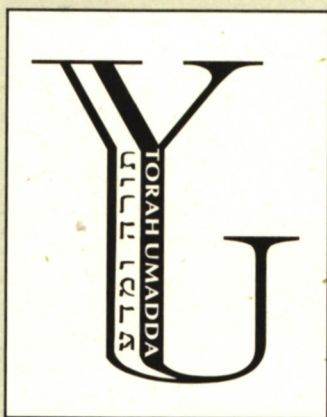



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WHAT'S IN A NAME?

AN INTRODUCTION TO
YESHIVA UNIVERSITY

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The name "yeshiva" combined with "university" often seems to perplex people unacquainted with the history, background, and mission of these two venerable institutions.

Most people in our society know what a university is, but their knowledge of a "yeshiva" is often cursory and, usually, based upon stereotypes—most of which are long outdated.

How, they wonder, can there coexist in a single institution one department (the university) which stands for critical thought and pushing ahead on the frontiers of knowledge, and which prides itself on its universal concerns, with another (the yeshiva) which seeks to preserve an ancient way of life and is mostly confined to the Jewish people and religion?

As a result, when hearing about Yeshiva University they are either puzzled or amused, as if the very name is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms.

Yet in over a century of its existence, and over fifty years of its having attained official university status, Yeshiva University has proven that the two are not a contradiction and, even if often divergent in mission, style, and purpose, they are ultimately compatible. The purpose of this brochure is to elucidate this relationship and introduce you to the reality that is Yeshiva University—surely one of the most unusual schools of higher education in the universe of universities, and most certainly unique in the history of the institution called "yeshiva."



The Yeshiva— What Is It?

The yeshiva (plural: *yeshivot*) is the oldest institution of higher learning in Judaism. As such, it may well be the oldest form of formal higher education in the world.

The earliest *yeshivot* we know of flourished in both Palestine and Babylonia in the century before the Common Era. By comparison, universities began to coalesce into formal schools only in the late Middle Ages.

So inseparable is the idea of higher formal education from the fabric of Judaism, that Jewish legend maintained that, in earliest Biblical days, Abraham sent Isaac to study in the Yeshiva of Shem (son of Noah) and Eber—thus locating the origin of the Yeshiva to within eleven generations of the creation of man!

The word *yeshiva* literally means “sitting” or “seat” (also “session”), perhaps the chair from which the master, the head of the school (the *Rosh Yeshiva*), holds his lectures and directs the discussion. Another opinion derives the name from the fact that the disciples sat at the feet of their master.

Interestingly, in the great academies of the Greek thinkers—Socrates, Plato, Aristotle—the preferred way of engaging in learned discussion was by walking; hence, these scholars were referred to as *peripatetics*. The Jewish way was by sitting (hence the name *yeshiva*). Thus, prayer—a spiritual as opposed to intellectual exercise—was by

standing (the very name for the central devotion of the prayer service is *amidah*, “standing”), whereas that which required intellectual as well as spiritual effort, such as the recitation of the *Shema*, must be recited whilst sitting.

Both the Jewish and the Greek ways implied deep concentration, mental focusing, immense intellectual effort, and great respect for brain-power and its achievements. But the Jewish ethos contained one additional and critical element: it regarded the subject matter as well as the very act of study as *sacred*. In a sweep of imagination meant to teach the overwhelming importance of learning, the Talmud spoke of God Himself devoting a portion of each day to the study of Torah! And hence the immortal teaching of the Mishnah* that *Talmud Torah ke'negged kulam*, the study of Torah outweighs all the other commandments taken together.

In the oldest yeshivot, the teaching material consisted of the traditional lore, and this was delivered orally by the head of the school. About the time of the completion of the Mishnah (c. 200 CE), the traditional

* The Mishnah is the concise codex of the Oral Law which complements and elucidates the divine laws contained in the Bible. This, when supplemented by the far more extensive literature of the Gemara—which explains, examines, and adds to the Mishnah—is called the Talmud.

texts were recited by special memorizers, or by the class, and then explained and expounded by the teacher. The presidents of the two most important academies in Babylonia, those of Sura and Pumbeditha, were assisted by a teaching staff consisting of the chief judge, the proxy (who was generally designated as the successor of the president), and the seven heads of the teaching assembly, *Reshei Kallah*.

In the time of the Geonim (late 6th – mid 11th centuries CE), these Babylonian schools issued the authoritative regulations for all Israel. In Babylonia too were developed the particular characteristics of the yeshiva, which have remained to the present day, such as: the sing-song manner of reading and discussing the text; the use of intellectual challenge and academic ingenuity in the manner of teaching; the heavy demands made upon the students; and the *havruta* or collegial form of study, whereby two or three students studied the texts together, each stimulating and correcting the other.

In the Middle Ages and in modern times the material taught in the yeshivot grew enormously because the rabbinical literature, including the codifiers, had meantime increased in geometric proportions. It was the task of the master to give the lecture, which consisted of the explanation of the text “on the page,” and the *tosafot*, or additions and subtleties in the teaching material. He also had to be able to offer *hiddushim* (“new comments or novellae”),

that is, to form new combinations and provide original insights and explanations. Thanks to the peculiar nature of the Talmud, which is so all-embracing as to include almost all fields of knowledge, the pupils of the yeshiva were protected from an overly one-sided education, despite the fact that their studies were limited to the study of the Talmud and the commentaries while every other form of knowledge was either neglected or left for private study. Those who attended the yeshiva and attained success in their work were called *talmidei hakhamim*, "disciples of the wise."

But a yeshiva is more than an institution dedicated to sharpening the intellect and challenging the mind. In keeping with its view that the study of Torah is a sacred activity, a form of *imitatio Dei* (the imitation of God), the yeshiva is vitally concerned with the moral dimension of man: his ethical, social, and communal obligations, and with his soul—the "breath of God" which sustains him. An additional component of the uniqueness of the yeshiva is thus this awareness of duties even more than rights; of the imperative to be of service to others—all others; and of the need to bring the power of knowledge and education to bear upon the effort to "repair" the world and make it a better, safer, nobler place in which humankind, created in "the image of God," can live and flourish.

Despite the fact that, early in its history, the university did espouse certain moral val-

ues, the modern university has, since approximately the end of World War I, abandoned such preoccupations in its developing concept of the academic vocation. It is only very recently that some scholars have tried to recapture for the university some of its exceedingly valuable moral principles, or "academic pieties," even if divorced from their original theological moorings.*

The yeshiva is thus an institution that is well over 2,000 years old. It has shown incredible resilience, especially in its remarkable renaissance after the Holocaust, when many of the famous yeshivot of Europe re-established themselves both in the United States and in Israel, and inspired the building of countless other yeshivot throughout the world.

And the most unusual yeshiva in history is Yeshiva University, which sustains its uniqueness by drawing upon the two different sources of the systems of education: one is the *yeshivot*, described above, from which Yeshiva University inherits its essential character as well as its spiritual, moral, and ethical core. The second is the *university*, after which it has patterned its complex of schools and divisions, each resting on a deep-set foundation of liberal arts and sciences. This partnership of *yeshiva* and *university* is a pioneering venture, with no precedent in the history of the Jewish com-

* See, for example, Mark R. Schwehn, *Exiles from Eden: Religion and the Academic Vocation in America* (Oxford University Press, Oxford and N.Y.: 1993).

munity or of American higher education.

"Yeshiva," in the Jewish tradition, conjures up the most commanding intellects of our people engaged in the relentless pursuit of law and justice, holiness and morality. And "university" is its secular or universal counterpart: a school devoted to culture, the arts and sciences, and the practical wisdom of mankind.

"Yeshiva University" is thus more than a name identifying an institution. It is a concept, a value, an ideal expressed in but two words. Far from being a contradiction in terms, it represents a bold new synthesis, a daring adventure in education that has already proven its viability, its resilience, and its hardiness.

As a yeshiva, Yeshiva University (both in its undergraduate programs and in its affiliated Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary) continues the traditional mode of Talmudic learning, adding another link in the long history of "conversations" between teacher and student, scholar and colleague, one generation and another, for whom the Talmud is the stuff not only of profound thought, but life itself. Yet it benefits from exposure to the university by enlarging its vision, appropriating new methodologies, and expanding the scope of its young scholars.

Academically, the University stands in the image of America's greatest institutions of higher learning, stressing a foundation in the liberal arts and sciences as the basis of a

college education and the true mark of an educated man or woman. Furthermore, the academic dimension of Yeshiva University has been expanded to include prestigious graduate schools in medicine (Albert Einstein College of Medicine), law (Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law), psychology (Ferkau Graduate School of Psychology), social work (Wurzweiler School of Social Work), academic Jewish studies (Bernard Revel Graduate School), and other areas in which research on the frontiers of knowledge is preeminent. Emotionally and spiritually, the University is strengthened by those unique characteristics it has inherited from its yeshiva component.

The two, taken together, represent the institutionalization of the great credo of *Torah Umadda*—the symbiosis of *Torah*, the traditional stuff of a yeshiva education, and *Madda*, Hebrew for the world of culture and worldly learning, the curriculum of the university. On the undergraduate level, this integration is the lifeblood of Yeshiva University.

This concept defines the mission of Yeshiva University as it summons the multiple fields of human knowledge to face the frontiers of truth. All that the human intellect probes, all that it discovers, is made welcome here. We are dedicated to the life of the mind and the reality of the spirit with an unceasing confidence that the best of our Jewish heritage will survive all change and discovery and, indeed, will be enhanced by it.

Profile

Yeshiva University, in its second century, is the nation's oldest and largest university under Jewish auspices. With 16 undergraduate, graduate, and professional schools, divisions, and affiliates at four major campuses in New York City, and additional campuses in Los Angeles and Jerusalem, it offers studies in liberal arts, business, health sciences, law, social work, psychology, Jewish education, and Jewish studies, leading to bachelors, masters, professional, and doctoral degrees. With a budget of \$315,000,000, it also conducts widespread programs of research and community outreach, issues publications, and is the home of the Yeshiva University Museum.

Its 7,000 students (41% women) come from all parts of North America, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and the former Soviet Union. The University has awarded some 37,700 degrees and diplomas.

Dr. Norman Lamm, the first American-born president, is now in his 17th year of service.

Yeshiva University's hub, Joel Jablonski Campus, is at 500 West 185th Street in Manhattan's Washington Heights. Other New York City campuses are the Midtown Center, in Manhattan's Murray Hill section; Brookdale Center, in Greenwich Village; and Jack and Pearl Resnick Campus, in the Westchester Heights section of the Bronx.



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