

BOOKS

For the first time, a book has appeared which studies the world of higher Torah education in America—the more than 90 Yeshivos gedolos and kollels—post high-school institutions which have recreated Torah scholarship in this country.

Piety, Banality, Scholarship and Superficiality

The World of the Yeshiva
by William B. Helmreich
(1982, The Free Press,
MacMillan, \$19.95)

One of reality's most ornery traits is its obstinate refusal to be easily and simply deciphered. Despite man's persistent yearning to grasp existence in its totality, the complexity of being stands firm, revealing itself in only fleeting moments forever beclouded with much ambiguity, contradiction, irony and, above all, complexity.

The World of the Yeshiva is a thorough work which paints a multidimensional picture of a reality not easily summarized—the yeshiva world in America. Included in this work of both history and sociology is a brief introduction to Torah doctrines in general, a chronology of the yeshiva's amazing growth and success on these shores, and a detailed survey of its students' attitudes on a wide variety of subjects both past and present. For the most part, this obviously ambitious undertaking has realized its objectives.

Although much of what is documented in the book will be common knowledge to those in the yeshiva world, there is no doubt that his work breaks ground in being the first to present the realities of that world to academics. Whether or not sociological study is, in itself, a worthwhile endeavor is a question to be answered on the basis of one's view of liberal arts in general and is beyond our present scope. By the objective standards of the genre, though, the book is clearly the result of thorough research and its findings are, by and large, true.

Among the many points of interest in the book are some, which although clearly observable, go frequently ignored because of ideological considerations. In this category would be the clear distinction, which Helmreich documents, between the observance of basic Torah laws in the yeshiva world as opposed to the world of "Modern Orthodoxy" (pp. 229-36). The problem is a matter deserving

immediate attention and is one which Modern Orthodox leaders are beginning to acknowledge; witness the recent *Tradition* (Spring '82) symposium on the matter. Again, though, this is not really new data to anyone familiar with both the Modern Orthodox and yeshiva worlds.

The Traditional Yeshiva Student

The traditional yeshiva is the focus of the work. And there is much in the book which, although already widely recognized, benefits greatly from being restated and proven. Namely, that the American yeshiva has been extraordinarily successful in producing a generation of Jews who are pious, God fearing and Torah knowledgeable. It is a generation which has adopted a life's view in line with basic Torah doctrines and a lifestyle in accordance with the *Shulchan Aruch*. That this was accomplished in the midst of the awesome decadence of America's dying orgy of hedonism and selfishness is an achievement that cannot be praised enough. Helmreich's work testifies lucidly to this amazing triumph.

The picture is not all rosy, though. As the book makes all too clear, the

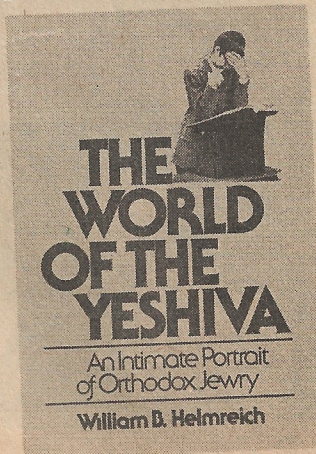
and a de-emphasis of *musar* (ethical) instruction. Also, the plight of the non-academically oriented student in the yeshiva is painfully documented (pp. 190-193).

On the teacher's side of the coin, Helmreich describes the scandalously low salaries in yeshivas, thus placing a foul albatross of guilt around the neck of the Orthodox community, and the fact that the yeshiva, although producing scholars, does not gear itself to producing teachers. Torah learners often do not qualify as Torah teachers (pp. 240-243). The question left unanswered in the book is whether those responsible for both the above faults are at all interested in their rectification.

Attitude Toward Secular Studies

From a broader perspective, one of the most painful pictures emerging from the book is that of the traditional yeshiva as a place where non-Torah knowledge, the totality of creation and non-Jewish humanity are viewed with a simplistic and, often, a crass disdain. The yeshiva postulates a philosophy which seems to produce an almost childlike insensitivity to all non-yeshiva endeavors. Throughout the work one wonders whether it must be this way. Couldn't the piety and Torah learning have been achieved without the attendant superficiality and callousness? Perhaps the answer is no; perhaps the American Babylon has sunk to the point where a smug haughtiness is the only possible and proper response. However, after finishing this book and having been inspired by its documentation of the yeshiva's spiritual victories, one is struck with a sense that, at the very least, the questions should have been asked.

On a different note, one must ask whether the non-spoken assumption of *The World of the Yeshiva* is ultimately true, namely that objective sociology can exist without a prior metaphysical value structure. Helmreich's approach is that of a detached secular scholar. However, the methodology of secular sociology is in itself a value rejection of all extra-material factors. If there exists a spiritual di-



yeshiva student, although essentially satisfied, is not completely happy. Helmreich has found several areas of alumni discontent which deserve our further attention (pp. 289-299). Among them are: a lack of personal interest on the part of many teachers; not enough, or any, attention given to *chumash*, *halacha* or Jewish history;

mension to reality, wouldn't it have a continual and profound effect on all cultural functioning? For example, Torah study serves to purify our being in a decidedly supra-temporal manner. The causes and effects of a true sociological theory must take such matters into account.

Further, does not the very tone of relativist detachment of the volume lessen the gravity and awe of the spiritual questions under discussion? In sum, Helmreich, by approaching sociology from a reductionist perspective, seems to have fallen prey to the same trap as the yeshivas by ignoring the spiritual as they have ignored the physical.

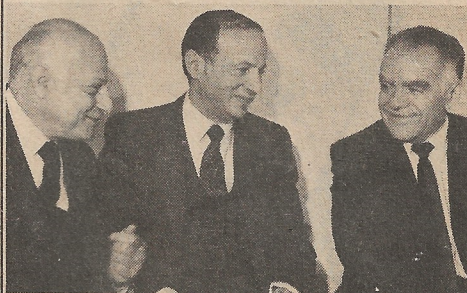
—Rabbi Mayer Schiller

Rabbi Schiller, an "old Yeshiva bochur," teaches gemorah at Mesifita Ohr Torah in Forest Hills, New York, and hashkafa at Ohr Sameyach in Monsey, New York. He is the author of the widely-acclaimed book, The Road Back. ■

Berman cont. from p. 5

Television's MacNeil-Lehrer Report and the Cable News Network program, Crossfire.

In light of his heavy responsibilities as Chairman of the Presidents' Conference—and his busy New York law practice—Mr. Berman has asked some



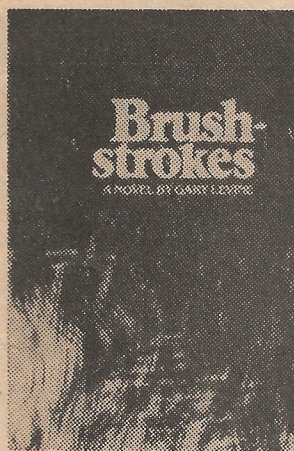
Following talks in Washington with President Reagan and other Administration officials, Israel's Foreign Minister Yitzchak Shamir (right) met with Yehuda Hellman (left) and Julius Berman (center).

of his fellow Orthodox Union officers to assist him with his administrative duties at the Union. Shortly after his appointment to the Presidents' Conference chairmanship, he appointed Sheldon Rudoff to chair a steering committee which includes Joseph Miller, Sidney Kwestel, Marcel Weber, Gerald Feldhamer and Rabbi Joseph Karasick. ■

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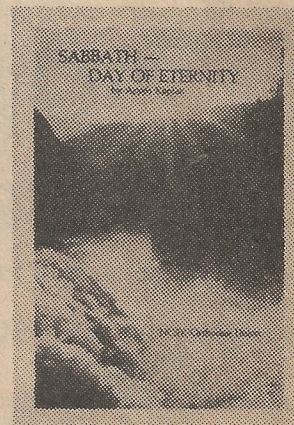
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