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Creating an Open Orthodox Rabbinate

Dov Linzer and Avi Weiss

rthodox Judaism is currently at a crossroads. In the post-Holocaust generation, Orthodoxy has shown new life, attracting and maintaining adherents and cultivating an increasing commitment to scrupulous observance and regular Torah study. The choice that Orthodoxy faces today is whether to focus on the needs of its own community or on the needs of the larger Jewish community, expanding outward, nondogmatically and cooperatively. Believing in an Orthodoxy that is open intellectually and

expansive and inclusive in practice, we need a new breed of rabbis. To this end, three years ago, we created Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School.

Our goal is to create rabbis who are critical thinkers with intellectual integrity and who openly engage the challenges of our modern and post-modern world while living a life of faith and religious commitment. Our curriculum includes

classes that explicitly address these issues. Our culture and staff encourage open discussion, and many of our students regularly participate in interdenominational and interfaith events. Our students learn that religious growth comes not through dogmatism but through questioning and struggle.

Openness in thought leads to inclusiveness in practice. We are training our students to be rabbis and leaders who will work to expand and enhance the role of women in religious leadership, the halakhic process, and ritual; to pursue positive interactions with all Jewish denominations; to impart to their congregants the deep religious significance of the State of Israel; and to see *tikkun olam* as a significant religious obligation. We recognize that the vast majority of Jews are unaffiliated; we are training our students to engage these Jews — not with the goal of making them Orthodox, but rather to ignite in them the spark of Jewish con-

sciousness and inspire their spiritual striving.

To create rabbis who are spiritual leaders, a culture of openness and an innovative academic curriculum are not sufficient. What is needed is a course of study that addresses areas such as leadership, education, communication, and conducting life-cycle events. Our professional training extends beyond a comprehensive classroom experience with two years of supervised fieldwork and internships mentored by seasoned rabbis in consultation with mental-health professionals. Such

a curriculum is designed to produce rabbis with wisdom as well as knowledge, who can educate and spiritually nurture all Jews, aiding them in times of crisis and helping them at all times to connect meaningfully with their Judaism.

While a professionaltraining curriculum is de rigueur in non-Orthodox rabbinical schools, it is virtually unheard of in Ortho-

dox yeshivot. The goal of traditional yeshivot is to produce Torah scholars. The goal of our school, as both a yeshiva and a rabbinical school, is to produce Torah scholars who are passionate about learning and are professionally trained rabbis and leaders.

We hope to produce rabbis with professionalism and mission — rabbis who will begin to transform Orthodoxy into a more open and inclusive movement. Through such a transformed Orthodoxy that so meaningfully and respectfully interacts with all Jews, regardless of affiliation, commitment, or background, we believe that we can do our share to transform the face of the Jewish community.

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