

# The Students Versus the First Dean of Yeshiva College: The Beginning of *Commentator* Politics

BY: Zev Eleff

*This essay is dedicated to Dr. David Srolovitz, Dean of Yeshiva College, whose commitment to scholarship and excellence is only surpassed by his devotion to his students.*

Founded during the spring semester of 1935, *The Commentator*, the student newspaper of Yeshiva College, spent its first months publishing non-confrontational news items and polite editorials. The Governing Board, led by Editor-in-Chief Moses I. Feuerstein, took some issue with Yeshiva College policies, but it appears that its overwhelmingly benevolent attitude toward the institution kept the newspaper in the good graces of Yeshiva President Bernard Revel's administration. One reader wrote to the paper during that first semester complaining that the sum total of all the Governing Board's editorials "has been some mild and evasive opinions on general questions." Despite this, the student journalists' generally complimentary pieces on the school's administration did not cease that year under Feuerstein, whose family maintained a close relationship with President Revel. The following excerpt of a letter – one of the few of its kind in what remains of Dr. Bernard Revel's personal files – sent to Samuel Feuerstein, a wealthy donor to Yeshiva, does well to illustrate this point:

"I want to let you know that in the recent written examination in the Talmudic department, your son surprised me pleasantly, by making a good showing. His attitude toward his Hebrew studies has greatly improved; and I sincerely trust that the true spirit, which abides in you and your family, will continue to grow in him and strengthen him for his life ahead."<sup>1</sup>

Another explanation for the newspaper's timidity is that Feuerstein and his fellow editors could not be sure how the Yeshiva community would react to a saber-rattling newspaper. Although the previous generations of Yeshiva students published newsheets, they were sporadic and functioned as bulletins to inform students of prayer times and special lectures. Certainly, in an institution modeled after the yeshivot of Eastern Europe, many rabbis and teachers spoke up in opposition when Feuerstein petitioned the administration to start a college newspaper in 1934. Mindful of how hard a task it was to call in favors and ultimately convince Dr. Revel to permit publication of the unprecedented student organ, Feuerstein was careful in his first months to straddle the thin line between editing a liberal college newspaper and behaving as a reverent

yeshivah student.

Yet, it would not be long before *The Commentator* developed its biting—and oftentimes seathing—pen, just over a year after printing its first edition. In its first major attack on the administration, *The Commentator* aimed its crosshairs on Dr. Shelley R. Safir, the first dean of Yeshiva College. Safir was a "close associate" of President Revel and served for many years as high school principal of the Talmudical Academy. When, in the late 1920s, Dr. Revel set about assembling a collegiate faculty, Safir was one of the few men the former trusted for giving counsel. As a result, it is not surprising that Safir was appointed Yeshiva College's first dean in 1931.<sup>2</sup>

However, while he had the backing of the school's higher administration, Safir's relationship with the student body was fraught with animosities from the time he assumed the deanship. As time progressed, Safir removed himself from taking part in student activities; the newspaper was not an exception. In Feuerstein's three semesters running the paper, we do not find a single quote attributed to Safir or inclusion of his name in any news story dealing with Yeshiva College. Instead, reporters retrieved YC news from Jacob I. Hartstein, the College's registrar at that time. Yet, in the publication's first year, despite student-organized opposition to Safir, *The Commentator* omitted any mention of it. The exclusion of student resentment for the Dean is especially noteworthy after considering that, on several occasions that year, editors were called into Safir's office under threat of censorship and disbandment.

Nevertheless, after two semesters of placating administrators, *The Commentator* devoted significant space to sharp criticism of Safir. Perhaps Feuerstein was aware of the faculty's growing displeasure for Safir's handling of the College's finances in the thick of the country's Great Depression. Also, with his father's strong ties to Dr. Revel, and informed of the President's preoccupation with fundraising and his deteriorating health, Feuerstein knew that resistance to any attack deployed in the paper would not be forthcoming from Safir's superiors.<sup>3</sup>

Teaming up with student government, the newspaper's large headline on the front page of the March 19, 1936 issue read:

**DEAN SAFIR CHARGED AS UNFIT FOR OFFICE; STUDENT COUNCIL ORDERS IMMEDIATE PROBE OF INDICTMENTS**

Reportedly, three days prior to the publication, Student Council members accused the Dean of "total disregard" for Yeshiva's religious ideals, incompetence in fulfilling his role

as dean, alienation of students, and behaving immorally, in a way unbecoming of the Dean of Yeshiva College. After hearing the charges in a session that took well over half an hour, the Student Council deployed a committee to investigate the matter and report back to the Council. In an accompanying editorial, Feuerstein's Board supported the Student Council's decision to probe the students' case against Dean Safir, but cautioned student representatives that they engage only in "fair play". Despite their strategically reserved tenor, the editors could not resist emphasizing that "the charges against Dr. Safir are of such a serious nature that, if substantiated, they would definitely disqualify a man from the deanship of any college, much less Yeshiva."

Yet, to understand the newspapermen's motives fully, we must consider the available details purposely omitted in both the front-page news story and the inside editorial—namely, the specific accusations levied against Dean Safir. In a three-page resolution, the Student Council outlined much more grievous indictments than the ones alluded to by the paper. The Student Council claimed to have in its possession copies of letters from Dr. Revel to Safir that proved that the Dean mishandled funds for both the College and the Talmudical Academy. In listing Safir's "acts against Jewish law," the Council reported the following:

"1. Students were sent by the Dean to a non Kosher restaurant for the purchase of meat sandwiches.

2. Dr. Safir was seen on several occasions driving to and from the Yeshiva in his car on the Sabbath. On one occasion in tennis clothes and with tennis equipment."<sup>4</sup>

In addition, the Student Council cited the Dean's use of "loud and intemperate language." However, most astounding of all was the Council's claim that "Dr. Safir has appeared to be unduly intimate with his former secretary." As a result of Safir's affair and the newspaper's very public report of the charges made by the Student Council, Dr. Revel appointed a committee consisting of five Yeshiva College professors to do whatever you may deem necessary in order to ascertain all the facts in this connection. This includes the calling of witnesses and the examination of all pertinent evidence. Upon completion of your investigation you will kindly present to me your findings together with your recommendations.<sup>5</sup>

In a letter from the appointed members of the committee to Safir dated May 11, 1936, they informed the dean that they were "happy to state that a great many of these [charges] could be rejected as irrelevant without further

investigation. There remain, however, certain others which require examination." While we cannot know which accusations were the ones that resulted in Safir's eventual removal from the deanship, we can be sure that the students were the ones primarily responsible for the dismissal. Further, that Feuerstein and his fellow editors were aware of the details of the Student Council's charges is indubitable. Nevertheless, despite enough ammunition to involve the school's Board members, *The Commentator's* self-censored news and balanced editorial treatment of the affair reflect a level of respect for the graveness of the situation. Whether the Governing Board's decision was based on respect for Safir's personal privacy or for the integrity of the College is also unknowable. What may be discerned, however, is that in the earliest days the editors of *The Commentator* viewed themselves not as a fourth estate, but as a part of student leadership meant to work toward bettering Yeshiva College. Indeed, these newsmen were both wary of projecting flippancy unbecoming rabbinical students and were, at the same time, energized college students rearing to get involved in the politics of their beloved school.



After the March issue, *The Commentator* chose to refrain altogether from further direct discussion of the Safir affair for the remainder of the semester. However, with an irreverent punch, the surly college newsmen did opt to reprint a letter to the editor from Dean Safir originally published in the paper's inaugural issue on March 1, 1935 that described the newspaper as a "source of gratification" and expressed the Dean's hope that the student organ "will serve as a link to the students and the faculty." The only other reference to Safir in the publication came in *The Commentator's* final issue of the year. On the front page of the edition, an article released the results of a poll taken of the Yeshiva College senior class. The typical graduating senior of 1936, the poll reported, would resign if he were the Dean of