

SCHOOL OF THE BLUES

HOW THE "YEAR IN ISRAEL" CAN PREPARE STUDENTS FOR LIFE

By Lawrence Kelemen

I remember Cheryl from our undergraduate days at UCLA. She had big brown eyes, a bright mind and a warm personality. One afternoon, she jumped off the roof of an academic office building and killed herself. I remember being surprised only because I knew the victim. Suicides on American campuses occur pretty frequently.¹ This is the macabre side of campus life.

A Suicide Trajectory

After the home, most cultures have a secondary socializing institution—a sealed environment in which young adults are immersed to lock in the society's values and weltanschauung. In China and the former Soviet Union, it is the Young Pioneers. In Israel, it is the army. In the United States, it is the university. The university is where Americans become Americans. The college campus is the cultural launch pad that more or less sets our trajectory as individuals and as a nation.

Most Modern Orthodox Jews send their children to college. That's why we

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should be concerned about Cheryl, and about the students who killed themselves this year at Harvard, MIT, NYU and other elite educational institutions across the country, as well as the more than 1,000 American college students expected to kill themselves during the coming year.² The Harvard student newspaper, *The Harvard Crimson*, recently reported that fifteen of the school's undergrads committed suicide during the last decade, and during the same period almost as many students botched serious attempts at taking their own lives.³ NYU alone lost seven students to suicide this year.⁴

In a letter to parents enrolling their



students in universities and colleges across the country, the chief of Harvard University Health Services, Dr. Richard Kadison, recently wrote:

If your son or daughter is in college, the chances are almost one in two that he or she will become depressed to the point of being unable to function; one in two that he or she will have regular episodes of binge

*drinking (with the resulting significant risk of dangerous consequences such as sexual assault and car accidents); and one in ten that he or she will seriously consider suicide.*⁵

There are other signs of sadness on campus too. For example, substance abuse, moderate depression, sleep disorders, anxiety disorders, eating disorders and impulsive disorders (including those involving sexuality and self-mutilation) are increasingly common on college campuses.⁶

The American College Health Survey recently discovered that within the last school year 64.7 percent of students felt things were hopeless; 44.7 percent felt so depressed that it was difficult to function and 36.9 percent were diagnosed with depression.⁷ Another indicator: *Psychology Today* recently revealed that ...the number-one prescribed drug for college students is not the birth control pill or an acne medicine. It's Prozac. In second place are anti-anxiety agents. The number three spot goes to all other anti-depressant SSRIs combined.⁸

Harvard's Kadison calls these facts "the elephant in the room that no one is talking about."⁹

One could attempt to defend the university by arguing that bad parenting produces the unhappiness we see on campus, and that the university experience actually mitigates misery, or at least does nothing to contribute to it. If this were

true, students' psychological health would improve as they spend time away from home. The statistics lend a different impression, however. The percentage of college and university students seeking counseling increases from 16 percent in freshman year to 27 percent by senior year,¹⁰ and a ten-year research project on midwestern university campuses recently demonstrated that graduate students commit suicide far more frequently than their undergraduate peers.¹¹

There is something about the college experience that seems to cultivate melancholy. What is that something? And what can we do to ensure that Orthodox youth thrive during their university years?

The Centrality of Wealth

The United States has the most robust economy on the planet, and this is by design. We value wealth, we pursue wealth, and our most central cultural institution teaches our children to do the same. Despite the charmingly academic impression lent by ivy-covered brick buildings, even our most elite universities are no longer primarily bastions of intellectual adventure. They are professional training centers.

Those who teach in MBA programs have always confessed that they are simply training people to make money. Professors in the hard sciences too—mathematics, physics, chemistry and the like—have long admitted that they are creating a cadre of competent professionals. Only professors in the humanities attempted for a while to focus on developing their students' humanness and creating depth of mind and heart. Today this no longer seems to be the case. Allan Bloom, the late director of the University of Chicago's prestigious John M. Olin Center for Inquiry into the Theory and Practice of Democracy, summarized his increasing discomfort with the state of the university:

The [liberal arts] student gets no intimation that great mysteries might be revealed to him, that new and higher motives of action might be discovered within him, that a different and more human

*way of life can be harmoniously constructed by what he is going to learn.... An education, other than purely professional or technical, can even seem to be an impediment.*¹²

An education in the humanities is widely accepted today as just prerequisite work for admission to a prominent grad-

The university is where Americans become Americans. The college campus sets our trajectory as individuals and as a nation.

uate program, leading eventually to a lucrative career. Apologists for the academy often object that there is no need for the university to discuss the path to personal (as opposed to professional) success, since that is the domain of the parent. This objection is justified. Parents should take responsibility for imparting vision and values, and many make a vigorous attempt at that. The problem is that young adults head off to college at just about the time that they achieve the requisite maturity to absorb serious wis-



dom—the fundamental lessons about self-discipline, handling the power of sexuality, marriage and parenting. And from the day they leave home for college, students spend far more time listening to teachers in the classroom than to parents at home. (Perhaps this is why, unlike today's schools, universities two generations ago accepted the responsibilities of in loco parentis.) The reality "on the ground" is that most young adults spend between four and ten years preparing exclusively for career and fail to devote a

single year of their lives to personal growth.

To appreciate the extent of this imbalance—and perhaps its cause—imagine that today there were an alternative track in which students invested little time in preparations for career but spent four to ten years fully immersed in intensive preparations for marriage, child-rearing and other areas of personal development. How many people would opt to spend that much time preparing themselves (or their children) for personal success while largely ignoring professional development? Why instead do people feel comfortable with the reverse? Either our generation naively believes that it is easier to actualize our personal potential, build a good marriage, raise thriving children and live a healthy life than it is to make money, or perhaps many people just value the professional realm more than the personal one.

Sources of Sadness in the Short Term

One result of the university's de-emphasis on personal development is a large population of students with practically total autonomy to conduct their personal lives as they wish, and almost no preparation to handle this freedom. Two examples of this suffice.

First: No student-housing facility today has a lights-out policy (although student-housing curfews were standard two generations ago). The average college student is rarely informed that getting less than six hours of sleep causes attention deficits and depression, impairs memory and critical thinking, increases anxiety and weakens one's immunity.¹³ Nor are students taught about the psychological and physical dangers of replacing sleep with stimulant medications. Is it any wonder that some of our best and brightest students end up in crisis?

Second: Not only do most universities now offer co-ed dormitories and even co-ed floors, some schools (like Yale) require first- and second-year undergraduates to live in such environments. In 1997, five Orthodox students, who became known as the "Yale Five,"

valiantly launched a legal protest against Yale's policy, but they lost the case in an appellate court in 2001. While Yale freshmen and sophomores are today required to live in co-ed dorms, Yale is still not as "progressive" as colleges like Hampshire, Haverford, Swarthmore and Wesleyan, which offer students co-ed rooms. Given co-ed environments like these, should we be surprised that almost a third of co-eds' first encounters were "not wanted" or "forced,"¹⁴ or that 40 percent of college women report getting together with a guy for "a physical encounter" and "[not] expect[ing] anything further"?¹⁵ Should anyone be shocked if some of these women end up depressed?

The university's stress on professional achievement also contributes to crushing academic competition, which in turn produces depression. Every undergraduate program has a large population of students competing for a limited number of lucrative jobs and slots in prestigious graduate schools. One's GPA can mean the difference between professional life and death. "Too many students who get a B on a test," writes Kadison, "feel deeply that they are failures who will never get into graduate school or be successful in their careers."¹⁶ This is one reason why so many faculty today report receiving notes from students who write things like, "If I fail this course, I'm going to kill myself."¹⁷ Kadison reports that the least stressed students are that minority who learn not for the grade but for the knowledge.¹⁸

Sources of Sadness in the Long Term

Perhaps what should be of greater concern is how the university's lessons might be affecting its graduates years down the line. Students who spend many years acting as if success is defined by earning power internalize that lesson. They believe, at the subconscious if not the conscious level, that wealth buys happiness, and they organize their lives accordingly.

American universities largely achieve their goal. In 2003, North America produced more millionaires

than Europe, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East combined.¹⁹

But wealth does not really buy happiness. Studies of a phenomenon called "hedonic adaptation" show that people naturally adjust to (and therefore feel dissatisfied with) whatever level of wealth they achieve. Richard Easterlin, a professor at the University of Southern California, summarizes the findings of hundreds of studies, saying, "Material aspirations increase commensurately with income, and, as a result, one gets no nearer to the attainment of one's material goals."²⁰ However much we have materially, we still want more.

In contrast, Easterlin reports that people feel genuinely fulfilled by success in the personal sphere.²¹ He cites a



plethora of studies demonstrating that people who are healthy and have flourishing marriages achieve lasting happiness. People whose children are thriving report feeling satisfied with their lives. These are the resources of a truly rich life.

Solutions

The good news is that there are relatively inexpensive, accessible and effective ways to grant Orthodox students all the advantages of higher education without seriously compromising their emotional stability. One solution is the burgeoning array of one- or two-year yeshivah or seminary programs available in Israel.

These seminaries or *yeshivot*, which I call college-prep programs, specialize in conveying wholesome Jewish values in language eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds can appreciate. Some of the finest

teachers in the Jewish world take students on tours of ancient Jewish texts, and teach their imbedded values. Classrooms are lively. Questioning and argumentation are encouraged.

One of the lessons stressed in nearly every such program is that a profession is just a means to an end. "Life is for love," writes the Ibn Ezra.²² The real goal of life is to have meaningful closeness—closeness with a spouse, with children, with God. These programs try to drive this message in so deeply that even the university's brain-hammering emphasis on career won't shake it loose.

Every one of these schools has its own way of teaching students the priority of the personal over the professional sphere. For a decade, I have been teaching at one of these schools in Jerusalem. One of the subjects I teach is parenting—a topic few, if any, of my students will learn about during their undergraduate years. When taking my parenting class, many of my students get a sense—for the first time—of the sacrifices their parents have made for them. They also learn that good parenting is primarily about becoming a living example of the ideals one wants one's children to imbibe. They appreciate the urgency of developing patience, and the long and sometimes painful process required to do so. Perhaps most crucially, courses like these put the issue of family front and center. Making money is important, but raising good kids is more important.

Several of the Israel programs offer courses on dating and other issues related to the opposite sex. During this year abroad, students learn about the power of physical touch and its magical ability to intensify appropriate feelings or blur one's judgment. Through such courses, students are empowered to determine whether they will control, or be controlled by, sexual energy, and they are given common-sense guidelines for conducting wholesome relationships. Perhaps most crucially, these programs place sexuality into its proper context: marriage and commitment.

While the college curriculum trains

students how to get what *they* want, the *yeshivot* and seminaries teach students how to let go of what they want *for the sake of someone else*. Students also learn how to identify signs of a potentially abusive partner, how to handle disagreements, how to give and how to accept. They learn to express their concerns in a way that will not move others into a defensive posture. All these are skills that few undergraduates ever cultivate but are crucial if they are to stay sane in the relationships free-for-all that now reigns in America.

The best of the Israel programs also prepare students for the physical stresses that await them once university begins—the challenges of diet, exercise and, especially, sleep. "One of the commandments requires that we keep our bodies fit so that we can serve God," writes Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto in *The Way of God*,²³ a standard text studied in such programs. Students hear about Maimonides, who recommended that his students get eight hours of sleep; the Chofetz Chaim, who extinguished the lights in the *beit midrash* every night at ten o'clock so that students would not "turn nights into days, and days into nights" and Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, who retired to his room each evening at eleven o'clock, no matter which Torah scholars were visiting him at the time. Some *yeshivot* and seminaries explicitly address crisis preparation and management. A few weeks ago, I watched a group of about a hundred students pore over the words of Rav Mendel Zevarez' *Cheshbon Hanefesh*. Eyes were wide, and the room was so quiet I could hear students breathing. My students learned that crisis is a part of everyone's life and something they can handle if they prepare properly. They learned that God provides them with everything they need to handle pain, but they must start collecting the necessary resources. They will need every word of Torah they can study; they will need every drop of wisdom their parents and teachers can share; and they will need to draw upon their own potential greatness. Rav Zevarez offers further advice for life: Beware of

naiveté, overconfidence and indolence. Practice hanging on to personal refinement, even under stress. Remember that you are never alone, so turn to God.

While at first students were shocked to discover that suffering is inevitable, subsequently, they were comforted. "Once you know it's not all going to be okay," one student said to me on

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the way out of the classroom, "then it might *really* be okay."

The *yeshivot* and seminaries don't just teach Torah; they teach life. They teach self-respect and coping skills; they teach students to set limits and exercise self-control. Most crucially, unlike universities, these programs are not purely utilitarian. They convey respect for material accomplishments while stressing that such endeavors are not as important as personal development, relationships, family and health. They give youth a sense of inspiration, meaning and purpose, and a taste of a more exalted, spiritual life. They accomplish all that liberal education once promised, and much more.

On my tours of American university campuses each year—where I speak with hundreds of college students—I see the difference between those who attended yeshivah or seminary in Israel and those who went straight to college. Although there are no large-scale, longitudinal studies yet, on the campus, our graduates seem more stable, directed and motivated than the mainstream, and they are happy too.

On one of my recent tours, a student who now studies at a Jewish college, told me how much she differs from her

classmates who didn't have the Israel experience: "I don't get it. Most students get wasted a few times each week. They just can't take the stress, so they drink or smoke. And they conduct romances like high school kids. They cram for tests and fail. Where do they think they are, and what do they think they're doing? Am I the only one who realizes that life has begun?"

I get about twenty letters every month from my Israel students who are now in university. Like normal kids that age, they have complaints and questions. But the letters are upbeat. They reflect openness and honesty. They talk about good grades and good friends. They contain hopes and dreams.

There are exceptions—kids who, instead of investing in the opportunity to study in Israel, spend the better part of a year hanging out in Jerusalem's bars. But they are a minority, and they make a conscious choice. Most of those who attend these programs apply themselves, and their subsequent success at handling the stresses of university is living testimony that we can increase the percentage of students for whom the college experience will be a productive, healthy and joyous one.

For students who missed the opportunity to attend one of these programs, there is another solution—Israel summer programs and Israel semester- and year-abroad programs for students already attending universities. Almost all of these programs grant college credits for participation, and funding from the Birthright Israel Foundation (www.birthrightisrael.com) may even cover the cost of airfare.

NCSY (National Conference of Synagogue Youth) and the Orthodox Caucus have compiled lists of *yeshivot* and seminaries in Israel, which can be accessed at www.ou.org/ncsy (click on the yeshivah directory link on the site) and

www.ocweb.org/index.php/israel_school_guide, respectively. Information about summer programs and semester- and year-abroad programs are also available from sponsoring organi-

zations like Jerusalem Fellowships (www.jerusalemfellowships.org), Hasbara Fellowships (www.israelactivism.com), Darche Noam Institutes (www.darchenoam.org), Jewish Learning Exchange (www.ohr.edu/yhiy/article.php/1598) and Neve Yerushalayim College (www.nevey.org).

I think about Cheryl a few

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times each year, a wonderful woman who, no doubt, would have contributed to the world had she been able to cope with all she was facing. While there are many students like Cheryl out there, it is consoling to know that now, as post-high school Israel programs become more popular, students can get the preparation they need to succeed, and even thrive, in university. **JA**

Notes

1. The UCLA Police Department, for example, reports handling twelve campus suicides in the last eleven years.
2. Mary Duenwald, "The Dorms May Be Great, But How's the Counseling?", *The New York Times*, 26 October 2004; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report, cited by Elizabeth Fried Ellen, "Suicide Prevention on Campus," *Psychiatric Times* 19:10 (October 2002) and Richard Kadison and Theresa Foy DiGeronimo, *College of the Overwhelmed: The Mental Health Crisis and What to Do About It* (San Francisco, 2004), 151. See also, National Strategy for Suicide Prevention (A Collaborative Effort of

SAMHSA, CDC, NIH, HRSA and HIS), Department of Health and Human Services, published at <http://www.mental-health.org/suicideprevention/>.

3. Hana R. Alberts, "Suicide Attempt Rate Rises," *The Harvard Crimson*, 7 October 2004.
4. Duenwald, "The Dorms."
5. Kadison and DiGeronimo, *College*, 1.
6. Ibid., 240-241.
7. Ibid.
8. "What's in a Pill?", *Psychology Today* (May 2002): 4.
9. Kadison and DiGeronimo, *College*, 1.
10. K. Patterson, "College Students Report More Stress, Depression, Suicidal Thoughts," *Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service*, 12 February 2003, K2831.
11. M.M. Silverman et al., "The Big Ten Student Suicide Study: A 10 Year Study of Suicides on Midwestern Campuses," *Suicide and Life Threatening Behavior* 27(3) (fall 1997): 285-303.
12. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York, 1987), 338-339.
13. F. Brown, W. Buboltz Jr. and B. Soper, "Relationship of Sleep Hygiene Awareness, Sleep Hygiene Practices, and Sleep Quality in University Students," *Behavioral Medicine* 1 (spring 2002).
14. Edward O. Laumann et al., *The Social Organization of Sexuality* (Chicago, 1994), 329.
15. Norval Glenn and Elizabeth Marquardt, *Hooking Up, Hanging Out, and Hoping for Mr. Right* (New York, 2001), 4-5.
16. Kadison and DiGeronimo, *College*, 36-37.
17. Ibid., 36.
18. Ibid., 37-38.
19. Robert Frank, "U.S. Led a Resurgence Last Year Among Millionaires Worldwide," *The Wall Street Journal*, 15 June 2004.
20. Richard Easterlin, "Explaining Happiness," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 100:19, 16 September 2003: 11180.
21. Ibid., 11181.
22. On Deuteronomy 30:19. See also Lawrence Kelemen, *To Kindle a Soul: Ancient Wisdom for Modern Parents and Teachers* (Jerusalem, 2001), chap. 4.
23. 1:4:7.

Jewish Initiative on Campus

In an attempt to help Orthodox students navigate the current college environment, the OU, in partnership with Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life and Torah MiTzion, the Religious Zionist *kollel* network, launched the Jewish Learning Initiative on Campus (JLIC). By placing Orthodox rabbinic couples on campuses throughout the United States, JLIC helps Orthodox students balance their Jewish observance with the secular milieu on campus.

Rabbi Reuven Ibragimov and his wife, Nalini, serve as the JLIC team at Brooklyn College. "I remember [as a college student] feeling lost on campus. There was no one to turn to," Rabbi Ibragimov says. Now, the Ibragimovs offer regular Torah classes, daily minyanim, lively Shabbat and *yom tov* celebrations as well as personal counseling.

Currently on nine campuses including Yale, Princeton, Brooklyn College, University of Pennsylvania, University of Maryland, University of Illinois, UCLA, Brandeis and Cornell, JLIC couples strive to enhance the learning opportunities available to students while providing an infrastructure for Orthodox life to flourish. Taking an individualized approach, the couples host students at their Shabbat tables, interact with them in the cafeteria and on the basketball court and study Torah texts with them.

The couples make themselves available to the students, creating a comfort level that enables students to seek advice on halachic, intellectual or personal matters. "My father passed away four years ago, and Rabbi Reuven [Ibragimov] has been a real father figure to me," says Elan Strobel, nineteen, a business major at Brooklyn College. "He has helped me ... [to] be spiritually strong at college.... I look to him as my rabbi and my friend."

Sarah Stadler, a twenty-one-year-old music major, came to Brooklyn College on the heels of a year of intensive learning in Israel. "Coming back from Israel, one has to create a kind of protective bubble," she says. "I needed to reconnect, to take what I've learned in seminary and somehow hold onto it.... If I didn't have the rabbi, the *rebbeztin* and the *shiurim*, I think I would have trouble grappling with who I am."

Strobel speaks for many of his fellow Jewish students who benefit from JLIC when he says, "JLIC is my home away from home."

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