



# KOL HAMEVASER

The Jewish Thought Magazine of the Yeshiva University Student Body

## The Year in Israel

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## About Kol Hamevaser

Kol Hamevaser, the Jewish thought magazine of the Yeshiva University student body, is dedicated to sparking discussion of the Jewish issues on the Yeshiva University campus and beyond. The magazine hopes to facilitate the religious and intellectual growth of its readership and serves as a forum for students to express their views on a variety of issues that face the Jewish community. It also provides opportunities for young scholars to grow in their intellectual pursuits and mature into confident Jewish leaders. Kol Hamevaser is published on a monthly basis and its primary contributors are undergraduates, although it also includes input from RIETS Roshei Yeshivah, YU Professors, and outside scholars. In addition to its print magazine, it also sponsors special events, speakers, discussion groups, conferences, and shabbatonim. The magazine can be found online at [www.kolhamevaser.com](http://www.kolhamevaser.com).

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**This magazine contains words of Torah.  
Please treat it with respect.**

# The Year in Israel: An Introduction to the *Shanah ba-Arets*

BY: Ilana Gadish

The year in Israel has become a widespread social phenomenon, to the point that, as many of the writers in this issue note, students finishing their yeshivah or day school educations are almost expected to continue their study with a year in Israel. This year is seen as a unique opportunity to focus on study of Torah; the year in Israel is often considered central to the Torah education of the observant Jewish student. Some Jewish high school graduates of other denominations also choose to spend a year in Israel, post-high school, in various year-long programs. Conversely, many students in the Orthodox community, as well as in the broader Jewish community, do not spend a year studying in Israel. In the Orthodox community, many claim that the year in Israel is essential to establishing a strong Jewish foundation and a connection to Torah-observant Judaism. However, attending a *shanah ba-arets* program is not a guarantee that a student will remain connected to Torah, the land of Israel, and to Judaism, nor is it unlikely for students who do not spend a year in Israel to achieve goals similar to those who do.

As R. Rapp mentions in his interview<sup>1</sup>, no two *shana ba-arets* programs are the same. Yeshivot, seminaries, and Israel volunteer programs all have different goals and mission statements. This is a positive phenomenon, in that students have a plethora of opportunities presented before them, and can find an institution with a curriculum and ideology most suited for them. Conversely, the variety in ideology, hashkafah, and goals can lead the students (and even educators) to overemphasize these differences, leading to factions and splits in the younger Jewish community. Students become obsessively concerned with details such as size, color, and material of *kippot*, or differences in centimeters of sleeve-length and skirt color. External differences are suddenly hyper-stressed, and are reason for students of different yeshivot or different seminaries not only to refrain from interacting with each other, but to express disdain and disrespect for each other. Accent and pronunciation of Hebrew words while learning Torah, or the students' jargon and diction, become more important than the words being said and studied themselves.

It seems that the oft-asked question "where did you go in Israel?" serves to draw certain conclusions about the individual based on his or her answer. Furthermore, the one who answers "I didn't go to Israel" is faced with the oftentimes-false assumptions of others. The enterprise of trying to delineate a person's hashkafah or religious observance level based on where or whether they went to Israel for the year is unsophisticated and insensitive, and creates chasms in Jewish communities on college campuses. Perhaps these are just microcosmic manifestations of larger fissures in the broader

Jewish community. Either way, there is definitely room for introspection and critical analysis of the broader project of the year in Israel.

That being said, the year in Israel is an opportunity for students to focus entirely on their Jewish identity, observance, and Torah study in an environment that fosters personal and spiritual growth during a time of transition from the structure of one's family and home to the vast world of choice and independence of a university setting. It is important for the positive features of the year in Israel to continue to develop, while ensuring that the potential negative results are scrutinized and ultimately prevented. Thus, it is important for our community to devote time and energy in taking a close look at the year in Israel, as to ensure that the goals and effects of the year are serving the broader Jewish community in the best (and most varied) ways possible. The goal of this issue is to engage in a critical analysis of the phenomenon of the year in Israel and to offer a diverse spectrum of perspectives on the subject.

Most students writing for this issue have the obvious advantage of having spent a year or even two studying in Israel, and their perspectives are particularly important. Talya Laufer's article makes a critical assessment of the *Rebbe-talmid* (Rabbi-student) relationship in the context of year in Israel

programs. Chesky Kopel analyzes the anonymous anecdotes of a student spending a year in Israel at an unknown yeshivah published in *The 5 Towns Jewish Times* under the pseudonym "Talmid X." Tammie Senders writes about her own year in Israel experience, and, among other points, stresses the importance of keeping an open mind during the year. Fran Tanner, a graduate of SCW and a *madrikhah* (counselor) for the American students studying at the *Beit Midrash le-Nashim* at Migdal Oz, powerfully emphasizes the need for students to view the year in Israel not as a "gap-year" but rather as a part of what students call "real life," as she notes that viewing the year in Israel as the only or focal opportunity for Torah study in one's life reduces its effectiveness.


Unique perspectives are presented in this issue by educators in *shanah ba-arets* programs. In her article, Mrs. Naomi Berman of Midreshet Lindenbaum discusses how the year in Israel impacts students and their involvement on college campuses, while an interview with Mrs. Mali Brofsky of Michlelet Mevaseret Yerushalayim (MMY) offers insight on various facets of the *shanah ba-arets*. Additionally, an interview with R. Dani Rapp contains reflections on the year in Israel from the point of view of a *Rebbe* at Yeshiva University, and it discusses both spiritual

and academical benefits for students. An interview with R. Dr. Shalom Berger, author of *Flipping Out?: Myth or Fact? The Impact of the "Year in Israel,"*<sup>2</sup> provides historical and sociological insights on the year in Israel. In general Jewish thought, Chana Cooper writes about the status of the *eved Kena'ani* (Canaanite slave).

We hope that this issue provides insightful ideas on the phenomenon of the year in Israel, and that these insights are helpful and conducive to generating productive conversation in the broader Jewish community on this important educational matter.

*Ilana Gadish is a senior at SCW majoring in Jewish Studies with a minor in Biology. She is an Associate Editor for Kol Hamevaser.*


1. "An Interview with R. Daniel Rapp," pp. 12-13.
2. Shalom Z. Berger, Daniel Jacobson, and Chaim I. Waxman, *Flipping Out?: Myth or Fact?: The Impact of the "Year in Israel"* (New York: Yashar Books, 2007).



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# The Year in Israel

## A Spectrum of Rabbi-Student Relationships in Light of the Year in Israel

BY: Talya Laufer

The Gemara in *Berakhot* 62a relates a series of anecdotes about two Tanna'im and an Amora and the extremes to which each of them went in order to learn from his teacher. R. Akiva and Ben Azzai followed their mentors to the bathroom, while R. Kahana lay hidden under the marital bed of his teacher, Rav. When rebuked for taking such liberties with their masters, all three justified their actions by declaring, "*Torah hi ve-lilmod ani tsarikh* – It is Torah and I am required to study it."

One issue these stories raise is how far one may go to further one's pursuit of Torah knowledge. However, a more general issue raised in these anecdotes is that of the boundaries of the rabbi-student relationship. The stories in the Gemara relate to the rabbi-student relationship as being centered around *talmud Torah* and Halakhah, but the question of parameters is equally pertinent when it comes to the parts of these relationships that exist outside of the classroom and *beit midrash*. When students look to their teachers for instruction on matters external to the halakhic system, boundaries that may already be unclear can be blurred further. Thus, healthy relationships between rabbis and their students should be subject to certain limits in order to uphold more important values. In the case of R. Akiva, Ben Azzai, and R. Kahana, the principles that may or may not have been violated were ones of modesty and privacy. In the context of extra-halakhic instruction, the values at stake include, but are not limited to, intellectual autonomy and self-expression.

Throughout my studies both at an Israeli high school and an institution for advanced women's learning, I was always interested in the overlap between learning Torah from educators in the classroom and learning about life from these same people in other contexts. The above story

**“In a community that educates for independent thought and healthy doses of skepticism, is this new model of rabbi-student relationships counterproductive to its goals?”**

from *Berakhot* is obviously an extreme, almost ludicrous, example. To me, the story has always highlighted the need for boundaries between rabbis and students. For the Modern Orthodox community, which generally champions the value of critical and independent thought, this question is particularly relevant. An examination of the parameters that govern these relationships is especially vital in light of the relatively recent addition to the standard track of Modern Orthodox Jewish education, namely, the

year in Israel. Since the end of the twentieth century, thousands of Modern Orthodox students have decided to extend their formal Jewish education by spending at least a year immersed in Torah study in Israel, and the numbers are growing steadily.<sup>1</sup>

Rabbis and educators in these post-high school programs are usually significantly more involved in the spiritual development of their students than their American yeshivah high school counterparts. This can be attributed to the fact that while consistency and excellence in learning are encouraged at the high school level, students at yeshivot and midrashot in Israel are free of the stressful scholastic pressures of high school. Even in those programs that do administer tests and give grades, these are not a central part of the experience. The informal atmosphere that prevails, as a result, encourages the cultivation of rabbi/teacher-student relationships.<sup>2</sup>

Another circumstance that is conducive to teacher-student relationships in Israel is the nature of the year in Israel as a transition period for most students, largely because it is an experience that forces them to make important life decisions – religious and otherwise – for themselves. Therefore, they often reach out to their rabbis and teachers in search of emotional and psychological assistance.<sup>3</sup> Students seek advice on topics ranging from family and romantic relationships to their future goals and life plans.

In a community that educates for independent thought and healthy doses of skepticism, is this new model of rabbi-student relationships counterproductive to its goals? Furthermore, are rabbis and educators in year in Israel programs qualified to counsel their students on extra-halakhic issues? How so? This question pertains to the relationships between rabbis and members of the Modern Orthodox community both individually and collectively. This article, however, will focus on the individual aspect of this question.

There is a broad spectrum of approaches that can be adopted in justifying these relationships, ranging from models originating in the ultra-Orthodox community to models molded after various Western perceptions of leadership. It is my intention to discuss three such models that, in my opinion, represent the most significant points on this spectrum.

The first model is the one adopted, for the most part, by Haredi and Yeshivish communities in Israel

and the Diaspora alike: a concept often referred to as *Da'at Torah*. It is important to note that the origins of the concept of *Da'at Torah* and the extent of its basis in rabbinic literature are much-disputed issues and are beyond the scope of this article.<sup>4</sup>

R. Bernard Weinberger, former leader of the Young Israel of Brooklyn and member of the Rabbinical Alliance of America (RAA), eloquently defines *Da'at Torah* as understood by the RAA and the Agudath Israel of America:

**“But wherever on the spectrum a rabbi-student relationship stands, rabbis must be conscious of the weighty responsibility that comes along with agreeing to counsel students/congregants on extra-halakhic matters.”**

“This [*Da'at Torah*] involves a lot more than a Torah *Weltanschauung*, or a Torah-saturated perspective. It assumes a special endowment or capacity to penetrate objective reality, recognize the facts as they ‘really’ are, and apply the pertinent Halakhic principles. It is a form of ‘Ruach Hakodesh,’ as it were, which borders if only remotely on the periphery of prophecy.”<sup>5</sup>

Proponents of *Da'at Torah* believe that extensive knowledge of Torah imbues a person with the ability to render judgment not only on matters of halakhic concern, but also on political, psychological, economic, and other issues.

One example of a supposed manifestation of *Da'at Torah* in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the source of the extensive medical knowledge of R. Avraham Yeshayahu Karelitz, also known as the Hazon Ish. The ArtScroll History volume on the Hazon Ish's life relates the marvels and miracles that took place as a result of his expert medical counseling. The Hazon Ish purportedly possessed knowledge of human anatomy and medicine as broad as any professionally-trained physician of his time, and he would frequently issue practical medical instructions to those who sought his counsel. The source of his vast repository of knowledge is unknown, though ArtScroll suggests that “his every counsel was Divinely inspired.”<sup>6</sup>

It is important to note that while individuals allegedly possessing *Da'at Torah* must be experts on Halakhah, decisions involving *Da'at Torah* are not arrived at through halakhic arguments. While halakhic reasoning may be part of the decision-making process, conclusions are reached by means external to Halakhah, be they *ruah ha-kodesh* (divine inspiration), intuition, or worldly knowledge acquired outside the *beit midrash*.<sup>7</sup>

According to this extreme view that upholds the idea of *Da'at Torah*, rabbinic leaders are qualified to offer advice and even issue binding

statements regarding issues unrelated to Halakhah. Consequently, it would be very fitting for a rabbi at a post-high school program in Israel to advise his students on matters pertaining to family, relationships, dress, college, emotional wellbeing, or other extra-halakhic questions.

Another justification for rabbinic counseling outside the framework of *pesak Halakhah* (rendering a legal judgment) lies in a reexamination of the definition of *pesak Halakhah*. The concept of

halakhic *pesak* need not necessarily be interpreted in the classical sense of a rabbi issuing a definitive ruling regarding questions of *issur ve-hetter* (the prohibited and the permitted). Many issues, individual or communal, presented to rabbinic figures might not appear at face value to be halakhic in nature, although they do indeed have halakhic ramifications.

On an individual level, a student may come to his/her rabbi seeking advice regarding which institution of higher education to attend. The choice may be between attending a religious versus a secular university, or between attending a university at all versus learning full-time in a *yeshivah gevohah* (advanced yeshivah). Whatever the options are, though the decision may seem to be outside the realm of Halakhah, its halakhic ramifications place it within the boundaries of halakhic *pesak*; that is to say, Jewish law extends beyond immediate questions of *issur ve-hetter*. In this instance, since the student has a halakhic obligation to be engaged in *talmud Torah*, a rabbi may advise his student against attending an institution at which he believes the student's commitment to learning will falter.

The concept of what seem to be extra-halakhic issues having halakhic extensions can hold true on a communal level as well. For instance, R. Ovadia Yosef is the spiritual leader of the Shas political party in Israel, and thus his opinions have extensive weight in the forming of party policy. There is a general consensus in Israeli ultra-Orthodox society (especially in the Sefaradi community) that R. Yosef's decisions are to be accepted by virtue of their coming from a source of *Da'at Torah*, in the strongest sense of the term. According to the model presented above, however, R. Yosef's pronouncements could be binding for his community, not because he is a *gadol* possessed of *Da'at Torah*, nor because he is qualified to make political decisions, but rather because these political



decisions are actually halakhic in nature (and R. Yosef's qualifications as a halakhist are virtually undisputed in the Orthodox community today). For example, it can be suggested that when R. Yosef issued a statement in 2004 declaring that anyone who voted for Shas in the upcoming elections would be ensured a place in Heaven,<sup>8</sup> he did so in order to enable Shas to maximize its efforts to build and improve the religious infrastructure in Israel, a cause which can certainly be considered halakhically-driven.

A third justification for rabbis proffering extra-halakhic advice to their students is by virtue of their being "Torah personalities." As an educator, a rabbi's job does not end with teaching a shi'ur and assisting his students in honing their *talmud Torah* skills. It is the rabbi's duty to impart to his students his worldview and system of values. R. Shalom Carmy describes R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik as conveying to his students

"Not only an introduction to halakhic literature and its analysis, but also a 'philosophy,' a way of thinking about, and weighing, the principles underlying the Halakhah, a living sense of religious experience, and a sensitivity to human variety and particular circumstance."<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, the Rav's goals as an educator were not limited to teaching Torah, but rather extended to passing on a religious experience and a hashkafah.

Without asserting that the Torah is the exclusive source of all knowledge, it is still reasonable to suggest that subsumed within it is an ennobling system of values and principles.<sup>10</sup> Thus, when a student looks up to a "Torah individual" who embodies many of the values that the student is striving to embody, it is quite logical for the student to seek counsel from that individual. The rabbi's advice would then be considered more like a "point in the right direction" or a way to assist the student in applying his values to his life, rather than a formal *pesak*.

As mentioned earlier, the above three models represent what I believe to be three significant points on a broad spectrum of models of rabbi-student relationships. To me, a glaring, but not fundamental, issue with the first two models that is somewhat minimized in the third is the tremendous risk of abuse of power they pose. I think the third model provides more opportunity for students and congregants to be critical in choosing role models and counselors. But wherever on the spectrum a rabbi-student relationship stands, rabbis must be conscious of the weighty responsibility that comes along with agreeing to counsel students/congregants on extra-halakhic matters. However they justify giving advice on a matter that is outside their professional area of expertise, they must bear in mind the enormity of the power they possess to influence the lives of those who trust and admire them. With this power comes a measure of accountability, if not technical then spiritual, for whatever action the recipient of advice may or may not take.

On the flip side, it is crucial that the individual consulting with a rabbi is cognizant of certain risks implicit in seeking counsel on questions outside of Halakhah. Asking for advice when confronted with a difficult situation is surely a wise and commendable step. However, a distinction must be drawn between

asking a rabbi for guidance so as to make a better-informed and insightful decision, and asking a rabbi to *make* the decision. When torn by a troubling issue, it is easy to abdicate personal responsibility for one's decisions by attributing them to a rabbi and leaning on his status as a "Torah individual" for legitimization in the face of challenges to one's actions. It is not difficult to fall into a passive approach to one's life, in which all the important issues and decisions are turned over to people who are supposedly better equipped to deal with them.

This is especially true within the context of the *shannah ba-arets* experience. During the course of the year in Israel, students often undergo transformative processes that challenge many of their pre-conceived notions about Judaism, Torah, and life in general. When contemplating how to proceed with these developments, both during the year and after it, the idea of finding a trusted mentor to whom one can turn for advice amidst all of the change and challenge is an attractive one. Students must be mindfully accountable for their decisions and the actions that follow them. Extra-halakhic rabbinic guidance is not meant to provide miraculous answers and solutions, but to encourage self-awareness and trigger thoughtful decision-making.

*Talya Laufer is a sophomore at SCW majoring in Chemistry and Talmudic Studies.*

1. Daniel Jacobson, "In Search of Self: Psychological Perspectives on Change During the 'Year in Israel,'" in *Flipping Out?: Myth or Fact?: The Impact of the "Year in Israel,"* ed. by Shalom Z. Berger, Daniel Jacobson, and Chaim I. Waxman (Brooklyn, NY: Yashar Books, 2007), p. 90.
2. Jacobson, p. 118.
3. Jacobson, p. 120.
4. For further reading, see Lawrence Kaplan, "Daas Torah: A Modern Conception of Rabbinic Authority," in *Rabbinic Authority and Personal Autonomy*, ed. by Moshe Z. Sokol (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1992), pp. 1-60; Alfred S. Cohen, "Daat Torah," *Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society* 45 (2003): 67-105.
5. Bernard Weinberger, "The Role of the Gedolim," *The Jewish Observer* 1,2 (1963): 6-10.
6. Shimon Finkelman, *The Chazon Ish: The Life and Ideals of Rabbi Avraham Yeshayah Karelitz* (Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 1989), p. 205.
7. Kaplan, p. 18.
8. Lilach Weissman Itim, "Rabbi Ovadia Yosef: Whoever Votes for Kadima Will Go to Hell," *Haaretz*, March 25, 2006, available at: <http://www.haaretz.com/news/rabbi-ovadia-yosef-whenever-votes-for-kadima-will-go-to-hell-1.183608>.
9. Shalom Carmy, "The Heart Pained by the Pain of the People: Rabbinic Leadership in Two Discussions by R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik," *The Torah u-Madda Journal* 13 (2005): 1-14, at p. 2.
10. R. Lichtenstein develops this idea in his essay in the 1997 Orthodox Forum: Aharon Lichtenstein, "Legitimization of Modernity: Classical and Contemporary," in *Engaging Modernity: Rabbinic Leaders and the Challenge of the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Moshe Z. Sokol (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1997), 3-33, at p. 2.

## An Interview with Mrs. Mali Brofsky

BY: Sarit Bendavid

*What would you say are the basic goals of the shannah ba-arets for American students?*

I think the age at which people embark on this *shannah alef* experience is really a time of self-development and identity formation, and the year gives people an opportunity to think seriously about the extent to which Judaism is going to play a role in their personal identity. This is accomplished by studying traditional Jewish texts and also by being exposed to a vibrant and meaningful Judaism in Israel in a way that some students may have not experienced before. It is a combination of exposure, education, and then ultimately integration into their lives.

*Do you think that all students emerging from yeshivah day schools in America should be encouraged to study in midrashah/yeshivah for the year? Do you think that the learning might not be suitable for some people?*

I think nothing is black and white, and there are always going to be exceptions, individuals who, for personal or developmental reasons, are not suited for the year in Israel. But in general, Jewish teenagers have something to gain from taking off time and delving into their Jewish heritage as well as experiencing or examining the meaning of the State of Israel. With regard to learning, I would say there is probably a type, degree, and style of learning for everyone. So, again, there are a variety of programs, and the key is to find the one that best suits the individual's needs – religiously, intellectually, emotionally, and personally.

*How do you think educators in post-high school Israel programs can best ensure that change or development is substantial and lasting?*

That is a great question. I think it is probably best achieved by working to create change that is really internalized and congruent with whom the person wants to be. That means that there is no one right approach, and there should not be an end goal in mind. There could be general guidelines, but there should not be a stereotypical student that you would want to create. I think you have to help the student figure out who he or she wants to be and really work with each individual. And I think that the growth needs to be slow, steady, and authentic, rather than extreme and fast, if it is going to be long-lasting.

*Should the focus for students be on building learning skills, gaining knowledge, or personal growth?*

Ideally, I would say all of those things are valuable, and this also depends on the student's skills and inclinations. The student should really find the institution that best suits his or her needs hashkafically and intellectually. I think it is important that the institutions present themselves honestly and say what they are about so that students really know what it is that they are getting themselves into and

can pick an institution that is best for them.

I personally believe in skills building, which allows students to take learning with them for life so that it grows with them, as one does not stop developing when he or she is eighteen. I am sure those of you who are in college realize that life continues, so it would be a shame if your Torah development remained at one level and the rest of your development continued somewhere else. I also think that the year is an opportunity to amass information and knowledge. Concerning personal growth, I think this should always be a goal. If it is not about growth, then why are you doing it? And all Torah learning should lead to growth, for Torah is meant to impact one's development.

*As an educator for women, do you think that women's programs should be styled similarly to the beit midrash model of most men's programs? Do you think that there are significant differences between the ways men and women approach learning Torah, and, if so, how should those differences manifest themselves in their respective programs?*



I think you really asked two different questions there. I think that your first question was, should women's programs have a beit midrash? I personally do believe in the power of the beit midrash as an integral part of *talmud Torah* – making Torah your own and being exposed to the breadth and depth of knowledge. I could talk about the benefits of the beit midrash forever – the value of independent learning and delving into the texts and making them a part of you. But I could hear an argument that it might not be right for each student and may not reach each student, so there might be a need to adjust systems and curricula accordingly to fit different types of students. "*Chanoch la-na'ar al pi darko*," "Educate the child in his own way" – this should be true for males as well as females. I do not see the question of beit midrash as gender-differentiated.

However, even though I am saying that, I absolutely do believe in differences between males and females, and these differences will affect the way that males and females experience everything, including the beit midrash. As my guiding rule when approached with questions of this kind, I always quote a very famous *devar Torah* by the Akeidat Yitschak.ii He explains that women have two names, Chavvah and Ishah. Chavvah is *em kol chai*,

## “I am sure those of you who are in college realize that life continues, so it would be a shame if your Torah development remained at one level and the rest of your development continued somewhere else.”

the unique part of a woman that is female and is not shared with males, but Ishah is basically the same as *ish*, representing the components of the human personality shared both by males and females. So even though I recognize that there is something unique about being a woman, I also recognize that there are so many things we share through our joint humanity. When people say that something should be different because it is tailored for women, I always ask, are you trying to make it less or more? If you are going to say that women should receive less, learn less intensely, and be exposed to less because they are women, then I am wary. But if you are going to tell me that we should add another layer because there is this added level that is uniquely feminine, then I am interested in listening.

Concerning a beit midrash, what is unique about a women’s beit midrash? What does the female experience create? What will it foster that would not be fostered in a male beit midrash? These are the questions that one has to ask.

*If you were creating a program for women, how would you design it differently in order to accomodate these gender differences?*

I think I would play to strengths of cooperation and relationship-building, spirituality and creativity. I would like also to let the program evolve, to leave room for it and see what happens. What would the women do? Would they create some type of self-expression through some other medium that would not necessarily be expected? We do now have women’s battei midrash, and it would be nice if someone did some type of study and saw how women in these programs feel different from those learning in male battei midrash.

*Is post-high school the optimal age for the year in Israel experience? Would it be better utilized at a different point in life?*

I do think there is something very positive about this age. Specifically, this time of later adolescence is the time of identity formation. At this stage in your life, you are supposed to be differentiating yourself from people around you, deciding who you are and what group you are going to identify

with or not identify with. The next stage is forming a family – once you know who you are, you can move on to a relationship with another person. From that perspective, I think it is the right age. The age of identity formation is the exact time when you should take some time off for yourself, by yourself, and think about your values, your future, and your religious perspective and decide how you want to integrate them into your life.

But, having said that, I also think it is important to remember that this is not the only time that something like this can happen. People grow and develop throughout life. I was speaking to a friend of mine last night and she said that the only time that she realized what type of religious life she wanted to lead was in her late twenties. I think that some people do not necessarily maximize their Israel experience but then blossom on a college campus.

So there is no hard-and-fast rule, because there are plenty of people who develop at other times and maybe really would benefit from taking time off at a different stage. But I do think that there is something very appropriate about this specific stage of life.

*In your opinion, what is the future of the year in Israel phenomenon? Is it still growing? Has the economic recession affected it?*

I do not have the technical statistics on the recession. It has affected it to some degree, but I think that the experience is so powerful and transformative on an individual, communal, and generational level – we see how the year in Israel has had such an impact on Orthodoxy, certainly in America – that I would be surprised if it disappeared. I do not see any signs of major change.

*What would you say is the greatest challenge or problem associated with the year in Israel?*

When the whole experience became popular twenty years ago, it was a self-selecting group of students who did not come because “it was the thing to do,” but now it is the thing to do. That means that your population is much broader. Overall, that is very positive because it means that you have more people being engaged in this process of *talmud Torah*, self-discovery, and exposure to Israel and Judaism, but it also means that there is a much larger array of students and you have to be able to reach all of them.

Another challenge is the effect that incredibly rapid technological changes are having on the ways in which people are learning, processing information, and thinking critically. The student of today is not the student of ten years ago, and if you

try to teach a student of today the same way you taught a student of ten years ago, you are going to be frustrated and wonder why you are giving a student the same sources, yet he or she cannot work through them in the same way. I think our challenge is not only how to reach our students today, but also how to gain from this change, because I do not believe that any change is exclusively negative; there is also a positive result. We are so busy trying to keep up with our students that I think it would be nice to also gain from our students and learn from them, harnessing the new student mind in a way that is beneficial both for the students’ learning and for ours.

*Students are often stereotyped and judged based on where they studied in Israel. How true or meaningful are these stereotypes? For prospective students, is there a more respectful manner to maneuver the system of schools without relying on stereotypes?*

Is there validity to stereotypes? There is a broad validity to stereotypes – but it is always very broad. I think the best way to maneuver the system in order to choose a school is to gather information and speak to actual alumni. However, my caveat would be that when you talk to alumni, only talk to them about their institutions, because what they say about other institutions is probably less valuable and should be taken much more with a grain of salt. I would also speak to more than one person to get a range of perspectives. In addition, if you can, go and visit – that can be helpful. But if you do that, also come prepared, because some institutions have a wide variety of approaches and styles and you should probably know what types of classes you should be sitting in on and what you should be looking for.

*For American students interested in making aliyyah, when do you think is the best time to do it? Following their shanah ba-arets, after college, or at a later point in life?*

There is no right answer, of course. It depends on the person and his or her life circumstances. I will say two things. If you really do want to make *aliyyah*, it has to be a living goal in your life. You have to keep it alive in your experience because it is so easy for it to slip away. You have to make a concerted effort to keep that flame burning. The other thing is that if you are a person who is really interested in integrating into Israeli society, then the earlier you come, the more integrated you will become. You do not have to be that kind of person. I do not think that an American *oleh* who speaks English his entire life and lives in an American community is a less worthy *oleh* than any other, but for those who want to really integrate, the younger you come, the more comfortable you will be in Israeli society.

*Do you have any advice for students interested in pursuing hinnukh (Jewish education) professionally, whether in Israel or in America?*

That is a hard question. Learn a lot of Torah. Pursue advanced degrees in *chinnuch* or education. Grasp any opportunity to learn. Make sure you really

like teaching. Figure out whom you want to teach. I will say that we need good *mechannechim* and *mechannechot* all across the spectrum. Speaking as a mother, the most important person in my life is my child’s *ganenet* (grade-school teacher). My children have not gotten to high school yet, but at that stage it certainly matters who their teachers are. So, I always say to my students, “You are the ones who are going to change the world, make *aliyyah*, join the system, change society, and save *Am Yisrael*.”

*Do you think there are fewer opportunities in Israel for Americans who want to pursue hinnukh?*

I wish that I could say no, that there are so many opportunities for everybody. I think that it is a challenge, but it would be sad for me to see somebody not make *aliyyah* because of this. I am not judging anybody. Every individual must figure out how he or she is going to maximize fulfilling all of his or her dreams, and I think that it will be very particular for each person. I do feel very fortunate that I did not have to give up either one of those. I cannot say that there is no room for good teachers. I do not want to make it sound all rosy, but there is still always room for good teachers, especially those who are willing to broaden their horizons and not just lock themselves into teaching in a particular type of institution or to a particular type of student population.

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1. *Mishlei* 22:6.
2. *Sefer Akeidat Yitshak to Bereshit, sha’ar* 9, section 8.



## *Shanah ba-Arets*: Bridging the Gap

BY: Fran Tanner

The year spent in Israel is often referred to as “the gap year,” a term that is quite problematic. A gap implies a hole, a break between two parts. This terminology encourages us to view the time spent studying in Israel as a break from the “real life” which comes before and after it – namely, high school and college. It is its own entity, separate and disconnected, standing in between the other parts of life.

**“Perhaps, when described as just a continuation of the rest of life, the *shanah ba-arets* loses some of its thrill, some of its spectacularness. Nevertheless, that is a price worth paying; in describing the *shanah ba-arets* as part of real life, we increase its effectiveness, long-term, immeasurably.”**

Furthermore, even when not using that specific term, we sometimes conceive of the year in Israel as set apart from the rest of life; often, students, either on their own or based on what they are told, make the mistake of approaching the time spent in Israel as a “once-in-a-lifetime experience,” their “opportunity to learn Torah,” and *the* year of religious introspection and upheaval – to the exclusion of the rest of their lives.

These descriptions come with good intentions in mind. They reflect an attempt to encourage students to make the most of their year and get the most out of the religious and educational experiences that yeshivot and midrashot provide. Nevertheless, I believe that representing the year in Israel in this way is a grave error.

The *shanah ba-arets* is certainly a great opportunity. The environment of yeshivot and midrashot, in which students have fewer distractions and more time to focus on studying Torah than in other stages of their lives, certainly allows for tremendous growth. Nevertheless, the year in Israel is not the only opportunity for growth and learning. Students need to know that they should be constantly learning and growing: not only during their year in Israel, but also before and after. When understood in this light, what happens during the year in Israel is not so different from what happens during the rest of the years of their lives. It is not a break to do something else; rather, it is part of the ongoing process of growth and learning in which students should be involved for their whole lives. The Torah study that they do in Israel is meant to be part of a lifelong quest for Torah. The religious growth achieved in Israel is a part of a life-long struggle to perfect oneself as an *oved Hashem* (servant of God).

Describing the year in Israel as a “gap,” or

designating it as *the* year for x, y, and z, makes it distinct and disconnected from the rest of life. It turns it into a “bubble” – a year of growth that is unparalleled in, and separate from, the rest of the stages students will go through in life. To describe the year in Israel as *the* year of spiritual growth, thus implying that the returning eighteen/nineteen-year-old students have completed their only year of growth and reached their spiritual height, is a scary thought. I certainly hope that students continue to make progress, spiritually and intellectually,

well beyond the young age of eighteen. *Be-ezrat Hashem*, they will have many more religiously meaningful years of life to come.

Thinking of the *shanah ba-arets* as a “gap year” creates problems for students both before and after their year of study in Israel. I have heard high school girls say, “I wear pants now, but it’s okay – I’ll ‘flip out’ in Israel,” or, “I’m not ‘*shomer [negi’ah]*’ now, but I probably will be after Israel.” If one really believes that, according to Halakhah, he or she should not be wearing pants or engaging in physical contact with members of the opposite gender, why should one continue doing so until he or she arrives in Israel? If one recognizes that there is something to change, why push it off? Why not make the change right away? The year in Israel should not be viewed as the only time to improve oneself. Rather, a person should *constantly* strive to perfect his or her *kivvum ha-mitsvot* (mitsvah fulfillment) and personality traits.

Furthermore, if the year in Israel is a gap, many of the things that transpired there do not need to apply to “real life.” People come back from Israel and jump back into “real life,” forgetting to take with them everything they have gained and spent their time doing for the past year or two in Israel. They are forgetting to continue the processes they started there, forgetting that the halakhot they kept so stringently there still apply elsewhere, forgetting that their year in Israel is not the only year to learn Torah but that *talmud Torah* is something one should be involved in throughout one’s life.

Instead of treating Israel as a gap or break from real life, we need to educate our *hanikhim* (advisees) and students that there is more to real life than high school and college; what they go through during their year of Torah study in Israel is a part of it!

Torah *is* real life. Learning Torah is not something reserved for the *shanah ba-arets* – “*lo ba-shamayim hi*” (the Torah is not in the heavens); Torah needs to be part of every Jew’s life, always. This message cannot be stressed enough and is not stated enough during students’ time in Israel. Students need to be told that though they are learning this year, they will not learn *everything* this year. Rather, they must keep learning, year after year. They need to set aside time from their busy college schedules in the following years to be *osek ba-Torah* (involved in the study of the Torah), which is *hayyei olam* (eternal life). They need to know it is going to be more challenging because they are going to be busy with other responsibilities, but this IS their life, and that is why they must keep doing it. R. Aharon Lichtenstein recently related a similar idea in a *sihah* (lecture) given in Migdal Oz. He said, “Sometimes in the yeshivah, there are discussions about Torah study as preparation for life. This infuriates me. Preparation for life? Preparation for something that does not yet exist – like training before the game?! This *is* life! *Ki hem hayyeinu* (for they [Torah and mitsvot] are our lives)!”<sup>1</sup> Torah is not a gap, or a break, or even a preparation; it is an inherent part of a Jew’s life, always, and needs to be given the proper time and place at all stages.

Perhaps, when described as just a continuation of the rest of life, the *shanah ba-arets* loses some of its thrill, some of its spectacularness. Nevertheless, that is a price worth paying; in describing the *shanah ba-arets* as part of real life, we increase its effectiveness, long-term, immeasurably. Students will not only learn the Torah that they can manage to fit into one year, but will be encouraged to continue learning for many years to come. Students will not only grow as *ovedei Hashem* in that single year, but they will hopefully continue to strive to be better, always. This way, we encourage students to take the other parts of their lives more seriously. Furthermore, we ensure that students do not leave behind the Torah they are learning during the *shanah ba-arets* when the year is over, that they do not throw off all the lessons they have taken when they leave the doors of the beit midrash and travel back across the ocean. Rather, they should leave armed with the strong arsenal of Torah, Halakhah, and *middot* which they have acquired over the year, and go forth with the recognition and anticipation that these are to continue to play a central role in their lives.

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1. Author’s translation from Hebrew.

**“To describe the year in Israel as *the* year of spiritual growth, thus implying that the returning eighteen/nineteen-year-old students have completed their only year of growth and reached their spiritual height, is a scary thought.”**

## An Interview with R. Dr. Shalom Berger

BY: Shlomo Zuckier

*Please provide a brief history of shanah ba-arets programs and their development from their inception until now.*

Students have been traveling from the Diaspora to learn in Israel from time immemorial. I think that a good example is the story where Rabbi Ze'ira avoided Rav Yehudah, who wanted to discourage him from going to Israel to learn, because he felt that Bavel was where the Jewish community had become established and that leaving was forbidden. In the modern age, we know, there were students who came to learn in Palestine from the United States. A number of students from Yeshivas Rabbeinu Yitzchak Elchanan (RIETS) were killed in the 1929 riots in Hebron, where they were studying in the Hebron Yeshivah.

The individual who should be credited with the current version of one-year Israel study programs is R. Zevi Tabory, who developed the idea in the late 1950s in his capacity as Director of the Torah Education Department of the Jewish Agency in New York. (I will note that his son, R. Binyamin Tabory, and his grandson, R. Aviad Tabory, have carried on this tradition as Ra"mim in Yeshivat Har Etzion and Yeshivat Eretz HaTzvi, respectively.) Although the Jewish Agency no longer plays an active role in programs such as these, it must be credited with the development of Machon Gold and Beit Midrash L'Torah (BMT), which were the pioneering study programs in Israel for Diaspora youth.

While these programs began as learning opportunities for the most dedicated students, over the years they have become part and parcel of the standard Modern Orthodox day school education. Most day schools encourage their seniors to go to a learning program in Israel, and most of the yeshivot and women's programs have developed facilities and curricula aimed specifically at this audience. The change that has taken place – the move from a self-selecting, elite program to one that is standard for many North American high school graduates – has certainly impacted on the experience itself.

*What do you think are the main positive effects that the shanah ba-arets has presented to the individual student spending the year in Israel? Are there any downsides or dangers to the phenomenon?*

As someone committed to Jewish knowledge and Jewish continuity, I believe that these programs offer an opportunity for students to spend an essential year (or two) delving deeply into traditional Jewish study and practice and choosing to make those a core part of their identity. Parents have asked me why twelve years of day school education do not succeed in accomplishing that, and I think that there are many reasons why that is so. The fact of the matter is that, for most kids, the first time that they leave their homes is after graduating high school. This is a moment in their lives when they begin

to separate from their parents and make decisions about their own personality and identity. Given that many of these students will be attending secular universities, the question is whether we prefer that the environment in which the student will be making these decisions is a supportive, Jewish environment or a challenging, secular one.

Of course, this assumes that one views commitment to Jewish knowledge and Jewish continuity as core ideals. If one views acculturation into American life as the core ideal, then encouraging students to view parochial Jewish values as overriding would be worthless.

A danger that is most often raised regarding the one-year Israel programs is that students become too committed to Jewish ideals – the popular “flipping out” phenomenon. My message to parents who raise this issue is that they should work with their children to find programs whose core values match their own. If you do not want your child to remain in Israel and join the army, or if you do not want him to sit in kollel his whole life, then choose an appropriate program whose values are in sync with your own. If you believe that this is a year that your child will take seriously, make sure that you invest time in learning about the different programs and choosing appropriately.

*How have shanah ba-arets programs impacted the American Centrist Orthodox community? What do you think their long-term impacts will be?*

One obvious impact can be seen in the YU beit midrash. The crowds that fill night *seder* simply did not exist twenty years ago.

Expectations are different today. Not so long ago, parents sent their children to day schools and relied on the expertise of the teachers to educate them. Today, many parents want to know why a school is using one method or another. The proliferation of Zionist kollels in schools and communities is a clear outgrowth of this experience, as are YU programs like Kollel Yom Rishon and other outreach efforts in communities. When I was a student in YU, the *shabbatonim* that I was involved with were largely experiential visits to communities. Today, there are expectations regarding the content that such a *shabbaton* would have. And I do not mean to limit this to YU. Secular college campuses across the U.S. now have active battei midrash; the JLIC initiative is another example of new, higher expectations of what Jewish life on campus can be.

As far as the long term is concerned, it is worth pointing out that current sociological studies find a “disconnect” between young American Jews and the State of Israel.<sup>ii</sup> When I discussed the research findings with Dr. Steven Cohen, he told me that Orthodox respondents were pulled from the study because they skewed the results. They were still

closely connected to Israel. I credit the year in Israel for at least some of that connection. As challenges to the legitimacy of the State continue, this continued connection will be important, both for Israel and for American Jewry.

*In your book, Flipping Out?: Myth or Fact?: The Impact of the “Year in Israel,”iii you deal with questions of what changes and does not change in students in their year in Israel. Can you please succinctly summarize your findings?*

Succinctly summarize my life's work?! Buy the book! As a teaser, I will say that most of what educators expected and believed would happen in Israel does, in fact, take place.

Regarding religious ritual behaviors like *davening*, regarding personal modesty issues like *negi'ah*, regarding commitment to continued Torah study – all of these “shot up” in the course of the year. Similarly, commitment to Zionist ideals, like expecting to make *aliyyah*, doubled in the course of the year.

What was interesting were areas where there was no change. For all that plans for *aliyyah* increased, adoption of what I called “religious Zionist dogmas” did not. So, when asked whether they viewed the modern State of Israel as “the national homeland of the Jewish people,” about half of the students strongly agreed with that statement at the beginning of their year in Israel. That sentiment remained the same at the end of the year. Only eleven percent of the surveyed students strongly agreed that “the modern State of Israel is a fulfillment of the *nevu'ot* of our prophets” at the beginning of the year. Thirteen percent strongly agreed at the end of the year. (As an aside, I will mention that a Pew Report Survey done about five years ago found that sixty percent of white Evangelical Protestants believe that “Israel is the fulfillment of biblical prophecies.”)

Potentially more disturbing was my finding that moral and ethical behaviors, e.g. honesty when taking a test or standing up for an elderly person, did not change. Upon review of the data, I was relieved to discover that the most likely explanation for this was the fact that the students scored themselves so highly that it would have been difficult for them to improve on their original scores.

This leads to a number of interesting questions about day school graduates who are willing to admit that, by and large, they do not say *asher yatsar* (the blessing after using the restroom) or *bentsh* (grace after meals), but *do* give *tsedakah* (charity) appropriately. While there are many possible explanations for this, my suggestion is that there is no larger social reinforcement for *mitsvot bein adam la-Makom* (mitsvot between man and God), while there is for *mitsvot bein adam la-havero* (mitsvot between fellow men). The messages of their day

schools therefore resonate for them with regard to some mitsvot, but for others, that social support will not be forthcoming until they are in yeshivah in Israel.

*How have the financial problems of the past few years affected yeshivot and seminaries?*

There was serious concern that the economic woes in the U.S. would impact the numbers of students coming to Israel. While there may have been an immediate dip in enrollment, from what I understand it has not been significant. Apparently, spending this year is not considered to be “discretionary.” Keep in mind that for many students – especially those studying in YU – the year in Israel is relatively inexpensive.

*What ethical problems have you seen or heard about concerning the different Israel programs? Do you feel there is a need for a centralized authority to regulate these issues? Do you feel YU has a role it could, or should, play in this process?*

In my “day job,” I work at the Lookstein Center at Bar-Ilan University, where I moderate the Lookjed listserv, an online discussion group for Jewish educators. A recent discussion revolved around a post in which the principal of a large North American high school wrote that he had been offered a significant amount of money for every student that he would direct to a particular yeshivah. This revelation has encouraged educators to begin to develop a code of ethics that would address such issues as admissions policies, acceptable rhetoric when discussing competing institutions, etc.



Students who join the joint YU-Israel program are effectively YU students and will be receiving YU credit for their study. YU has already begun a process of visiting individual programs and evaluating their course offerings, physical facilities, support services, and so on. This is a welcome development, and developing ethical guidelines fits into the overall role that YU can play.

*Some have claimed that many yeshivot and seminaries, due to the need to attract students, lower their educational standards and provide “edutainment” in place of education. Do you think this claim is true? Is it a positive or negative phenomenon? If negative, how can it be combated?*

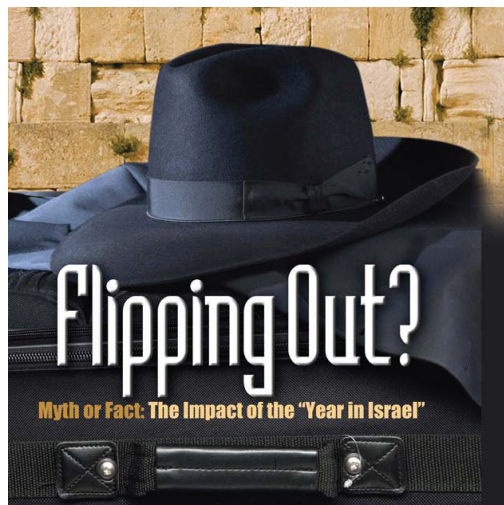


# Truly Once in a Lifetime?: An Approach to Maximizing the Israel Gap Year Experience

BY: Tammie Senders

People always like to reminisce about how wonderful things were in the “olden days” and how they have deteriorated as time has passed. It is difficult for me to say whether schools have weakened their curricula in order to attract students. There is certainly more catering to the needs of the students now than there was when I was a student here in Israel thirty years ago. But that is true across the spectrum in education – not only in the Jewish world, but in churches and in secular schools, as well.

Furthermore, there is a recognition that students will be engaged by many other experiences beyond those that take place in the classroom. If this is a recognition and application of Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences, that is great. If it is simply pandering to lazy students, then we should find another business to go into.



Rabbi Dr. Shalom Berger received his BA, MA, EdD, and semikhah from YU. His doctoral dissertation focused on the impact of one-year Israel programs on American day school graduates and was published as part of the recent book, *Flipping Out?: Myth or Fact? The Impact of the “Year in Israel.”* He is currently Director of E\*Communities at the Lookstein Center for Jewish Education at Bar-Ilan University.

1. Ketubbot 110b.

2. See Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman, “Beyond Distancing: Young Adult American Jews and Their Alienation From Israel,” available at: <http://www.acbp.net/About/PDF/Beyond%20Distancing.pdf>.

3. Shalom Z. Berger, Daniel Jacobson, and Chaim I. Waxman, *Flipping Out?: Myth or Fact?: The Impact of the “Year in Israel”* (New York: Yashar Books, 2007).

4. See Jeffrey MacDonald, “Congregations Gone Wild,” *The New York Times*, August 7, 2010, available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/08/opinion/08macdonald.html>.

5. See Stanley Fish, “Deep in the Heart of Texas,” *The New York Times*, June 21, 2010, available at: <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/06/21/deep-in-the-heart-of-texas/>; idem, “Student Evaluations, Part Two,” *The New York Times*, June 28, 2010, available at: <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/06/28/student-evaluations-part-two/>.

It is almost *de rigueur* for Modern Orthodox Jewish teenagers to spend a gap year in Israel following completion of high school. For some, it is the experience of a lifetime, a Camelot in Jerusalem. For others, it is a disillusioning journey in a foreign land with a different culture and little emotional support. After having experienced Israel firsthand during the 2009-10 academic year, I have emerged shaken, but hopefully a bit wiser for the effort.

In his *Jerusalem Post* blog entry entitled “Once in a Lifetime?,” Nathaniel Rosen reflects upon his year in Israel experience.<sup>1</sup> He explores what it is about the post-high school year in Israel, specifically in a religious yeshivah or midrashah program, that makes it a unique event, one that cannot be experienced at any other point in life or in any other place. He explains that it is really “against the backdrop” of the Land of Israel that all of the Torah that one learns during this year comes alive.<sup>2</sup> The independent, voluntary, and critical study of Jewish texts, the exposure to each facet of a living Jewish people, and the connection with thousands of years of authentic Jewish sites help each person develop a meaningful appreciation for Judaism as a religion and Israel as the Jewish homeland. It is also this year that marks the transition from the limited educational repertoire of an adolescent to the more sophisticated and challenging educational experience of an adult.

But many eighteen and nineteen-year-olds in some of the same yeshivot and midrashot have the exact opposite experience of what Rosen describes. They find Israel’s beaches, bars, and nightlife to be almost hypnotic. The loosely-monitored educational system becomes an opportunity for exploitation. Classes are there to be skipped, Ben Yehuda Street is a hotspot for drugs and alcohol rather than for shopping and eating, and weekends are an invitation to explore prohibited locations. They are in the same land and the same schools as the students that Rosen discusses, but their experiences are worlds apart.

How does one make the gap year journey into a spiritually-uplifting experience of a lifetime and avoid the pitfalls that turn it into a spiritually vacuous adventure? The answer lies in looking at a broader definition of religious growth, resisting the challenging social pressures of family, friends, and the Israeli institutions themselves, and modifying one’s own level of expectations.

To begin with, one must be open to growth. In her perspective-stretching book *Mindset*, Carol Dweck distinguishes between fixed mindsets, held by those who believe that ability and knowledge are finite, and growth mindsets, held by those who view each challenge and each failure as a steppingstone to later success.<sup>3</sup> Yeshivah and midrashah students

must be willing to challenge previous perspectives, move out of their comfort zones as they expand their horizons, and be able to view success and failure as part of an overall growth experience.

But it is not sufficient to simply have a growth mindset. To have a successful gap year in Israel, one must also understand the meaning of true Jewish religious growth. The mission statements of many yeshivah and midrashah websites include goals such as enriched Torah study, exposure to the beauty of the Land of Israel, and contact with other types of Jews; yet, schools often do not actually provide students with such a diversity of experiences. First, the curricula of most programs focus on Torah study with a strong emphasis on talmudic erudition, so there is rarely any quality time to engage in other aspects of Torah learning. Perhaps as a response to this concern, there has been a recent increase in the number of programs that, in addition to championing the study of Talmud, focus as well on the study of Tanakh, Jewish philosophy, and Jewish history. Also, traditional yeshivah and midrashah programs have been geared to the privileged few who can sustain focus over a fourteen-hour day of rigorous textual study, often leaving behind students who have shorter attention spans or grow more by engaging with their creative abilities. Again, perhaps in response to these criticisms, there has been a rise in the number of programs that blend Torah study with art, music, and programming designed to nurture the soul.

programs have even integrated communal service into their weekly schedules, providing students with an opportunity to interact with members of Israeli society on a consistent basis.

Unfortunately, these newer programs are still not considered mainstream by many because they do not adhere to the more traditionally-accepted definition of religious growth, which is focused on the number of pages of Talmud that can be learned in a week or the number of commentators that can be quoted from memory. It is time to redefine religious growth. Students should learn to view God as the *bore olam*, the creator of a vast, beautiful, and multifaceted world filled with variegated groups of fascinating human beings, in addition to being the *noten ha-Torah*, the giver of the Torah. Jewish religious growth, then, must include both the academic as well as the spiritual, experiential, and interactional. It must incorporate all types of Torah learning as well as programming that connects students with the Land and people of Israel.

Beyond redefining religious growth, students interested in maximizing their year must properly approach the societal pressures placed on them by parents, siblings, teachers, and friends. For many, there are pressures to appear different externally in order to prove that they are really absorbing the Torah lessons to which they have been exposed. As a result, many students feel the need to adopt *humrot* (stringencies) that they had never previously felt were necessary. For some, that takes the form

**“The mission statements of many yeshivah and midrashah websites include goals such as enriched Torah study, exposure to the beauty of the Land of Israel, and contact with other types of Jews; yet, schools often do not actually provide students with such a diversity of experiences.”**

In terms of exposing students to the beauty of the land, many traditional yeshivah and midrashah programs do apportion time to explore the land; however, they are focused on isolated *tiyyulim* (day-long hiking trips) to various geographic regions of the country and do not include interactions with the people of Israel. In some newer programs, there has been a greater focus on exploring Israeli cities, with a special emphasis on exposure to the poor and downtrodden members of Israeli society. In addition, there has been a real focus on exposing students to Israelis from all walks of life. Some

of wearing longer skirts or white shirts or no longer talking to members of the opposite gender. For others, it involves only eating in *mehadderin min ha-mehadderin*-certified (ultra-stringent kosher) restaurants. For still others, this means extending their *shemoneh esreh* by five minutes. Now, this is not to say that self-improvement in the areas of *tzeni’ut*, *kashrut*, and *kavvanah* in *tefillah* is not a worthy goal. However, students should undertake these changes as a result of personal conviction, not because they want to comply with external pressures.

Other gap year students feel pressured to cast off the religious practices of a strictly observant adolescence and adopt a more lenient and cosmopolitan approach in preparation for participation in the American college scene. The beautiful beaches of Eilat and the exciting nightlife of Tel Aviv are tempting models for the secular lifestyle into which the student will be entering upon his or her return home.

Finally, gap year students sometimes feel pressure to remain the same. Many students are warned by friends and family not to change and are paralyzed by the thought that they might somehow emerge as a different person at the end of the year. It is challenging for an eighteen and nineteen-year-old yeshivah high school graduate to withstand all the pressures urging him or her to change, one way or another, or to remain the same. To be truly successful, gap year students must realize that it is okay to try new things and even to take religious risks, but that they need not fundamentally change who they are, where they have come from, or what they believe.

In addition to redefining religious growth and keeping societal pressures in perspective, it is critical that students reevaluate their expectations. In his book *Happiness is a Serious Problem*, Dennis Prager asserts that having high expectations is the greatest cause of unhappiness.<sup>4</sup> The more one expects, the less happy he or she will be in life. However, lowering expectations should not negatively impact our desire to achieve. According to Prager:

**“Yeshivah and midrashah students must be willing to challenge previous perspectives, move out of their comfort zones as they expand their horizons, and be able to view success and failure as part of an overall growth experience.”**

“One should not assume for a moment that a lack of expectations means not being ambitious, not aspiring towards the highest goals, or not thinking positively. However, not having expectations does ensure two beautiful things: minimum suffering over unfulfilled goals and profound gratitude over goals that are fulfilled. ... [T]hose of us who have minimized our expectations walk around with a greater sense of

thankfulness (because so many wonderful things that we didn’t expect come our way each day) and with far less bitterness (because few, if any, expectations have been frustrated) than those who have expectations.”<sup>5</sup>

Reducing expectations bolsters one’s efforts to continue to improve and to become the best that he or she can be. It minimizes the setbacks one would normally suffer from and replaces them with feelings of appreciation for what has gone right and what will be helpful in the long term. Yeshivah and midrashah students need to keep Prager’s concept in mind in setting high goals for their gap year in Israel while maintaining low expectations as well. Setting goals for what one wants to achieve during his or her year in Israel helps maintain focus and fuels a

**“The year in Israel is meant to be the floor, rather than the ceiling, of one’s personal and Jewish odyssey.”**

feeling of fulfillment at the end of the year. But expecting that one’s year will be easy and wrinkle-free can only lead to disappointment and possibly even despair when things do not work out exactly as anticipated. For individuals with growth mindsets, like Nathaniel Rosen, sometimes the surprising twists and turns or unlikely events will be the factors that most profoundly impact one’s year.<sup>6</sup> Leaving one’s mind open to unexpected opportunities in random places like the *shuk* (Mahane Yehuda market) or the *Tahanah Merkazit* (Central Bus Station) can yield mind-expanding development equal to that advertised by yeshivot or midrashot. With the adoption of this low-expectation approach, it becomes easier to appreciate and feel gratitude for all of the year’s experiences.

In August 2009, as I left home to begin my gap year in Israel, I thought I was primarily interested in intense, high-level learning, and I was excited to be in an environment where I could really gain a greater appreciation for my religion and for the land of my people. But my preconceived notions about religious growth, my difficulty in resisting societal pressures, and the very high expectations I had set for myself caused me to hit a wall that shattered my self-esteem, damaged my decision-making capacity, and nearly crushed my ability to grow. Only after taking the unconventional step of moving to a new seminary – which solved many, but not all, of my challenges – did I begin to realize that my growth was not meant to come solely from the knowledge I could attain by learning four hours or more of Talmud each day. The success of my year in Israel was ultimately defined by my realization that I was on a journey: a journey to become more aware of who I was and who I was meant to be; a journey to search for a better understanding of my strengths and weaknesses, talents and flaws; one that required painful failure as a steppingstone to ultimate success.

The year in Israel can bring a student to the gates of heaven or the depths of hell. As my own experience taught me, to achieve the former and

truly maximize the year, one must first leave behind all preconceived notions of the meaning of religious growth and be open to a more richly-defined growth. This is growth that blends academic development with heightened spirituality, Talmud study with other worthy disciplines, and Torah study in general with an awareness of the land of Israel and the Jewish people. Second, one should use this gap year to find the courage to look within rather than to succumb to the judgments, opinions, and influences of family, teachers, and friends. It is a time to change if change seems right and to remain the same if that is what seems appropriate. Last, one must reduce expectations in order to minimize disappointment and maximize gratitude and appreciation. My personal story taught me that these three elements

are critical but also, more importantly, that the success I ultimately experienced was not a finite end to my religious development, but the beginning of a process. The year in Israel is meant to be the floor, rather than the ceiling, of one’s personal and Jewish odyssey. The adoption of the right mindset and attitude towards spending the gap year in Israel is the key towards making the most of the experience and returning with a renewed commitment to personal and communal growth.

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1. Nathaniel Rosen, “Once in a Lifetime?,” *The Jerusalem Post*, December 29, 2008, available at: [http://cgis.jpost.com/Blogs/yeshivahboy/entry/once\\_in\\_a\\_lifetime\\_posted](http://cgis.jpost.com/Blogs/yeshivahboy/entry/once_in_a_lifetime_posted).
2. Ibid.
3. Carol Dweck, *Mindset* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2006), pp. 6-14.
4. Dennis Prager, *Happiness is a Serious Problem* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998), pp. 55-64.
5. Ibid., pp. 63-64.
6. Nathaniel Rosen, “Mid-life Crisis?,” *The Jerusalem Post*, February 12, 2009, available at: [http://cgis.jpost.com/Blogs/yeshivahboy/entry/mid\\_year\\_crisis\\_posted\\_by#](http://cgis.jpost.com/Blogs/yeshivahboy/entry/mid_year_crisis_posted_by#). Though Rosen does not discuss the exact term “growth mindset” as explained in Dweck’s book, he proves in this blog entry to be a prime example of this phenomenon.

## Now in the Five Towns: Chronicling the Year in Israel

BY: Chesky Kopel

“The year in Israel is a relatively secretive phenomenon, a closely guarded mystery whose inner workings are known only to the students who have already experienced it.”<sup>1</sup>

The year in Israel experience has become a centerpiece of the Torah education process in many of our communities, though it means very different things to different people. Generally speaking, the prevalence of the practice of spending a gap year in a yeshivah or seminary and the effect that it seems to have on so many students have cultivated a culture of mystery and drama concerning the year’s perceived powers. The quotation above, published by a yeshivah high school graduate from the Five Towns, Long Island, as he prepared to depart to Israel to spend his year in a yeshivah, provides a striking example of this mystique. His terms are colorful, captivating, and absolutely reverent. If one were to replace the phrase “the year in Israel” with “the Bermuda Triangle” or “extra-terrestrial activity,” and “students” with “victims” or “researchers,” his sentence would be just as coherent.

A consequence of this culture has been a rising demand to characterize the significance and purpose of the year in Israel. Perhaps the first comprehensive study of the phenomenon, *Flipping Out?*, by Shalom Z. Berger, Daniel Jacobson, and Chaim I. Waxman,<sup>2</sup> was published just three years ago and was the subject of a wide array of reviews and criticisms. The work incorporates statistical analysis and expert opinions of educators, rabbis, and social scientists. However, despite the empirical importance of such a representative investigation, it obviously lacks the power of a comprehensive case study. Never before have our communities seen the published chronicles of a young man or woman studying in Israel, until this year...

A young man who identifies himself only as “Talmid X” (a title he borrowed from “Player X,” a column in *ESPN The Magazine*)<sup>3</sup> has taken upon himself to chronicle his experiences as a student in his *shanah alef*, first year, in yeshivah. His intention is to provide answers to many questions that readers may have about the year in Israel, whether they are logistical, metaphysical, or something in between. His submissions are printed as a biweekly column in *The 5 Towns Jewish Times*, entitled “The Year in Israel.”

The idea of such a column has many detractors. I have heard people express concern for the sake of the young man himself. By expending great time and effort to convey his Israel experience to others, he risks diminishing the real meaning that it has for him in the present. (Talmid X informed me in a private



e-mail exchange that he has thought seriously about this concern and feels that it is not a danger for him. He explains that his strong personal motivation for genuine growth and the minimal time requirement for writing his column give him and those that know him well confidence that he need not worry about objectifying his Israel experience.) On a different note, dissenters claim that any insights Talmid X hopes to provide can only ultimately be relevant for a very small fraction of students in Israel. The writer is studying in only one of dozens of institutions (described only as “a well-known hesder yeshiva”).<sup>4</sup> Each institution presents its own unique setting, set of beliefs, and method of learning. He is one person, with one personality, hailing from one community, and his words certainly cannot possibly reflect the emotions and experiences of others, let alone the majority of others. Nonetheless, I believe that the undertaking is intriguing and courageous, and worthy of presentation. I will address a few significant themes that Talmid X has raised in his column over the past six months.

The writer appears to be a motivated and religiously committed student, driven from the

images of its journey to an audience. In such a frame of mind, certain aspects of the yeshiva experience are very prominent and pronounced. One of these aspects is the process of choosing a yeshiva:

**“Never before have our communities seen the published chronicles of a young man or woman studying in Israel, until this year...”**

“The anxiety of choosing which post-high-school yeshiva to attend for the year can be compared, in a sense, to the pressure inherent in the modern shidduch process. Or so I have been told.”<sup>7</sup>

Talmid X describes the process of applications, interviews, and decisions as fast-paced and pressured, filled with intensified scouting, advice seeking, and interrogation of yeshiva representatives. The choice of “the modern shidduch process” as a model of comparison highlights some of the emotions and concerns under constant scrutiny and controversy in

directed at veterans of the Israel experience. More particularly, he is aware of the pejorative term “flipping out” that is often applied to those who transform their religious identities while studying

in Israel, and he seeks to demonstrate that a student may genuinely and sincerely change his or her level of commitment if he or she so desires. He advised that new students in a yeshiva or seminary pay no attention to the stigma that lingers over them as they ponder their post-year-in-Israel future:

“Don’t be afraid to grow. If you hear that to change for the better is ‘conformist,’ laugh, because nothing could be further from the truth. In a rather ‘Roark-ian’ manner, it’s about you and no one else. Wouldn’t choosing based

**“He is one person, with one personality, hailing from one community, and his words certainly cannot possibly reflect the emotions and experiences of others, let alone the majority of others. Nonetheless, I believe that the undertaking is intriguing and courageous, and worthy of presentation.”**

outset to utilize his year for maturation and accomplishment in Torah study. Already in the summer preceding his departure for yeshiva, Talmid X referred to his upcoming journey as a “once-in-a-lifetime chance to spend a year in the Holy Land, studying the most important thing on earth.”<sup>5</sup> His writing is lofty and sentimental. In his on-the-scene observations, Talmid X is quick to confirm his hopes and suspicions. After just one week of studying in yeshiva, he declared:

“Whatever they tell you – they’re wrong. It is impossible to understand what the year in Israel is like if you haven’t gone through it yourself. Trust me. I’m here, fresh after experiencing the first week, and I am truly [...] shocked [...] It’s honestly indescribable. But I’m going to try.”<sup>6</sup> This sort of sentiment was likely uncommon

the Five Towns and Yeshiva University communities (as well as many other similar communities). “Shidduch” is a buzz-word, meant to draw the attention of readers to the mystifying reality of the drama that accompanies the year in Israel phenomenon. The writer himself recognized this and conceded that he over-dramatized his situation later in the same column.

Despite the emphasis on the unique and exalted nature of the Israel experience that this column hopes to decode, much of the writing is basically and generically personal, as any travel log is expected to be. The writer expresses excitement and apprehension for his first encounter with independence, as well as fear and concern for the possibility of growing distant from the friends of his childhood.

**“As part of the mission in composing his column, Talmid X sees fit to respond to the claims of religious superficiality directed at veterans of the Israel experience.”**

among eighteen-year-olds attending post-high school programs in Israel at the time. It is the product of a uniquely excited mindset, ready for drama and transformation and driven to present sensationalist

Intermingled with these emotions and observations is a moving agenda. As part of the mission in composing his column, Talmid X sees fit to respond to the claims of religious superficiality

on the ignorant opinions of others be the act of a follower, while an intelligent individual will think for himself and change if he deems change to be necessary? I think so.”<sup>8</sup>

Talmid X’s term “Roark-ian” is ostensibly meant to refer to Howard Roark, the protagonist of *The Fountainhead*, a 1943 novel by Ayn Rand. Like many of Rand’s literary heroes, Roark is a champion of individualism and personal vision. A person who subscribes to a “Roarkian” worldview most likely pays little attention to the common standards and the heckling of his surroundings. He follows his heart and does what he feels is true and necessary. Ironically, Talmid X’s Roark commits himself to a mission seen by many as conformist and not particularly unique. Nonetheless, he does not care about others’ cynical assessments of him, so long as he is satisfied with himself. This is Talmid X’s vision of success for himself and others in Israel and his response to the “flip-out”-crying detractors.

What this column lacks in statistical applicability to the greater population of students studying in Israel it makes up in emotion and resolve. Some may feel that it is easy to dismiss his accounts as over-dramatized, but they in fact provide an apt account of the sort of personal profundity that many students choose to experience in their year(s) in Israel, and not surprisingly so. An atmosphere of such great “mystery” and “secret” calls for nothing short of profundity.

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*History and is a Staff Writer for Kol Hamevaser.*

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2. Shalom Z. Berger, Daniel Jacobson, and Chaim I. Waxman, *Flipping Out?: Myth or Fact?: The Impact of the “Year in Israel”* (New York: Yashar Books, 2007). Rabbi Dr. Berger and Rabbi Dr. Jacobson both wrote their doctoral dissertations on this subject as well.
3. Talmid X, *ibid*.
4. *Ibid*.
5. Talmid X, “Baby Steps for No Regrets – The Year in Israel, Part 4,” The 5 Towns Jewish Times, July 1, 2010, available at: <http://www.5tjt.com/international-news/7581-baby-steps-for-no-regrets-the-year-in-israel-part-4>.
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## An Interview with R. Daniel Rapp

BY: Staff

*In your opinion, what is the most important impact that the year in Israel has had on the Jewish community in the Diaspora?*



Studies have shown that the quality of our students coming back from a year in Israel is generally better than that of those coming straight out of high school. I think there was a study by John Fisher in 1998 that found that if you take two students with the same GPA and SAT score, and everything is kept the same except for the year in Israel, the student who went to Israel will end up with a GPA of 0.3 points higher. At a university, it is a plus to have better students who focus more and do better. Obviously, this is not a goal of the yeshivos or students when they spend the year in Israel, but it just shows that there are benefits other than those explicitly stated as the goals of the programs. This may be because taking a year off – the “gap year,” as it is called in other colleges: a year to make a *havdalah* (separation) between high school and college – allows for a maturation period. It does not make the students intellectually stronger, but it makes them more focused and better prepared to do what they have to be doing.

*As Dean of Undergraduate Studies for the Stone Beit Midrash Program (BMP) and the Isaac Breuer College (IBC), you deal with students on a personal level. Do you see a difference between students who spend a year or two in Israel and those who do not?*

Though it is hard to make broad claims, it is definitely true that the students who spent the year in Israel are older than those who are true freshmen. While this would be the case for students who spent a year playing ping-pong as well, it is probably a positive activity for students of college age to spend a year thinking about what is important; thus, the year does seem to make a difference.

*Are there students whom you would advise not to spend the year in Israel?*

Not every student’s experience in Israel is a rousing success, and there are definitely those students who should not have gone. For example, sometimes I will advise *ba’alei teshuvah* (people who are newly Orthodox) to go to the Mechinah Program for a year first, because if you go to Israel without any background, you will spend the year learning how to learn rather than actually learning content. On the other hand, if you go already equipped with the ability to learn, you can accomplish much more in your year.

**“I think the key to the year in Israel is that we take students out of the standard daily life and force them to focus on religion.”**

in general religious observance, beyond *limmud ha-Torah* – it can be more focus on *tefillah* or *shemiras ha-mitsvos* in general.

While the main goal of the yeshivos is spiritual growth, there are other benefits as well. We at Yeshiva benefit greatly from the year in Israel.

in Israel. If you tell seventeen-year-olds to go six thousand miles away and have a “good time,” some of them really will.

*Do you think there are improvements that can be made to the year in Israel programs?*

There are, but judging success and failure is difficult. You cannot just look at the results to gauge the success of a program. There are programs that get high-quality students and do a bad job and programs that get medium or weak students but are doing a phenomenal job. Still, the programs with high-quality students seem to have better results. To be fair to the programs, you cannot just look at what comes out; you have to look at what goes in as well.

It should be noted that different yeshivos have different goals. Some need to make their students interested in Judaism. The students have gone through twelve years of yeshiva education and

*leave? To what extent do you think that this is appropriate or advisable?*

I think the students do continue to identify with their yeshivos, and the truth is that we at YU encourage it. The Sganei Mashgichim (spiritual advisors) have lunches with guys and divide them based on the different yeshivos they attended. On the one hand it is nice, but on the other hand we would like guys to identify with YU that way, too. The yeshivos in Israel have the advantage of size, being much smaller than YU is. They may have one hundred guys, as opposed to YU, which has eleven or twelve hundred students on campus at any one time. I do think that a parallel phenomenon happens within the shi’urim in YU. The same way people identify as “Gush guys,” they might identify as a “R. Rosensweig guy” or a “R. Schachter guy,” identifying with their shi’ur rather than with YU as a whole.

**“...different yeshivos have different goals. Some need to make their students interested in Judaism... For others, the goal may be to make the students *shomer torah u-mitsvos* (observant of the Torah and commandments), keep *shabbos*... These are obviously all worthwhile goals.”**

have shown no interest in Judaism at all. For others, the goals may be to make the students *shomerei Torah u-mitsvos* (observant of the Torah and commandments), keep Shabbos, marry Jewish, get them off drugs, and other similar things. These are all obviously worthwhile goals. There are some programs that get students who come in with no problems, and those students should be learning Torah. If the yeshiva would spend time singing songs with them, rather than teaching them to be *talmidei chachamim* (Torah scholars), it would not be doing its job.

*How have the yeshivot changed since you were in Israel for the year in Yeshivat Kerem B’Yavneh?*

I think yeshivos now need to have the image of warmth, and some have developed initiatives such as “Bayit Cham” (Warm House) hospitality programs. This is not a bad thing, as long as this does not come at the expense of the quality of learning. Hopefully, it so far has not. Many yeshivos manage to be warmer places, including places where a lot of dancing goes on, without compromising the level of learning.

*To what extent do you think students in YU continue to identify themselves by the yeshivos or seminaries that they attended in Israel after they*

To summarize, in general I do not think that it is a bad thing for guys to identify with their yeshivos. It is fine if they walk around with sweatshirts from their high schools, too. There is no reason for them to disavow their past. Hopefully, they have warm feelings about their yeshiva in Israel, and one would hope the same would happen in the three or four years (or more, if they study for *semichah* [rabbinic ordination]) here – that at some point they would feel connected more with YU. Hopefully, YU is doing everything it can to make people like it.

*Do you think there is a sense that people want to be back in yeshiva? Do you think that that is a good thing?*

Yes, there is such a sense. I would love to be back in yeshiva as well – it beats working. It is not that the yeshivos are going around saying that their *talmidim* should be miserable in YU. If *talmidim* are identifying more with their yeshivos than with YU, we at YU have to ask what we can do to make them more comfortable. Obviously, if the reason they liked yeshiva more was that they did not have to go to college or see their parents, we cannot help that. However, if they felt that it was a warmer environment or they were accomplishing more there, we should do whatever we can to make



## After Israel: Potential and Pitfalls on Campus

BY: Naomi Berman

them accomplish more here. We cannot blame the yeshivos for the fact that the students enjoyed their time there.

*Is there a problem with the potential cliques that are created by students from the same yeshivot?*

Not really – it is understandable. The students spend a year in Israel away from everything. They are away from their family and, for the most part, away from American culture. They spend that year (or those years) with fifty guys, 24/7, so it makes sense that they would become close to that group of friends. And it makes sense that they would feel close to the yeshivos as well. Especially if the students feel they accomplished a lot in yeshivah, they are going to feel connected to it. If they did not have those warm feelings towards the yeshivos, it would be a lack of *hakkaras ha-tov* (gratitude). Is there a problem with having *hakkaras ha-tov* for yeshivos in Israel? Absolutely not!

Parenthetically, I would ask if we wish that they had the same *hakkaras ha-tov* for YU, and of course the answer is, absolutely yes! I am not sure whose fault it is that they often do not. Perhaps it is inevitable because there is so much more pressure here, and it will take people years to realize what they got here, or perhaps it is the bureaucracy that frustrates people. At any rate, it is not the fault of the yeshivos and the relationship the students have with them.

*Do you find that guys do not click with students from other yeshivot?*

It is hard to tell. To take a personal example, when I got back from yeshivah, I did not have a lot of time to socialize. I was friendly with the guy I sat next to in shi'ur, in night *sefer*, my roommate, and the person next to me in the dorm. In general, the people in your shi'ur, your roommates, and your *chavrusos* (study partners) are all people with whom you attended yeshivah. People choose whom they are comfortable with and that is whom they end up associating with, and often, those people are the people who were with them in yeshivah. It is not that people are opposed to talking to people from other yeshivos, but often it happens practically that they seldom do so. The people who surround them are just people from their yeshivos. The same thing happens in YU. Often, people from MYP and IBC do not hang out with each other simply because they do not see each other.

*Do people generally break or follow the stereotypes of their yeshivot?*

If a yeshivah is known for being warm and fuzzy and that is who I am, I will go there. If a yeshivah is known for being cold and intellectual, and that is what I want, I will go there. For the most part, it is a self-fulfilling prophecy, and it is very hard to change what the yeshivah is.

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I come to the discussion about the year in Israel experience from the particular vantage point of someone who has been involved in *shannah ba-arets* programs as well as the Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus (JLIC) in the United States.<sup>1</sup> My husband and I were the dorm parents and Ra"mim (teachers) at Midreshet Lindenbaum before we pioneered JLIC at Brandeis. We have subsequently returned to Midreshet Lindenbaum and Yeshivat Eretz HaTzvi, respectively. Based on these experiences, I will specifically address the relationship between the *shannah ba-arets* and the university experience. Does the year in Israel prepare a student for being a Torah Jew in university? Should that be one of the goals of the *shannah ba-arets*?

Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life considers its mission to “provide opportunities for Jewish students to explore and celebrate their Jewish identity.”<sup>2</sup> For many Orthodox university students, Jewish identity has been an absolute given but suddenly requires radical redefinition. Questions that arise include: In the absence of school structure and parental pressure, will I still learn Torah and attend *minyán* (daily? weekly?)? Hopefully, this is where the year in Israel plays a role. The decision to attend a *shannah ba-arets* program is fundamentally identity-forming. It is a declaration that *talmud Torah* is part of one's Jewish self-definition.

Beyond the inherent value of *talmud Torah* itself, the additional (and perhaps even more critical) role that learning plays is of a more social nature. A vibrant *beit midrash* creates a community within a community. No matter what else is happening, a *minyán* and a *beit midrash* will anchor the student to the Jewish orbit.

Detractors will point to the all-too-frequent instances of students who, despite twelve years of yeshivah day school and a year of yeshivah in Israel, seem to disappear from the Jewish radar screen on campus. They will argue that the year in Israel clearly has no impact. I would agree that indeed the year in Israel is no guarantee. Perhaps the most startling case I ever encountered was a student who, at the end of his year in a prestigious yeshivah in Israel, shipped his books to our home in Boston so that they would be waiting for him upon his arrival on campus. We dutifully packed the boxes into the trunk of our car, anticipating meeting this clearly enthusiastic new member of our community. Weeks later, needing to reclaim the trunk of our car, we hunted him down. He picked up his books and that was the last we saw of him. This was not a case of the influence of secular campus wearing away at his belief or his motivation. This was a case of a student “crashing” within two months of leaving yeshivah. No, the year in Israel is no guarantee; however, I do believe that there is evidence that the year in Israel does have significant impact on many, if certainly not all, participants.

In the fall of 2000, after my husband and I completed our first semester at JLIC at Brandeis, we conducted a survey of the Orthodox community.

At the time, we were interested in learning more about the background and needs of the community in order to become more effective leaders. Looking back now, that survey also sheds some light on the impact of the year in Israel. We distributed the surveys to students voting in the Brandeis Orthodox Organization elections. The yeshivah and midrashah graduates were significantly more likely to participate in the elections (i.e. to affiliate with the Orthodox community in an official manner). Of this population, forty-six out of fifty-six considered themselves to be active in Jewish learning, whether through classes offered by JLIC or *havrutot* (peer learning), while only eight of the seventeen who did not attend yeshivah in Israel after completing yeshivah high school claimed to be involved in learning, and, astoundingly, only one participated



regularly in any class. While I do not have the exact data regarding the correlation between the year in Israel and *minyán* attendance, my anecdotal impressions suggest that the statistics would be similar.

While this survey reflects the situation on one campus over a decade ago, a quick online search corroborates my impression that these general trends continue. Student leadership positions, whether at YC and Stern or in the Hillel communities on other campuses, tend to be dominated by *shannah ba-arets* graduates, and this is not limited to the realm of the *minyán* and *beit midrash*. To cite one random example, the University of Pennsylvania Orthodox community's Chessed Committee last year was chaired by two Midreshet Lindenbaum alumnae. Does the year in Israel cultivate a greater commitment to *hesed*, or merely greater confidence to be involved?

To a degree, then, I would respond that the year

in Israel does help prepare students for Jewish life in a university setting even without programs making this an explicit aspect of their agenda. But I also believe that the *shannah ba-arets* programs can and should take certain active steps. The two programs with which I am most familiar, Midreshet Lindenbaum and Eretz HaTzvi, both offer college preparatory programs. The goal of these programs is not to provide an answer key: we cannot anticipate every argument students will encounter in their university Bible classes, and we certainly cannot script the conversations they might have with a roommate who invites a member of the opposite sex to share his or her room for the night. We can raise awareness of the issues with the goal of taking some of the edge off of the culture shock that students experience (hopefully!) when entering the campus environment.

Preparation, however, only goes so far. The most essential role that the *shannah ba-arets* can and should play in the students' university experience is in providing ongoing support during the university years. Perhaps the reality has changed in the intervening decade, but during our tenure at Brandeis we were extremely disappointed to discover that yeshivah high schools did not seem to feel any responsibility towards their graduates in university. Ironically, the same high schools which were investing significant resources in sending their representatives for annual visits to check up on their students in Israel were failing to send representatives to visit their students on the much closer-to-home university campuses, where support of Jewish educators seemed to us to be all the more critical. With the help of Yeshiva University, we contacted every Orthodox high school in the United States in the hopes of learning about and contacting incoming students before they arrived on campus. The response was underwhelming. In contrast, many (but not all) of the yeshivot and midrashot were eager to put their students in touch with us and sent a continuous stream of representatives to give shi'urim and visit alumni on campus.

The yeshivot and midrashot encourage continued involvement in Jewish learning, foster a Torah-observant social network, and offer ongoing support while students are in university. Each of these strengths comes with drawbacks. It behooves educators in yeshivot and midrashot to be keenly aware of and sensitive to these issues.

While I believe that ongoing support can play a decisive role in maintaining the students' Jewish connection while on campus, it should not come at the expense of building new connections. I am familiar with the issue from both perspectives. The *shannah ba-arets* educator is sincerely committed to providing support and being available for the myriad halakhic and hashkafic questions which inevitably surface during the university years. However, as a JLIC educator, I know that sometimes the best answer is, “I'm happy to discuss the issue with you, but I strongly recommend that you also consult with your local rabbi/JLIC educator.”

By the same token, the ongoing encouragement of learning is crucial. However, there is a danger of

setting the bar too high. I recently received a letter from a former student struggling with what she described as a common post-midrashah feeling that “If they [midrashah graduates] are not learning, they are failing... You (as a collective faculty) reiterated to us over and over again how important Talmud Torah was and how essential it was for us to incorporate learning into our lives once we returned to our respective homes. I can understand the importance of that message. We needed to go home fired up and determined to continue our learning so that our year was just the start of a long process and not simply an exception. However, much of the last two years has been [spent] dealing with the realities of life which are demanding and can mean that other things take priority.”

The message that *talmud Torah* is of paramount importance should not be abandoned, but should include an honest discussion about realistic expectations. To whatever degree possible, these discussions should also be tailored to individual students’ needs; not every student shares the same abilities, nor are all students entering the same environment.

Finally, we must address the vital issue of social network. Before my tenure at Brandeis, I shared the party line that pushed *minyan* attendance and beit midrash participation as the keys to “survival” on campus. After my JLIC experience, I started to modify my message. Obviously, *minyan* attendance and beit midrash participation are critical, but I also warn students of the danger of creating communal ties which are *too* strong and consequently breed what President Joel refers to as “Orthodox triumphalism.” This triumphalism is to the detriment of other Orthodox students, of the Jewish community at large, and ultimately of the *shanah ba-arets* graduates themselves.

The data quoted above demonstrate the problem. Yeshivah high school graduates who do not spend a year in Israel seem less likely to get involved in their university’s Jewish community. Perhaps this is an outcome of self-selection. The same people who choose not to spend a year in Israel choose to be less involved in the Jewish community on campus. However, I learned that the picture is often more complex and, frankly, depressing. Students who did not spend a year in Israel might want to be more involved but are intimidated by those who did. I know of some cases where students either left the Orthodox community because they were treated like outsiders by students who had spent a year in Israel or remained peripherally involved but were deeply disturbed by their predicament.

At the same time, students who develop immediate and strong connections in the world of the *minyan* or the beit midrash often forgo involvement in the broader Jewish community. In the Hillel environment, where all Jewish students need to share space and resources, this insularism sometimes breeds tension and, in extreme cases, even *hillul Hashem* (desecration of God’s name).

I once mentioned to some colleagues in *shanah ba-arets* programs that I encourage my students to be involved in Jewish life outside of the Orthodox community. The response: “If they are still going to *minyan* and keeping kosher after two years on campus, then they can think about extending

themselves further.” I adamantly disagree. It seems to me that rather than shaking their religious commitment, broadening their horizons only intensified students’ commitment to the Jewish community in general and a sense of pride in their own traditions.

In light of these considerations, my modified message to year-in-Israel graduates, including those attending YC and Stern, is this: become a part of the beit midrash community, but keep your expectations of yourself realistic; embrace the talents and contributions of those who come from different backgrounds; and join forces to build the broader Jewish community. You have a lot to give and everything to gain.

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1. JLIC (according to its website) is a program run by the Orthodox Union, in partnership with Hillel, that “helps Orthodox students navigate the college environment, and balance their Jewish commitments with their desire to engage the secular world. In addition, JLIC provides avenues for spiritual development and exploration for Jewish students from varied backgrounds; JLIC presents a positive, sophisticated and welcoming face for Orthodox Judaism on campus.” See: <http://www.jliconline.org/index.php/about/>.

2. “Telling the Hillel Story,” available at: [http://www.hillel.org/about/facts/hillel\\_story/default](http://www.hillel.org/about/facts/hillel_story/default).

# General Jewish Thought

## *Eved Kena'ani*: The Other Jewish Slave

BY: Chana Cooper

Throughout history, Jews have contemplated the practical and ethical implications of the biblical injunction of slavery. As recently as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the discussion of biblical slavery was of practical interest. During the American Civil War, a public and heated dialogue about the permissibility of the institution of slavery took place between rabbis of the time, each using Torah sources to defend his respective position.<sup>1</sup> In today’s Western world, however, slavery has mostly been eradicated and is widely viewed as morally unacceptable in both the Jewish and non-Jewish communities. Contemporary studies of biblical slavery and the halakhot regarding an *eved Kena'ani* (Canaanite

unto nations.<sup>4</sup> In fact, explains R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, the Torah only permitted the purchase of an *eved Kena'ani* if that individual was already a slave under existing international law.<sup>5</sup>

The prime example of a Torah law as a concession to human reality is found in Hazal’s comments on the topic of *eshet yefat to'ar*, a non-Jewish female captive whom the Torah allows a Jewish soldier to take as a wife.<sup>6</sup> In light of this law, the Gemara in *Kiddushin* 21b states that, “*lo dibberah Torah ela ke-neged yetser ha-ra*,” “the Torah [in this case] speaks specifically against the evil inclination.” Rashi there explains that since the soldier’s desire would be insurmountable, the Torah permits the soldier to behave in a dubious manner. Rambam famously employs a similar concept in explaining

**“We find a tension in Halakhah between limiting slavery and ensuring that slaves do not become Jews through compulsion.”**

slave) often focus on the ethical implications of the Torah’s sanction of slavery.<sup>2</sup> With the assumption that slavery constitutes a violation of basic human rights and seems to negate the Torah’s view that every human being is created *be-tselem E-lohim* (in the image of God), scholars often ask why the Torah allowed slavery altogether.

In response to this challenge, many Jewish thinkers explain the Torah’s permissive approach towards slavery not as an expression of an ideal, but as a concession to the historical reality of the time in which the Torah was given. Since slavery was a universally accepted practice in the ancient world and indeed was depended upon by existing economic frameworks, the Torah could not have expected the Jews to refrain from engaging in this practice. Thus, the Torah instead sought to limit its injustices by creating a slavery system that was as ethical as possible, with the ultimate goal of eliminating it entirely.<sup>3</sup> Another possible way to view this concession is that, given the pervasiveness of slavery in ancient cultures, had the Torah forbidden slavery in a Jewish society, *Am Yisrael* would have had great difficulty impacting the models of slavery in surrounding societies. Requiring a more upright system of slavery, one in which non-Jewish slaves could also partake, the Torah gave the Jewish nation recourse to improve the conditions of those slaves and to provide an example to other nations for ethical treatment, serving as an *or la-goyim*, a light

the biblical institution of *korbanot* (sacrifices).<sup>7</sup> He argues that, although animal sacrifice is not the ideal way to serve God, the Torah constructed a system of *korbanot* because, historically, that was the accepted mode of worship. As such, it would have been impossible for the Torah to effectively prevent *Am Yisrael* from serving God in that manner. From these examples it emerges that viewing certain legal constructs in the Torah as acknowledgments of difficult realities rather than paradigms for ethical behavior exists within Torah tradition. According to this approach, Halakhah promotes certain ethical ideals, but cannot always require that these ideals be fully implemented immediately after the Torah was given. Instead, it may take time and much training in Torah in order for *Am Yisrael* to achieve the Torah’s true, ethical goal. However, it must be stated that these ethical ideals are internal to Torah and the halakhic system, and are not adopted from the external world and applied to Torah.<sup>8</sup>

Although the ethical dilemma posed by the overall existence of biblical slavery is often addressed, a notable issue rarely dealt with on a philosophical level is the religious status of the *eved Kena'ani*. While the exact nature of this status is not clear, the *eved Kena'ani* is largely viewed as being in between a *ger toshav* (resident alien)<sup>9</sup> and full Jew. He is obligated to undergo a conversion process, including *milah* (circumcision) and *tevilah* (ritual immersion), and must keep all mitsvot except



for those that are time-bound.<sup>10,11,12</sup> If emancipated, the *eved Kena'ani* becomes a full member of the Jewish people. Why did the Torah feel it necessary to impose halakhic obligations upon the non-Jewish slave? Why is there no possibility of owning an *eved Kena'ani* who abides by the *sheva mitsvot benei Noah* (seven Noahide laws) like a *ger toshav*, but without any additional Jewish commandments? In defense of the Torah's permissive approach towards slavery, it is often noted that the Torah considers the *eved Kena'ani* to be a part of the Jewish community; proof that Halakhah does not treat the slave solely as property, but recognizes him as a human being as well.<sup>13</sup> But why does Halakhah prohibit an *eved Kena'ani* from maintaining a non-Jewish Noahide identity and achieving a respected and acceptable place in a Jewish society without the additional Jewish obligations?

One possible explanation for this phenomenon lies in practical, political reasoning rather than philosophical explanation. Professor David M. Cobin, a professor at Hamline University School of Law and an expert on slavery in Jewish law, argues that Hazal were fearful that the non-Jewish slave, even one ostensibly keeping his Noahide obligations, would remain too connected to his gentile national origins.<sup>14</sup> Such a slave might betray the Jewish community by releasing potentially harmful information he obtained while working for his Jewish masters to the empires in power. This worry was expressed by R. Hai Gaon, who stated in a *teshuvah* (responsum) that although it might be permissible to keep an unconverted slave, one should not do so if there is a "fear that unconverted slaves will reveal Jewish secrets to those who seek after Jewish souls and blood and bring danger or war upon Jews."<sup>15</sup> Thus, by demanding that the *eved Kena'ani* take on a stronger Jewish identity, only those slaves who are willing to abandon their non-Jewish identities are allowed to serve in and become a part of the Jewish world.

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Additionally, Hazal may not just have been fearful of possible injurious reports reaching the non-Jewish powers but may also have been concerned about the possible negative impact of having large foreign populations flooding Jewish society.<sup>16</sup> Introducing a significant number of slaves coming from various cultural backgrounds into a new societal context could greatly destabilize a community or lead to a slave rebellion.<sup>17</sup> The halakhic requirement of conversion was therefore intended to maintain stability in the Jewish community by only allowing those foreigners who were willing to blend into

Jewish culture to become an *eved Kena'ani*.

Finally, I would like to tentatively suggest that just as the entire enterprise of slavery in the Torah can be seen as a concession that should ideally be eliminated, the particular laws of an *eved Kena'ani* can be viewed through this lens as well. Since the

**“Why does Halakhah prohibit an *eved Kena'ani* from maintaining a non-Jewish Noahide identity and achieving a respected and acceptable place in a Jewish society without the additional Jewish obligations?”**

Torah allowed slavery but wished to minimize its practice while making it as ethical as possible, the Torah wanted to ensure that Jewish society would not develop into a rigid caste system with an entrenched slave class at the bottom of the social order. In order to ensure this, the Torah gave the *eved Kena'ani* the status of a quasi-Jew so that his Jewish master would be more likely to view him as one of his own. In the ancient world, "slaves were almost always of a different ethnic group, national origin, religion or political unit than their owners" because, psychologically, these differences, viewed as inferiorities, made it easier to enslave foreigners.<sup>18</sup> By giving the *eved Kena'ani* a quasi-Jewish status and allowing him to become a full member of the Jewish community when emancipated, Halakhah tries to make sure that Jewish society will never turn into a slave-based class system.

A major challenge to this proposed explanation is the severe halakhic limitations on freeing an *eved Kena'ani* based on the *pasuk* "*le-olam ba-hem ta'avodu*,"<sup>19</sup> "you shall thus have them serve you forever,"<sup>20</sup> which teaches that a master cannot free

means to have control over one's environment. Consequently, in order to engage in meaningful *avodat Hashem* (worship of God), one must have the control and freedom to choose to do so. Since the *eved Kena'ani* only becomes a complete Jew once his master frees him, the slave's Jewishness

is completely controlled by his master, which is antithetical to the Torah's view that Jewish worship requires autonomy. However, in a case of *devar mitsvah*, the freedom of the slave is the result of the will of God, not another human being, and thus the slave's Jewishness is not imposed upon him by the will of another person; rather, it is the will of God, so to speak. Therefore, we find a tension in Halakhah between limiting slavery and ensuring that slaves do not become Jews through compulsion. In reality, however, manumission was often encouraged and halakhic authorities often "decided almost every doubt in favor of freedom."<sup>25</sup>

If my proposed explanation for the religious status of the *eved Kena'ani* is a tenable one, then this halakhah provides an inspiring example of the Torah's attempt to form an ethically based society. Furthermore, it underscores the Torah's understanding of human nature that drastic societal changes cannot be imposed in a short time. In its infinite wisdom, the Torah provides the framework to achieve the ultimate goal, allowing human beings to eventually reach the ethical understanding present in the Torah all along.

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1. For instance, see: R. Bernard Illoway's sermon, "The Wars of the Lord," given at the Lloyd Street Synagogue in Baltimore on January 4, 1861, available at: <http://www.theoccident.com/lloway/sermon.html>; R. David Einhorn's response to Dr. Morris Jacob Raphall's "The Bible View of Slavery" (1861), which appeared in the German magazine Sinai, vol. VI, in 1861; English translation available at: <http://www.jewish-history.com/civilwar/einhorn.html>.

2. The biblical slavery discussed in this article refers to the laws governing *eved Kena'ani*, not *eved Ivri* (Hebrew slave).

3. Nahum Eliezer Rabinovitch, "The Way of Torah," *The Edah Journal* 3,1, (2003) pp. 8-12.

4. Shmuel Goldin, *Unlocking the Torah Text: Shmot*. (Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing House, 2008), p. 176.

5. R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Commentary on the Torah, Shemot* 12:44. R. Hirsch speaks of international law although no formal international legal system existed. I believe he means to refer to the informal status that a slave had in the eyes of the surrounding nations.

6. See Deuteronomy 21:10-14 and commentaries to that verse.

7. *Moreh Nevukhim*, III:32.

8. How to determine whether any given ethical value is internal or external to Torah is a complex issue that is beyond the scope of this article.

9. A *ger toshav* is a non-Jew who formally agrees to abide by the seven Noahide laws, but is not circumcised and does not have to perform ritual immersion. See: Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Issurei Biah*, 14:7. It should be noted that there are varying opinions on the exact definition of a *ger toshav*.

10. *Mishnah Berakhot* 3:3.

11. *Hagigah* 4a.

12. *Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh De'ah, Hilkhoh Avadim*, 267:1, 3-8, 17.

13. Rabinovitch, p. 9.

14. David M. Cobin, *Chicago-Kent Law Review*, 70,3 (1995), pp. 1339-1348.

15. *Teshuvot Ha-Geonim*, Number 431 (A. Harkavy ed., 1887), as quoted by Cobin, p. 1343.

16. Goldin, p. 177.

17. Ibid.

18. Kenneth S. Bordens and Irwin A. Horowitz, *Social Psychology, Second Edition*. (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2002), p. 115.

19. *Vayikra* 25:46.

20. *The Living Torah* translation.

21. *Gittin* 38b; Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Avadim*, 9:6.

22. Some authorities maintain that this is only for a *devar mitsvah* that is for the public good. Others argue that it is only forbidden to release a slave for no reason at all, but as long as the master has some justification for releasing his slave, he is permitted to do so. See Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Avadim*, 9:6, as well as *Migdal Oz* and *Kesef Mishneh* there; Nahum Rabinovitch, idem, p. 11, footnote 66.

23. The ideas put forth in this paragraph are from R. Aryeh Klapper, "Are Workers More Than Wage Slaves? Toward a Halakhic Labor Ethic" (audio), Summer Beit Midrash, available at: <http://www.archive.org/details/RabbiKlapperAreWorkersMoreThanWageSlavesTowardHalakhicLaborEthic>.

24. Mentioned by R. Klapper, *ibid*; for original source, see: R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith* (New York: Three Leaves Press, 1965), p. 15.

25. Cobin, p. 1341.



# TORAH U'MADDA IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

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**Furst 501**

**April 6th**

**7:30 pm - 10 pm**

**Light refreshments will be served**

**Transportation will be provided from Beren campus at 6:30**

**Speakers include: Dr. Shira Weiss, Rabbi Saul Berman,  
Rabbi Yona Reiss, Rabbi Blau, Dr. Daniel Rynhold, President  
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