torah lishma students to be thoughtful about the ideas that they hold dear, and how each institution may nurture and challenge them.

Theoretical background

Levisohn’s sphere of animating ideas is a response to an earlier model of educational vision articulated by Seymour Fox. According to one articulation of Fox’s model, vision-guided practice is the result of an act of translation from foundational commitments to practical decisions. Fox insisted that these foundational commitments, encapsulated by a conception of an ideal person or society, must be comprehensive and systematic, such that there is always an answer to the question: Why are we doing this?
Levisohn’s critique of Fox’s model is that the insistence on comprehensive and systematic visions is both unjustified and burdensome. Consequently, Levisohn imagines vision-guided Jewish educational practice as dynamic rather than stagnant, with a multitude of influences which fluctuate between resonance and dissonance. He emphasizes that this is a non-hierarchical system, in which there is no “higher-level” philosophical idea which governs other “lower-level” ideas. Rather, all animating ideas simultaneously exert influence on (and are in turn influenced by) educational practice. Furthermore, for Levisohn, in contrast to Fox, vision-guided education results from a conversation between theory and practice rather than the direct translation of theory into practice.

One important implication of this is that the revelation of inconsistencies within a vision is par for the course, and not a cause for alarm. While visionary educators may be looking to iron out the creases, they don’t need a comprehensive theory of everything before they get started with implementation. In other words, while Fox demands answers to the ultimate “why?” question, Levisohn implicitly requires of educators only a proximate “why?” Levisohn’s model portrays vision-guided practice as subject to constant change or revision and distracts emphasis away from grandiose philosophical ideas that are sometimes divorced from reality.

In a more recent paper, “Theories of Transformative Learning in Jewish Education: Three Cases” (2017), Levisohn demonstrates the explanatory power of this way of thinking about vision. Levisohn invited leaders from a number of diverse Jewish educational projects and initiatives to give a presentation which included an articulation of “their desired outcomes, the pedagogies or technologies that they employ in pursuing those outcomes, what the experience of the program
is like for the participants, and what kinds of documentation they do or might gather." In his analysis, Levisohn identifies ideas which animate these programs, focusing on their various theories of how transformative learning occurs.

This research project is comparable to this enterprise of Levisohn’s. Each of us is interested in the range and variety of visions of Jewish education which are being enacted by practitioners today. We are both interested to learn from institutional leaders: why do you do what you do? And we have both invited these leaders to be reflective in describing the way(s) in which they envisage the impact of education at their institution. However, whereas Levisohn chose diverse cases within the broad field of Jewish education in the search for various models of transformational change, I have chosen subject institutions representing a significant sample of the coed yeshivot in order to better understand the contours and intricacies of educational vision in this narrow field.

Subject institutions

This paper explores the educational visions of four coed yeshivot based in Israel and the USA. Below are short descriptions of each institution based on the language used on their respective websites:

“Hadar empowers Jews to create and sustain vibrant, practicing, egalitarian communities of Torah, Avodah, and Hesed." Founded in 2006 in New York City’s Upper West Side by Rabbis

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6 [https://www.hadar.org/about](https://www.hadar.org/about), accessed 03/07/2018
Shai Held, Elie Kaunfer, and Ethan Tucker, today the Hadar Institute offers a variety of programs for lay leaders, professionals, musicians, and educators.

“Pardes is an open, co-ed and non-denominational Jewish learning community, based in Jerusalem and with programs worldwide.”7 The Pardes Institute opened its doors in 1972, thanks to the endeavor of founder Michael Swirsky. Today Pardes offers a range of immersive study programs at its home in the Talpiot neighborhood of Jerusalem, Israel.

“SVARA seeks to engage, educate, and empower a community of learned and innovative players—people who transform the Jewish world into a more creative, representative, and engaging place.”8 Based in Chicago, Illinois, and founded in 2004 by Rabbi Benay Lappe, SVARA creates LGBTQ+ inclusive spaces for the study of Talmud from a queer perspective.

“The Conservative Yeshiva is a diverse, egalitarian, and engaged learning community in the heart of Jerusalem where you can ask questions, explore, and grow, and gain skills for a lifetime.”9 The Conservative Yeshiva opened in 1995 at the Fuchsberg Center, the USCJ’s home in Israel on the edge of the city center, from which it runs long- and short-term study programs.

Contribution to the field

This study invited leaders of coed yeshivot to articulate the ideas which animate their institutions, and to describe how these ideas are enacted in policy and practice in their torah lishma programs. By comparing and contrasting these ideas, this study seeks to offer a clear understanding of which ideas unite the institutions and which distinguish them. Another

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7 https://www.pardes.org.il/about/pardes/, accessed 02/01/2018
8 http://www.svara.org/about-svara/, accessed 02/01/2018
9 http://www.conservativeyeshiva.org/mission/, accessed 02/01/2018
contribution of this study is to shine a spotlight on a set of institutions that have captured the imagination of a sector of young adult American Jews. Since these institutions and their visions are dynamic, this study captures a particular moment in time. In spring 2018, some torah lishma programs were experiencing significant growth, and some were completing leadership transitions. I also hope that this research will stimulate a broader conversation about the ideas that animate the coed yeshivot and provide a foundation for future research on the enactment of educational vision at these institutions and others.

Study design and methodology

This study is interested in institutions offering programs which teach Jewish text to students of multiple genders who are learning torah lishma, as opposed to studying towards rabbinic ordination, academic degrees, teaching certification, or other types of professional qualification. I chose to concentrate on torah lishma programs because they typically assume minimal prior knowledge of their students and are not restrained by the need to prepare students for any particular profession or expertise. Consequently, I believe that decisions concerning teachers, students, and subject material may provide the clearest indication of the educational priorities of their host institutions. Who should learn here? Who should facilitate that learning? What is worth learning? And how is it learned? I am also focusing on programs which offer (or have offered) full-time academic programs, because these have maximum opportunity to create immersive vision-guided learning experiences, and because they will be easiest to compare to one another. In particular, this study focuses on programs at four coed yeshivot which offer English-language instruction.
The primary method for collecting the data used in this study was semi-structured interviews with leaders at each coed yeshiva – two per institution:

- Hadar Institute:
  - Rabbi Ethan Tucker (President & Rosh Yeshiva)
  - Dena Weiss (Rosh Beit Midrash)
- Pardes Institute:
  - Dr. David Bernstein (Dean)
  - Rabbi Meesh Hammer-Kossoy (Director of Admissions)
- SVARA:
  - Rabbi Benay Lappe (Rosh Yeshiva & Executive Director)
  - Rabbi Mónica Gomery (Associate Director)
- USCJ Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem:
  - Rabbi Joel Levy (Rosh Yeshiva)
  - Dr. Josh Kulp (Rosh Yeshiva)

The decision to focus on institutional leaders relates to my own studies in the Hornstein Program for Professional Jewish Leadership but is primarily strategic; institutional leaders (many of whom are founders) are well-placed to both articulate and represent the institutional vision and its enactment. They also constitute a sufficiently small group that two interviewees from each institution may form a representative subset. Some of these leaders have also published articles or recorded lectures and these served as a useful supplementary data source.

In “Theories of Transformative Learning in Jewish Education: Three Cases,” Levisohn acknowledges that the data he collected "are neither the leaders’ innermost thoughts about their programs (no confidentiality was possible, given the format), nor are they simply brochure boilerplate.”10 This principle is also applicable here; during interviews I asked probing questions

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which called for interviewees to be reflective about the articulation and enactment of their institution’s vision, but it was also made clear that their comments would not be anonymized.

Another limitation is that although the selection of interviewees was made thoughtfully, with the intention of identifying one thought leader and one program leader at each institution, two individuals still represent a small sample of the faculty and staff responsible for determining and implementing an educational vision. While we must not assume that every opinion offered during the interviews represents an institutional consensus, there are instances in which we can extrapolate safely, and others in which the data leads us to conclusions about the diversity of opinion in the field.

Though I am not directly affiliated with any of the institutions in which this study is interested, I am a former student of the USCJ Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem and am friendly with professional staff and alumni of all four institutions. I have therefore strived to rely only on the data collected and my analysis of that data, setting aside any pre-existing ideas I have about each institution and its vision. Only one of my selected interviewees, Rabbi Joel Levy, is also a personal friend. I have opted to include him in the study because an alternative interview subject from the same institution would be much less well-placed to articulate the vision of the Conservative Yeshiva and describe its enactment. I made a special effort before the interviews with both Rabbi Levy and Dr. Kulp to stress that they should not assume prior knowledge on my part when answering the interview questions.

The initial interviews, each lasting ninety minutes, first invited each interview subject to articulate the ideas that animate their institution and then elicited descriptions of and stories about the enactment of vision in key areas of policy and practice in the torah lishma program, in
order to more fully understand these animating ideas and to identify others. The full interview protocol is included as an appendix to this study.

Before conducting interviews, I reviewed the available literature regarding these institutions, and relevant material published by the institution, such as class schedules, mission statements, and articles written by institutional leaders. These interviews were conducted via audio (and in most cases video) conference and recorded for transcription and analysis.

After this initial round of interviews, I conducted an initial analysis, in which I identified animating ideas through a close reading of the interview transcripts, synthesized the ideas expressed by leaders representing the same institution, and categorized these ideas into five groups: ideas about Judaism, God, and Israel; ideas about human flourishing and the ideal community; ideas about curriculum, subject areas, and subject material; ideas about teachers and teaching; and ideas about learners and learning. Within each category, I then compared the ideas identified at each institution and noted gaps in the data and in my understanding. After this initial analysis, I conducted thirty-minute follow-up interviews with one subject from each institution, with the goal of filling these gaps. These were also conducted via audio or video conference and recorded for transcription and analysis.

In my final analysis, I performed another close reading of the accumulated interview transcripts, coding interviewee responses which revealed ideas in each of the five groups listed above. Comparing the responses in each category, I sought to identify areas of consensus and of either patent or subtle difference, thus illuminating the similarities and critical differences between institutional visions.
Significance of the study

It is my hope that this study will provide food for thought not only for prospective students and professional leaders but for all who have been associated with the four institutions considered therein. There is also much that will be of interest to leaders of other vision-guided institutions of Jewish education: the interplay of four comparable but distinct educational visions highlights a number of tensions with which progressive Jewish educators must grapple and a variety of nuanced approaches to their resolution. In particular, it raises up instances of the tension between respecting both tradition and moral intuition, valuing both diversity and alignment, and stewarding the growth of both individual and community. The study also presents and analyzes a range of justifications for emphasizing Jewish literacy, Talmud study, and hevruta study, which may prove provocative to practitioners and theorists alike.

Road map

This paper presents the educational visions of four institutions through the lens of five categories of animating ideas. My goal is to demonstrate the similarities and critical differences between these educational visions through an analysis of these animating ideas, and thus to illuminate the contours and intricacies of educational vision at coed yeshivot.

In Chapter Two, I present ideas about Judaism, God, and Israel, including various approaches to torah (Jewish text), halakha (Jewish law), theology, Jewish peoplehood, and the question of who is a Jew.

In Chapter Three, I present ideas about human flourishing and the ideal community, including attitudes towards inclusion, pluralism, and prescriptivism.
In Chapter Four, I present ideas about subject material and in particular about Talmud, which is a focus of the curricula of all four institutions.

In Chapter Five, I present ideas about teachers and teaching, including various conceptions of good teaching, good teachers, and a good (collective) faculty.

In Chapter Six, I present ideas about learners and learning, including preconditions for and desired outcomes of successful learning, and the rationale for the hevruta model of learning.

In Chapter Seven, I conclude with a brief review of my work and a discussion of its implications and areas for further study.

Style guide

A number of stylistic choices were made in the final presentation of this thesis. Firstly, since Brandeis University and the majority of my interview subjects are North Americans, I have adopted standard U.S. spelling and grammar, in place of my native British English. Only one of my interview subjects, Joel Levy, was born outside of the U.S. and I trust he will forgive me for presenting his words in “American English” [sic].

Secondly, I have made decisions on the transliteration and formatting (italicization, capitalization) of Hebrew words on the basis of considerations of clarity and preservation of the voice of the interview subjects. Substantial efforts have been made to ensure consistency where possible.
Chapter Two: Ideas about Judaism, God, and Israel

“All serious Jewish institutions have a commitment of some type toward what it means to live a prayerful life, what it means to live a life of interpersonal service, and what it means to really study Torah.”

– Dena Weiss, Hadar

Why study classical Jewish texts?

A reasonable starting point for our exploration of four coed yeshivot is their attitude towards Torah, in the sense of classical Jewish text or the classical Jewish canon (rather than the five books of Moses). Torah study is at the heart of all four institutions: “A person who doesn't want to spend most of their time studying text wouldn't find a reason to be at the Conservative Yeshiva,” says Josh Kulp; “we’re spending all this time and energy trying to get people to engage seriously with Jewish texts, with Jewish literature, ideas, theology, law, observance.”

The most prominent shared feature of Hadar, Pardes, SVARA and the Conservative Yeshiva, according to Dena Weiss, is that “none of our institutions are willing to say that the Torah is not relevant,” and the evidence supports this assessment. David Bernstein provides an example:

They could be learning about an ox goring an individual. We think that has contemporary importance, because it's about how people treat one another and learning individual responsibility. There are important contemporary lessons for the modern world, that may not be [about] oxen, but may be [about] other things: corporate polluters, et cetera. So I think that all of those things are the bread and butter of Pardes.
Whereas one might have thought that laws governing liability for damage caused by work
animals are of limited significance to the contemporary suburban Jew, Bernstein argues that from
this text one might derive important lessons that speak to modern life.

Ethan Tucker says that at the center of Hadar’s project is the idea that “Torah speaks to
life and responds to life” – that our thinking about Torah is, and should be, both impacting and
impacted by reality:

That runs pretty deep through all kinds of things [at Hadar]. I would say, that's actually the
overarching category in which the commitment to gender equality fits, which is to say, living in an
increasingly gender-equal society, we've got these forms that are from an earlier time. This is
feeling weirder and weirder. We've got to at least open this up, and either be able to come up
with a reason of, like, “oh yeah, even though it used to just be in keeping with the way the world
worked, now we should be pursuing non-egalitarianism in a counter-cultural way”, or “yeah,
here's what a deep look at the tradition shows: that's no longer the right application”, but like the
über category there is assuming that the Torah is not just form, but content.

This is an important idea for Tucker and Hadar. Like a piece of artwork, Torah is not merely the
sum of its physical or linguistic parts; it also has content (or essence) which emerges from the
form (or physical/linguistic arrangement). Although the form is canonized and therefore set, the
content may change across time and cultural context. He continues:

The world is not static, but changing, and if the Torah is eternal, you have to sort of unearth from
its form what that content is, and then figure out how it applies. And that doesn't always mean
that you go along with what conventional wisdom at the moment is. Again, it may mean you're
deeply counter-cultural. I don't think the fact that everyone's on their smart phone, and
everyone's reachable all the time, and there's a twenty-four/seven work culture means that we
should be finding a way to understand Shabbat as ultimately enabling that. It's quite the opposite.
It's like we live in a moment where there's a new Pharaoh who is enslaving us, and Shabbat is
meant to be the counter-cultural tool...

...a substantive conversation of engaging the data we have on the page and the data we have from
life: that to me is like an overarching value that guides all the other values.

The idea of putting Torah in conversation with contemporary reality animates other coed
yeshivot as well. Joel Levy gives a historical example: “the amoraim understand the world
differently from the tannaim, which then led to the evolution of Jewish thought and variant
readings of *tannaitic* sources,” and his students at the Conservative Yeshiva are expected to continue this process by reading Torah in the light of their lived experience.

The idea of reinterpreting the content of Torah while retaining its form is advocated, perhaps in the extreme, by Benay Lappe of SVARA, who critiques the measured and gradual updating of tradition:

So, first of all, I think that our project is a disruptive project and I think that makes us different from those other places. I think the other places are trying to shore up and sustain the tradition mostly as it exists now. With a few opening up spots, you know: basically halakhic Orthodox with egalitarianism. For me that's like a sustaining innovation that is not going to save the world. It's going to make the same problematic world. It might look a teeny-weeny bit better, but it's still going to retain a deeply problematic nature as heteronormative space, or the patriarchal space, ultimately based on weird power dynamics. So that's one way I think we're different. That's just the beginning.

I think those other places are also imagining that benefit will happen when Jewish people master the content of the wise teachings of the tradition. And that might be true if you're in a period of stasis where the tradition is working. When the tradition is working really well, it can help people lead meaningful lives. You want to teach them this stuff, the content of that tradition. And that seems like a good strategy in those times. I don't think we're living in one of those times...

For Lappe, the times we live in call for a more radical treatment of tradition, which holds a looser grip on aspects of the tradition which may appear harmless but in fact contribute to the stability of deeply problematic structures.

In her ELI talk, “An Unrecognizable Jewish Future: A Queer Talmudic Take,” Lappe suggests that when Torah – the Jewish “master story” – no longer seems to provide relevant answers to life’s deepest questions, most Jews see a “take-it-or-leave-it” choice between isolationism and assimilation, but only a few see a third option:

They [the rabbis] went Option Three: They accepted the crash, embraced the crash, went back to the tradition, took with them what still worked, mixed the old with the new, and created a radically new tradition, a radical new Judaism...
...at a time of crash, you want as many Option Threes as possible because you never know which one's going to work...\textsuperscript{11}

Lappe is not calling for a superficial makeover of Jewish tradition nor for its total abandonment, but rather for a radical update which involves revisiting the blueprint and moving some walls.

In a sense, each of the interviewees and their institutions are engaged in Option Three projects which involve combining the old with the new. None of them is opting for Option One (protect the tradition at all costs) or Option Two (reject the tradition in its entirety). The coed yeshivot agree that Jews should study Torah because of its capacity as a source of life-enhancing meaning. Yet within this consensus is lodged a disagreement: when lived experience clashes with the received content of Torah, which should cede to – or learn from – the other? One way in which SVARA is distinctive is that it is animated by the idea that this is a junction in history at which calls for a radical shift in the content of Torah.

**What is the halakhic process?**

The Conservative Yeshiva, Hadar, and SVARA are each committed to the idea that *halakha* (Jewish law) evolves over time in parallel with moral intuition, although individual faculty articulate this in a variety of ways. Levy, for example, says that “you can’t have Jewish law that is immoral – that would be untenable.” He continues:

*Halakha*, for me, is about Jewish praxis, so in that sense it’s universal. I don’t think there has ever been a Jewish conversation which was theoretical but not oriented towards working out what the best way is to be in the world. I don’t think it’s monolithic, I don’t think there is a *halakha*. I think *halakha* is the vehicle through which Jews express aspirations of behavior. It’s multi-layered, it has lots of different manifestations and it changes over time as we know more about the world. It doesn’t simply change with the times, it changes with a growth in understanding, moral intuition

\textsuperscript{11} https://elitalks.org/unrecognizable-jewish-future-queer-talmudic-take
changes and evolves as we know more about the world, as we evolve as a species, so the halakha has to evolve as well, because it's seeking truth. It's not seeking fashion, it's seeking truth.

Tucker expresses a comparable sentiment: “Torah is eternal and applied thoughtfully to an ever-changing world, and that means when the world changes, the application of Torah to it changes.”

Lappe describes how her realization of this principle featured in the founding of SVARA:

I want to tell you a story. I was on a subway in... June 2003, and I opened up the newspaper, and the headline read, "Supreme Court overturns sodomy laws." And it was the Lawrence decision, and I sat on this train and I cried because I knew that no kid coming out was ever going to think what I thought when I came out, which is "they put people like me in jail," because that was just never going to happen again. And when I came out, I knew two things: one, that they put people like me in jail, and two, that as a Jew being gay was against God and Torah. And I knew that that case had come to the Supreme court because Lambda Legal, a gay advocacy organization, had brought that case to court. And I knew that the world had just changed because queer people went to law school. And it was very obvious to me that the Jewish world was not going to change until queer people went to yeshiva, as queer people. And that's why I started SVARA. I started SVARA to be that yeshiva.

While Levy and Tucker here frame halakhic progress, respectively, in terms of the collective development of moral intuition or an ever-changing world, Lappe emphasizes the role of the individual halakhic decider. This is not a contradiction — after all, the individual halakhic decider is applying their moral intuition to an ever-changing world — but it does highlight the idea that halakha does not necessarily emerge from community-wide consensus, but rather from the enlightened view of an entrusted group or individual.

Despite the considerable overlap in perspective, each of the institutions has a unique system for determining halakhic practice in house. At Hadar, Rabbi Tucker is the halakhic authority (though he stresses the rarity of unilateral decisions). Weiss describes the qualities which qualify him for the role:

I would say the three core components, which I feel very confident that Ethan has in spades, are: obviously, the knowledge of halakha, you just need to know what the sources say. The second is that you need to really be able to listen to the question behind the question... I think that a good halakhic decider also has to be a good listener. The third piece is that a good halakhic decider is realistic and not only knows the abstract halakha but also knows what really is doable. I don't
really give halakhic decisions, but I know that sometimes the decision that’s right for one person is not right for another person, and that can combine all sorts of factors, so I think that it’s those three understandings. You have to understand the world – you have to understand what is really out there for people, you have to be listening to the individual who’s talking to you, and you’ve got to know your stuff. I think those are the three important components.

At the Conservative Yeshiva, communal practice falls under the auspices of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS) of the USCJ’s Rabbinical Assembly. The CJLS has proven itself to be among the most progressive of contemporary halakhic authorities, approving a variety of teshuvot (responsa) including one which allows women to be counted in a minyan (prayer quorum). At SVARA, there are virtually no halakhic guidelines in place (though apparently the snacks are always kosher). Thus, when it comes to prayer at SVARA’s immersive programs, says Gomery, “it’s usually led by participants and there are usually a multitude of practices being expressed.”

In contrast, Hadar and the Conservative Yeshiva each hold services thrice daily, each following a distinct set of (probably rather similar) halakhic rulings.

At Pardes, the approach to halakha is inconsistent due to the duality of normative and pluralistic influences. Some years ago, Pardes also followed a halakhic authority, their former Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Daniel Landes, but today halakhic policy is more ad hoc. Intriguingly, Landes’ ruling on who can be counted in a minyan (or alternatively: who is a Jew) is still used for whole community prayer, but in the Orthodox mehitza minyan Rabbi Meir Schweiger employs a more stringent policy. (It is unclear whether other Pardes minyanim follow any particular halakhic authority.) One interesting implication of this approach is that individuals who follow the halakhic

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rulings of more progressive authorities are welcome at the institution, although they may find themselves subject to the Orthodox halakhic rulings upheld by others.

Since each of the coed yeshivot allows for the practice of egalitarian prayer, it would not be appropriate to characterize any one of their halakhic approaches as Orthodox. Nonetheless, there is a diversity of opinion regarding the extent to which halakhic deciders should allow their moral intuition to guide their rulings. In other words, each of them is responding to a tension between conservative (with a lower-case “c”) and progressive attitudes towards the relevance of knowledge about the modern world to the halakhic process.

How important is halakhic status?

Another interesting implication of the ambiguity surrounding halakha at Pardes is that an individual of patrilineal Jewish descent only may be counted in the whole community minyan but not in the meḥitza minyan. Hammer-Kossoy reflects on the challenge that patrilineal Jews pose at Pardes:

The biggest challenge for us... is Jewish status. The way as patrilineal descent and intermarriage have become the norm in Judaism, and those children have reached our target population age. Now it's much harder for us to engage in ritual together. We still are able to learn text together, but the gaps between... The halachic status is a very significant challenge for us as an institution. Really it is an institution with a lot of connections to halakha and we really want to have halakhic Jews. Most of our teaching faculty if not all of them are... we all have some sort of thick relationship with halakha. Most of them are Orthodox. Most of our students are not Orthodox, so trying to figure out how to do that in a way that is authentic for everyone in the community is much more challenging than it was before when you come to ritual...

It's hard to be of patrilineal descent, and it's shocking for people of patrilineal descent who have been living in patrilineal communities to come and meet people who they love, and they think are like them, and discover that their halakhic status is an issue for them too... It's not fair to compare the challenges of the Orthodox Jew who doesn't want to drink wine with non-halakhic Jews with the pain that the person who’s not being drunk wine with feels. It's a very personal pain. It's very real. It's very painful.
The Conservative Yeshiva also accepts students of patrilineal descent who are not counted in a *minyan* according to the official stance of the CJLS (though Kulp suggests that they will probably put out a *teshuva* reversing this position “at some point”). Levy describes different ways in which patrilineal students have handled this:

> We think it’s the right of students to expose what they want to expose about themselves to us, when they come to the institution. Some people with patrilineal descent come in with guns blazing through the front door and say, "This is who I am, take me or leave me." Then we have fun fireworks right the way through the year. Some people choose to go under the radar and that's their right. In the same way as a Jew wandering around the Pale of Settlement from village to village had a right to turn up and be included in the *minyan*, no one was carrying any *ketubah* [marriage document], parents’ *ketubah*. People have the right to say who they are when they arrive at a new space, that's part of the fluidity of Jewish life. I think that is built into the halakhic system, those people have a right to do that. I think certain students do that as well. It's not my job to go nosing around in terms of people's halakhic status. …

> Someone who has been raised as a Jew under those circumstances and has lived a Jewish life and takes themselves seriously, I'm going to be the last person who says that they don't have Jewish identity and that Jewish identity isn't meaningful. I think it's extremely meaningful, but there are technical, club requirements that are played out in the Conservative movement for better and for worse, which our institution adheres to.

There are at least two interesting features of Levy’s stance. The first is the emphasis on rights, rather than responsibilities; in this passage, Levy appears unconcerned that by withholding their status from others, the student of patrilineal decent may cause others to inadvertently err from their own halakhic practice (e.g. by counting them in a *minyan*). The second is that Levy advocates for a system which was practiced historically rather than the more stringent system which is used in traditionally observant communities today. (It is unclear whether he understands his position as halakhically legitimate, subversive, or both.)

At Hadar, Tucker is attuned to the moral complexity of the situation and he takes a different, novel approach:

> Candidates who are of only patrilineal descent need to go through a process with us before they can be full-time students. That is to say, we do not just have an ambilineal descent policy at Hadar. That feels to us totally necessary, under any reading of the rabbinic tradition that is continuous
with the past. I actually think the thing that is most honest to the rabbinic tradition and to the reality on the ground today is to essentially say that those born to two Jewish parents are Jewish by birth, unambiguously. Those born to two gentile parents are unambiguously not Jewish by birth, and for them, there is a process of conversion that enters them into the covenant and into the Jewish people.

And those with one Jewish and gentile parent, in either direction, are of mixed heritage in a complex way that, in fact, recommends and demands going through a process that I would describe as unambiguously affirming the Jewish roots that that person already has, in an exclusive covenantal way, which would mean, in my ideal world, anyone who had one Gentile parent, irrespective of who it was, I would take them to the mikveh [ritual pool] without much process, and with a beit din [rabbinical court] the day before the program, and say, "Look. This is something that's really already yours, but it's not the only thing that's yours. It's not unambiguously yours, and to step into this covenantal space, actually, both parents matter, and it affects you."

I actually think that the traditional understanding of a Jewish mother being sufficient is a mistake in the reading of the halakhic tradition... There isn't really a precedent, before modernity, of a gentile father and a Jewish mother, together, raising a child in the context of the Jewish community and completely ignoring the father's paternity as irrelevant. That's what I would like to do. In reality, it's very hard to tell someone who grew up their entire life thinking that, "Oh, my mother's Jewish. I don't have to think about this at all," to suddenly completely surprise them and shock them with something that I have to acknowledge, even though I think it's right, is not what you would get by googling anything or asking someone.

Here, Tucker is using his knowledge of tradition and the modern world to conceive of a system which honors both. This seems like the type of innovation that would be welcomed at SVARA, but, in fact, Lappe takes a different tack: “One's status as a Jew is neither here nor there, as far as I'm concerned, as a student at SVARA.”

It is worth noting that all four of these responses to the question of patrilineal Jews involves using moral intuition, to varying degrees, to moderate the traditional position of excluding patrilineal Jews from the community, whether it be through full inclusion, partial inclusion, willful ignorance, or total rejection of the question. There is a resistance across the institutions to turning away persons who connect and affiliate with Judaism despite their halakhic status. None of them are willing to turn away the Jew of patrilineal descent as we might expect.
of most Orthodox yeshivot. Instead, each of them chooses its own Option Three, its own path to bring in the student and extend the conversation.

**How important is Jewish theology?**

Theology was not a popular topic of conversation during the interviews, perhaps as Bernstein puts it, because “Jews are notoriously not God-centered.” None of the institutions have a defined theological position, and interviewees indicated that there was significant diversity in religious belief among their faculty and students:

I had a student come talk to me after the first night of the *beit midrash* session we're in right now, who really wanted to know whether the SVARA faculty believes that God is part of the rabbinic process. Such an interesting question to be asked. There was a lot of anxiety behind the question in terms of: is this a space that's safe for me theologically to learn? … The thing I told her was that I do feel that I can confidently say that everyone on the faculty and staff of SVARA believes that God is somewhere in the process, and that it will be very different depending on each of us, how we would articulate that. (Gomery)

Sometimes a cigar is something symbolic and metaphorical, and sometimes a cigar is only a cigar. Deciding between the two is not always easy... We have a number of classes that are more spiritually minded and deal more with the Divine... God is not the primary role at Pardes. The primary role is the classical texts. Whether one views them as divinely inspired, or whether one views them as humanly made, that’s what we’re teaching. We have *minyanim* [prayer quorums] at Pardes – that's about God too, but you know what? It’s also about the liturgy that the rabbis created, and educating people to be literate Jews, functional Jews, whether or not they believe in God. So, I would say that God plays a role, and sometimes teachers talk about God, but they talk more about the *humash* and the *gemara* than they talk about God. (Bernstein)

There's no thought police, but I think that we are a space in which God talk is really welcome and is really present. It's not quite the same as saying everybody believes in God or you must believe in God, but that we feel like God's presence, either as an idea or as a reality, needs to be part of what we're doing when we're talking about religious service, refer to it and think of it as serving God, and I think that that's core... I think that a lot of our faculty are very theologically driven. They believe that they're doing God's work. That is something that permeates. (Weiss)

Judaism allows the notion of God to change over time. The God of the Bible is not the God of the rabbis, is not the God of the medieval philosophers, is not the God of the Kabbalists. They all worship Adonai and would perceive themselves to be a part of the same struggle, so I can see myself as part of a continuity of people searching for God and searching for the good and in many ways, there is continuity, but the quest is common... I think people are, quite justifiably, asking...
what does it mean to search for God in the 21st century, knowing what we know about the universe? Not trying to put ourselves back into how other people conceive the universe, but saying: "What does a person with a really decent Western education in the twenty-first century know about the world and, in the context of that knowledge that we have, what does it mean to seek God? What does it mean to know God?" (Levy)

At first glance, these excerpts appear to demonstrate considerable variety. For instance, Levy’s appeal to history and the search for God and Bernstein’s appeal to metaphor and applicability set a very different tone, and in some sense reflect diverse institutional trends. Upon a closer reading, however, it seems that the institutions are, in some sense, theologically aligned. Each of them recognizes that the study of classical Jewish text is often accompanied by students’ personal search for God, and each expects its faculty members – who are experienced searchers – to be able to articulate a theology without imposing it on others.

Although multiple interviewees expressed rich theological positions, and many also noted an increase in students’ interest in “God talk” over the last several years, it is not clear that any of the coed yeshivot are presently animated by any particular ideas about God. Nonetheless, I noted that interviewees always used the word “God” to refer to the Divine, rather than traditionalist/Hebrew alternatives (unless employing technical terms such as bein adam lemakom). It therefore seems plausible that theological animating ideas are in play, but the data is insufficient for further speculation.

How should Jews relate to Israel?

Pardes and the Conservative Yeshiva are both situated in Jerusalem, less than three kilometers apart. Kulp, a co-founder of the latter, describes the significance of the location:

I mean, I’ll be honest, we started in Jerusalem, because that’s where we were... I think that Israel is the future of the center of world Jewry. I think it’s already the center of world Jewry... And
therefore, I think it makes sense for people who are experiencing deep levels of Judaism, to also experience serious amounts of time living in Israel, and experience the culture of Jerusalem, particularly Jerusalem. Although, you know, I don't have any problem with Tel-Aviv, or elsewhere... The heart of Jerusalem is right downtown at the Conservative Yeshiva, where you have access to all sorts of other cultural activities, other cultural and educational institutions. More so, than probably any place in the world...

I think that somebody who wants to have a serious lifetime's engagement with Judaism should spend significant portions of time in Israel. Like, a summer is not enough. A summer teen tour, a Birthright tour all the more so, is not enough. You need to live there. Whether six months is enough, I don't know. [Whether] a year is enough, I don't know.

For Kulp, there is significant educational value to living in Israel, rather than merely visiting. Israel is arguably the global center of Jewish learning and indisputably the most immersive setting for exposure to Jewish culture on the societal level.

The functional value of Jerusalem and Israel as the center of Jewish learning and culture is also recognized by the Pardes faculty. Meesh Hammer-Kossoy says:

We really believe *ki mi-tziyon teitze torah* [from Zion comes forth Torah]\(^{13}\). It's a unique opportunity historically to be part of this young Jewish state, which is a laboratory for Jewish texts and [thinking about:] what does it mean to have a state which is not just ethnically Jewish but is guided by Jewish values and by Jewish time? Experimenting with all of those things and living with those things are an integral part of the curriculum.

Yesterday I was in charge of a yom iyun shel ḥesed [study day of loving-kindness] in memory of two of our students that were killed in the Hebrew University bombing in 2002. We have a memory of them each year. We had a session actually trying for ourselves to figure out exactly how being in Israel is a central part of our goal. I think that it's clear to us that it is an essential part of goal. What exactly that means, every person of course is a little bit different. But yes, that's very important to us.

The same verse from Isaiah was also employed by Bernstein to describe Pardes' relationship with Israel, perhaps indicating that they harbor more religious Zionist sentiment than their neighbors at the Conservative Yeshiva. Nonetheless, both institutions value the vibrancy of Jewish life in

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\(^{13}\) Isaiah 2:3
Israel, which they recognize as a historical phenomenon. This is unsurprising given that the majority of both faculties chose to make Aliyah from their countries of birth – mostly the USA.

At the Conservative Yeshiva, however, teachers are typically more politically liberal on Israel than their Pardes counterparts. For instance, asked whether Pardes would accept a student who rejected the right of the State of Israel to exist as a Jewish state, Bernstein says:

Those are personal opinions people have, and as long as they don't try to push their agenda on the community, we don't have problems with that. A person's still a Jew. Torah still belongs to them, and unless they do something that violates community norms in some way, we would accept them. We wouldn't throw them out.

We had a case of a student who was a BDS supporter a few years ago, who ran a lunchtime session. She asked to run a lunchtime session promoting BDS, and we let her run it. She ultimately decided to leave the institution, because she felt that she couldn't gain enough support, and, therefore, couldn't justify being in Israel if she couldn't do that.

Answering the same question regarding the Conservative Yeshiva, Levy laughs: “You mean like most of the faculty?” Though this is likely an exaggeration, one cannot help but notice the difference in tone.

On the other side of the ocean, Tucker describes himself as an “uncomplicated Zionist with a religious orientation” and indicates that while some BDS supporters may not be comfortable studying at Hadar, others have done so and thrived. Expanding on this point, Weiss explains:

We consider ourselves to be a Zionist institution. You would have to be someone who could participate in that. It's less about right wing, left wing, and more about pro-Israel, anti-Israel. I think anti-Israel might be a line. I think if we have a student who came in and said, "I am devoting my life to the destruction of Israel from the inside out," I think it's quite possible that we would not accept them, but if someone said, "I'm really critical of Israel's policies, and I think that a really effective tool for there to be substantive change is to participate in BDS," I don't think that's a reason to disqualify them.

Lappe, on the other hand, says that SVARA has:

no position whatsoever [on Israel], other than we don't have litmus tests on whether students believe or don't believe, and we don't close the door to any student based on their politics any
more than we would based on anything else. So early on when we were broke, we got a $300,000 grant from the federation, and when they told us it had strings attached, and the strings were that the students we accepted into the program we had pitched them couldn't be BDS members or have Facebook presence sympathizing with BDS, and then they extended that to even publicly opposing the occupation, we gave them their check back. Not because of what our politics on Israel are, but because of what our philosophy is on what our students politics can be. So, no, we don't have a stated position.

At SVARA there is no concern whatsoever regarding students’ political stances, which may be connected to the higher levels of BDS activism among American Jewish socialist groups such as the Workmen’s Circle.

Another interesting feature arising from the interviews was the relationship between geography and politics. For instance, although the two Jerusalem-based institutions are separated by only three kilometers, the Conservative Yeshiva is in the heart of West Jerusalem while Pardes is within commuting distance of the Gush Etzion settlement bloc where many of its faculty live. Levy notes that some adjunct faculty at the Conservative Yeshiva also live east of the Green Line, but he wonders about the likelihood of a full-time teacher ever doing so: “Are there fully egalitarian local minyanim over the Green Line or is living over the Green Line related to the suppression of women’s rights in Judaism? What an interesting question.”

In the USA too, location is connected to Jewish community politics. Although Lappe, founder of SVARA, explains that the location of their base in the suburbs of Chicago holds no special significance beyond its proximity to her home, Mónica Gomery notes that:

It does feel meaningful to me that we are not on the east coast, that’s oversaturated with Jewish life and options and opportunities for Jewish learning and Jewish community building. Chicago has a huge Jewish community, a huge Jewish history, but I think that it has been helpful to us to be rooted in a part of the country that has not historically been drenched in the resources of institutional American Jewish life, because that’s part of our larger mission, that is to be the space where the folks who have not been able to feel their full selves can come into the room and feel like they can do this. They can learn.
Hadar, conversely, is based in the resource-rich Jewish community of Manhattan. “New York City,” opines Tucker, “is fairly described as the most important city in the diaspora and contains 40% of North America’s Jews... in the metropolitan area, and in that sense, if Judaism goes where the Jews are, then it’s a natural place [for Hadar] and those of us who started it up were there.”

Hadar has recently been investing in its presence in Israel and Tucker adds that:

there is something that I think diaspora Judaism brings to the table, which is distinctive and important, which is how one functions as a minority, how one absorbs ideas and practices in one's larger environment and, nonetheless, does a kind of translation of them into the Jewish realm and vice versa. To the extent that Torah has something to say to the world, it presumably shouldn't just be bottled up in one particular location and cut off from people who are not in the covenant or inner circle, so to speak.

Tucker is not alone in aspiring to bring the message of Torah to the world beyond the edges of the Jewish community:

I want to promote, broadly speaking, versions of Judaism, which are in accord with the values that I hold dear. I want to promote that, not because I want to see the Conservative movement flourish. I do that because I want to see the world flourish, I hope that doesn't sound too grandiose. (Levy)

In my most grandiose moments I think it makes sense to open up the Talmudic project to the whole world. (Lappe)

We want nothing less than a more literate, more passionate, more committed, more moral, more open Jewish people. If we can do that, we think that will have an impact on the rest of the world as well, a positive impact. (Bernstein)

Regardless of their geography, each of the institutions sees itself as participating, however modest its contribution, in a global project which transcends religion as well as location.

Aside from these lofty ambitions, two trends become apparent from a comparison of the data. The first is a correlation between religious traditionalism and pro-Israel sentiment, with Pardes and Hadar higher on the scale than the Conservative Yeshiva and SVARA. The second is the impact of location on the character of an institution. Geography is a key factor in attracting
faculty and students alike and can have an impact on an institution’s animating ideas long after its founding. There is a clear sense in which each institution is the product of its surroundings.

Conclusion

The exploration of animating ideas regarding Judaism, God, and Israel in this chapter, while not comprehensive, highlights a number of consensus positions between the coed yeshivot, and gives the impression that they may share more in common than not. Subtle differences in their approaches to classical Jewish text and halakha have visible effects on the ground, but position them in nuanced debate, rather than fundamental opposition, about the appropriate course of action given the lived Jewish experience in today’s world. An openness to diverse ideas about Israel, God, and the applicability of moral intuition makes for a set of vibrant institutions whose students and faculty contribute to millennia-old Jewish conversations.
Chapter Three: Ideas about Human Flourishing and the Ideal Community

“The goal of the Yeshiva is not the Yeshiva. The goal of the Yeshiva is not to promote the Yeshiva. The goal of the Yeshiva is... the transformation of Jewish life.”

– Joel Levy, Conservative Yeshiva

What characterizes human flourishing?

What is the good life? To what should human beings aspire? Joel Levy makes a case for the importance of being rooted in a culture:

I think that one of the key challenges that the world is facing is the question of identity in a shrinking world. How do you maintain identity in a shrinking world? People are very nervous about identity. People are nervous about identity because as the boundaries and walls between people shrink and as the internet grows, and as people travel more and as we see more of the world, and we understand the relativistic nature of culture... our commitments, our primary commitments to our particular cultures can fade...

People are feeling the pinch, because something about the internet and the way that modern society is going tends towards a lower common denominator, and it's hard to convince anyone to commit the energy and effort into particular cultures that are required in order to gain mastery over those cultures... The alternative is the shift in the world towards fundamentalism, which is a shift back towards the taken-for-granted-ness of identity, where the borders are very high and where you promote an ideology of fundamentalist commitment to one particular text based on what I would see as a faulty ideology, faulty both morally and intellectually...

I certainly fantasize about a world without many boundaries, where people are deeply committed to their own cultures, in order to be able to sing the song of their own culture, but in a way that is not negating of other cultures... If we want to live in a world that is both cultural and multicultural – committed and yet lives at peace with itself and doesn't destroy itself – then you have to have more and more people floating around who know exactly who they are, have deep cultural competence, and yet don't gain that through pressing the fundamentalist button. The Jewish community is yet to do that.
Although this may be a personal, rather than institutional, fantasy, the cultivation of cultural competence and the rejection of fundamentalism resonate within the world of the coed yeshivot.

Because of the highly-textual nature of Jewish tradition, Jewish cultural competence is often equated with Jewish literacy, and so we may expect an examination of attitudes towards Jewish literacy at the coed yeshivot to reveal ideas about human flourishing. For this purpose, it is helpful to employ a framework developed by Mollie Feldman in her MA thesis, which presents three distinct approaches to Jewish literacy.

The idea that Jewish literacy is a key tool for personal enrichment reflects the Personal Approach to Jewish literacy, which Feldman identifies by its focus “on the effect that learning has on an individual’s sense of meaning, motivation, and identity.” Across the institutions there was consensus that meaning-making is a critical human activity:

We leave a lot of open space for differing reads and we’ve had our minds blown before how students are reading the text and understanding it. (Gomery)

The Torah piece [of Hadar’s mission] is very much about having an inquiry and process of learning that is intellectually rigorous, all questions on the table, and is fundamentally a spiritual search for truth, not just an academic investigation. (Tucker)

In my opinion, the goal [of Pardes] is to get every Jew to be able to enrich their connection to Judaism... Everyone will use the tradition in different ways, and that’s totally fine, that’s part of the goal, but we want everyone to have a rich connection... We’re looking for people who are thoughtful, care about community, care about Judaism, and care about living a life of meaning. (Hammer-Kossoy)

[Our students are] people who are looking for religious meaning and are looking to what it means to construct a meaningful life. (Levy)

Asked which Jewish ideas are central in the worldview of the Conservative Yeshiva, Levy describes “that journey” of meaning-making:

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15 Feldman, ibid, 4.
We’re in a pursuit of the good. What does it mean to be good? That, again, is subject to huge variation... What does it mean to be a good person? The Jewish genius has always been to ask that question and then to try and answer the question in detail. What does it mean to lead a good life? Not in an abstract sense, but tachlas [practically], what do you have to do? What kind of person do you need to be? What kind of capacities do you need to develop? I think that that question is constantly being asked in the beit midrash [study hall]... What does it mean to be a good person? What does it mean to do good? What do I need to do to my life to make myself a better person? What does society need to look at in order to be a better society? What’s the relationship between the two? How do I work for the good?

Levy continues to describe a core method for enacting this approach:

In addition to thinking about what you believe, one of the things you'll be thinking about is what religious disciplines you're likely to take on, which will be manifestations of your deepest held beliefs. That will be halakha. Those things will become consolidated in your life, and you ought to consolidate things in your life, because people ought to consolidate religious discipline in their lives, that’s the deal. I don't mind what that looks like. That could be all sorts of different things... Students who come to the Yeshiva are asking those questions and come to all sorts of different conclusions. I would be disappointed with a student who wasn't thinking: “how does everything that I've learnt and experienced become consolidated into forms of religious discipline?”

Essential to Levy’s vision of human flourishing is the idea that people should “put their money where their mouth is” and “walk the walk” by aligning their beliefs and religious practices. Human flourishing, according to this approach, involves a spiritual exploration drawing on a combination of introspection and extrospection (examination or observation of what is outside oneself), and resulting in the internalization of religious discipline or commitment. As emphasized by Tucker above, this process must be intellectually rigorous, and as emphasized by Hammer-Kossoy above, it must emerge from engagement with the tradition.

Critically, the coed yeshivot see an exploration of Jewish text as the gateway to this process. Levy says that “the idea that the starting place for a Jewish journey is your own capacity to read Jewish sources is a key educational principle” at the Conservative Yeshiva, and this seems to be a view shared by all four institutions. Indeed, the combination of introspection (study of the internal self), extrospection (study of the external world), and the study of Jewish text map directly on to the qualities that Weiss ascribes to the halakhic decider in chapter two.
Feldman contrasts the Personal Approach with the *Shanda* Approach, which “prioritizes Jewish literacy as an essential component of belonging, emphasizing the way in which Jewish literacy can make one an ‘insider’.\(^{16}\) Here, cultural competence opens the door to full ownership of and grounding in a cultural tradition. Evidence of this approach is identifiable in Bernstein’s goal that students build “their self-confidence as Jews, their ability to join a very deep Jewish conversation that’s been going on for millennia and will increase their involvement in Jewish life.”

Bernstein lists some of the “basic Jewish skills” with which he wants Pardes students to become equipped:

How do you say *birkat hamazon* [grace after meals]; how do you sing Shabbat *z’mirot* [songs]; how do you run a *tisch*; how do you give a *d’var torah* – we want them to come away with those things – how do you lead a Pesach *seder*. I like to say on the first day of school, every year, I say to them two things. I say: “look around the *beit midrash*, all of these books belong to you. They belong to you the way Shakespeare belongs to every Englishman and Dante belongs to every Italian. This is your cultural heritage.”

Implicit from this flow of thought is a connection between ownership of the Jewish library and performance of competencies that enable one to function in a traditional Jewish community.

The other thing that Bernstein says to incoming students, especially those in the introductory levels, is:

“Next year, after you’re finished at Pardes, there will be a time when you are going to be the most knowledgeable Jew in the room. It could be with your family, it could be with friends, it could be at work, it could be within your *shul* [synagogue]. You will be the most knowledgeable Jew in the room. You have to be ready for that. You have to be able to answer questions, say you don’t know, know where to look, know who to ask. But you will be the most knowledgeable Jew in the room as a result of being at Pardes for a year.” … That’s a statement not only about Pardes, [it’s a] statement about the vast illiteracy in the Jewish world today.

Here, the emphasis lies on the potential for students to disseminate their knowledge to others, beyond the walls of the institution. Learning for the purpose of teaching or transmitting

\(^{16}\) Feldman, ibid.
knowledge to others characterizes what Feldman terms the Continuity Approach, in which Jewish literacy is a “practical tool” for self-proliferation.\textsuperscript{17} This approach is encapsulated by Tucker’s rumination that Hadar’s mission involves “creating a core… that radiates outward.”

These three approaches to Jewish Literacy — Personal, \textit{Shanda}, and Continuity — are by no means mutually exclusive. The combination of Personal and \textit{Shanda} approaches is evident, for example, in Gomery’s description of SVARA’s paired values of being \textit{gamirna} and \textit{savirna}:

The idea of having a \textit{yeshiva} and creating these so-called “players” comes from the rabbinic criteria for being a learner, which is that you become \textit{gamirna} and \textit{savirna}: \textit{Gamirna} — meaning really steeped in your book learning, your text learning, your skills; being very fluent in the system and the tradition; being an insider, becoming an insider in the game legally, intellectually, philosophically, literarily… \textit{Savirna} — opening of one's moral intuition, one's reasoning, the relationship between the communal wisdom and the internal \textit{kishkes} [stomach], the voice that says, "I am experiencing pain. I'm witnessing other people's experiencing suffering. I know something feels true about justice, and I can feel it compassionately and sense it and respond to it."… You need both. You can’t really have one without the other. You can have one without the other but that doesn’t make you this ideal person that the Talmud is modeling us to be. Refining and deepening — one strengthens the other...

Here we see the combination of spiritual pursuit (becoming \textit{savirna}) and competency-building (becoming \textit{gamirna}) which map onto the Personal and \textit{Shanda} approaches, as well as the combination of introspection-extrospection and knowledge of tradition which we saw earlier.

Another feature of SVARA’s philosophy is the intended application of these attributes, which Lappe sets out thusly:

Top of the pyramid of Jewish ideas that we take seriously is the concept of \textit{svara} itself. We believe — and it's not a belief, it's jurisprudential history — that \textit{svara} is a source of Jewish innovation, source of law, which is equal in authority to Torah itself. That's just a fact. It's not like I think this is true. It's a fact. And the only place that I and my colleagues may differ with respect to \textit{svara} is that I think we should see ourselves as empowered to utilize \textit{svara} today, and that it is possible in every generation and necessary in every generation for some number of people to get learned enough to be able to utilize their \textit{svara} to play with the tradition and innovate, and be authoritative. …

\textsuperscript{17} Feldman, ibid.
There are two requirements for messing with the tradition. You've gotta be *gamirna* and you gotta be *savirna*. You gotta know your shit, and you have to be, as Menachem Elon defines *svara*, a person with deep insight into human beings and their relationships... We're in serious trouble if we don't think we can utilize that source of law [*svara*] today. ...

Any innovation that is made, even if it is sourced in any of the other sources of law, like precedent, or custom, or a verse from the Torah, or legislation, is always driven by *svara*. You don't have the impulse to make things better unless your *kishkes* tell you that somebody is hurting, and that hurt is bad and needs to be fixed. So the tradition is inadequate in some ways. ...

One of the things that we're out to do is to create players, create people who will roll up their sleeves and use their *gamirna* and *savirna* to dive in to make the tradition better.

This suggests a fourth approach to Jewish literacy, which we might call the Player approach. (In the context of SVARA, a “player” is not somebody who participates in the halakhic game by following the rules, but rather somebody who contributes to the halakhic process by which the rules are made.) The Player approach is similar to the Continuity approach in the sense that it frames Jewish literacy as a tool for empowerment, but here the learner is primarily empowered to change tradition, perhaps even subversively, rather than to transmit it.

It is worth emphasizing that none of these four approaches to Jewish literacy is exclusive to any one of the four institutions. One could argue for the prominence of a given approach at a given institution (most plausibly: Personal at the CY, *Shanda* at Pardes, Continuity at Hadar, and Player at SVARA) but, ultimately, one can also find evidence for all of these approaches (and possibly more) at each institution. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine any of my interviewees arguing for some approaches to the total exclusion of others. In combination, these approaches paint a picture of human flourishing which involves the application of moral intuition and textual knowledge to the renewal and transmission of tradition.
How does community enhance human flourishing?

A limited vision of the ideal community might consist of a group of individuals simply engaged in human flourishing, but this vision may be extended when we imagine the ideal community as one which enhances the possibility of human flourishing. For example, Bernstein describes two functions of the ideal Pardes community – communal religious practice and interpersonal relationships:

I think that one of the great difficulties that people have had with Jewish life is when they try to practice it alone, because it’s not meant to be practiced alone. It’s a very much bediavad [ex post facto] situation, which is not, I think, the original intent. If there’s no choice, there’s no choice, but really it’s so much better practiced in community.

...if we create a happy community, a community where people are glad to be together, and have friendships and have relationships that are meaningful, and can share... share learning, share Shabbat, share other experiences, tiyulim [excursions] – if people can share those things, then I think it creates a healthier atmosphere for people to learn, and also to grow Jewishly in whatever way they'll chose to grow.

The value of interpersonal relationships, in particular, was echoed by representatives of other institutions. Describing indicators that the student community on their Year Program was thriving, interviewees said:

When students have one another over for meals, for instance, when we have no programming, that's generally a very good sign, and something that we want to see. (Tucker)

I think it's very important for them [students] to get to know each other personally, and form friendships – to get to know their backgrounds, their lives, who they really are – and really live together in a very intense kind of way. Not every minute of every day, necessarily, but it would not be a successful year if students only engaged in hervuta [paired learning], and never had Shabbat meals together, and never got to know each other very personally. (Kulp)

[Being in community] involves anything and everything. From having coffee together to lunch together, to going through scary times in Israel when terrorism increases, to celebrating someone's engagement, to going to somebody's wedding, to sitting around a Friday night table and singing. (Bernstein)

The “supportive” is really how we know that it's working. Supportive means when one of the fellows is going through a particularly difficult time emotionally or physically, that their peers are aware of it and they care and they’re doing something... Almost everybody is going to be leading
some component of davening for the first time. The amount of excitement that other people have when one of their peers has led minha [afternoon prayer] for the first time is how I gauge how well this community is doing as a supportive community. Did they notice that Bob hadn’t led minha for the first five months? Did they see him preparing, and are they able to celebrate his simha [celebration] in achieving that goal? (Weiss)

I had an experience where there was a learner in the room who was a beginner learner... and this person was called on to recite her text. She had not ever studied Talmud before that week and she recited the entire text, which was incredible, from beginning to end, but it probably took her ten minutes. Maybe it was five minutes, it felt like ten minutes. It felt like two hours. She is an incredibly shy person and not someone for whom language learning comes easily... People [were] invested in her process... I found myself sitting there watching her weeping. Then I looked around the room and there were a lot of other people weeping. I still think about it all the time because I only party understand what it was. (Gomery)

From sharing meals to deep emotional investment, there is a shared understanding that the ideal community is one in which individuals share friendship, even intimacy.

Bernstein’s first community function – communal religious practice – is used to justify efforts to bring Pardes students and faculty together for prayer and other Jewish rituals. However, as Hammer-Kossoy admits, “it's much harder for us to engage in ritual together” now that the halakhic status of so many of their students is contentious. At SVARA, traditional communal ritual is often limited to a blessing before learning and the recitation of the kaddish derabbanan afterwards, and even then it is understood that some may opt out.

On the other hand, Hadar and the Conservative Yeshiva, which feature higher levels of halakhic consensus, are more invested in maintaining the critical mass required to establish normative ritual practices. Says Tucker: “I think it's very powerful when people come from different backgrounds, so long as when folks are together, they're sufficiently on the same page of what we're doing together, and it doesn't sort of devolve into chaos.” Says Levy: “I think that any functioning community can tolerate all sorts of people at the edges, but the edges can't be the center. It would be a problem if we lost any center of normative practice.”
For Levy, in particular, normative practice is not merely a matter of creating “religious dynamism and integrity and intensity,” but also of religious health:

When I started learning, in my twenties, the choices that were available were very limited, and it often had to be the case that in order to gain skills in a Jewish context, to have an immersion experience with Jewish texts, to encounter significant relationship with the halakhic tradition to have a primary experience of Jewish prayer – all of those things, when I was searching around, were taking place within the context of non-egalitarian, ideologically fundamentalist institutions. In order to partake in that experience, in effect one had to be a voyeur. You had to go in, you had to close off certain parts of yourself, you had to accept that there would be a gulf between your own ideology and practice, and the institution that you were learning in, so you were a form of religious tourist.

You can still have powerful religious experiences as a voyeur. Tourism is cool. There is nothing wrong with being a tourist. I think in a religious context, religion is often about proximity and not distance, so it’s about alignment and not about distance. It damages you to be exposed for too long to religious tourism, to being a religious tourist. It's damaging because it creates an abstraction where you have religious role models that you know aren't like you. You can't really aspire to being like that because you know they're either practically or ideologically misaligned. That can be long-term damaging. I've spoken to a lot of people who have been damaged by those kinds of misaligned educational experiences.

It is interesting to compare this powerful idea of Levy’s with his approach to patrilineal descent, outlined in chapter two, and one wonders whether an individual who opts to conceal their halakhic status at the Conservative Yeshiva is also participating in a “misaligned educational experience”. Levy continues:

I want to be part of an institution where someone can come in and with no drop off of seriousness or intensity can struggle with people with whom they are aligned... working out what it means to be a Jew who takes Judaism seriously in the 21st century, with all that we know about morality and with all that we know about the reality of the developments of Jewish sources, in terms of history, and holding all that together and trying to create an institution where one can be exposed to those key elements of Judaism without compromising on intensity on the one hand, and without compromising on who you are and what you actually believe on the other hand.

The struggle which Levy describes here might be understood as a shared challenge, as a debate between individuals who share common assumptions, or, indeed, both.

Communal religious practice may, to some extent, be an end unto itself at one or more of the coed yeshivot. However, it can also be understood as a collective manifestation of the
phenomenon of belongingness crucial to the *Shanda* approach to Jewish literacy. That is to say, engaging in ritual together solidifies or concretizes, and thus enhances, individuals’ sense of belonging.

Another value which permeates the coed yeshivot is debate for the purpose of mutual learning, typically known as *maḥloket leshem shamayim* (argument for the sake of heaven):

> We leave everything unresolved... The Talmud is mostly a literature of non-resolution. The texts are not usually ending in a resolved place, but also we don't really need to come out with a unified reading because that's not how our learning space is orientated. (Gomery)

> One of the things that we're looking at in the application and interview process is: Can you respectfully communicate with other people? ... Do you know what it means to take responsibility and have to take leadership and to resolve conflicts and to learn with a *hevruta*? Is somebody gonna want to spend two and half hours across the table from you and feel like they're being listened to? (Weiss)

> All the teachers are into the notion of *maḥloket*. They're very deeply into the idea that there can be incompatible views held within Judaism that are both legitimate readings of tradition... The really, really difficult issues come out over politics and over issues, for example, to do with gender, where there are genuine differences between students. Avoiding the knee jerk assumption that things shouldn't be put on the table is important. We're really working hard to allow students to bring all that hard stuff into the space of the *beit midrash*. There is a working assumption that the *beit midrash* should be a place of reality and a place where people don't check out too much of themselves at the door. (Levy)

> We tell people, we're not interested in safe space. I like to say we’re interested in brave space. Put yourself out there, say what you believe. Use the "I" word. Don't tell other people you, you, you. Say, I believe this. I believe that, and people should be appreciative of the fact that you put yourself out there, and you should be willing to listen as well as to speak. (Bernstein)

*Maḥloket* is essentially an exercise in mutual meaning-making – the collective manifestation of the Personal approach – and is therefore a technique for the enhancement of human flourishing as understood by the coed yeshivot.

One might be surprised to think of any institution being simultaneously animated by both the idea of normative communal practice and the idea of exposing and tackling individual differences. At least three interesting things can be said about this. The first is that none of these
institutions advocates for normativity or diversity in the extreme – each has elements of both. In this sense, the relationship is analogous to that of the Personal and Shanda approaches to Jewish literacy which are distinct but may be complementary. There is a scale between the two extremes on which each institution much situate itself. In this case, the order would arguably be Hadar, Conservative Yeshiva, Pardes, SVARA in decreasing order of normative practice.

The second is that mahloket leshem shamayim is not exclusively a tool for articulating diverse perspectives and arriving at mutual understanding, but may plausibly result in a shared commitment to a course of action arising from shared beliefs.

The third is that both communal practice and communal debate are enhanced by, indeed made possible by, the existence of strong interpersonal relationships. Thus, in the ideal community, the vibrancy of ritual life and the possibility of mahloket leshem shamayim both rely on the formation of deep and meaningful friendships between community members.

How prescriptive should a community be?

The correlation between shared core beliefs and a joint course of action is borne out by the relative levels of prescriptivism employed at each institution. At Hadar, the most prescriptive of the four institutions here considered, “there actually is an expectation that all of the full-time stipended fellows are going to be keeping a halakhic lifestyle for the duration of the time that they’re in the program,” explains Weiss, “we’re trying to create a community of peer-reinforced practice, and we also are trying to educate towards practice. You can’t do that if you’re not practicing.” Conversely, at SVARA, Lappe says:

I personally am completely uninterested and uninvested in the Jewish practice of our students. I have no interest or investment in what they do or they don’t do, whether they daven or they don’t
daven; what they eat, what they don’t eat; what they do on Shabbat, what they do on the holidays, whether they go to shul or not. It’s not my concern at all… There would be options available for students to daven three times a day if that’s their practice, but it will never be a required part of any SVARA program, full-time or otherwise, that students conform to any specific halakhic practice.

In between these “extremes,” the Conservative Yeshiva and Pardes both struggle between a desire for a vibrant prayer life and a desire to honor the autonomy of their students:

I think it’s important for them [the students] to form the prayer community, where they come regularly to minyan. We don’t always succeed in that, but we want to. (Kulp)

We have a meḥitza [gender-segregated] minyan and an egalitarian minyan and no minyan. There’s no expectation that you’re going to come to minyan. We try to make that available, but it’s a place where you really don’t have to go if you don’t want to. It’s available to you, but it’s not expected of you. (Hammer-Kossoy)

In spite of these differences, the interviewees seemed to share a concern that their institution not be perceived as coercive.

[Pardes is] an open, non-coercive, non-directed environment… (Hammer-Kossoy)

Our orientation to study is not to read for direct data on how we should practice. We’re reading for other messages about how we should think and how we should carry ourselves in our world and how we should think about change and think about tradition. (Gomery)

The halakhic discourse is ubiquitous at the Yeshiva, but not monolithic. For example, we’re not trying to say to people, we want you to take on board practice X, Y and Z. (Levy)

The language that we use is “normative but non-coercive”. There are yeshivot, more traditional yeshivot, where there is a mashgiach who actually goes and checks to see: "Are you wearing your tzitzit? Did you do X, Y, or Z things?" We don’t have a police force, but we do have an expectation. (Weiss)

This may be an indicator that the coed yeshivot are particularly concerned to distance themselves from traditionally coercive yeshivot, or a nod to the Sovereign Self – a phrase coined by Cohen and Eisen to denote the Jew who holds personal autonomy above all standards of religious
behavior\(^{18}\) – which increasingly characterizes liberal Jewry in North America. There is, perhaps, an understanding that the use of authoritarian force to ensure religious practice does not resonate with an authentic pursuit of religious meaning.

Levy recognizes the value of stewarding students’ journeys and stresses the need for transparency:

One thing that we do emphasize is that the student body is diverse and the institution doesn't harbor, either implicitly or explicitly, fixed goals in terms of people's religious practice. It doesn't say on the outside, we welcome everybody and we don't have an agenda, but really on the inside we have an agenda. Many institutions have a covert code in terms of goals. The Yeshiva wants to help people along their religious journeys and to push them along those journeys but doesn't harbor secret assumed knowledge that we know what the best place is for people.

Bernstein notes that there once was support for this type of subversive traditionalism at Pardes:

There was a time when there were a couple of factions within the Pardes teaching community that focused on the question of: ‘how important is it that we get our students to be more traditionally observant?’ versus ‘how much are we just a place for learning, and what comes out will come out?’ which I guess is another way of saying, a more pluralistic view.

Faculty who held by the first, “traditionalist” position advocated for pursuing a program of increasing traditional observant among students, even those who did not express interest in doing so. Faculty who held by the second “pluralist” position advocated for providing education and allowing students to make their own choices about observance.

I think that the major protagonists of those two positions in the faculty either are no longer on the faculty, because it's twenty years later; some of them retired, some of them moved on to other things.

Or, I think people have reached a kind of a consensus about that. I remember, we used to have faculty meetings and people used to argue about these things, and people don't argue about them so much anymore, because I think we realized that even if you're a little more on this side, or a little more on that side, if you're a little more traditional or a little more pluralistic, that our goals are so much the same, and that we really believe that if people learn more they'll become more passionate and more committed.

The people who are more traditionally minded, I think over the years have become much more accepting and interested in our students becoming active Reform Jews, and are very proud of that. And I think that those who might be more on the pluralistic side, nonetheless, want our students to know what is the traditional matbea shel tefilla [liturgy of the prayer service], and then, to be able to, off of that, develop their own tefilla practice. So, I think that there isn't an edge about that in the way there once was.

Here, Bernstein describes the resolution of the tension between the traditionalist and pluralist positions as a gradual compromise, through which emerged the shared goal that faculty teach students about tradition but do not interfere with decision-making.

Two results emerge from this exploration. The first is a general consensus among the coed yeshivot against coercive religious practice. There is a clear preference for ritual practice arising from volition, rather than the reverse. The second is that interviewees associated prescriptivism almost exclusively with halakhic practice (even though it is apparent in other areas, such as pedagogy, as we shall see in chapter five). Therefore, the level of prescriptivism is typically derived from the relative centrality or irrelevance of halakhic practice to the central project of each institution. At Hadar halakhic practice is required, at the Conservative Yeshiva it is encouraged, at Pardes it is taught, and at SVARA it is tolerated.

How inclusive should a community be?

Weiss explains that, at Hadar, “we don’t recruit for diversity, but we benefit from diversity” and this is the consensus position regarding the student body at each of the four institutions. Among the diversities that leaders of Hadar, Pardes, and the Conservative Yeshiva valued were geographical, denominational, educational, political, age, gender expression, sexual orientation, and religious background.
Regarding diversity, SVARA works under a different paradigm. While other leaders were reluctant to associate their institutions with the label “pluralist,” Lappe says:

Yeah [we are pluralist]. We don’t use that word, simply because it seems so obvious once you go to queer and queer normative. It’s the same reason we don’t use feminist. Of course we are feminists.

While others detailed various conditions under which non-Jews might be able to take a class or join the program, Lappe says:

One’s status as a Jew is neither here nor there, as far as I’m concerned, as a student at SVARA. You know, it’s fairly well known that the early rabbis were disproportionately converts themselves, or children of converts. I’m interested in people who want to be part of the project of making the Jewish tradition a better tradition so that we can create better people, so that we can make the world a better place for all people. I actually don’t think you need to be Jewish to be engaged in the Jewish project... To really focus at some point on bringing the technology of Talmud study as a way to become a different kind of human being to the whole world – why would we not want to do that? You don't have to be Jewish to have this practice make you a more empathic, complex, thoughtful person. Don't we want everybody to be like that?

Diversity is an active goal at SVARA. Describing the ideal student cohort, Lappe tells me:

It probably goes without saying that there would be diversity in terms of gender expressions and sexual orientations, but I’d like there also to be diversity in terms of able-bodiedness, race, economic status, convert/born Jewish status, practice in terms of halakhic observance, theological diversity, you name it. I want as queer a group as I can possibly get.

Lappe distinguishes between different categories of queerness: “queer number one” folk – the initial target audience of SVARA’s project – are part of the LGBTQ+ community. Over time, however, they were joined by “queer number two” folk – “people who respected a different worldview and they loved having a queer-normative space, and they weren’t comfortable in the old environment where a certain set of assumptions were made.” At SVARA, explains Gomery:

we also are specifically oriented towards people who have had marginal experiences in the Jewish community or in society at large. People who have been maligned or alienated from institutional Jewish life and who often are coming into our space either feeling able to show up there as their full selves in a way that they haven’t been in other Jewish spaces for many different reasons, different parts of their identities or their politics or their values that they're holding.
SVARA is deeply invested in creating a space that includes people who have traditionally been excluded from Jewish text – described by Lappe as “people who are not just cis-gendered, heterosexual, male, Orthodox or traditionally believing or behaving, born Jewish, deep Jewish education… people who are not that...” – with the result that some of those who are natural insiders in other Torah-learning spaces may find the culture at SVARA somewhat alien.

In this regard, SVARA is similar to the other institutions, all of whom are more concerned about reaching students who identify with their core values than with setting up broad red lines. When Gomery declares that “we will take you if you want to study with us,” she strikes a similar tone to Levy, who says “anyone can basically come, so long as you want to come and you want to pay and you want to be part of that environment and you’re not looking to do kiruv [proselytizing] for your world,” or Tucker, who says “the goal here is not about drawing political red lines, but it’s about what are we building together.” The bottom line for inclusion at the coed yeshivot seems to be: if you understand our project and you still want in, then you’re welcome here. Thus, the projects which appeal to the broadest audience have the capacity to be most inclusive.

**Does Judaism compel social action?**

The coed yeshivot vary widely in their approach to social action. At the Conservative Yeshiva, students are encouraged to attend weekly services at the egalitarian section of the Kotel (Western Wall), which, as well as making for vibrant prayer, also serve as a political message in support of egalitarianism and religious pluralism in Israeli society. At Hadar, conversely, a distinction is made between politically oriented social justice projects and hesed work, such as
weekly visits to elderly residents of a nursing home (a core component of the Year Program). At Pardes, a range of volunteering options are provided, covering both categories, while SVARA does not facilitate social action in any such way.

It is difficult to draw conclusions from this data, especially given the complex relationship between politically-engaged action and fundraising. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that only Hadar includes a commitment to *Hesed* in its mission statement, as one of three core values.

**Conclusion**

The coed yeshivot are each animated by a vision of human flourishing arising from the idea of cultural competency generally and Jewish literacy in particular, and supported by a community characterized by strong interpersonal connections. Each of them values Jewish tradition as a tool for belongingness and meaning-making to be transmitted and renewed. However, the relative emphasis applied to each of these processes can lead to wildly different outcomes in the realms of prescriptivism, inclusivism, and social action.
Chapter Four: Ideas about Subject Areas

“We really just do one thing, which is teach Talmud.”

– Mónica Gomery, SVARA

Why teach Talmud?

Talmud is a core curricular component at each of the institutions represented in this study, occupying four mornings per week of study during the Year Programs at the Conservative Yeshiva and Hadar, and three for all but the least advanced students at Pardes. Full-time students at SVARA would be expected to spend at least as much time studying Talmud, if not more.

One shared rationale for this phenomenon is that Talmud is a subject area which requires more time than others to achieve mastery. For example, Bernstein explains that “the nature of the study of Talmud is that it’s very time intensive. You can’t really make progress in Talmud without investing a lot of time. It’s just like that. There are different subjects in the world that require different kinds of time.” In SVARA’s full-time program students were expected to spend between four and six hours studying in hevruta between Talmud shiurim (teacher-facilitated classes). Lappe says this decision was based “on years of experience of how long it seemed to take students... to prep and to do hazara [review] on the previous shiur's material... and to own the previous material 100%.”
Despite the consensus on this issue, none of the interviewees offered a substantive account of why it should be the case that Talmud requires more time than other subject areas to make progress or achieve mastery. It seems likely that the devotion of more time to Talmud is in fact a consequence of a separate consensus on the importance of studying Talmud in the original Hebrew/Aramaic (in contrast to afternoon classes at the Conservative Yeshiva, Hadar, and Pardes, in which texts are typically provided in both Hebrew and English translation). Bernstein opines that Talmud and Tanakh are the two subject areas which should not be studied in translation:

I think that if somebody wants to study Jewish thought they probably do everything in English. Somebody wants to study Jewish history – they can do it in English, and unless they are writing their PhD they won’t be very limited. But if you want to get into the world of Jewish learning, I think those [Talmud and Tanakh] are the two most basic things that one needs to study [in the original] and everything else comes from there as well. Everything else emanates from there.

Studying any text in the original is naturally a slower process than learning in translation. However, the time-intensive nature of Talmud study alone does not sufficiently explain its prevalence in coed yeshivot since it leaves open the question of why Talmud study is worth this significant investment of time which might have been spent learning something else. A number of possible answers to this question arose from the interviews, demonstrating the diversity of attitude among these institutions.

At SVARA, Talmud is presented as “a spiritual and intellectual technology” (Gomery), “one of the most powerful technologies that the tradition has to offer for becoming a certain kind of person, and for becoming a leader who can continuously upgrade the tradition” (Lappe). The value of Talmud study at SVARA is its unparalleled presentation of the rabbinic program of disruptive innovation, of overturning the written Torah in the name of svara (moral intuition and
reasoning), and for this reason teaching Talmud is at the heart of SVARA’s mission. Says Gomery: “We teach Talmud through the lens of the rabbinic project being a queer project, a sort of queer legacy that teaches us how to be a certain kind of human being, a certain kind of Jew.” For SVARA, the value of Talmud is as a unique tool for capitalizing on queer, fringe experiences to create “players” in the game of Jewish life equipped with the textual knowledge and moral intuition and reasoning to be a force for radical change.

At the Conservative Yeshiva, one core value is “an approach to Jewish text, which is deeply intellectually open, which takes account of the historical nature of Jewish text, i.e. isn’t seeking first and foremost a synthesis but is rather looking for the intellectual history of Judaism, how it changes over time” (Levy). The Talmud is recognized as an especially rich source of intellectual history; Kulp describes it as “the most foundational text for Judaism as Judaism developed over the centuries” and recalls the thrill of teaching a class in which students worked through difficult material in the Tosefot to reveal a portrait of a medieval Jewish community grappling with and reinterpreting the *gemara*. Says Levy:

The Talmud is overtly, even self-presented, as a multi-layered text with different historical periods. There is a strong emphasis, certainly in my Talmud class, on working out the layers of evolution of Jewish intellectual history, showing how different layers actually had different understandings of the sources, and how that changes over time – really that evolution being at the center of the conversation.

Addressing the *why* question more directly, Levy adds:

I think because the Talmud has been the chief pedagogic canon of the Jewish people for the last couple of thousand years, 1500 years, meaning so many other areas of the tradition are predicated on understanding how that Talmud tradition works. If one gains mastery in being able to read that stuff, it will naturally lend itself to be able to understand the way the Midrash works, the way that *parshanut* [commentary] on the Bible works, the way that the *teshuvah* [responsa] literature works, the way that the codification process works. I think that’s the primary pedagogic canon of the Jewish people and its mastery opens all sorts of doors for other textual traditions.
For Kulp and Levy, the value of Talmud is its function as a gateway to Jewish literacy – the key tool for accessing the vast library of Jewish text – and its authenticity is rooted in its historicity.

Representatives of Hadar characterized Talmud study primarily as a different type of social currency: a symbol of traditional Jewish learning. “The core of the curriculum is Talmud,” explains Weiss, “both because that’s traditional for a yeshiva and because Talmud, in order to be done well, really requires a number of hours.” Tucker expands on the idea of Talmud study as a mark of authenticity:

Well, it's a good question. I ask myself that, because I'm not always sure the answer is right. The basic answer is, meaning descriptively, it's the coin of the realm. It's the coin of the realm in all kinds of ways. First of all, it's for sure the coin of the realm in terms of measuring yourself up against: what does a serious yeshiva look like? Well, you study Talmud in the morning. Just, there's no other answer to that. It's also, interestingly, the coin of the realm in terms of authenticity of experience, even for people who have never learned it before, you know, and for people who I could say to them: “This is not a good use of your time,” they still wanna learn it because they feel like it... signifies access to the whole thing, so there's demand for it.

A commitment to intensive Talmud study, for Tucker, buys Hadar a certain degree of authenticity as “a serious yeshiva” and buys its students a sense of authentically engaging with tradition. This answer to the why question perhaps represents the other side of the authenticity coin: here, the Talmud is primarily of symbolic rather than concrete value, its authenticity rooted not in history but in its status in contemporary Jewish life.

Of the four institutions, Pardes’ answer to the why question was perhaps hardest to identify, with no obvious consensus arising. There are echoes of the historicity/Jewish literacy approach in Bernstein’s assertion that students at Pardes should “begin to understand the world of the rabbis and the world of classical Jewish texts. That’s what we want to introduce some students to and those are the things that are probably hardest for them to do on their own, certainly Talmud.” Hammer-Kossoy, however, offers a different type of answer: “Talmud and
Chumash... that’s the core of our tradition”. For some voices at Pardes, perhaps, the value of Talmud is intrinsic rather than extrinsic – not a coin of the realm which buys literacy, authenticity, or radical change, but an end unto itself.

The three extrinsic values of Talmud study outlined above are not necessarily exhaustive of the category, and they are not mutually exclusive. Talmud study is easily identifiable as a key feature of all four institutions, and interviewees typically acknowledged multiple animating ideas about the extrinsic value of Talmud study while emphasizing just one or two. This is indicative of the possibility that animating ideas can sometimes arise from, as well as inform, practice.

It is not immediately obvious, however, that each of these institutions would recognize the Talmud as intrinsically valuable, since it is plausible (at least hypothetically) that the Talmud might be supplanted as the Conservative Yeshiva’s gateway to Jewish literacy, or SVARA’s spiritual and intellectual technology, or even Hadar’s coin of the realm. This raises Euthyphro-like questions about the directionality of animating power between the Talmud and its properties. Do we study Talmud because we value its properties, or do we benefit from its properties because we value Talmud itself?

What are the other curricular priorities?

Pardes is the only one of the three active Year Programs which offers tracked classes in Chumash as well as Talmud, with beginner students spending more time on the former and advanced students on the latter. “We teach those classes in the morning,” says Hammer-Kossoy, “Everyone experiences the morning classes as the core of the curriculum.... That’s their home room. That’s their core learning”. Bernstein describes the Pardes curriculum as “a traditional
yeshiva curriculum but more balanced”, including “more space given to Tanakh” than at classical yeshivot. The rationale for emphasizing Tanakh seems to be an argument from tradition: “It’s the Book of Books” he says.

The Year Programs at Hadar, Pardes, and the Conservative Yeshiva each offer a range of non-tracked classes in the afternoon. Weiss describes some of the competing factors at play in designing the class schedule:

The curriculum shifts basically with every z’man, with every semester. We're really trying to get our students to be exposed to as much of the Torah as possible, and we're also trying to get them to engage with it very deeply and very seriously and those are really two goals that cannot be met at the same time. We try to make sure that there's a fair representation.

In terms of other subjects, I try to have some Tanakh taught in some form in every z’man. Sometimes it’ll be parshanut [commentary], sometimes it'll be straight up Tanakh, sometimes I'll try to get it in the back door by doing something with Midrash, but I'm always trying to make sure that there's some representation of Tanakh, and that we're really just talking about the other key areas. We want to have mahshava [Jewish thought], we want to have halakha, we want to have hasidut, we want to have a deep engagement in the broader midrashic literature. It's hard to have all of those things happen at the same time and happen in a deep way, but we really are trying to get as much representation of the Jewish canon as possible.

I would say the only real exception to trying to cover the canon... I don't think we particularly focus on kabbalah. I don't think there's every really been a serious kabbalah class.

Asked for the rationale behind this, Weiss continues:

I think that in part the curriculum is always driven by the interests of the faculty. We haven't had somebody for whom kabbalah is their real emphasis. I also think that what we're really trying to get people to engage with are the material that we feel like literate Jews should know, and kabbalah by virtue of it being an esoteric discipline, is not considered something that every Jew has to know. In that way, when it comes up in the context of a class we don't shy away from it and say: "but that’s kabbalah, so you to wait until you're forty to learn it", [but] it's not something that we're sort of actively trying to expose our students to in a really rigorous way.

The idea that there are some subject areas which it is important for all Jews to know also appears in Ethan Tucker’s description of the Hadar curriculum:

There is, I would say, a kind of revolving set of topics and genres in the afternoons, that are meant both to expose students to, and engage them with, the genres themselves, so Tanakh and parshanut and aggadah [myth/legend] and mahshava and halakha, because those are important
things for people to know and for a yeshiva to study, and some degree of taking on topics and
issues that feel like they are key, so a halakha class might engage something like conversion in
depth, or topics and issues that feel like they're particularly central to processing the Jewish
experience in the contemporary world.

Once again, we see here the significant animating power of Hadar’s image of the classical yeshiva
as the marker for which subject material is worthy of study.

The twenty students in Hadar’s Year Program will typically take most of the same classes,
since there is usually only one offered in each timeslot, with the occasional choice between two.
In contrast, Pardes and the Conservative Yeshiva are able to offer a comparatively broader range
of classes, as demonstrated by the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Afternoon classes offered in Spring 2018</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Conservative Yeshiva</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Humash</td>
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<tr>
<td>Megillot &amp; Jewish Calendar</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bekiu Talmud</td>
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<td>Aggadah</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intro to Midrash</td>
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<td>Hilkhot Yom Tov</td>
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<td>Hilkhot Kashrut</td>
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<td>Hilkhot Avilut Ve’eretz Yisrael</td>
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<td>Kabbalah</td>
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<td>Jewish Spirituality</td>
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<tr>
<td>Philosophy of Human Rights</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theology Workshop</td>
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<td>Hebrew Ulpan</td>
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While the ability to offer such a broad range of classes is in part a virtue of their size, the choice
to focus on breadth rather than depth is notable. Kulp offers one framework for designing the
schedule at the Conservative Yeshiva:

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19 [http://www.conservativeyeshiva.org/year-semester/#spring](http://www.conservativeyeshiva.org/year-semester/#spring)
20 [https://www.pardes.org.il/students/spring-semester-2018/](https://www.pardes.org.il/students/spring-semester-2018/)
[In] the afternoons, we try to have a balance between classes that I would say are more spiritually and philosophically focused, and classes that are more, like, halakhically focused. And there's some in-between. So, we have a smattering of classes on practical halakha, history of halakha, Bible, which includes Chumash. And various Jewish thought kinds of classes, including spirituality. Jewish thought can include tefilla (prayer) as well.

Inherent in the bias towards breadth at the Conservative Yeshiva and Pardes is a preference for students to choose their own paths. Unlike at Hadar, there is no pressure for students to “see the whole of Torah.”

The question of which subject areas, other than Talmud, to prioritize is most active at SVARA, where the full-time program is on a two-year hiatus. “We had a Talmud curriculum, a Hebrew curriculum, and a Bible curriculum; and in our second year we added a Mishna track,” says Lappe. This is a stark contrast from the plethora of subject areas offered at the other institutions, and it is rooted in Lappe’s idea of a shrinking Jewish canon:

I believe we’re in a period of enormous disruption, where the practices and the Jewish specifics are not working and need to be changed, and a lot of the foundational assumptions of the tradition need to be reworked. And in such a period of time, I think the canon tends to shrink, and what is required mastery for a leader becomes a much smaller amount of material. And that drives our pedagogic approach, because in such a time if I’m right, you don’t need a kind of encyclopedic knowledge of vast amounts of current content, like I said before, because it’s not working. The rabbis define being gamirna, like knowing their shit, as – not knowing the Torah – it was knowing their mishnas by heart. And the Mishna was the new invention. It was a tiny amount of material that was a piece of the new canon. And this is one of the reasons why we don't focus primarily at the content level. It's not about what does Judaism say about, or Jewish law on X, Y or Z topic. We're not topic driven, and I think that's one of the things that it seems distinguishes us from other players in this space and opens up the possibility of leadership to people like me who began learning as adults and will never become the scholars of the old canon.

On the one hand, this idea seems to place SVARA in direct contrast to the other institutions considered in this study, each of which are animated by a more expansive conception of Jewish literature. Yet on the other hand, the shrinking canon is roughly equivalent to the primary sources which constitute the core curriculum at those same institutions. (For instance, “there is... a heavy
reliance on pushing towards literacy in terms of the students’ experiences of key, primary Jewish sources,” says Levy; “we share that in common, I think, with much of the Jewish world.”

Although Talmud is the subject of the vast majority of SVARA learning, Lappe does have a broader vision for a full-time program curriculum:

I think there will be a bible department and the teachers are gonna teach it with the same rigor and requirement for ownership and precision with which we see the Talmud. Same for Mishna. There would be a halakha le’ma’aseh [practical halakha] class, and people are gonna be learning she’elot u’teshuvot [responsa] literature. There’ll be a very, very, very rigorous Hebrew component...

This seems to indicate a tension at SVARA between the shrinking cannon and an expansive curriculum. Lappe shares in the fantasy of achieving both breadth and depth, and even fantasizes about providing classes beyond the scope of Jewish text:

There'll be a kind of disruptive innovation track, in which students are gonna learn the theory of disruptive innovation and how to be entrepreneurs.... You know, there's no economy in any new option three world. And the funders are funding option one. They're funding establishment institutions. So these folks are gonna have to learn how to start a not-for-profit, and be heads of start-ups and figure out how to make those work.

In this we see at SVARA the possibility of subject matter as instrumental rather than essential.

In the design of the secondary (non-core) curriculum, we see a number of factors which are not necessarily rooted in animating ideas such as the number of students, the size of the budget, and trends in student interests, but we also see how, as Tucker puts it, “an institution’s schedule and faculty resources... aren’t just devoted to what students want to learn. They’re devoted to what an institution feels like it wants to model and put out in the world,” whether it be a plethora of Jewish options, a commitment to the whole of Torah, or a disruptive project.
What makes for good subject material?

Across the institutions there was a consensus that one important role of faculty is to decide on the texts they will teach:

Individual teachers are told broad subject areas, but oftentimes teachers are teaching things that they're really passionate about. If they're teaching prophets, they'll be attracted to things that they're doing research on or they're thinking about. There is a great deal of flexibility in terms of teacher teaching what they want. (Levy)

I think that what a teacher needs to know is: what's the right amount of material to give someone in hevruta [so that] they're going to have enough to learn, they're not going to be bored, they're not going to feel overwhelmed by the amount. (Weiss)

It's up to the teacher. We have a very veteran faculty, whom I trust very much. (Bernstein)

The one arena in which teachers have less autonomy are the tracked morning classes. Says Levy:

In terms of Talmud, we decide as a Talmud faculty what the subject matter is, and everyone is studying, broadly speaking, the same material, but there is still a lot of wiggle room for different levels to make sure that they're pitched appropriately between the four or five different Talmud levels among the students.

At Hadar, explains Weiss:

We have certain prakim [chapters] that we've done before, so sometimes we'll cycle them in and out. We're always trying to hit the perfect medium between not constantly recreating the wheel and sometimes teaching old material, but also not feeling like faculty are just teaching the same thing over and they never get to do any preparation and they never get to expand to new prakim. We're always trying to strike a good balance between not having constant novelty, which is a tremendous amount of hard work, and also not just trudging through the same three chapters again and again and again.

One pragmatic implication of the policy of having students across tracks studying the same material is the possibility for an inter-track conversation to take place across the community. Tucker, reflecting on the idea of a student-oriented and student-generated curriculum with individual learning goals, says that one major obstacle to such a setup is the desire to be “a yeshiva that’s learning a masekhet.”
Since former Rosh Yeshiva Daniel Landes left Pardes, their Talmud and Chumash classes have stopped coordinating on materials. Hammer-Kossoy explains that some masekhtot are more naturally suited to beginner students, while advanced students want to tackle others, and teachers are enjoying the freedom to teach what they’re passionate about. Similarly, higher-level Chumash classes have begun to break away from the two-year Genesis-Exodus cycle.

While some afternoon classes are necessarily thematic, there’s a consensus among the Conservative Yeshiva, Hadar, and Pardes that learning should ideally proceed page by page through the classical Jewish texts. “We basically learn in order…” says Tucker, “That itself is a kind of an ideological move; the goal of what we’re doing here is to make ourselves subservient to the text, and to learn it, not to cherry-pick the parts of it that are meaningful to us.” Bernstein offers a similar rationale:

The morning classes are mostly learning b’sefer b’seder, they’re going according to the book. They’re studying sefer bereishit [Genesis], they start at perek aleph [chapter one] and they start moving. Or they’re studying masekhet Sanhedrin, they begin a certain perek and they learn through the perek. And there’s a value in that because that is the way to gain skills. That’s the way to understand what the texts are really about, not to cherry-pick all of the nice pieces. Not to say: “oh, we’re not going to deal with the boring pieces; we’re not going to deal with the uncomfortable pieces.” We’re not going to edit them out.

The exception to this rule at Pardes is the “Text & Today” track, geared towards students with the least textual knowledge, which Hammer-Kossoy characterizes as “trying to survey the entirety of the Chumash over the course of the school year. They're doing the greatest hits. They're not trying to read every page, but they're doing great stories.”

At Hadar, Tucker acknowledges the difficulty of teaching challenging material such as texts which advocate persecution of homosexuals but leans towards the belief that “once you have people for a year, everyone’s got to be able to trust each other and know each other, and then you have a follow-up conversation if you need to…. You should, in theory, be able to teach
 anything.” Weiss agrees that it is important to address these texts rather than avoid them where possible:

> It's very hard to really teach Jewish text honestly without confronting texts that have a different understanding of women's role in society than we do.... Every teacher has a different strategy around this. I think that it's definitely the case that for some students, one approach is better, and for some students, another approach is better. We definitely don't ignore it, and I think that's really the most important and sort of most unifying feature, is that we don't pretend that these texts think about women the same way that we do. We really do set aside time to have those conversations, name the difficulties in texts. There are some teachers who are very skilled at pausing and taking a lot of time to have those conversations and working the through. Personally, I'm the kind of teacher that does a good job at naming and making light of those situations and trying not to get bogged down by the pain and trying to move a little bit past it. Then I frequently will teach about how one maintains a religious attitude while dealing with difficult texts. Really, we're always trying to make sure that there are enough orientations and enough different approaches so that students will be able to find the time or the role model or the viewpoint that works for them.

For Weiss, there is no one-size-fits-all approach for dealing with challenging texts, but not dealing with them is not an option.

> Asked about the organization of texts encountered in a Talmud class at SVARA’s full-time program, Lappe explains:

> It's definitely not thematically, and they definitely don't go straight through a masekhet or a seder. It's sugya to sugya... and as their learning progresses, they’re getting into more Rashis, they’re getting into tosefot, they’re getting into rishonim as they’re getting more comfortable with the gemara itself.

In contrast to the other coed yeshivot, where students typically learn a text in order, Lappe is not opposed to cherry-picking. The sugiot that the SVARA faculty teach are connected by the motif of radical rabbinic innovation. Lappe describes the makings of a good SVARA sugya:

> We choose texts first off that foreground and make very apparent to the learner the project of radical innovation that the rabbis are engaged in, so that they can realize that the kinds of radical innovation necessary today are not things that either need to be abandoned because they're not legit, or that need to be done from the outside or that casts one as illegitimate. I want the students to see that the rabbis are smart, sophisticated, courageous, that they are using their svara, so that the student can see: “Oh my God, they're really just like me, because I have the same problem with Torah” or “I have other problems, but now that I see how they dealt with the problems they
had, I can use the same tools and mechanisms to deal with the problems I have, and I now have a new option. I don’t have a take-it-or-leave-it, I now have a ‘now I can fix it’ option.”

I want the students to see that the tradition is natively radical and willing to prioritize one’s own svara even over Torah. So the rabbis overturning Torah, that’s a home run. In a text, if they cite svara as their source, that’s a grand slam.

Lappe believes that an expert such as David Kraemer can identify the application of svara on any page of the Talmud. However, she and the SVARA faculty will cherry-pick sources, thereby stewarding the students educational journey while sacrificing breadth in favor of depth.

Intriguingly, when it comes to challenging texts, Lappe takes a more cautious approach than her counterparts at the other coed yeshivot:

In the full-time program, I’m not gonna spend my first year with a text where the rabbis are talking about sex with three-year old girls. I’m not gonna teach that in the first year. I want them to see the rabbis as good guys, and I think they were good guys, before I really raise up and shine a light on the ways that we might be profoundly disappointed in them. I try to help my students see that there’s no reason to think that they were feminist or egalitarian or share a lot of our values, so I don’t think it’s fair to judge them on the extent to which they’re not feminist, et cetera. But yet it’s not gonna be my first go to place until they really trust these guys and trust the tradition and have seen them already kind of at their best in terms of the degree to which we can relate to them and are not repulsed by their choices. Then I’m gonna [let students] be repulsed by their choices, and I’m gonna frame those problematic texts as being in the Talmud in the first place because they’re problematic.

SVARA’s uneasiness with texts that paint the rabbis in a highly unfavorable light reveals an interesting quirk: on the one hand, the decision to study sugiot out of context is highly untraditional, but on the other hand, there is a deep traditionalism underlying Lappe’s desire to help students fall in love with the rabbis, and with the rabbinic project.

Comparing this approach with those used by the other institutions, we see a tension between the desire to trust students to make positive meaning out of challenging texts, and the fear that the ideas in those texts may have a damaging impact on their relationship with the entire genre or canon. The unifying factor between these motivations is the implicit desire that
students should ultimately come to feel ownership over these texts, both in order to fully celebrate the good and fully grapple with the bad and the ugly.

Conclusion

A variety of rationales are employed to justify Talmud’s prominence as the primary subject area for study at the coed yeshivot which, other than Chumash at Pardes, occupies twice as much study time as any other subject area on the active year programs. Pardes is also distinctive in moving away from the model of having students across ability levels studying the same texts in order to cultivate an inter-track conversation. SVARA emerges as having the most divergent approach to subject material, based on the philosophy of a shrinking Jewish canon and the careful selection of texts which highlight the role of svara in the rabbinic project.
Chapter Five: Ideas about Teachers and Teaching

“They have to be great teachers. Not good teachers, great teachers. I’ve had to let good teachers go.”

– David Bernstein, Pardes

What characterizes good pedagogy?

Multiple interviewees mentioned the idea that good teaching should challenge students. Kulp, for instance, says:

Classes are meant to challenge students and make them think about the material that they're learning, to make them difficult for them in a sense, you know. The difficulty could depend on the class, but classes shouldn't be spoon-feeding information. They should be difficult challenges, trying to figure out what these texts are talking about, what they did mean, why are they saying what they have to say...

The best teaching, I think, is when students are challenged, material is challenging... And good teaching makes students feel like they're progressing and feeling good about themselves. Students should feel like it's hard but they're learning, right? If they feel that it's too easy, then, "What's the point? What do I need this for? I can just learn it on my own." If it's too hard, and they're not getting anything, then also, what's the point? You're not learning anything. So, it's hard to find that balance.

This principle is known as the zone of proximal development, developed by Lev Vygotsky\textsuperscript{21} and associated with the category of flow (or growth) experiences in which participants develop skills and strategies through completing moderately challenging tasks with some guidance, support, and/or scaffolding. Although some interviewees did mention coverage and competencies as

educational targets, the overwhelming trend was in favor of student growth as the measure of success.

A key feature of learning in the zone of proximal development is educational scaffolding. For instance, Talmud classes often begin with a short introductory gathering in which faculty introduce key concepts. Says Levy: “The introductory session is really about setting up the students to access the material and to facilitate that, so it doesn’t become too frustrating.”

Some teachers distribute word banks to beginner-level students, although this practice is frowned upon at SVARA, where there is significant emphasis on learning how to use standard learning resources. Says Gomery: “Students are learning off the daf [page] directly. Everyone is learning with the Jastrow [dictionary] and a Frank dictionary. Everyone is studying in hevruta. All hevruta [pairings] have two sets of dictionaries, two sets of texts.”

One challenge for teachers, mentioned by Weiss, is providing the appropriate level of scaffolding for classes comprised of learners at a variety of levels. The faculty at SVARA take a somewhat novel approach to this challenge, providing the same material to students of all levels, with the understanding that advanced students will cover more ground than beginners. “You get through as much text as you can get through,” explains Gomery, “so some people will see everything, some people will see three words. That is hevruta.”

Hevruta is one of four steps in the SVARA method of Talmud study, alongside shiur, hazara, and recitation, with each stage heavily standardized. Gomery describes the structure of the second step, shiur:

You come to shiur all together as a group and unpack and decode the text. The way we do shiur is we have a reader who reads through the text in the original and vocalizing it for us as best we can. We correct vocalizations and then our students have to make an inside translation and an outside translation of the text. The inside translation is hyper-literal, very precise and exact....
Every single letter and every element of a word is accounted for in a hyper-literal inside translation, and then the outside translation you say it in comprehensive flowing English. Then we read through the text altogether vocalizing, inside and outside translation. The students do the reading, the teacher corrects, and we discuss and unpack and make sense of it altogether. That’s the second step. Then you go back to hevruta for hazara.

Curiously, SVARA, which is the least prescriptive of the institutions in terms of religious observance, is the most prescriptive in terms of its systematic learning process. Says Gomery: “It’s extremely demanding. We hold our students to a very, very, very high level of rigor in their learning.” In his 2005 paper, “Vision and the Problem of Purity,” Barry Holtz postulates that “there need to be opportunities for loners and good-hearted lunatics in every institution.”22 One wonders about which types of students are put off by these different varieties of prescriptivism, and do not find a place in the system.

SVARA may be the most demanding on their students, but each of the institutions places value on the careful translation of text. I asked interviewees what would concern them to see a teacher do or say in their institution, and many emphasized the importance of distinguishing between technical errors in translation and legitimate variance in interpretation. Bernstein makes this point through a reference to a midrash from Bamidbar Rabbah:

[I would be concerned] if a teacher would be closed to alternative reading of a text that actually makes sense... I very much want teachers to be closed to readings of the text that make no sense, like, a student misinterprets a word and then goes off on a tangent explaining that the text means X when it's just a product of their misinterpreting a word. So, that is what we call in pedagogic parlance, wrong.... I like to say there are seventy faces of Torah. But there aren’t seventy-one. Seventy-first is not right, it's just wrong, it's just somebody made a mistake. But there are seventy ways to interpret Torah, so it's important for people to see multiple ways of understanding Torah. And every generation has a new way of looking at Torah and I think at Pardes we feel it’s very important to both see how the rabbis themselves disagreed in their interpretation of Torah and that’s a model for us, that’s what we should be doing as well. But having said that, sometimes people just make a mistake and it’s important to point that out and not to gloss over it and make believe that that’s also good.

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Kulp emphasizes the challenge of making technical corrections without embarrassing or disempowering the student:

It would concern me if a teacher belittled a student, made a student feel bad, stupid. And it's hard, because sometimes you want to say: "Your interpretation, you just didn't understand the word." You don't want to say, "You translated the word this way. That's really great. I love that interpretation." If it's wrong... the person needs to learn...

I think that it would concern me also, in any of our discussions, for teachers not to at least have respect for their students' diversity of opinions. I think that probably a lot of times we need to have conversations where we listen to each other and we don't turn it into a debate. That's hard to do.

From this testimony we see widespread concerns for accuracy and for student empowerment, which come to a head when a student mistranslates a text. Interviewees concurred that ultimately errors should always be corrected, since this is in the long-term interests of student skills-building and empowerment, but many acknowledged the importance of calling out mistakes without causing embarrassment to the student.

Multiple interviewees highlighted the teacher's role as empowering facilitator. Weiss feels that “a very good lesson is also a very well-structured lesson, where the students feel like they're participating and they're generating most of the ideas that are happening in the class, but the teacher is guiding the conversation.” Levy describes a structure which involves both student-generated discussion and frontal presentation:

There is the layer of the students themselves presenting what they've encountered, which is important. It's not just a top down presentation, it's a bottom up presentation. The students themselves need to feed back and to reflect on what they've learnt. The sharing is about hearing multiple voices. There is an assumption, not that everything goes, but [that] different readings, variant readings of the text are encouraged and held. What are the variant readings of this text? Where are the ambiguities of this text? To hear different voices for that.

Then I think it's important for teachers to be able to... present approaches, cross fertilization of other ideas from other areas of Jewish thought, variant readings or girsa'ot of the text – to be able to teach something, which goes beyond what the students themselves were capable of gaining on that material. Then I think it's crucial for the students themselves to be accommodating that material and thinking about that material and working out what it means to them.
Here, and elsewhere, Levy stresses the importance at the Conservative Yeshiva of ensuring that “student reflection and processing is part of the discourse”:

For me, [great pedagogy] would be the ability to transmit the depth of the textual tradition, including its ambiguity, and to be able to transmit that with pathos. When you teach a text, for the text to then become a vehicle for the student to really work deep stuff through in the text and for themselves, and for the text to become the locus of that. [A teacher should be] someone who has really climbed inside the text for themselves and for whom the text is that locus of those deep conversations, and someone who knows how to transmit that experience to other people, so that a student can experience for themselves how one can have depth conversations through classical Jewish sources.

The emphasis on reflection and processing is consistent with the commitment to meaning-making as a key component of human flourishing, shared by each of the institutions, which we saw in chapter three.

In particular, Hadar leaders highlighted the need for classroom management to ensure that all students are participating in and benefitting from group discussions. In Weiss’ role as Rosh Beit Midrash, she prioritizes working with teachers and students to ensure that conversations feel safe and constructive:

I would be concerned if there were very bad classroom dynamics, unhealthy classroom dynamics, and the teacher was either unaware of them or aware of them and abdicating responsibility. ... In any given class, there are always going to be students that participate more or participate less. If you are a teacher that never notices that you have two students that never raise their hands or one student who totally dominates the conversation, and you don't speak to the students that don't raise their hand and say, "How are you doing in class? Do you feel comfortable?" or if you don't feel in control of the class and have to tell the person who's talking over everyone that they need to stop, you're not serving your role as the teacher. ... I feel like a safe learning environment is critically important, and it's up to the teacher to provide that.

Tucker agrees, and notes that “there’s different styles around regulating people. Do they need to raise their hand or not? ... It’s not just a free-for-all for the most vocal folks to take over, so there’s meaningful classroom management from teachers in that regard, to make sure people are all jumping in.”
In this section, we have seen broad consensus on the characteristics of good pedagogy: the thoughtful selection of material and provision of scaffolding, the eliciting and correction of a sound technical understanding of the text, and the facilitation of deep meaning-making which brings students into conversation with multiple perspectives. One imagines that faculty at Hadar, Pardes, and the Conservative Yeshiva would not be pedagogically out of place in one another’s classrooms. (Indeed, the latter two do share some part-time faculty.) SVARA is the odd one out not because they don’t value these elements, but because while other institutions allow their faculty more autonomy, SVARA’s clarity of method makes for an especially rigid and rigorous learning process.

What else characterizes a good teacher?

Interviewees were unanimous that, in addition to being excellent pedagogues, faculty must be committed to the broad mission of the institution. In Tucker’s words: “We demand of our faculty that they not just be people who can teach things, but that they model things and that they, just in an organic way, are what we’re teaching.” There is a sense at the coed yeshivot not only that the medium is the message, but that the messenger is the message. Tucker continues:

There's any number of things that would make someone an inappropriate faculty member at Hadar, but it would be like, self-evident. ... Someone who doesn't observe Shabbat: they're out – not because we're on some witch hunt against people who don't observe Shabbat, but like we're building a community that has shmirat mitzvot as its core, and that person's not doing that, and they can't fully model that. Similarly, someone who thinks it's forbidden to daven in an egalitarian minyan. They can't model that.

Similar ideas permeate each of the institutions:

What we look for in faculty is obviously commitment to our core values. We’re also looking for people who can be religious role models. (Weiss)
We’re looking for someone who has done the work, someone who leads a life which is committed and egalitarian. Someone who actually walks the walk and talks the talk. Someone who has gone on a journey towards internalizing Jewish praxis for themselves, not necessarily according to Conservative halakha, but going on a journey to have a life of Jewish commitments, of deep commitments together with serious learning. ... We’re an egalitarian institution and we want our teachers to also be happy to dive in, in a space like that, and not just tolerate it, but actively pursue it in their own lives. (Levy)

We want our teachers to believe in our mission. ... We could go hire all-star teachers from around Jerusalem... but they're guns for hire, right? And they don’t believe in what we’re doing. Maybe they don't hate what we're doing, but it's not their thing. (Kulp)

They have to fit into our mission. If they are intolerant or have too clear of an agenda of where they want the students to be, then those are things that make them unfit to teach at Pardes. (Bernstein)

Basically, we realized we have to have homegrown teachers. (Lappe)

Here the position of SVARA is slightly different because their ambivalence around religious behaviors precludes the possibility of a religious role model in the traditional sense (although Lappe does believe in the importance of spiritual practice for teachers: “It helps them be more centered human beings, and able to sort out what’s going on between them and their students... but I have no investment as to whether that’s meditation or shaharit or whatever...”). Instead, Lappe casts SVARA teachers in the role of empowering symbol:

I think ideally the teacher should be the queerest person in the room. ... I think the teacher should always be a kal v’homer to every student in the room. In other words, every student ought to be able to look at that teacher and go, "Oh my God, if you are in love with the rabbis, if you think this is valuable... then I can too."

This is indicative of the idea that students should strive to be like their teachers – not in the sense that they should become more queer, but rather that they should share their love for the rabbinic project and perhaps even hope to emulate them.

The other idea which emerged repeatedly is that teachers should have an exceptional level of textual knowledge:
When I look for teachers, first of all, they have to be scholars in their field. They have to be excellent in what they’re teaching. They have to know their stuff very well. (Bernstein)

We would be looking for someone who was a real master of the textual tradition. (Levy)

We’re also obviously looking for people that are Jewishly knowledgeable and very engaged teachers. (Weiss)

The exception to this rule is again SVARA. Gomery describes an alternative vision of teaching:

A faculty member needs to be constantly studying, and learning with their students, and carrying humility into the space: “I'm not an expert apart from my students. I learn alongside them.”

This ideal of the teacher as co-learner is a direct response to the model of teacher as scholar prevalent among the other institutions. Lappe explains:

In some learning contexts, particularly text study, and particularly Talmud study, and particularly serious learning places, the person in the front of the room is the scholar. And that person models a human being that very few of the students will ever be able to become. And since one of the primary goals of our project is empowerment, that works at odds with the goal of empowerment. I will never have a teacher at SVARA who's the Talmud scholar that no student will ever become, because that teacher is going to be fundamentally disempowering to the student. I don't want the student going, "Oh my God, my teacher is so amazing. I could never be that." I want the student to look at the teacher and go, "Yeah, I could be that." And the way we do that is by being in an authentic co-learning relationship with the student. At SVARA the teacher is essentially in a hevruta relationship with the class.

And it's not just... like, all teachers say that. All teachers say, "I always learn from my students." But I'm serious... I'm not trying to be the scholar. I started learning Torah at 31. I'll never be that, and that's not what I can bring to the world. I cannot bring to the world an encyclopedic knowledge of Talmud or ... That's not my deal. But on my good days, I'm a good teacher.

For Lappe, reducing the distance between student and teacher is paramount because she is invested in turning students into teachers – ideally teachers who share her educational approach.

Embedded in this approach is a critique of the idea that scholars are appropriate role models for students who are not aspiring scholars. If educational institutions want students who are looking to build skills and make meaning through Torah study, then they should provide teachers who are pedagogues who are engaged in meaning-making. By employing a faculty of scholars, we risk teaching students that the only way to make meaning is to become an expert,
which does a disservice to the masses of educated Jews across the full range of professions. Perhaps there is an interesting parallel to be drawn between Lappe’s critique of the scholar-as-teacher and Levisohn’s critique of Fox’s trickle-down vision. Neither of them is satisfied with the idea that “if you start with cognac, you will be lucky to end up with grape juice.”23 Just as Levisohn postulates that vision and practice are mutually causative, Lappe holds that teachers and students should meaningfully impact one another.

Finally, there was a general acknowledgement that a good teacher should invest in their relationship with their students. Cumulatively, the interviewees painted a rich portrait of teachers who are:

- empathetic and able to really listen and understand complex student issues, and will be able to be pastorally valuable on the team (Weiss)
- get[ting] to know the students very personally (Kulp)
- prepared to take students into their lives and mentor those students (Levy)
- seeing each student as they are and loving each student and helping them through their particular journey (Hammer-Kossoy)
- transparent, vulnerable, loving, really care about the student, and actually love the student. I don't believe you can teach students that you can't love. (Lappe)

As asked to share an educational highlight from her time at Hadar, Weiss recollected an episode in which her students had asked for clarification on a metaphor she frequently employed but that they didn’t understand:

It was also very meaningful for me as a teacher to know that my students felt comfortable enough with me to say, "You've been using this pedagogical strategy, this metaphor, over and over and over, and you think it's great, and you think it's really helping us, but we feel comfortable enough with you to say "it's not helping us, it's not good... and we trust you to help us unpack it, and get us to a place where we'll understand." That was a real highlight for me from this year.

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Anecdotes such as these indicate that the ability to form strong interpersonal relationships is critical for good teaching to occur.

In summary, the coed yeshivot all want teachers who are excellent pedagogues, role models of their core values, and invested in relationship-building. But whereas Hadar, Pardes, and the Conservative Yeshiva aspire to employ scholars, SVARA prefers queer learners who are just one or two steps ahead of their students.

Is faculty diversity important?

Although interviewees spoke highly of their colleagues without exception, there were some concerns expressed about their faculty as a collective. At Pardes, for instance, the proportion of Orthodox teachers is much higher than that of the student body, and at the Conservative Yeshiva there is only one woman (out of five) on the full-time faculty.

One trope which emerged from Kulp’s ruminations on teachers and teaching was the ideal of a diverse faculty, especially along the axes of gender, geography, and political outlook:

I think it's important to keep a balance in the genders of the faculty. We hired a few new teachers this year, and most of them are part-time, but they were all women, because we don't have as many women on staff. ...

It would be nice to bring in other people with backgrounds from other parts of the Jewish world, too... It’s good not to be too America-centric.

I’d like to see some right-wing people on staff... since most of the faculty is pretty left-wing... you know, students who feel right-wing should feel like they have a cogent intellectual voice to help support them inside the Yeshiva, so they don’t feel chased away or alienated.

This position is consistent with Levy’s concern about the damage caused when “you have religious role models that you know aren’t like you”. If the Conservative Yeshiva’s faculty
represent the full range of the egalitarian community, then it should always be possible for their students to find an appropriate role model.

At SVARA, there are presently four teaching faculty, of whom Gomery says two “are female-identified cis-gendered and two are transgender male-identified or masculine-of-center.” Lappe has ambitious goals for faculty diversity, though she is naturally disinterested in teachers who lack fringe experiences:

I want the faculty to represent, to model, to be people who are not all able-bodied and cis-gendered, and no one in the front of the room at SVARA is ever heterosexual. That’s just a given. I want them to not all be white, and I want them to not all be born Jewish, and I’d be really excited to have someone who’s not even Jewish. I think that'd be really interesting. I want people who just learned their aleph-bet. Not just, but started out their learning as adults learning aleph-bet. Not just people who went to yeshiva as kids or went to day school and then some Jewish summer camp, and then the Hillel, and then they got their PhD in Talmud. Those people I'm not particularly interested in.

Gomery puts this into the context of empowerment: “We are invested in our students seeing themselves in us. We're invested in our students explicitly feeling if they want to that they are on a path toward leadership that they can see and understand.”

When I asked leaders at Hadar and Pardes whether their institutions were interested in faculty diversity, the answers made it clear that this was not a high priority:

I think everyone wants the faculty to be further diverse, but it's not so simple to diversify the faculty as it sounds. Certainly, you’re not gonna fire me for being Orthodox! ... There's not that many liberal Jews who are qualified, and there's a lot of competition for them... They want to teach other places. (Hammer-Kossoy)

In Jerusalem, finding outstanding, non-Orthodox people who fit all the criteria I mentioned and are willing to work at Pardes as opposed to the university is not so easy. We have succeeded in some cases. We are very happy with that and we just hired a new President of Pardes, who was a Reform rabbi, and I think that that says something about our institutional values. But I'm not willing to compromise on our high standards of scholarship and teaching and involvement of students. If I just hire somebody because they'll be some kind of token role model, those token role models generally don't earn the admiration of the student body. (Bernstein)

We definitely do have, and have had in the past, faculty that are queer identified and obviously staff that are queer identified. But... the demographic reflection is pretty natural, like the
The coed yeshivot characterize good pedagogy as selecting appropriate material, providing appropriate scaffolding, correcting technical errors, and engaging students in a reflective process. SVARA’s pedagogical method is a powerful animating force which is deeply connected to a vision of the teacher as learner. These features set SVARA aside from the other
institutions, who have otherwise similar criteria for the ideal faculty member. The value of faculty diversity is acknowledged by each institution but taken more seriously by some than others.
Chapter Six: Ideas about Learners and Learning

“We’re looking to invest in people who are, in one way or another, going to have an impact on creating the communities that the institution is set up to advance.”

– Ethan Tucker, Hadar

Who should learn?

One important precondition for good learning is having the right students in the room. Interviewees agreed that among the first characteristics they look for in potential students is self-motivation. Says Gomery, “it’s adults and it’s elective and you have to opt in.” Asked about the ideal candidate, responses included:

Someone who wants to do this thing – that is the primary thing that we’re looking for. We’re looking for volition. The good students are the ones who you don’t have to recruit, the ones who come to you because they say, "You’re what I’m looking for." The majority of recruiting is like that. The majority of recruiting, I think, is where you say who you are and then someone says, "That sounds great, I’ve been looking for that and I would be very excited to be amongst a community of people who are doing that stuff. I believe in the project and I buy into what the vision is." (Levy)

We are looking for alignment in terms of Hadar's core commitment. I would say full alignment is not really a top priority so much as interest and investment, I think, is much more important to us than ideological clones. (Weiss)

The process is really very self-selective. We’re not interested in having the elite students. We’re interested in opening the doors of Torah study as wide as possible, so if somebody wants to come and study Torah at Pardes, generally, we’re happy to accept them. (Bernstein)

We try to be very provocative and edgy partly to scare away... People who are embarrassed or scandalized by our messaging are precisely the people we don’t want in the room in the first place. So we’re really trying to get people in the room who are gonna be part of what I call option three, part of a disruptive project. (Lappe)
These stances differ in their commitment to inclusion and the level of alignment they want from their students but concur on the importance of student motivation.

Some interviewees emphasized that motivation is not only a matter of believing in the institution’s project, but of committing to a demanding and immersive learning schedule. Tucker, for example, says that the ideal candidate for Yeshivat Hadar programs must be willing to spend all day learning. Weiss expands on this point:

I would say in terms of who we’re looking for, we’re looking for people who are excited about and can handle an extremely rigorous schedule. Tefilla begins at 7:45am four out of five days a week, and, especially during the summer, there are going to be two, sometimes three late nights that go until 9:00pm. It's really not a program for people who are [thinking]: "I would like to dip my toe into this. I might be fun."... We do need to find people who can handle an extremely difficult, really rigorous program that is not going to get them a degree. It’s not like you're a [student] doctor and you're in residency, and you know that when you’re done you'll be a doctor. You’re going to be putting in these twelve-hour days and when you come out, you're going to have put in twelve-hour days with not really much more than your love of Torah to show for it. We really do have to check for that.

Gomery characterizes the learning experience at SVARA as “extremely demanding,” noting that “the rigor of it doesn’t work for everyone and you have to really want to be there... I don’t think that we think that everybody should be doing this.”

Levy agrees that Conservative Yeshiva students should “be able to cope with the intensity of the experience,” and he adds:

We need people of a certain intellectual caliber... Almost all the students have had tertiary education, although that's not always the case, but sometimes it is hard for students who don't have a certain educational background.

Reading between the lines, it seems that the key point here is that students are more likely to thrive if they have already learned how to learn in an academic setting.

Incoming students are often encouraged to prepare by attending a Hebrew ulpan or otherwise making an effort to learn the language, although only the Conservative Yeshiva
currently offers classes in modern Hebrew as part of the curriculum. Often, Hebrew level is the primary consideration for dividing students into tracks for core text classes, or into learning pairs for *hevruta* study.

**How should learners prepare to learn?**

One way in which the learning process at SVARA is distinctive is the framing of every learning session with ritual. Before anybody looks at a text, says Lappe, “there would be a *niggun* [wordless chant].” She continues:

> We’re getting a little bit into the soft element around the nuts and bolts, but we start out by setting the mood, then there are dedications. Dedications are a really important part of getting the learner to be emotionally present, and transparent, and vulnerable, and sharing a little bit about something from their life. They’re going to dedicate their learning to someone in their life who may be ill, in whose memory or in whose honor they’re learning, someone who is just thrilled to know they were learning. So it’s a very emotional part. We give it a lot of time. We sometimes spend 20 minutes on dedications in a three-hour block. Then comes the *brakha* [blessing] for learning. Then the teacher at the front of the room is going to pre-teach maybe some halachic concept or term or context that’s relevant to the *sugya* before setting off the students into *hevruta*.

The idea that good learning requires emotional presence is powerful and connects to other ideas that we have already encountered, including that relationship building and meaning-making are key to the educational process. This is consistent with Lappe’s idea that Talmud study is primarily a spiritual practice:

> I take the idea of *derekh hashas* very seriously – the idea that learning Talmud is a way to develop ourselves spiritually and come closer to God. There's a big emphasis on the experience of the learning at SVARA, not just on the content. The content is actually icing on the cake, but it's not what we’re primarily shooting for.

None of the other coed yeshivot ritualize their learning in this way; each of them encourages (or in Hadar’s case, requires) students to attend *shaḥarit* (morning prayer) before classes begin but
none of their interviewees suggested explicitly that learning should be framed by spiritual practice.

SVARA’s approach to framing the learning process (which also involves concluding with the *kaddish derabbanan*) adds emotional presence to the educational scaffolding that was seen across the institutions in chapter five, and introduces the idea that encountering a text requires both emotional as well as rational preparation.

**Why study in ḥevruta?**

Studying in ḥevruta is a widespread practice at the coed yeshivot, which typically takes up around half of the time that the student spends learning. Students will study texts in pairs in the *beit midrash* while faculty make themselves available to help when needed or make other types of intervention. Interviewees suggested three primary utilitarian justifications for the prominence of this technique – skills-building, meaning-making, and supportive relationships – which also occurred in a trio in our exploration of community in chapter three.

While discussing ḥevruta, Weiss mentions a Talmudic passage from Ta’anit 7a:

Rabbi Ḥama son of Rabbi Ḥanina said: ‘What is the meaning of the verse “Iron sharpens iron; and a person sharpens his friend” (Proverbs 27:17)?’ This is to teach you that just as one iron sharpens another, so too do two students of Torah sharpen one another in learning.

The key idea here is that during ḥevruta learning, both partners benefit from the interaction and become more competent learners. Framing ḥevruta as a skills-building exercise, Kulp says that “there’s a positive value to figuring it out yourself, without a teacher there, with a ḥevruta. If a teacher interrupts too much, then the students don’t get to go through that figuring it out
process, taking wrong turns, making right turns, everything. So there needs to be some time for
that.”

At SVARA, the hevruta process of decoding a text is especially systematic:

The students are working one word at a time, looking up each word in the dictionary, finding its
root, identifying prefixes, suffixes, infixes to whatever extent they're able based on their Hebrew
level. They're identifying up to fifteen things about each word, including the language it's in, the
binyan [verb structure], the voice, the tense, the person, gender, number, and so on. And they
work that way one word at a time through the assigned material, which tends to be about two
lines of Talmud per three-hour block. (Lappe)

After shiur, students do hazara – returning to the text they have learned with their hevruta partner and
memorizing it:

Now they're reading in a step-by-step method. The one with higher Hebrew skill starts first. The
other student goes to school on them, and that person is going to be translating inside, outside,
and explaining out every single word of these two lines. Then they switch, the other person does
it, when one makes a mistake the other corrects them, they're referring to their notes. Then the
first person takes a turn again and closes their masekhet and now their molecules and the text
molecules are going to come together in this process of memorization – they're going to recite
out the text from memory, and they're using this memorization as a diagnostic tool to help them
see where they didn't really understand the text. The ultimate goal is not that they have the text
memorized, it's that they have this deep ownership of the text which the memorization process
helps... When I can recite the entire thing through and I've memorized it, I've owned it. (Lappe)

Here the role of the hevruta partner is critical to the learning process, each student sharpening
their partner’s iron.

As students build the technical skills, through hevruta study, to accurately translate and
understand a text, notes Bernstein, they become increasingly capable of continuing the learning
process without the assistance of a teacher:

If we only gave lectures it would be wonderful, our teachers are wonderful lecturers. It would be
fascinating, interesting. Students would gain a lot of knowledge, [but] they would gain very little
in the way of skills. We want them to gain the skills to become more independent learners and to
gain more self-confidence looking at the classical Jewish texts.

Levy expands on this idea:
Hevruta is important because it's dialogical and because it's horizontal, as opposed to vertical. Students of the same level and capacity are learning together, and I have no doubt that the conversations that are taking place in that horizontal framework are more important to the student than the vertical stuff that takes place in class, where there is something being imparted top down. That is a precious space. What you're there really imparting is the culture of learning itself. We do hope that students will come out of the institution having acquired the taste for hevruta and the taste for the religious act of learning, the act of learning itself, as being of value. Having spent many hundreds of hours during the course of their year doing that, I think it would be natural if that had rubbed off, that they had fallen in love with that horizontal experience of simply opening Jewish sources with a friend and immersing oneself as a religious act.

"If it was all top down," Levy says later, "then there would be some kind of assumption that you have to be at the yeshiva in order to do this... you wouldn't want your top down teaching to create some sort of sense amongst the students that the only place to learn Torah is with a teacher." In other words, hevruta study is a means to the end of building technical skills, which in turn is a means to the end of taking the culture of learning beyond the limits of the program and the beit midrash.

A second practical rationale for hevruta study is the opportunity it affords students to encounter a text and begin the process of meaning-making without the interference of a teacher. Hevruta, says Bernstein, "is where the student actually confronts the text unmediated without a teacher. It's where the student develops skills. It's where the students are able to figure out meaning – decoding, but also meaning-making – and figuring out, what does this mean to me?"

According to this approach, the dialogical aspect of hevruta study provides ideal conditions for students to articulate and refine their response to a text, which in turn makes for a richer discussion during class. Much of this is articulated by Weiss:

I also see from my own experience as a learner, studying hevruta is more fun and more engaging than learning just when it's by yourself and the text. Sometimes you do lose a little bit on, let's say, efficiency – it's often more efficient to learn by yourself – but it's usually less fun and less deep than learning with the right hevruta. Yeah, and I think that people's knowledge spaces are different, and people's learning styles are different, and they'll just see something else. I think that a student who prepares a text in hevruta already is trying to have a good conversation about
it... you've already started to have the conversation, so the thoughts are a little bit more ready [in *shiur*] – they're more at your fingertips... I do think that it's easier to elicit conversation when people feel like the *shiur* is part of the continuing conversation.

One element added here is the value of studying with a *hevruta* partner who brings different knowledge and experience, and a different world view to the table, which enhances the meaning-making process. The process may involve *mahloket leshem shamayim*, as described in chapter three.

This connects to the third practical rationale: supportive relationships. In the same way that strong interpersonal relationships both arise from community and facilitate human flourishing, so too supportive relationships are at once a means to the end of, and the product of, a successful *hevruta*. Across the institutions there was a shared idea that learning with the same *hevruta* partner, building a relationship over the course of a semester or year, was significantly beneficial to the learning process, such that the learning of students who failed to establish a regular *hevruta* relationship tended to suffer. Bernstein, for example, says that “there’s a value to the continuity of learning with somebody. You learn each other’s pace. You learn each other’s way of doing things. You don’t have to start again with somebody.”

At Hadar, Weiss appreciates the value of an invested *hevruta* relationship:

It [*hevruta*] also allows you to have your personal relationship, having someone to check in with, having someone who feels responsible to you, and then whom you feel responsible to also. I think is a core part of the learning. Texts are not only about words; they’re also about people. Having a person through whom you’re reading the text is extremely useful, and having it be the same person allows that relationship to be more deep than it would be if you were just always going on first dates over and over and over again.

The idea of *hevruta* partners being mutually responsible for one another is especially prevalent at SVARA, where learners rely on each other in the memorization process:

As soon as they start reciting out and they make a mistake, their *hevruta* who's looking at the text and monitoring them gives them the word they made a mistake on. If I say “*ma’akhilim*” and it's
ma’akhil, my partner’s gonna go, "ma’akhil," and send me back to the beginning, and I'm gonna recite again from the very top until I get to that place where I made the mistake, and I’m gonna get it right, then I'm gonna move forward. As soon as I make a mistake on another word, my partner tells me the right word, sends me back to the beginning. (Lappe)

We teach this thing at SVARA that you are always responsible for your hevruta's learning and your hevruta is responsible for yours. If I recite well, it actually reflects better on my hevruta than on me, because it means that my hevruta is accountable to me and has supported me to be able to learn. (Gomery)

At its best, a hevruta relationship deeply enhances the learning of both partners.

At Hadar, Weiss learns with students before the Year Program begins to get a sense of both their skill level and their learning style, in order to assign them into classes and hevruta pairings. Among the things she is looking for are:

personality – Are you a yeller? Do you have a sense of humor? Are you someone who's a little bit more reticent and need a hevruta who's more patient? I'm also looking at things like... speed – There are some people who are sort of very quick, and they need a hevruta who can either keep up with their speed or actually slow them down... There's also people who really want to go and parse every single word, they are grammar-philes... Some people, if they don't have a hevruta who's willing to talk about the big idea, they're going to be really frustrated. I’m trying to get a sense of that early on to see who’s going to be a good pair, either because they're similar, and therefore their needs are aligned, or because they can really complement each other, and in that way, their needs will be aligned.

Faculty at other coed yeshivot also recognized the importance of having the right hevruta partner, although they felt varying degrees of comfort involving themselves in the pairing process. Levy, for example, hopes that his students will become more self-aware, and therefore more empowered to choose appropriate learning partners, through reflecting on their hevruta experiences:

I would encourage my students to pause for a few minutes before the end of hevruta and to have a meta-conversation about: What did we do? Who were we each? Do you think I listened carefully? Were we doing exegesis or eisegesis? Were we reading out of the text or into the text? When I did that, did that make you happy, sad, frustrated? Did we stay on point for long enough? Did we stay on point too long? Were there personal things that we needed to find time to talk about that we didn’t find time to talk about because you were obsessing over the meaning of a certain text? I think there's all sorts of variables and varieties in terms of the hevruta experience, and I think the real question is about gaining some account of meta-awareness about what's going
on in a hevruta and then making sure that you're meeting each other's needs. It's the same thing that happens in a regular relationship, where you're asking, "Was I there for you in the way that you wanted me to be there for you?" I think that's a good skill. To be a good hevruta is to be a good person, in some ways.

Here we see that, at one extreme, a well-matched hevruta might flourish from the get-go, while another hevruta might initially struggle but, over time, see both partners become more empathic, supportive, and accountable.

According to these three utilitarian justifications, hevruta is a tool which is employed to fulfil some combination of goals – building skills, making meaning, and developing relationships – all of which we have identified as animating ideas in their own right. Yet, another perspective juxtaposes these utilitarian justifications for the prominence of hevruta study with a familiar alternative, articulated by Weiss:

On the first level, I think that hevruta learning is traditional, and so even if it didn't have clear pedagogical advantage, which I think it does, I think there might be a reason just to do it because that's how it's been done. We do feel like we're trying to run a traditional institution and doing things the way that they've been done is something that we value.

This idea of tradition for traditions sake is a recurring theme at Hadar, but in this case it is not entirely unproblematic. In Notes from ATID, Aliza Segal claims that Jews do not engage in hevruta study because “we’ve always done it this way”, but rather because “people in the modern period have decided that it is a good idea.” She cites evidence that hevruta study as we know it first became common practice in the yeshivot of Eastern Europe and only became widespread after the First World War, when yeshiva study became standard for observant Jewish men. It is

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therefore the *perceived* authenticity of *hevruta*, rather than its historical usage, which makes it an animating force on educational practice at Hadar.

**What are the outcomes of good learning?**

Interviewees suggested three different categories of outcomes that should arise from the learning process: that students are able and enthusiastic to continue learning after the program; that students have increased their engagement with the institution’s core values; and that they are able and enthusiastic to promulgate those core values to others beyond the walls of the *beit midrash*.

The first category of outcomes includes both the skills and motivation necessary for continued learning. Says Levy:

> The first year is an enormously steep learning curve in terms of just the capacity to crack open classical works and read them for yourself. We want students to feel that after a year books that have been closed to them are now open to them and that they don't fear sitting down and cracking open the classical works of the tradition. We want them to have developed the patience that is required to master the tradition…

> The pedagogy is designed to encourage autonomy and then autonomy is both the capacity and the desire…

Asked what successful education looks like at the Conservative Yeshiva, Levy says:

> it’s the conversations that carry on out into the corridor and which are picked up again the next day. There is something about the continuity of learning that can take place in a multi-day, multi-month program that most people will be new: coming back to the same text day after day after day and adding layer upon layer… there is an unpicking of layers that becomes incredibly deep and ingrained in a way that it can’t do in a non-immersive program.

Such an impact is sometimes felt long after the student has left the institution. Weiss tells me:

> I often hear people referring back to lessons that they learned at the yeshiva and being able to apply them in their lives, and to me, that's the most gratifying thing. Where someone says, "I was having this conflict with my Hillel board, and then I remembered that we learned this seemingly unrelating mishna in Bava Kama, and that mishna sort of entered my mind unbidden and I was
able to use what that *mishna* taught me as a frame for resolving this kind of conflict," – those are the moments that I love the most, where it's so organic. They really find that the time that they spent with us is transformative and useful... I particularly love those moments when someone says, "My learning just came over me and I wasn't even expecting it and it's still relevant." Those are the good moments.

It is those moments in which students are flourishing as Jewish learners.

The second category of outcomes involves the internalization of values, and the final category involves the spreading of those values to others. Says Tucker:

I want them to take away a sense of the mission of Hadar. What it's trying to accomplish. How it wants the world to look different, and I want them to take away a sense of how they can contribute to that, assuming they're motivated to. I want them to have some understanding of how they can be citizens of that world, to contribute in a deep way, and part of that is also getting them to be sort of inaugurated into the larger community of alumni and network of people engaged with Hadar.

In addition to core values such as learning, interviewees were keen to see students leaving with a commitment to religious discipline, self-confidence, respect for others, gratitude, obligation, and Jewish continuity, amongst others that we have seen in earlier chapters.

Each of the coed yeshivot has an active network of alumni who have transformed their Jewish communities or created new ones. For Hadar, that means more communities characterized by Torah, *avodah*, and *hesed*; for the Conservative Yeshiva it means more Conservative and non-Orthodox communities embracing learning and living out their ideologies to the fullest extent; for Pardes it means all of the denominations being further enriched by Jewish tradition; and for SVARA that means “queering up the rabbinate” and proliferating queer players in the halakhic game.

Lappe shares with me one heart-warming success story which touches all four institutions:

I met a gentleman at a board meeting of an organization that invited me in to do my Crash Talk. And at the schmooze time, this gentleman told me about his trans son who was just transitioning,
and he was very supportive of his son, but his son was struggling with his Jewish identity. And a year or so later, I get a call from this young man who was a junior in college, and he wants to learn more about Judaism. So I am kind of mentoring him about what he can read, and how he can improve his Hebrew. He doesn't even have his aleph-bet at this point.

He teaches himself the aleph-bet online. And he starts learning Mishna by himself in the original with his dictionaries. Then he comes to Queer Talmud Camp the next summer, and he's paired up with another student who's also a beginner, an African-American convert, and the two of these guys are up all night, every night, in the beit midrash, getting the text that they didn't have time to get in the two three-hour blocks during the day. And by the way, they're up all night with dozens of other students, but they're up the latest. And they're working super hard, and this young man then goes off to Pardes, and learns in their summer program. He did a short course at the Conservative Yeshiva.

The next year he comes back to Queer Talmud Camp again after graduating college. After his second time at Queer Talmud Camp he joins the Full-Time Program. He's in the program for a year, he learns his ass off, he becomes a better Talmudist than me. I have very little to teach him. He goes off to Hadar, and he does a year at Hadar, and is about to do another year at Hadar, after which he plans on getting a Master's in Talmud and education, or rabbinic ordination. And his passion is to bring Talmud to people like him who just had their aleph-bet, were queer, who want to be players, and his goal is to be rosh yeshiva of a SVARA-style beit midrash. And he's gonna do it. He's unbelievably gifted, ten times smarter than me, ten times better at text than me, and that's what I'm after.

Conclusion

The coed yeshivot each employ hevruta study: a structure which amplifies the processes of skills-building and meaning-making through the context of a deep, committed learning partnership. Hadar is distinctive for its commitment to hevruta for its traditional status rather than its (uncontested) pedagogical value. SVARA is distinctive for its focus on cultivating emotional presence as part of its spiritual practice of Talmud study. Each of the coed yeshivot is looking for students with the capacity and volition to participate in their respective projects, to immerse themselves in learning, and to emerge with the skills and enthusiasm to continue living out the project in their communities.
Chapter Seven: Conclusions

Comparative analysis

Over the course of this study, I have identified a number of ideas which animate educational practice at four coed yeshivot, and compared and contrasted these ideas. The aggregate of these ideas is not necessarily a comprehensive picture of educational vision at these institutions – there may be animating ideas that did not arise during the interviews, or that I failed to identify – but it is sufficient to draw some limited conclusions.

The primary conclusion of this study is that uniformity or diversity of animating ideas among the coed yeshivot is a matter of scale, rather than binary. That is to say: correlation between ideas about any given area at any two institutions may range between extremes. Broadly, there are three types of relationship that can be identified between animating ideas: general consensus, mahloket leshem shamayim, and fundamental disagreement.

General consensuses among all four institutions were mostly limited to the areas of human flourishing and learning. Interviewees’ testimony reflected a commitment to the ideas that human flourishing involves, at least, cultural competence, alignment of belief and practice, making fully autonomous choices, some degree of engagement with like-minded people, and some degree of engagement with diverse worldviews. They also shared a conception of learning which involves skill-acquisition and meaning-making taking place in the zone of proximal development, and enhanced in the context of strong interpersonal relationships. Many of the
common policies regarding the ideal community, subject areas and material, pedagogy, and Judaism were to some extent derivative of these foundational ideas.

Fundamental disagreements occurred when one or more institutions were animated by an idea which was rejected or ignored by the others. SVARA is in some sense the most distinctive of the four institutions since it has the most exclusive animating ideas, including the idea of the shrinking canon, the idea of systematic pedagogy, and the idea of teacher as co-learner. Other fundamental disagreements included Hadar, SVARA, and the Conservative Yeshiva’s absolute commitment to egalitarianism (as opposed to Pardes’ accommodation of non-egalitarian practices), and Pardes and SVARA’s commitment to non-denominational space (as opposed to Hadar and the Conservative Yeshiva’s more directed spaces). Arguably, Hadar’s commitment to its students living out a halakhic lifestyle places it in fundamental disagreement with the other institutions, although this may be a difference in scale rather than principle.

In between the general consensus and the fundamental disagreement lies mahloket leshem shamayim, which arises when institutions share two or more values which come into tension in some way, and elect different ways of resolving or managing this tension. One example of this is the case of the Jew of patrilineal descent, which raised tension between the value of moral intuition and the value of respecting tradition. This is a recurring mahloket, which was also manifest in debate regarding the extent to which tradition should be honored or renewed, the relative virtue of Torah knowledge and kishkes in the halakhic process, and perhaps even the balance between hesed and social justice.

Another recurring mahloket arose from tension between limited and expansive ideas about group diversity – the broad tent and the special interest group. This was present in
disagreements regarding the competing values of openness and alignment, the importance of communal religious practice and diversity of halakhic stances, and the value of mahloket as a tool for enhancing mutual understanding versus as a tool for refining a shared position.

The third recurring mahloket that I identify is a tension between the needs of the individual student and of the collective community. This comes to bear on decisions around subject material – should students with different skills and interests learn different material, or are these differences outweighed by the value of a communal conversation around a shared text? – and religious practice – is it the community’s concern how individuals practice Judaism privately?

Mahloket such as these make for active (if hypothetical) conversations between the institutions, typically characterized by varying interpretations of the demands of circumstance in favor of one value over another. While general consensuses and fundamental disagreements give us some sense of the ideas which define and distinguish the coed yeshivot, this picture is incomplete without the nuance of mahloket.

Some instances of general consensus, mahloket leshem shamayim, and fundamental disagreement are identified in the tables below.
### Ideas about Judaism, God, and Israel:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>General Consensus</th>
<th>Mahloket Leshem Shamayim</th>
<th>Fundamental Disagreement</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Why study classical Jewish texts?</strong></td>
<td>Torah study (core value); Torah is relevant to modern life</td>
<td>Torah speaks to life vs. Torah responds to life</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>What is the halakhic process?</strong></td>
<td>Halakhic deciders must have Torah knowledge and moral intuition</td>
<td>Halakha should be respected vs. Halakha should be renewed</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>How important is halakhic status?</strong></td>
<td>Patrilineal Jews should not be prevented from learning Torah</td>
<td>Upholding tradition vs. Subverting tradition</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>How important is Jewish theology?</strong></td>
<td>Theology is not of central importance</td>
<td>Freedom of belief vs. Communal norms</td>
<td>Pro-Israel (Hadar, Pardes)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>How should Jews relate to Israel?</strong></td>
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### Ideas about Human Flourishing and the Ideal Community:

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<th>General Consensus</th>
<th>Mahloket Leshem Shamayim</th>
<th>Fundamental Disagreement</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>What characterizes human flourishing?</strong></td>
<td>Jewish literacy (cultural competence)</td>
<td>Jewish literacy as a tool for meaning-making vs. Jewish literacy as a gateway to belonging; Following tradition vs. Reworking tradition</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>How does community enhance human flourishing?</strong></td>
<td>Interpersonal relationships enhance sense of belonging; Mahloket Leshem Shamayim</td>
<td>Alignment of belief and practice within a community vs. Diversity of belief and practice within a community</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>How prescriptive should a community be?</strong></td>
<td>Non-coercion</td>
<td>Normative practice vs. Individual autonomy</td>
<td>Requires halakhic lifestyle (Hadar)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>How inclusive should a community be?</strong></td>
<td>Kindness</td>
<td></td>
<td>Queer-normativity (SVARA); Egalitarianism (Conservative Yeshiva, Hadar, SVARA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Does Judaism compel social action?</strong></td>
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<td>Hesed vs. Social justice</td>
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### Ideas about Subject Areas:

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<tr>
<th>General Consensus</th>
<th>Mahloket Leshem Shamayim</th>
<th>Fundamental Disagreement</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Why teach Talmud?</strong></td>
<td>Talmud as key canon</td>
<td>Educational value of Talmud vs. Traditional value of Talmud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What are the other curricula priorities?</strong></td>
<td>Expansive curriculum (variety) vs. Focused curriculum (tracked); Breadth vs. Depth</td>
<td>Chumash as key canon (Pardes); Shrinking canon (SVARA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What makes for good subject material?</strong></td>
<td>Level-appropriate material vs. Inter-track conversation</td>
<td>Cherry-picking sources (SVARA)</td>
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### Ideas about Teachers and Teaching:

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<tr>
<th>General Consensus</th>
<th>Mahloket Leshem Shamayim</th>
<th>Fundamental Disagreement</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>What characterizes good pedagogy?</strong></td>
<td>Zone of proximal development; Technical correction; Facilitation of meaning-making</td>
<td>Heavily standardized learning process (SVARA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What else characterizes a good teacher?</strong></td>
<td>Faculty alignment with core values; Strong faculty-student relationships</td>
<td>Teacher as co-learner (SVARA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Is faculty diversity important?</strong></td>
<td>Faculty diversity is ideal but not of central importance</td>
<td>Faculty empathy mitigates need for diversity (Hadar)</td>
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Ideas about Learners and Learning:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who should learn?</th>
<th>General Consensus</th>
<th>Mahloket Leshem Shamayim</th>
<th>Fundamental Disagreement</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Some level of student alignment with core values; Capacity for intensive programming</td>
<td>Developing advanced students vs. Accommodating beginner students</td>
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<tr>
<th>How should learners prepare to learn?</th>
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<th>Spiritual scaffolding (SVARA)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hevruta is an excellent forum for skills-building, meaning-making, and relationship building</td>
<td>Educational value of hevruta vs. Traditional value of hevruta</td>
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| Why study in hevruta? | Student ability and desire to learn independently; Student ability and desire to promulgate core values | Stewardship of student alignment with core values vs. Students as fully autonomous decision-makers | |

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<th>What are the outcomes of good learning?</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Student ability and desire to learn independently; Student ability and desire to promulgate core values</td>
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Levisohn’s new theory of vision

This study has demonstrated some of the explanatory power of Levisohn’s model of a dynamic relationship between vision-guided Jewish educational practice and a sphere of animating ideas. In particular, it has exhibited three features of this model: the mutually causative relationship between ideas and practice, the possibility of tension among animating ideas, and the categorization of animating ideas.

The first of these is perhaps best rendered in the geographical example highlighted at the end of chapter two, where some leaders sought a rationale for the location of their institution. Gomery, for instance, knows that SVARA is based in Chicago simply because Lappe lived there when she founded the institution, but yet found meaningful the idea of not being located on the USA’s resource-rich east coast. Hammer-Kossoy describes the entire Pardes community
congregating around the question of how (not whether) being in Israel was important to the institution’s project.

A subtler instance of this phenomenon may be seen in Weiss’s and Tucker’s respective assertions that the value of hevruta study and of Talmud study are primarily their authenticity within the Jewish tradition, and secondarily their instrumental value (e.g. in relationship-building or skills-acquisition). The presence of multiple, coherent rationales may be seen as an indication that sometimes the idea follows from the practice ex post facto rather than ex ante, although it may be challenging to determine precisely which is which.

In any case, if we understand educational vision to be dynamic, then we should anticipate the modification of animating ideas over time. These are just a few examples of an idea emerging from practice, and it is easy to imagine how changing leadership may choose to reinterpret the deeper significance of elements of practice implemented by their predecessors – especially elements which are physical or culturally ingrained, and therefore not easily adjusted.

The possibility of tension between animating ideas is confirmed by some of the open or active questions being addressed within each of the coed yeshivot. At the Conservative Yeshiva, for instance, the idea of respecting the authority of the CJLS and the idea of including students across non-Orthodox denominations may peacefully coexist at times, but clash in the matter of student prayer leaders using feminine God language. At Hadar there is a tension between the idea of participating in Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jewish conversations, and at Pardes there has been a comparable tension between the ideas of traditionalism and pluralism. At SVARA, there is an active question about the respective value of infiltrating and transforming the Jewish mainstream, versus creating queer-normative Jewish spaces outside of the mainstream. The
issue of patrilineal descent is the site of a clash of ideas at all four institutions, the idea of inclusivity coming into conflict with traditional ideas about who is a Jew.

Levisohn’s seven categories of animating ideas provided a helpful structure for this paper, though I did make adjustments to some of the category titles, including to add (and thus emphasize) ideas about teachers and learners as well as teaching and learning. I also found it advantageous to merge two pairs of categories: those relating to Judaism and the Transcendent, and those relating to human flourishing and the ideal community. Each of these is a matter of preference rather than critique; many animating ideas cross boundaries between categories and where one draws the lines is always arbitrary to some extent. Indeed, a number of the ideas identified in the preceding chapters were challenging to categorize: ḥesed might be an idea about both the ideal community and Judaism; ḥevruta could be an idea about pedagogy or about learning. In fact, one could argue that the ideas I categorized as being about Judaism are in fact merely Jewish ideas about human flourishing, the ideal community, or something else. Yet this framework is still useful for identifying animating ideas that may arise more or less independently before coming into contact in the arena of educational practice.

Through conducting this research project, I have identified three shortcomings of Levisohn’s new theory of vision. The first is that Levisohn’s commitment to egalitarianism (i.e. non-hierarchy) of ideas amounts to an overcorrection of Fox’s hierarchical model. That is to say that one can maintain that vision amounts to more than an abstract philosophy without insisting that all animating ideas are equally powerful. It is manifest throughout the preceding chapters that institutional leaders frequently manage tensions between ideas by prioritizing one over the other. For instance, each of the institutions strives to be inclusive, but three of the four will never
do so at the expense of egalitarianism. Levisohn’s model lacks a mechanism for distinguishing between core/primary and marginal/secondary ideas.

The second shortcoming is that although the model assumes that educational vision evolves over time, it does not account for changes in animating ideas which do not occur through educational practice. In the preceding chapters we have seen ideas which arose through deep internal reflection, response to external world events and trends, and even changes in personnel. As suggested by Schwab’s fourth educational commonplace of environment or milieu (alongside the teacher, the learner, and the subject matter), vision and practice do not form a closed system, but rather exist in perpetual interaction with institutional decision-makers and the world in which they live.

Finally, the sphere of animating ideas does not distinguish between conscious and unconscious/subconscious ideas. In his articles critiquing Fox, Levisohn emphasizes the importance of intentionality in the practice of vision-guided education, yet one could plausibly imagine two institutions animated by the same ideas but with a significant difference in intentional implementation of those ideas in practice. This is suggested by the fact that some of the ideas I identified were expressed explicitly by the interviewees while others were merely implied. It seems fair to attribute to these institutions a high degree of intentionality but surely there are a few ideas which have an impact on practice on the subconscious level. Thus Levisohn’s model allows us to develop a picture of the ideas which animate an institution, but not of the level of intentionality with which they are implemented.
Areas for further study

There are a variety of directions in which one could build on this study to include comparable institutions with torah lishma programs such as BINA (Tel Aviv) and Paideia (Stockholm), Orthodox yeshivot, non-Orthodox seminaries, academic Jewish Studies departments, or any vision-guided institutions engaged in immersive Jewish education. Such extensions might focus in on just one or two aspects of this study, exploring, for example, the diversity of pedagogy or curricula used in Talmud courses at universities or Jewish Day Schools. One could even use this study to begin thinking about the staffing criteria for study in Israel programs or ideas about the ideal community at summer camps. (Indeed, there is much that is equally relevant to non-Jewish settings.)

This study also raises questions connected to the field of relationship-based education, which will be of interest to those who have thought deeply about ḥevruta, such as Orit Kent and Allison Cook who have partnered with the Hadar Institute to launch their Pedagogy of Partnership initiative. These include: What is the impact of ideological distance between learning partners on the outcomes of their learning? What do SVARA students gain (or, indeed, lose) through their sense of responsibility towards and accountability for the learning of their partner? And is the common assumption that hevruta study is most effective when practiced with a regular partner (rather than, say, a rotation within a small group) well-evidenced?

Finally, much of this study will be of interest to those who have theorized regarding educational vision and its enactment. Some of the questions which might be addressed by further studies include: What types of ideas might be identified through the observation of educational practice or through interviews with current and former students at these institutions, which are
lost or undervalued through a focus on institutional leadership such as that of the present study? How might awareness of competing institutions and their animating ideas impact the way in which an institution presents and develops its own educational vision? In what ways does an educational institution with a concealed agenda behave similarly to and differently from (other) vision-guided educational institutions? In what ways do ideas impact practice without the intentional mediation of educators? And how should (or, indeed, could) one go about measuring the success of the implementation of an educational vision?
Appendix: Primary Interview Protocol

I. Articulating the vision

1. What is your institution’s raison d’être?
   - What is your elevator sales pitch for your institution? How would you describe your institution to a potential donor?
   - What kind of change does your institution want to see beyond its own walls, such as in the broader Jewish community or the world?
   - What trends in the Jewish community or the world is your institution responding to? Has this changed over time?
   - Is the location of your institution connected to its mission? If yes, how so?
   - Does your institution have a theological stance or position? Is there a connection between the Divine and your institution’s mission?

2. What are the Jewish ideas that your institution takes most seriously?
   - What ideas does your institution consider to be at the heart of Judaism?
   - Would you describe your institution as “pluralist”? Why or why not?
   - How are disputes about communal religious practices settled at your institution? Who or what has religious authority?

3. The institutions I’m looking at for this study are Hadar, Pardes, SVARA, and the Conservative Yeshiva. What term would you use to describe a group which includes these institutions?
   - I have been using the term coeducational yeshivot. Does this sound right to you? Why/why not?
   - What are the ideas that these institutions share in common?
• What are the ideas that differentiate your institution from the other coeducational yeshivot?

II. Enactment - Students

4. What do you look for when recruiting torah lishma students for the Year Program?
   • What would an ideal candidate for the program be like?
   • Why is it important to have torah lishma students?

5. How important is it to have a diverse group of students?
   • What kinds of diversity are you most interested in?

6. Who shouldn’t study at your institution?
   • What would make you think twice about accepting somebody?
   • Would your institution accept a student who believes that Jesus was the messiah? (If no: Would it make a difference if they were halakhically Jewish?)
   • Would your institution accept a student who holds that women should not lead prayer services? (If no: Would it make a difference if they were a woman?)
   • Would your institution accept a student who is not Jewish and not interested in converting?
   • Would your institution accept a student who identifies as Jewish but was not born to a Jewish mother and has not converted?
   • Would your institution accept a candidate who vocally supports the BDS movement? (If no: Would it make a difference if the student was Israeli?)

III. Enactment - Faculty

7. What do you look for when you are hiring faculty for the Year Program?
   • Is there any way in which you would like to diversify your faculty in the future?
• Is it important that the faculty at your institution are demographically representative of the students? Why/why not?

8. We already talked a little about who shouldn’t study at your institution. Are there any additional red lines for faculty?
  • Are there any attitudes, beliefs or practices that you would entertain in a potential student but not in a potential faculty member?
  • What is the rationale for this?
  • Are there exceptions for part-time faculty?

9. What is important for new faculty to understand about teaching at your institution?
  • How, if at all, do you initiate new faculty? (Can you give me an example of this?)
  • What do new faculty learn when they begin teaching at your institution?
  • Are there any key pedagogic tools that you want new faculty to be familiar with?
  • How, if at all, are faculty briefed to handle conflict between students with conflicting ideas? (Can you give me an example of this?)

IV. **Enactment – Curriculum, Subject Areas and Material**

10. What is the curriculum of your institution’s Year Program?
  • What is the rationale for this?
  • What are the most important components of the curriculum?
  • The schedule suggests that Talmud is the subject area on which your institution places highest priority. Is this correct? Why is that?
  • Are there any other subject areas that students are required to study? Why?
  • Which subject areas do you intentionally exclude from the curriculum?

11. How do you decide which texts are studied in each class?
• Do individual faculty decide?
• Are there any texts that you would prefer faculty not to teach at your institution?

12. How are courses structured/organized over the course of a semester?
• Can you give me some examples?

V. Enactment – Pedagogy

13. Can you walk me through a typical Talmud class for torah lishma students in the Year Program?
• What is the rationale for this structure?
• What is the role of the faculty during shiur?
• What should faculty be doing during seder?
• How does this compare to other classes?

14. What does good teaching look like at your institution?
• Could you share with me an educational highlight from your institution? An instance where the educational process was at its best?

15. What would concern you to hear a teacher say during class?

VI. Enactment – Outcomes

16. What goals do you have for the Year Program students as a collective?
• What type of community are you trying to build at your institution? How do you achieve that?
• What do you hope that the students will learn outside of classes? How do they learn this?
17. What do you want torah lishma graduates of the Year Program to take away with them?
   • What skills should they have learned?
   • What dispositions should they have learned?

18. What types of things do you see or hear from alumni which make you feel that the program has been successful?
   • Can you give me an example?

19. What would concern you to see or hear from an alumnus or alumna, that would make you feel that the program had not succeeded?
   • Would it concern you to learn that a student had become less observant?

VII. Wrap up question

20. Throughout this interview, I’ve been listening for the big ideas that animate your institution and examples of what those ideas look like in practice. Are there any important ideas that you feel we haven’t touched on until now?
Works Cited


