Books

My Yeshiva College: 75 Years of Memories
Edited by Menachem Butler and Zev Nagel
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387 pages

Reviewed by Herbert Schlager

Reading My Yeshiva College: 75 Years of Memories, a collection of sixty-four reminiscences and glimpses of Yeshiva College life, as recalled by former students and teachers, flooded me with memories of my undergraduate years at Yeshiva College and of the strong feelings the school has always engendered. While Yeshiva Torah Vodaath never had to explain the provenance and significance of its institutional name, Yeshiva College, with its Torah Umadda insignia, never managed to get such a break.

The debate about the nature and purpose of Yeshiva College can be fierce. For some, Yeshiva College’s religious and secular studies are not inherently contradictory but actually complement, enhance and enrich each other. After all, the purpose of both is the disinterested search for Truth. However, for others, such a synthesis or symbiosis is anathema, pure heresy, proof positive that the school motto is really “Torah Madua?” and that the originators of the school’s slogan purposely shrouded their intention in an alchemic formulation because they couldn’t decide which of the two orientations should follow the other.

As a budding yeshivah bochur growing up in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, I was frequently admonished by my rebbeim to forgo college. But if I were “lo aleinu,” unable to resist the gravitational pull towards the secular, I was told to, at the very least, stay clear of Yeshiva College, which claimed to be Torah-true through and through, but which was, at best, a dangerous artifice, a Potemkin shtetl, a patchwork of symbolism employed was that of the parah adumah, the red heifer, which, while purifying the defiled, also defiled the pure. If you arrived at the institution non-frum and ignorant of Jewish law, Yeshiva College probably could do no real harm and could, in fact, do some good. But if you entered frum, you would become hopelessly lost.

Better, I was told, to attend a goyishe church school—at least there I would experience the difference between the sacred and the profane, and not get sucked in by pseudo-frum spin doctors.

Decades later, as My Yeshiva College amply documents in its remarkable vignettes, Torah flourishes at the College, and the Yeshivish world recognizes, albeit grudgingly, the profound and incalculable contribution of Yeshiva College to Torah life in America. The opposition has mellowed and is more appreciative; nobody moved the halachic goal posts, the strident have become less shrill, less judgmental, more patient and currently seek common ground—and it all happened right before our very own eyes. What Yeshiva College taught the Torah world is that there are parallel ways to reach one’s destination, to achieve one’s goals, to spread the Torah’s light to others and to serve the Lord of the Universe.

Intriguingly, there has always been this debate among Yeshiva College alumni about the nature of their own academic, professional and personal success. Did they do it on their own? Did Yeshiva College make it all—or half—possible, or did the graduates succeed in spite of the school, because, by force of circumstances and necessity, it enabled them to acquire and develop requisite skills? While My Yeshiva College doesn’t exactly answer these questions, it does offer insights on the positive nature of the Yeshiva College experience and, on a more general level, how Yeshiva College, which began as a tiny beit midrashbinical school, managed in so short a period of time to assume a position of academic prominence, reach the big leagues and evolve into a major institution of higher education and the flagship of Modern Orthodoxy. A minor miracle, at the very least! A special providence, indeed!

The book, which originally appeared in the form of individual essays published in the Yeshiva College student newspaper, The Commentator, is structured sequentially, highlighting moments in the reigns of the first three presidents of Yeshiva College—Rabbi Dr. Bernard Revel, Rabbi Dr. Samuel Belkin and Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm. As a totality, these essays illustrate the challenges the college faced and celebrate its myriad accomplishments. Each of the sketches or vignettes is a story in itself and attempts in some existential way to define the Yeshiva College experience, the school’s mission and its...
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impact on each of the participant writers and on the Jewish community at large. Rather than serve as a history of the college per se, My Yeshiva College is a walk down memory lane, a bright mosaic that illuminates the way we were and the way we fare now as a result. Specifically, the editors, Menachem Butler and Zev Nagel, who are both recent graduates of Yeshiva College, ask the contributors, “What is Yeshiva College?” much in the same way the Gemara in Masechet Shabbat (21b) ironically asks, “What is Chanukah?”

While the Talmud clearly describes and defines Chanukah, in the case of Yeshiva College, the answers are partial, wide-ranging and sometimes eye-glazing. What clearly emerges from the vignettes is that Yeshiva College means different things to different people. As Rabbi Gil Student, founder of Yeshar Books and the publisher of My Yeshiva College, asserts in his essay on “The Ongoing Conundrum of Yeshiva College,” the school itself has, “from its very inception until today, engaged in its own struggle with self-definition. What is Yeshiva College? Is it a college for yeshivah students? A yeshivah for college students? A yeshivah-college hybrid and, if so, which of a variety of types?” In practical terms, these questions of self-definition are best understood in the context of the religious challenges we face as Orthodox Jews who confront and interact with the modern world on a daily basis. In his analysis of Yeshiva College, Rabbi Dr. Eugene Korn (YC ’68), currently director of Jewish affairs at the American Jewish Congress and editor of The Edah Journal, writes that although the general culture has been significantly transformed from what it was in the turbulent sixties—a time of agony and ecstasy for both Americans in general and Jews in particular—the same questions remain:

“How do we crucially accept high culture and be true to the halakhic and meta-halakhic values of our mesorah? What is the proper dialectic of intellectual rigor and moral sensitivity? How can we retain our Jewish identity, yet not become just a curious and isolated sect? How can we relate to klal Yisroel in a real, not merely rhetorical, way? And, finally, what do we have to contribute to God’s world, the future and to all humanity whom He created be-tzlem Elokim?”

These questions, raised in one form or another throughout the book, illustrate the personal journey many face in pursuit of the elusive Torah Umadda synthesis. Because the book encompasses seventy-five years of reminiscences, it is difficult to do justice to the wealth of information it offers and the insights it provides. There are portraits of the European gedolim who were invited to join the faculty by Rabbi Dr. Revel and Rabbi Dr. Belkin. Anyone as fortunate as I was to have some of these gedolim as rebbeim can attest to current Yeshiva President Richard Joel’s depiction of these giants as “men of penetrating intellect and profound integrity.” Included in their numbers and in the portraits and snapshots are home-grown American Talmudic scholars and pioneers of American Orthodoxy.

Unfortunately, however, because My Yeshiva College is a project of the Board of Directors of Yeshiva College, we get only a partial, sanitized and selective rendering of the Yeshiva College experience. Much of the excitement, vibrancy, richness and improvisational nature of Yeshiva College life is not narrated. So many personal journeys through the labyrinth of Yeshiva College that would be of immense interest to the reading public are never delineated. We never seem to get off the main road, the official highway coded with the standard markers. Perhaps exploring some uncharted trails and meandering paths would kick up too much dust. Irrespective of whether the pool of essays was purposely filtered, the effect is that a good deal of what we all experienced at Yeshiva College has not been recorded in this volume, and the absence thereof is deeply felt. In concentrating editorial attention on graduates who are currently part of the “Jewish Establishment,” we get an “authorized version” of the Yeshiva College experience. We would have been better served with a more inclusive representation, with reminiscences by the “Yeshiva shel Ma’alah” as well as those by the “Yeshiva shel Mitzvah.”

Notwithstanding the aforementioned observations, there is much to prize in this volume of memories. The second part of My Yeshiva College explores the extraordinary pioneering feats that took place during the Belkin years and provides the most extensive treatment of the Yeshiva institutional experience. It was during this period that Yeshiva College faced daunting financial challenges and a near-death experience, but under Rabbi Dr. Lamm’s leadership it was able to fashion and re-structure itself into a full-fledged university with an endowment of at least one billion dollars.

In order to survive, Yeshiva College took steps that are only partially alluded to in some of the essays. Dr. Steven Bayme, national director of the Contemporary Jewish Life Department of the American Jewish Committee, tells us that in reviewing those years, “one must avoid the temptations to don rose-colored glasses.” For example, “academic departments generally lacked a critical mass of faculty and had to subsist with very few personnel.” Moreover, “the double program in itself posed serious challenges to maintaining standards of excellence and demands upon student productivity.”

On a personal note, I recall some of the college’s deficiencies becoming public information when I had the opportunity to examine Yeshiva College as a case study at Harvard Business School. The study was in connection with the landmark US Supreme Court ruling that Yeshiva College faculty members were not considered employees covered by The National Labor Relations Act and could therefore not unionize. As part of the case study, Harvard sponsored a debate between the Yeshiva College faculty union, represented by Dr. Manfred Weidhorn, Yeshiva College professor of English,
and the Yeshiva College lawyer. During the debate, Dr. Weidhorn pointed out that the Yeshiva College case study was a “model of how not to run a university.” My classmates at Harvard—some of whom are now presidents, vice-presidents and deans at mid-sized and small universities—could not believe the negative findings that emerged from the case study. They were astounded that, for instance, Yeshiva College’s day-to-day “management” activities were largely controlled by the vice-president of business affairs and that “academic affairs was under the aegis of a host of medieval rabbis.” After classes, back at the dorm, I tried to explain to my colleagues that the case study was an outsider’s view and that the authors of the study failed to see the larger picture, focusing instead on what they found to be the highly Byzantine structure of decision making. What convinced my classmates was certainly not my eloquence, but Yeshiva College’s outstanding reputation. For many of them, Yeshiva College ranked along with the giants of American higher education, and so the initial healthy regard they had had for the school as an academy open to plural perspectives and intellectual diversity more than balanced the case study’s negative findings.

In essence, My Yeshiva College is itself a case study of sorts, but it is also a love song to which my voice wholeheartedly joins. Yeshiva College was a great experience. It strengthened our love for Torah and for Eretz Yisrael as well as our appreciation for academic discourse and the twin imperatives of mastering and perfecting the world. It provided us with the opportunity to get to know fellow Jewish students from all over the world, to build personal relationships and create lasting friendships. Tim Russert, Meet the Press moderator, perhaps said it best when he told graduates at this past year’s Yeshiva College commencement: “You have something others would give most anything for! You believe in something—in your God, in your country, in your family, in your school, in yourself and your values.”

For all this, countless generations—and on a personal note, my own children, daughter-in-law and son-in-law—are grateful for the leadership and vision of Rabbi Dr. Revel, Rabbi Dr. Belkin and Rabbi Dr. Lamm and the direction of Yeshiva College under current President Joel. As long as Yeshiva College continues to invest in the Jewish people, its future is assured.

Shortly after the Rav’s passing, there was a period of time when eulogies for him were delivered almost nightly by roshei yeshivah at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS). This was their opportunity to commemorate their distinguished mentor’s accomplishments, as well as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for students like me to gain multiple and sequential insights into the Rav. The differences in these respective portraits were, however, striking. In one rosh yeshivah’s description, the Rav seemed like a misunderstood halachist who had strange practices based on unique halachic rulings. From another’s perspective, he was a fiery halil musar. One rosh yeshivah portrayed him as an abstract lamdan and another as a religious conservative who opposed halachic change except when absolutely necessary and halachically justifiable. And so on.

In some respects these various perspectives were quite amusing, because each speaker emphasized a facet of the Rav that was most reflected in the speaker himself. Clearly, the speaker concentrated on those aspects of the Rav that he found most compelling.
Yet, the very fact that so many different people could find an exemplar of different disciplines in the Rav was the most revealing discovery. Initially, I was confused about these widely varying descriptions, but eventually I realized that they are, in fact, all true. The Rav spoke and wrote teachings of the Rav. The concept is fairly simple. The Rav spoke and wrote teachings of the Rav. The concept is fairly simple. The Rav spoke and wrote teachings of the Rav. The concept is fairly simple. The Rav spoke and wrote teachings of the Rav. The concept is fairly simple. The Rav spoke and wrote teachings of the Rav. The concept is fairly simple. The Rav spoke and wrote teachings of the Rav. The concept is fairly simple. The Rav spoke and wrote teachings of the Rav. The concept is fairly simple. The Rav spoke and wrote teachings of the Rav. The concept is fairly simple. The Rav spoke and wrote teachings of the Rav. The concept is fairly simple. The Rav spoke and wrote teachings of the Rav. The concept is fairly simple. The Rav spoke and wrote teachings of the Rav. The concept is fairly simple. The Rav spoke and wrote teachings of the Rav. The concept is fairly simple. The Rav spoke and wrote teachings of the Rav. The concept is fairly simple. The Rav spoke and wrote teachings of the Rav. The concept is fairly simple. The Rav spoke and wrote teachings of the Rav. The concept is fairly simple. The Rav spoke and wrote teachings of the Rav. The concept is fairly simple. The Rav spoke and wrote teachings of the Rav. The concept is fairly simple. The Rav spoke and wrote teachings of the Rav. The concept is fairly simple. The Rav spoke and wrote teachings of the Rav. The concept is fairly simple. The Rav spoke and wrote teachings of the Rav. The concept is fairly simple. The Rav spoke and wrote teachings of the Rav. The concept is fairly simple. The Rav spoke and wrote teachings of the Rav. The concept is fairly simple. The Rav spoke and wrote teachings of the Rav. The concept is fairly simple. The Rav spoke and wrote teachings of the Rav. The concept is fairly simple. The Rav spoke and wrote teachings of the Rav. The concept is fairly simple. The Rav spoke and wrote teachings of the Rav. The concept is fairly simple. The Rav spoke and wrote teachings of the Rav. The concept is fairly simple. The Rav spoke and wrote teachings of the Rav. The concept is fairly simple. The Rav spoke and wrote teachings of the Rav. The concept is fairly simple. The Rav spoke and wrote teachings of the Rav. The concept is fairly simple. The Rav spoke and wrote teachings of the Rav. The concept is fairly simple. The Rav spoke and wrote teachings of the Rav. The concept is fairly simple. The Rav spoke and wrote teachings of the Rav. The concept is fairly simple. The Rav spoke and wrote teachings of the Rav. The concept is fairly simple. The Rav spoke and wrote teachings of the Rav. The concept is fairly simple. The Rav spoke and wrote teachings of the Rav. The concept is fairly simple.
to do so easily. However, I am sure that some users of the machzor would rather have the entire section completely removed. Undue emphasis on the Rav's private customs and practices does, in some sense, make him seem like simply a man with strange practices rather than the towering intellectual figure that he was. Additionally, the two types of footnotes—commentary and practices—occasionally blend into each other when they run onto multiple pages and make for somewhat confusing reading. Nevertheless, I personally found the value of including these practices to outweigh these concerns.

In summary, these machzorim are indispensable for anyone looking to learn about the themes and prayers of the High Holidays or about the thought and methodologies of the Rav.

Notes
2. To date, there has been no comprehensive biography published on the Rav. Rabbi Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff's two-volume The Rav: The World of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik is a fascinating book, but it is hardly a comprehensive biography.
3. For example, see Rosh Hashanah Machzor, 447-449, regarding the blessing over blowing/hearing the shofar.
4. As can be seen throughout the Hanhagot HaRav sections, discussed later in this review.
5. See RHM, 535, about how God rules through natural and moral law, and the example quoted in the next paragraph of this review.
6. See RHM, 543-544) is clearly influenced by the views of Martin Heidegger. When I made this observation on my blog, commenters directed me to an article that discusses this as well as a statement by the Rav that he attended a course taught by Heidegger (in Rakeffet-Rothkoff, vol. 1, p. 195). See this discussion at http://hirhurim.blogspot.com/2006/10/rav-soloveitchik-and-heidegger.html.

However, it is understandable why the names of non-religious and non-Jewish philosophers would not be mentioned in a prayerbook. See the responses of Rabbi Amram Gaon, quoted by the Ramban and other Rishonim in their commentaries to Avodah Zarah 35b, and the series of posts on my blog titled "Citation of Non-Orthodox Scholars." As these machzorim are intended for synagogal use and for ritual purposes, they are different from a philosophical book.

6. See RHM, 98-99, about Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik's moving Rosh Hashanah Kiddush and RHM, 522-525, about the teacher from the Rav's youth explaining to him that Rosh Hashanah is about coronating God as king.
7. See RHM, 242-244, about God sitting on his throne and listening to prayers and RHM, 316-317, about how the tradition unifies across generations.
9. See YKM, 89, about how the praises "great, mighty and awesome God" refer to the first three blessings of the Shemoneh Esrei and YKM, 105, for the calming effect of the Shemoneh Esrei's final blessing, in peace, after the previous jarring prayers.