



Norman Lamm

CHANCELLOR

The first of these two documents comes from the Emanuel Rackman collection of the Rav's meetings 1963-1970, from our archives.

The second, unsigned letter to Dr. Belkin, has all the marks of the Rav's style and thinking. From internal evidence, the letter was written before the end of the 1950's.

(R. Blau was Rav's nephew
in 1955 & daughter
25.10.1957)

My dear Dr. Belkin:

Pursuant to our conversation of April 26th and in accordance with your request, I take the liberty of submitting to you this memorandum dealing with the educational problems we have frequently discussed, and which are of genuine importance to the further growth and development of the graduate division of the Yeshiva. The suggestions contained in the memorandum grew out of personal experience both as a teacher at the Yeshiva who has been interested not only in technical classroom work, but also in the emotional and intellectual response of the student body to the subject matter and methods of teaching, and as a member of the rabbinate to whom the opportunity is often afforded to watch the Yeshiva rabbi in action - grappling with problems, counseling his congregants, preaching, organizing and leading his community in all matters pertaining to Judaism. I have also interviewed a great number of my students over a period of many years and discussed with them various aspects of the Yeshiva program. These discussions were conducted at all levels, undergraduate and graduate as well. The general impression gained from all these observations and talks was that certain basic changes are inevitable if the student of today, who is the rabbi of tomorrow, is to free himself from a feeling of frustration, dissatisfaction with himself, and a deep sense of inferiority which express themselves from time to time either in cynical attitudes or in vanity bordering on the anomalous. Let me be frank and candid. The Yeshiva student is not the happiest fellow on the American university campus. He is far from being convinced that the Yeshiva gives him an adequate rabbinical training and provides him, at least, with the minimum amount of knowledge which is indispensable for the pursuit of a successful career in consonance with the great tradition of the rabbinate. He feels that the intellectual harvest he reaps at the time of ordination is by no means commensurate with the investment in terms of time, the most precious possession of a young man, and mental effort, which he made during his residence years in the Yeshiva. The student is dissatisfied with both the Halachic and philosophical religious training he receives at our Yeshiva. Upon entering the active rabbinate, he feels lost wherever he has to cope with either an Halachic or an ideological problem. This feeling of discontent generates resentment and bitterness which is often responsible for an attitude of indifference, to say the least, on the part of the Yeshiva alumnus towards the fate and destiny of his Alma Mater.

I have given unlimited attention to this complex problem and have explored the entire area of higher-Yeshiva education. In this memorandum, I incorporate the conclusions at which I have arrived.

I believe that for the sake of a clear and precise analysis of the difficult problem, we should turn for help to the comparative method which would show the contrasting differences between our Yeshiva and the yeshivah of old, and would clarify the inappropriateness of certain parts of our educational program to meet the need for a streamlined, well-organized rabbinical training. The Lithuanian yeshiva of old, a great and venerable institution, was based upon five cardinal theses.

First, total commitment of the student to his Halachic studies. I use the adjective total in a two-fold meaning; first, a total effort as to time - the student gave all his free time, e.g., the whole day and part of the night to the study of Talmudic texts; second, emotionally and intellectually his preoccupation with Torah dominated his whole personality - he devoted to it his undivided attention and loyalty. No other problem interested him, nothing else bothered his mind. Not even the problems which focused the attention of a Maimonides and Nachmanides deserving of thoughtful answers penetrated into the cloistered mentality of the Yeshiva student. In a word, the whole world was outside of his purview.

Second, the yeshiva of old, regardless of the fact that it pursued a liberal policy with regard to the admission of students and accepted all applicants indiscriminately, was, nevertheless, an esoteric school, ~~consecrationally and consistently~~. It never attempted to serve the general community as a whole and has always been content with accommodating the selected few. Great multitudes found physical shelter under the roof of the Yeshiva but only a few discovered the spiritual riches they were searching for. The course of study, method of instruction, and the substance of the lectures delivered by the teachers revolved about the genius and were organized for the specific purpose of developing the great minds. The average student was the forgotten man who benefitted very little by his residence at the yeshiva. The yeshivot had no idea of general Halachic education and they had no understanding of the crying need of basic knowledge of the Halacha at a layman's level in order to educate an enlightened communal leadership.

As such, the yeshiva of old never organized a well-balanced program aiming at providing the student with a comprehensive Halachic education. Its teachings were mostly rhapsodic and fragmentary. It lacked continuity and organic wholeness. As a rule, the Lithuanian yeshiva never displayed concern for the two-dimensional Halachic surface education but kept on probing the third dimension - depth - thus sacrificing quantity for a vastly exaggerated qualitative analysis which, at times, reached absurd proportions of hair-splitting, reminiscent of medieval mental acrobatics.

Third, the yeshiva has never considered itself as a professional school and has never sought to train the student in applied Halacha. Theory for the sake of theory was the shibboleth of this time - honored institution. That Halacha cannot be realized in a vacuum but must be applied to concrete, complex phenomena never entered the minds of the yeshiva students. The ideal consisted in the acquisition of scholarship. The problem of a profession, application of the acquired scholarship in life, was non-existent. The quasi-monastic world - negating philosophy which the Musar movement has developed within the yeshivot in the past seventy-five years, the complete segregation of the ~~חכם~~ from the masses as such and his retreat into a unique, almost hermit-like fellowship, closed his mind to the true challenge of Halacha as a dynamic force and practical discipline. The tragic results of such a mental attitude are now discernible in every sector of Jewish life. The ~~חכם~~ has attained a complete withdrawal from the people into a sectarian society with all its idiosyncracies and eccentricities.

Fourth, the yeshiva of old has rejected any attempt to formulate a religious philosophy in universal terms, and frowned upon anyone who attempted to translate Halachic ideas into the philosophical vernacular. Methods which were employed by Saadya, Judah Ha-Levi and Maimonides were classified as heretic and destructive. Alas, the modern form itself sufficed to evoke the wrath of certain individuals regardless of the conformist ideology expressed therein.

Fifth, the yeshiva has never instituted a promotion system and has ignored all formal means of checking the knowledge and accomplishments of the student. The latter could spend half of his life-span not being able to measure by objective standards either his attainments or his failures.

In view of the above-mentioned characteristics of the Lithuanian yeshiva, we may understand many of the shortcomings of our training program since it was modelled after this institution. I wish to make my attitude clear. I do not criticize the old yeshiva. It might have been the adequate educational institution within the sociological framework of the old, small-town Jewish community which was segregated from the world at large. I do not believe, however, that the Lithuanian yeshiva in its entirety can assimilate itself into the singular structure of the American Jewish community. I have indomitable faith in the Halacha as a divine, eternal imperative in its all-embracing philosophy, its agility, facility and applicability in different environments and cultures. Yet, we are committed to the Halacha but not to parochial educational methods evolved under the stress of certain historical circumstances and conditions which no longer exist. We cannot go on teaching Halacha along these lines and at the same time hope for success in the widest possible sense.

Let me construe five antitheses to the five previously formulated.

First, our Yeshiva student carries a double scholastic load - the secular and the Halachic. Both his time and mental capacity are divided between these two courses of study. Therefore, the time element becomes more precious and the clumsy arrangement of time which prevailed in the old country is out of place in an American institution. ^{Like our Yeshiva} An intensive time economy is indispensable here. Each hour counts, each period of study must not be wasted, each semester must be exploited to the fullest extent.

Second, the Yeshiva, like any other American institution of higher learning, is dedicated not only to the cultivation of scholarship as such, but also to the dissemination of knowledge at all levels. Jewish educational philosophy of old, as the American education system of today, has rejected esoterism and tried to make knowledge accessible to everybody - to the average and gifted student alike. I do not believe that the Yeshiva should abandon this democratic philosophy and organize a curriculum which is suited only for prodigies. Even as a professional school whose prime task consists in preparing rabbis and providing them with an adequate scholastic background which would enable them to meet the needs of the

most difficult ^{of all} profession, that of the orthodox rabbinate, the Yeshiva must not desert its liberal philosophy of education. In order to qualify for the rabbinate, one does not have to exhibit extra-ordinary brilliance. Average ability accompanied by moral integrity should suffice. Hence, the development of an adequate rabbinical training course adopted to the needs of the ordinary student is our most important and pressing problem which demands our immediate attention.

Since we all believe that Halacha education is of the highest value and that one without being acquainted at least with the fundamentals of Halacha, cannot discharge his communal duty as a rabbi, we must organize at once, a basic Halacha curriculum and devise ways and means how to give to the students the most concentrated and at the same time comprehensive Halachic training which is possible within the framework of our great institution. The training, not of outstanding scholars, but of sincere, enlightened and consciencious rabbis is our prime concern.

For this purpose, it is incumbent upon us to utilize every opportunity in order to stimulate the intellectual curiosity of the student, to make formal Halachic thinking, which is at times very technical and abstract, as fascinating and pleasing as possible and to develop in him a profound understanding for the methodology and modi cogitandi of the Halacha. Hence, it is imperative to establish the proper balance between quantity and quality and to eliminate extravagance and irresponsibility. To spend a full school-year on the study of fifteen pages of text, sacrificing thus an entire m'sehta for the sake of ingenious scholastic debates, borders, mildly speaking, on the ridiculous. In a word, we should try to unlock for the student the Halachic world - a world teeming with life, beauty and grandeur - instead of burying his soul in the sands of sterile argumentative casuistry. The training must not depend upon mere chance or arbitrariness but should follow a well-integrated program which should serve the purpose of providing the student with the quintessence of certain Halachic disciplines which are indispensable for his intellectual advancement.

Third, our Yeshiva should train the student not only in pure Halacha but also in the application thereof. The student should learn the art of translating Halachic abstractions into daily practice and of applying Halachic principles to concrete situations out of which perplexing problems emerge. In every field of scientific knowledge, proficiency in pure theory does not qualify a person to grasp its technological aspects. In order to master the latter, people devote many years of their lives. A mathematician or a physicist who formulates the law is not ipso facto an engineer who is able to translate this formula into machinery. The same is true of Halacha. The know-how is a very difficult art. The task of the rabbi, as I visualize it, does not exhaust itself in writing ^{אורח חיים} but in introducing Halachic purposiveness and order into a chaotic communal existence and in demonstrating to the American Jew that our traditional way of life can become a reality. The Yeshiva must equip the student with the necessary tools which he will later utilize in order to meet this

challenge.

We cannot afford the luxury of indulging in Halachic discourses, however sublime and profound, which are only of a theoretical nature and at the same time neglect topics and problems of the most practical significance, with which the rabbi is confronted daily and which form the fundamentals of our practical codes. It would be absurd, for instance, to concentrate while studying *Shema* upon the problem of *Shema* and neglect the chapters dealing with *Shema*. It would also be fallacious to spend a year on *Shema* and at the same time withhold from the student Halachic information about *Shema* which are related to almost every daily occurrences. Unfortunately, many teachers at the Yeshiva have practiced this peculiar form of pedagogy whose consequences are very detrimental.

Fourth, I believe that it is hardly necessary to state that philosophical training for the rabbi is of paramount importance. I deny not the historical fact that *Shema* has been bent more on the formulation of objective rules of conduct, specialized methods of Halachic research and formal technical analysis than upon the translation of our inner experience into a universal philosophical language. Judaism has been satisfied with an implicit philosophy and metaphysics, not feeling the need for outward expression as to the ultimate goal and mysterious origin of our great transcendental experience. However, slowly and painfully we have learned that the want of a philosophy defined in discursive terms, might be very annoying in times of crises and historical transition. Had, for instance, Second Commonwealth Judaism formulated its great moralistic doctrines in a philosophical vernacular comprehensible to both Jew and non-Jew of that era, Christianity would not have been able to boast throughout the ages that it had discovered new ethical horizons and would not have been credited with being a progressive religion. The Gentile would have known then that the "new" vistas allegedly unlocked by the founders of the church had been beheld long before their advent by the Jewish rabbis and moralists. *Shema* has always suffered from a

sense of shyness and reluctance to disclose our wisdom to the outside world, Maimonides and others realized the need for philosophical self-revelation and self-expression and resorted to metaphysics and philosophy to meet the challenge of *Shema*. If the perplexed cry out for a guide, we must satisfy their need and place them in philosophical counsel and leadership.

On the other hand, let us not forget that in our "materialistic", technocratic country, there is a powerful and constant quest for religious truth and its great redeeming and uplifting experiences. In no other country do people display so much interest in religious topics as they do here. Nowhere in Europe is there such a great demand for religious literature as there is in America and no book on religion could become a best-seller in the old country as it happens frequently here. May I point out that great universities in America have of late begun to expand and reorganize their divinity schools. The best example is Harvard which is attempting to transform a fossilized school of theology,

and this lack of metaphysical boldness and resoluteness has reversioned itself upon us more than all

which was already on the verge of complete disintegration, into an outstanding research center on religious thought and its impact upon contemporary civilization. In a word, the present-day American mentality is very susceptible and responsive to religious philosophic stimuli.

Unfortunately, the all-inclusive, dynamic Halacha has become completely divorced from this querying and questing and is not involved in this Sturm and Drang theological movement which is so characteristic of the American religious scene today.

That this neglect is detrimental to our cause is obvious. The intelligent lay leader in his search for religious literature will never chance upon a genuine presentation of the Halacha and traditional Judaism and, instead, will quench his thirst for knowledge with pseudo-philosophical platitudes. Moreover, the rabbi who lacks a sound philosophical understanding of our world-view will never be able to transmit to his congregants a unique message of Halachic Judaism. His sermons will resemble the stereotyped preaching of the average minister or reform rabbi.

Therefore, it is incumbent upon the Yeshiva to acquaint the student with the philosophical vistas of our faith. He must receive a sound training in the Jewish philosophical tradition, its problems and methods. Particular emphasis should be placed upon the Halachic aspects of our world view.

Fifth, the Yeshiva should establish an adequate promotion system and way of rewarding students for their efforts and scholastic achievements. It is always a heartache for me when I have to sign the identical S'micha for the mediocre and the brilliant, for the diligent and lazy graduate. There is no mark of recognition of the good student and this has destructive effects upon the mentality of the student body since there is no incentive for outstanding accomplishment and no motive to prompt the boys to excel in their studies. The sarcastic words of Koheleth *אין שום דבר חדש תחת השמש* are true in our case.

(The technical details of such a system could be easily worked out and such a change would vastly enhance the prestige of scholarship and inspire the students to greater efforts).

In view of the above-developed ideas I wish to suggest to you the following practical changes to be introduced in the graduate department of our Yeshiva. (I am confining my suggestions to the graduate department since, notwithstanding the rule that educational reforms must start at the bottom, for reasons best known to you, a thorough reorganization of the undergraduate department is not feasible under present circumstances.)

The minimum period of postgraduate residence should be extended from two to three years. This would be an important step forward. Since the leading theological seminaries throughout the country require a B.A. degree for admission and four years' residence for ordination, there is no reason why our Yeshiva should ordain students whose age is below the average of the theological student in America.

The lengthening of the time of residence, however important, does not alone spell the difference between failure and success. The latter depends upon the way in which this period is utilized. The main danger lies in the complacent approach of the teacher to whom time is of no value. The Yeshiva must demand from every teacher that he account for the time spent with the student in terms of scholastic accomplishment. Days, weeks and months must not drag aimlessly on and the student must not drift along with them like a canoe carried by the tide without guidance and direction.

The studies in the graduate division should consist of three courses:

First: Halacha, leading to הוראה in all three fields הוראה, דעה, אגדה. Of course, the Talmudic sources will always constitute the frame of reference. I do not believe in teaching הוראה which is completely severed from its Talmudic background. Yet the instruction in each particular code, must aim not at pure abstract knowledge, but as was indicated above, at the methods and application.

I further suggest that a year be spent on each of the codes. The first year, for instance, (although the order is immaterial), should be devoted to the study of בבלי, ירושלמי and משנה which, in my opinion, must form one inseparable entity. From my own experience, I know, and am willing if permitted to demonstrate it, that it is possible to complete both within a year's time, provided that there is a well-planned and intensive effort on the part of the teacher to cover the material. I doubt whether we should emphasize the detail at the expense of the fundamentals. The latter can and should be mastered in this allotted time. In the second year, the student must be introduced into the intricacies of גמרא - אגדה. A thorough study of the essential parts of אגדה, אגדה, אגדה, אגדה is indispensable and would help him later in his career to adopt an intelligent attitude with regard to such problems which occur daily. I do not mean that these studies will qualify the Yeshiva graduate to render decisions relative to אגדה and other complicated matters, however, he will be able at least to see the crux of the problem and to comprehend its implications and complications. The third year the student will occupy himself with אגדה. I would say that אגדה

and parts of אגדה should form the subject matter of his studies. The synagogue has been shifted into the focus of communal life

in our country and the rabbi's role as a guide and conseller of his congregation in matters pertaining to ritual has come to the forefront. I know of many incidents in which the rabbi forfeited his exalted position because of his ignorance of the foundations of prayer.

I would also include *Shema Yisrael* in the curriculum of the third year. The knowledge of this subject is essential for a practising rabbi.

Second: A thorough knowledge of the Pentateuch with its two basic commentaries Rashi and Nachmonides is a must. The candidate for a rabbinical degree ought to know not only intricate laws of but also the five books of Moses. The teaching of the Pentateuch must pursue a two-fold purpose. First, the knowledge of the Halachic components of the *Torah* - a good acquaintanceship with the laws of the Pentateuch which enrich enormously the mind of the student. Second, profound understanding of the Biblical narratives not only as historical records of a distant past but also as parts of the great historical drama of our people and as archetypes of the Jewish paradoxical destiny charged with powerful ethical motifs.

Third: Although it is difficult to teach Jewish philosophy of religion as an isolated course divorced from the general stream of religious metaphysical thought, we must, however, attempt within the short time at our disposal, to impart to the student a minimum of ideas based upon our philosophical tradition. It is almost incomprehensible that a rabbi leaving the portals of our Yeshiva should not master at least the four basic texts of Jewish medieval thought, if not in their entirety, then at least their most essential parts. I therefore suggest that a study of ~~the essential parts of these books~~ *the essential parts of these books* be made compulsory. It is impossible to point out here the selections from these books to be included in the required course. As a rule, I wish to say, we shall discriminate in these medieval books between genuine creative writing which is of perennial worth and an obsolete philosophical jargon which is engendered by each era. We might leave out, for instance, all Maimonidean ingenuities with regard to the Aristotelian physics and concentrate instead upon his moralistic and ethical ideas. *But this can be easily worked out.*

At regular intervals throughout the three-year residence period, written and oral examinations should be given to the students in order to check their knowledge and assure them that the time they have spent has not been wasted.

I have sketched roughly my thoughts in regard to your plan of reorganization of the graduate division of the Yeshiva and I hope that they may contribute toward the advancement of our beloved institution.

Sincerely yours,