

# On Orthodox Youth:

By Joseph A. Polak

There is a segment of the student population that appears to represent a new, quite recent entry to the list of *dramatis personae* of contemporary Orthodoxy. These Modern Orthodox students—some of whom I observe daily as rabbi at Boston University—are shadowy and evasive; they don't usually lead, volunteer or show up for events.\* They are the ones who, whether in *shul* or in class, tend to sit in the back and to marginalize themselves. They never

**Never have parents and community been as powerless as they are today.**

raise questions. Because they don't let others know what they are thinking—indeed, *whether* they are thinking—they appear to have an almost mysterious aura about them, so that the mode of one's relationship with them is always interpretive rather than direct. If one raises a question of substance with these students, they smile sheepishly, as if to say, "Thinking about these things is not really something that I do." There is a hollowness about them, a feeling of their being elsewhere. Their interest in, perhaps even their capacity for, abstract ideas (like free will, revela-

tion, the Messiah) is absolutely nil.

The prevalence of this kind of student is deeply disturbing to educators and parents. As I will try to explain in this article, this group reflects a new, alarming chasm that has opened between its members and meaningful religion. Part of the problem, I suspect, has to do with how we teach. Consider the following episode that occurred earlier this year:

When we read about the manna in *parashat Beshalach*, I raised the following question with my student community:

*Different societies provide different levels of social welfare for its citizens. Some societies, for example, provide free health care; some provide free or subsidized public transportation; some provide incentives for people to start up businesses. On the other hand, other societies provide only a standing army for the protection of its citizens but don't even collect garbage or clean streets. Assume also that the kind of social welfare a country offers has considerable impact on both the lives and the values of its citizens.*

*Now suppose that there was a country with such spectacular social welfare benefits that it actually offered, without any charge, full and completely satisfactory food and clothing for all its citizens. What do you suppose would be the impact of such benefits on the values of its population?*

The Reform students saw it—their hands shot up at once: Spectacular, they said. It would be a society in which envy would virtually disappear; when people looked at each other it would be for what was inside and not outside, and so forth. The Conservative students also saw it immediately: It would replicate the life in a Buddhist monastery, they suggested; it would

produce a holy people. Each community—Reform and Conservative—saw that the *dor hamidbar* would have had to be one of the holiest societies in human history because of the manna.

When I went to the Orthodox minyan—which is made up of alumni from America's finest Modern Orthodox day schools from across the country—and posed my question, I had what was surely one of the most astonishing pedagogical moments of my not-insubstantial teaching career. To my amazement and (frankly) horror, I discovered that the one hundred-plus Orthodox students gathered for Kabbalat Shabbat *didn't understand the question*.

Let me clarify: Had I asked these Orthodox students how many *degalim* (banners) represented the tribes of Bnei Yisrael in the desert, and what their formations were, or had I asked them the details of the *mishkan*, they would have been comfortable and forthcoming with the answers, unlike their Conservative and Reform counterparts. But as soon as I posed a question of *meaning* or of *values*, they either squirmed or, more commonly, looked at me as though I were from Mars, and then with limited patience. Many of the Orthodox students I meet are clueless when asked to engage in a conversation about why Torah values and knowledge are of consequence. They don't know how to talk or think about these issues; they don't know why or how Torah values *are* of consequence. I sometimes have the impression that they have never been asked the question "What do *you* think of Aaron's behavior during the debacle with the Golden Calf?"

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*Rabbi Polak is in his thirty-third year as Hillel rabbi to the Jewish community at Boston University. His writing has appeared in Commentary and Tradition as well as in a host of other scholarly books and journals.*

# A DEBATE

By Mayer Schiller

## A Glass More than Half Full...and Rapidly Filling

I have spent the past twenty-six years teaching Talmud to Modern Orthodox yeshivah high school boys. During this time an enormous change has come over those who have sat in my classroom. Bluntly stated, my current *talmidim* would be puzzled and appalled by the cynicism, negativism and above all, apathy of those I instructed a quarter of a century ago.

In every aspect of Judaism that one can think of—beliefs and practices, learning and *davening* and compliance with basic *halachot*—the Modern Orthodox community has experienced a veritable religious renaissance compared to where it was two and a half decades past.

This is the result of many factors, but the predominant one is the exposure of the system's high school graduates to the philosophies of the Religious Zionist yeshivot in Israel and their return to America, transformed in varying degrees by that experience. Today, those who went through this process are sending their own children to yeshivah high schools and are coming to positions of leadership in *shuls* and community organizations.

## Needless Pessimism

It was thus with some surprise that I read the largely negative depiction of my *talmidim* in Rabbi Joseph Polak's article.

Rabbi Polak makes some sweeping characterizations that may be summarized as follows: 1. Many Modern Orthodox high school graduates can-

not comprehend simple questions of social policy. 2. Some don't don *tefillin* daily. 3. Many are incapable of explaining or caring about basic Torah values. 4. Many were never connected to Torah and therefore discard it willingly. 5. Many have no fear of Divine punishment. 6. We, their teachers and elders, have no way to compel these students to obey the Torah after high school, and they enjoy this fact.

I must say that I do not recognize my *talmidim*, present or even past, in this presentation.

## The Good Path

The path followed by almost all the boys I have taught at The Marsha Stern Talmudic Academy Yeshiva University High School for Boys during the last fifteen years is as follows. During their high school years, a significant number are already fairly seriously committed to learning, *davening* and a halachic life. This number has varied over the years; today it is well over half. Almost every *talmid* goes on to learn for at least one year in Israel after high school. Upon returning—with their devotion to all aspects of *Yiddishkeit* vastly improved—they either attend Yeshiva University or a local secular college, which they almost invariably combine with day or evening enrollment in a *beit midrash*. They emerge from this process with a commitment to Torah and *mitzvot* and a means to a dignified *parnassah*.

This process is not limited to the yeshivah I teach at but is fairly common among those who attend similar institutions such as the Hebrew Academy of Long Beach in New York, Rambam Mesivta in Lawrence, New York, the

Jewish Educational Center in Elizabeth, New Jersey and several others.

There are two—not to be equated—flaws in the current system. First, there is a segment of the population that is left untouched by a serious Torah calling in their high school years. Second, the Religious Zionist influences in Israel are largely of the *Chardal* variety (*Chareidi dati leumi*, that is, they are Zionists but they do not view Western culture and secular learning as valu-

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able) and are thus unsympathetic to the notions of *Torah im Derech Eretz* or *Torah Umadda* as anything other than a means to the end of *parnassah*.

Of course, the latter problem is not confined to Modern Orthodoxy. The notion of acquiring knowledge as a means to improve the soul has largely been forgotten throughout the American educational system. Nonetheless, there remains a serious divide between the philosophy of most Religious Zionist institutions in Israel and that of the *Torah im Derech Eretz* and *Torah*

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*Rabbi Schiller gives a shiur at Yeshiva University High School for Boys in New York.*

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This problem—an incapacity by a large segment of Orthodox students to speak intelligently and compellingly about their religious choices—seems curiously absent among their peers in the Conservative and Reform ranks. While most Conservative and Reform students have a far more limited fealty to *halachah*, what they *do* have is the ability to personalize religion. As part of their education, non-Orthodox Jews are always asked such questions as “What does Shabbat mean to *you*?” or “Why have you chosen to wear a yarmulke?” And I’m afraid that non-Orthodox Jewish education, with its experiential approach to teaching religion, has succeeded in transmitting a sense of meaning, or at least a way to think about meaning, that appears successful, particularly in this postmodern, narcissistic age when what so many young people relate to best is themselves. Orthodox students for the most part, having never been exposed to this type of experiential education, do not appear to understand meaning-oriented questions.

A handicapped capacity for abstraction can have interesting consequences for a *frum* crowd: Such a group will have, as I have already indicated, no interest in *Olam Haba*, *Mashiach* or even in “simpler” things that can only be explained in abstract terms, like *tefillin* or *tzitzit*.

A *nouveau Chareidi* (formerly Modern Orthodox) mother of a prospective freshman phones me from the Midwest.

She: “My son is interested in attending Boston University. Mind if I ask you a few questions about the *hashkafah* of your place?”

Me: “Please.”

She: “Do you use *Chassidisheh* shechitah?”

Me: “Absolutely.”

She: “Is your bread *pas Yisrael*?”

Me: “Absolutely. Mind if I ask you a few questions about your son? Stop me, please, if it gets too personal.”

She: “Go ahead.”

Me: “Does your family go on camp-

ing trips over Shabbat?”

She: “As a matter of fact, we do! We build an *eruv*, and it’s always wonderful.”

Me: “Do you typically return home on Saturday night or Sunday morning?”

She: “Usually Sunday afternoon. Do you mind if I ask where this is going?”

Me: “When you go on these camping trips with the family, does your son typically bring his *tefillin* with him?”

She (pausing): “Now that you mention it, he doesn’t. He usually leaves his *tefillin* in school on Friday.”

Me: “Would you agree if I were to suggest that, knowing that your son has no serious commitment or attachment to putting on *tefillin*, when he leaves home he is likely to leave much of his commitment to *Yiddishkeit* back in the community where he found it? We have smooth *shechitah* here, ma’am, and *frum* bread, but you better check out your son’s values before you send him off to college. The yeshivot in Israel are also telling me that they’re having a heck of a time waking the boys up for *davening*; they’re telling me that apparently the boys don’t see religiosity as part of the script for the next few years of their lives.”

Yet, it is not merely an incapacity to personalize religion that I am trying to explain but also a similar incapacity to relate to abstract categories. Israeli *roshei yeshivah* have told me, with wide astonishment, that many of the American day school alumni who now spend their pre-college year in Jerusalem are startled to learn that one still has to *daven* and put on *tefillin* if he sleeps late. The *roshei yeshivah* have told me that these students genuinely don’t understand Judaism’s expectation that one’s commitment to observance be absolute. And herein lies the key to what I’m trying to explain: “Absolute” is not a concept that holds any meaning for them.

Another way the syndrome manifests itself is as follows: I usually have to speak to incoming freshmen to get them to attend my Torah classes. In recent years this invitation has led to a repeated pattern:

Student (somewhat amazed): “Why should I come to your *shiur*?” (It took me a long time to fathom the meaning

of this question, from whose tone one could easily conclude that attending a *shiur* now that the student is in college would be an activity that is wholly absurd. It amounts to the student saying something like this: *Hey, listen Rabbi; I attended twelve years of Torah classes. I did my piece, passed my exams, made my parents proud. I’m past all that now; I don’t need to do this anymore. It’s over.*)

Me: “I’d like you to attend my *shiur* because it’s *interesting*.”

Remarkably, this answer commonly works because it provokes their imaginations. Is this because they have never experienced Torah learning as interesting or have not thought about it this way? Is it possible that most of them have not been touched by a Torah life? What does seem clear is that the Torah life is one they’ll lead if that is what everyone around them is doing, but it is not one they will lead when such a society is not at hand. When the latter is the case, they will drop their observance without hesitation, without a smidgen of guilt or regret.

Twelve years of Jewish education has failed to *connect* them to their tradition. The reason that “connected” is so satisfactory a description of what has not happened to these students is because it accommodates another phenomenon: When students forget to bring their *tefillin* to college after wearing them six days a week since their Bar Mitzvot, then curiously enough, this forgetting never presents itself as an act of rebellion. No one is saying, “I no longer believe in the commandments,” or “My parents are hypocrites, and I hate them and all they stand for.” Discarding *tefillin* or *kashrut* among this population is very much like discarding the proverbial old sweatshirt—they were just never seriously attached to these *mitzvot* to begin with.

A Modern Orthodox father offers me the following lament: “Listen, between our tuition and the community’s contribution, over \$200,000 has been invested in my son’s Torah education. He comes from a loving home where people get along and even like each other [*peirush*: no rebellion here]. Yet when he

was packing for college, I noticed that it didn't even occur to him to take his *tefillin*. Where did we go wrong?"

There are many reasons for the calamity I am describing, but I will limit myself to three. The first—which I have already alluded to—is that the question "What does this mean to you?" has been insufficiently emphasized in the Torah classroom; perhaps because it is the question of the evil son in the Haggadah. The consequence of its banishment from the classroom is a culture of day school alumni who have no idea whatsoever of say, what the Holocaust means to *them*, or what a dress code means to *them*. Better, they don't know how to think this way, and when their educated Reform and Conservative friends describe what Shabbat means to them, it may well be their first encounter with this kind of thinking.

The second reason for the disconnectedness is related to the first. Teachers will not ask students what attending services means to them, because somehow the teachers believe that their students should observe the commandments out of a fear of God. Let this article, then, be the wake-up call to contemporary Orthodoxy. The age of the fear of God—certainly for this slice of Orthodox youth—is over. Notwithstanding the thundering second paragraph of Shema, few students believe that something bad happens to you if you don't observe the commandments. Their thinking might be as follows: *I won't steal because I think it's wrong to steal, or even because the Torah says don't steal, and the Torah is a neat book. But I have no fear of adverse spiritual consequences that come from stealing.* "Adverse spiritual consequences" is a concept that does not have the slightest bit of meaning for such students.

And this leads to the third reason: every student graduating from high school knows that *there is absolutely nothing, there exists no one who can compel him to be observant.* Never have parents and community been as powerless as they are today. Never has there been a society so bereft of resources for

demanding conformity. And as we have already said, young people certainly do not experience Divine forces for conformity either. The student has autonomy of a sort that no generation before him has ever had, and he revels in this autonomy. He loves it and enjoys it to its narcissistic hilt.

And now the good news. A bad spiritual spell seems to be reversing itself. Students are looking for community as well as direction. They want to be inspired, and they certainly want to be led.

My *shiurim* on campus are full, with more attendees than in recent years. Kosher dining and Friday evening attendance for *shul* and dinner are so high that we are putting up a new building to accommodate the crowds. The daily minyan has resuscitated itself after a several-year hiatus.

But, as I walk home from Shabbat morning services and meet some of the students I have been describing first making their way to Hillel, the sleep still in their eyes, I know that most of them have no intention of catching up on their *davening*, as almost every latecomer would have tried to do ten years ago. I also know that they won't try to catch up not because they are rebelling against their teachers, parents or values, but because the calculus of *tashlumim* (making up *davening*), as beautiful and idealistic as it is, represents a value structure to which they have no access. As a result, I appeal to their parents and teachers to provide real spiritual modeling, to speak with their youth about what Torah values mean to *them*—what there is, say, to be learned from the *Akeidah*, what that tale means to them and how it affects their lives.

And, sign of the times that it is, someone needs to make the case to them for the verity of the second paragraph of the Shema.

\*While this article focuses on an array of problems affecting Modern Orthodox youth, no one need assume that such issues are absent among young *Chareidim*. But that is another essay. **JA**

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*Umadda* schools in the United States.

However disconcerting the latter problem may be, it is the former problem, the inability to reach all of the *talmidim* pre-Israel—which is a far graver flaw—whose source we will pursue shortly.

Turning to the picture painted by Rabbi Polak, I find almost none of my *talmidim* who, while in high school, would callously not wear *tefillin*, or who are yearning for their immediate release from Torah life.

Could they articulate the underlying assumptions of their world? Yes, in a superficial, hesitant manner. But no more or less than most Americans—in our decidedly non-reflective, non-ideological age—could articulate their own worldviews. After spending a year in Israel, this changes for the better.

### General Social Awareness

Would my *talmidim* fail to grasp a social question presented to them in basic language? Granted that, while similar to most of their American peers, my *talmidim* do not find larger social questions to be of much interest, they are capable of understanding them. Sadly, given the nature of *Chardal* influences, this indifference to general society does not change much post-Israel.

(However, the root of this lack of a larger social awareness lies not in the Modern Orthodox educational system or even in the current state of American education, so much as in the very fabric of almost all Orthodox culture, which views political and social involvement as primarily the advocacy and protection of Jewish interests and not the promotion of a Divine-based view of society as a whole.)

### Is There a Campus Problem?

Given my positive view of the strides that Modern Orthodox education has made of late, do I thus conclude that Rabbi Polak has imagined the students he describes?

Not at all. They are very real.

Modern Orthodoxy is not a monolith. By its non-threatening nature, it will appeal to many whose degree of Torah adherence is a bit hazy. Of course, this is both a blessing and a curse. It is wonderful that many are thus introduced to Torah. However, it is painful that inevitably basic standards must be lowered to accommodate them. This is particularly true in those institutions that veer the most from traditional yeshivah patterns via their coeducational environment or their shortened hours devoted to Torah studies.

This is not the place to debate whether these institutions provide an opportunity for those who might choose more to choose less, or whether they enable those who would choose less to get at least what they offer. Probably both analyses are true. What is relevant is that these schools do not send all their students to Israel and since they appear less threatening to outsiders, service a weaker clientele in terms of *yediot* and *shemirat haTorah*. Their students also make up the vast majority of those Orthodox Jews who attend secular colleges and live in their dorms. Realizing this fact, some of the vignettes that Rabbi Polak presents become understandable.

### These Pastures Are Also Greener

However, let us keep in mind that the explosion of Torah learning and *shemirat hamitzvot* in many of the environs of Modern Orthodoxy (nonsensically labeled a "turn to the right" in some quarters, as if ideally *Torah im Derech Eretz* or *Torah Umadda* welcomed the previous state of laxity and disdain) has affected all of the movement's schools. They are all far better today than they were a quarter of a century ago.

Thus, the positive trends cited at the end of Rabbi Polak's article may be readily understood. In fact, I suspect that in years to come as the administrative upper echelons of the schools become staffed by those schooled under the post-Israeli-yeshiv-

ah renaissance, the schools will improve even more. Rabbi Polak may expect many more committed students in the years to come. In general, I have a far more optimistic view of the future of Modern Orthodoxy than Rabbi Polak does, and that optimism is validated every day at school during *davening* and in my *shiur*. The students today are not only much better than those I encountered decades ago but are giant steps ahead of the norms of ten years past.

However, there remain some areas of concern that demand both defensive and proactive attention. 1. Despite the progress made in Modern Orthodox circles in recent decades, the move-

## The notion of acquiring knowledge as a means to improve the soul has largely been forgotten throughout the American educational system.

ment as a whole still lags far behind basic standards of learning, *yediot haTorah*, simple practice of *halachah* and passion for commitment. This situation demands more effort, higher standards of learning and *davening*, more *musar*, *Chassidut*, *hashkafah* and inspiration. Indeed, if *Torah im Derech Eretz* and *Torah Umadda* adherents are ever to be capable of offering their approaches as equal alternatives to others, they must at least come close to their standards of learning, *davening* and *shemirat hamitzvot*.

2. The *Chardal* influence in Israel is inimical to true *Torah Umadda* or *Torah im Derech Eretz avodah*. *Torah Umadda* or *Torah im Derech Eretz* leaders and educators need to explain

the why and how of their approaches. It is woefully insufficient to proclaim one's loyalty to a *shittah* while doing nothing to explain its basis to one's *talmidim* and *ba'alei battim*.

3. The reduction of Jewish political activism to "what's in it for the Jews" is similarly destructive to the universal vision of *Torah im Derech Eretz* and *Torah Umadda*.

In the best of times, if Modern Orthodox schools were really devoted to *Torah im Derech Eretz* and *Torah Umadda*, and if their standards were on par with those of basic *halachah* (may we dream a bit more?) and they had a firm grip on the essentials of the Jewish faith and a sense of the Divine norms for all mankind, then we might send (with fear and trembling) some of our best and brightest to live on secular campuses. There, with their commitment firm and clear, they would remain a cadre of *mekadeshei Hashem*, not tempted by campus decadence. They would be paragons of *emunah* and Torah that would inspire both Jews and Gentiles.

However, there are precious few schools that may be so described. Thus, it would seem far better at this point to advise—if and when possible—the majority of Modern Orthodox students to pursue their higher education at Yeshiva University or to base themselves in a yeshivah dormitory or day-time *beit midrash* while attending a local secular college.

Realistically though, there will still be many who opt to live on a secular campus. It is there that the courageous efforts of the Rabbi Polaks will be most important. Yet, those battling *milchamot Hashem* in these negative environs should not conclude that those entrusted to their care are typical.

It is a heavy burden for us who fancy, to whatever degree, the doctrines of *Torah im Derech Eretz* or *Torah Umadda*, when we realize there still are "miles to go before we sleep." Nonetheless, we are far further down the path than anyone could have envisioned a quarter of a century ago.

Chazak V'ematz. **JA**