Adam S. Ferziger

Training American Orthodox Rabbis to Play a Role in Confronting Assimilation: Programs, Methodologies and Directions

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The Rappaport Center for Assimilation
Research and Strengthening Jewish Vitality
Bar Ilan University – The Faculty of Jewish Studies

2003 – 5763

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פרסום מס׳ 4 בסדרה

מחקרים וניירות עמדה
של מרכז רפפורט לחקר ההתבוללות ולחיזוק החיוניות היהודית

עורך הסדרה: צבי זוהר

4 in the series

Research and Position Papers of the Rappaport Center

Series Editor: Zvi Zohar

ערך: אברהם בן־אמתי
הביא לדפוס: יעקב חסון
עיצוב העטיפה: סטודיו בן גסנר, ירושלים
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In Memory of

J.J. Greenberg ז״ל

His sincerity and genuine love of Judaism
continues to inspire many Jews to explore their heritage

Preface

The Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research and Strengthening Jewish Vitality was founded in Bar Ilan University in the spring of 2001 at the initiative of Ruth and Baruch Rappaport, who identified assimilation as the primary danger to the future of the Jewish people.

A central working hypothesis of the Center is that assimilation is not an inexorable force of nature, but the result of human choices. In the past, Jews chose assimilation in order to avoid persecution and social stigmatization. Today, however, this is rarely the case. In our times, assimilation stems from the fact that for many Jews, maintaining Jewish involvements and affiliations seems less attractive than pursuing the alternatives open to them in the pluralistic societies of contemporary Europe and America. To dismiss such subjective disaffection with Jewishness as merely a result of poor marketing and amateurish PR for Judaism is an easy way out – which we do not accept. Rather, a concurrent working hypothesis of the Rappaport Center is, that the tendency of many Jews to disassociate from Jewishness reflects real flaws and weaknesses existing in various areas and institutions of Jewish life today.

The first stage of all research projects of our Center is, therefore, to analyze an aspect or institution of Jewish life in order to identify and understand what might be contributing to "turning Jews off". However, since assimilation is not a force of nature, it should be possible to move beyond analysis, in the direction of mending and repair. This is the second stage of our activities, and these two aspects are reflected in our name: The Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research and Strengthening Jewish Vitality.

Dr. Adam Ferziger holds a Ph.D. from Bar Ilan University, where he currently teaches at the Department of Jewish History. A resident of Israel, he was born in the United States and holds Orthodox rabbinical ordination ("semicha") from Yeshiva University. He was therefore eminently suited to undertake for the Rappaport Center a research program devoted to an analysis and critique of American Orthodox rabbinical training from a "counter-assimilationist" perspective. After outlining the difference between classic "kiruv" activities and the type of involvement that could be appropriate for the broad section of Jews verging on assimilation, Dr. Ferziger poses these seminal questions:

> How are Orthodox rabbinical candidates currently being trained? Do the Orthodox institutions that train congregational rabbis offer them the skills necessary to deal with contemporary assimilatory trends? Do most young Orthodox rabbis in training learn about the nature of the greater Jewish community? Do they gain abilities to communicate with non-observant Jews? Does their intensive study of classical Jewish texts enable them to locate suitable ones for exposing Jews who have become alienated from Judaism to the beauty of tradition? Do the rabbinical training centers encourage their

graduates to become pulpit rabbis? Based on the answers to these questions, a proposal can be put forward for how to focus future rabbinical training more directly on dealing with assimilation.

The answers to these questions, based on Dr. Ferziger's original research, are herein presented to the reader, under the title *Training American Orthodox Rabbis to Play a Role in Confronting Assimilation: Programs, Methodologies and Directions.* His findings are relevant for all Jews concerned with the future of the Jewish people, since Orthodox rabbis, along with rabbis of other denominations and along with Jewish lay leadership in communities around the world, have a joint purpose and mission: countering assimilation and strengthening Jewish vitality.

This paper by Dr. Ferziger is the fourth publication in the series "Research and Position Papers of the Rappaport Center". The three previous publications, in Hebrew, are:

- Asher Cohen, *Israeli Assimilation: The Absorption of Non-Jews into Israeli Society and its Influence on the Collective Identity.*
- Avi Sagi, *A Critique of Jewish Identity Discourse.*
- Ariel Picard, *Halakhic Responses to Assimilation.*

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Dr. Ferziger for his contribution to the endeavors of the Rappaport center, and to thank all those whose efforts have enabled the publication of this paper: Ms. Iris Aharon, organizational co-ordinator of the Rappaport center; Ms. Ruhi Avital (text editor), Mr. Ya'akov Hasson (production), Ben Gassner studio (cover graphics), and Art Plus Press.

After all is said and done, however, all of us involved in the activities of the Rappaport Center, and indeed all Jews and people of good will concerned with the vitality of the Jewish people, take the opportunity presented by the appearance of this publication to acknowledge the vision and commitment of Ruth and Baruch Rappaport. It is their initiative and continued generosity that enable the manifold activities of the Rappaport Center – thus making an important contribution to ensuring the future well-being of the Jewish people. May they continue to enjoy together many years of health, activity, satisfaction and happiness.

Zvi Zohar, Director
The Rappaport Center for Assimilation Research
and Strengthening Jewish Vitality

I. Parallel Growth: Assimilation and Orthodoxy in Contemporary American Jewish Life

Over half the American Jews who get married this year will choose a non-Jewish spouse, recent studies show.[1] Few of the children from those marriages will be brought up as Jews. Most will be given a Christian upbringing, have a dual affiliation to Judaism and Christianity or no religious affiliation at all.[2] While the

* I would like to thank my research assistant, Avner Landes, for his dedication to the project as well as his astute questions and suggestions at various stages in the preparation of this paper. I am grateful to a number of people who have been kind enough to read earlier drafts or portions of this paper and have shared comments that have enriched this work: Rabbi Herschel Billet, Professor David Ellenson, Professor Charles Liebman, Professor Chaim Milikowsky, Rabbi Ariel Picard, Professor Bernard Susser, Professor Ariel Toaff, Dr. Ari Zivotofsky and in particular, the director of the Rappaport Center, Dr. Zvi Zohar.

1 According to a 1990 demographic study of American Jewry the figure was 52% and rising; see the discussion in Jack Wertheimer, "Surrendering to Intermarriage," *Commentary* 111, 3 (March, 2001), 26. While some have raised questions regarding the way the 1990 data were collected, Wertheimer maintains that the general consensus is that the intermarriage rate today ranges somewhere between 43% and 52%.

2 Wertheimer, 30, cites the study of Bruce A. Phillips, *Reexamining Intermarriage: Trends, Textures, Strategies* (American Jewish Committee, William Petschek National Jewish Family Center and the Susan and David

estimated 5.2 million[3] to 6 million Jews[4] in the United States have flourished, they've paid a troubling price. To a great extent due to its own success in blending in with the larger non-Jewish community, American Jewry is actually shrinking.

Parallel to the weakening of roots for most American Jews, the late twentieth century witnessed a strengthened Orthodox Jewish community, with a thriving congregational life throughout the country. Orthodox education is growing from year to year, both on the elementary and high school level, as well as in post-high school yeshiva[5] programs. As sociologist Paul Ritterband put it, "...Jewish day schools are bursting at the seams, and intermarriage rates are going through the roof."[6] Kosher food can now be found with relative ease even in far-flung corners of the United States that have few observant Jews. America's biggest food producers

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Wilstein Institute of Jewish Policy Studies, 1997), which concludes that only 18% of "mixed families" bring their children up as Jews, whereas 33% are brought up as Christians and over 25% are given no religious upbringing at all.

3 This figure is based on the recently released National Jewish Population Survey from 2000, whose results are presently being published. See Melissa Radler, "U.S. Jewish Population Shrinking, Aging – Survey," *Jerusalem Post* (Oct. 9, 2002), 2; The figure given in the recent American Jewish Identity Study conducted by Barry Kosmin along with Egon Mayer and Ariela Keysar under the auspices of the Graduate Center of the City University of New York is 5.5 million. See Debra Nussbaum Cohen, "Jews Turning From Judaism," *The Jewish Week* [World Wide Web edition], November 2, 2001.

4 Jim Schwartz and Jeffrey Scheckner, "Jewish Population in the United States, 1999," in *American Jewish Year Book* 2000 (New York, 2000), 242, offer the figure of 6 million.

5 There is no consistent spelling of the term "yeshiva" in this paper. Rather, the term is presented colloquially as it is normally pronounced in the context being described. For example, the right-wing Orthodox post-high school institutions of higher learning are referred to as *yeshivos.*

6 Paul Ritterband, "Modern Times and Jewish Assimilation," in Robert M. Seltzer and Norman J. Cohen (eds.), *The Americanization of the Jews* (New York, 1995), 378.

now seek *kashrut* supervision for many more products in order to gain entry into this widespread and lucrative market.[7]

Orthodox Jews have become so accepted within secular culture that they no longer have to go through awkward excuses at meals when they attend academic or professional conferences. Indeed, they have come to expect that the organizers will provide "glatt gourmet" cuisine that matches their colleagues' dinner right down to the menu and silverware. In fact, it is no longer unusual to encounter Orthodox males who display their commitment publicly by donning their *kippot* at work, be it in hospitals, law firms, large corporations or government.[8]

Based on its own recent success at bucking the overall trend, one could argue that efforts should be made to design ways to enlist the resources of Orthodox Jewry to counteract the explosive levels of American Jewish assimilation. The effectiveness of such recruitment is questionable, however, for numerous reasons. First,

7 For a provocative portrayal of the renaissance of American Orthodoxy and its influence on current debates over the nature of American Jewish identity see: Samuel G. Freedman, *Jew vs. Jew: The Struggle for the Soul of American Jewry* (New York, 2001).

8 There is a vast corpus of writing published in the Orthodox press over the last twenty years that can be characterized as "triumphalist" literature. Such articles are sprinkled among most issues of the *Jewish Observer*, which is sponsored by the right-wing Orthodox *Agudath Israel of America*. This theme of triumphalism is also highlighted in many of the entries in a symposium on the future of American Orthodoxy published in *Tradition* 32, 4 (Summer, 1998). For less partisan evaluations of Orthodox success, see for example: Bernard Susser and Charles S. Liebman, *Choosing Survival* (New York and Oxford, 1999), 139–146; Jack Wertheimer, "Recent Trends in American Judaism," *American Jewish Year Book* 1989 (New York, 1989), 107–124. Indeed, Liebman already highlighted this burgeoning trend over thirty-five years ago in his now classic study "Orthodoxy in American Jewish Life," *American Jewish Year Book* 66 (New York, 1965), 21–97.

Orthodox success has brought with it increased Orthodox insularity.[9] Orthodox self-confidence and security has nurtured a belief among its devotees that it is a self-sustaining movement. Thus, the decline in the Orthodox sense of dependence on greater Jewry for its own survival has led to less interaction between Orthodox Jews and others than was previously the case.[10] As such, there may no longer exist even a minimal language of discourse that would allow for Orthodox Jews to play an effective role in the broader community. The Orthodox, one may argue, are a separate entity that is only concerned with its own religious, social and economic welfare – they are no longer active partners in the American Jewish collective. Therefore, they have no interest in involving themselves in the "predictable" problems of those Jews who have distanced themselves from "authentic Judaism." Moreover, even if the Orthodox were inclined to become active, the gap between their worldview and that of the average American Jew is so great that they simply would be unable to relate to them in a manner that could effectively discourage assimilation or heighten their Jewish commitment.

One can counter that, indeed while Orthodox triumphalism does bring with it a certain degree of self-indulgence, it does not necessarily lead to a denial of responsibility for the religious welfare of other Jews. Orthodox success has also spawned a cottage industry known as the *kiruv* movement.[11] Dozens of organizations, youth

9 See Wertheimer, "Recent Trends in American Judaism," 117–120.

10 For a recent description of the American Orthodox community prior to the 1960s that highlights its formerly higher level of diversity, see Jeffrey S. Gurock, "Twentieth Century American Orthodoxy's Era of Non-Observance (1900–1960)," *Torah U-Madda Journal* 9 (2000), 87–107.

11 One could argue that American Orthodoxy is torn between its belief that the only way to ensure its continuity is to invest all resources in strengthening

associations, camps, *yeshivot* and study programs have been founded since the 1960s that are dedicated solely to bringing loosely affiliated Jews "closer" to Judaism.[12] The apparent success, then, of this movement would seem to warrant consideration of this model as potentially one of the most effective vehicles for strengthening American Jewry. Perhaps far greater resources should be dedicated towards training Orthodox "case-workers" in the methodologies utilized by these institutions.

There are, however, both substantive and technical reasons to raise doubts regarding whether the current Orthodox-style outreach approach is the most suitable one for presenting an Orthodox model to fight assimilation. On a substantive level, the goal of most *kiruv* groups is not merely to raise the level of Jewish identity of those with whom they come into contact. They seek, rather, to bring those whom they attract to a point where they will identify completely with the Orthodox ideology of the organization and take full-fledged halakhic observance upon themselves.[13] This may

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those already within its ranks, on the one hand, and its sense of responsibility towards non-observant Jews, on the other. This tension can be illustrated through a "Symposium on the Priorities for the Years Ahead" published in the *Jewish Observer* (Tammuz-Av, 5757 – Summer, 1997). Of the seventeen figures who wrote for the issue, twelve raised outreach as a major priority. On the other hand, a contrasting sentiment was expressed by others including R. Yitzchok Sorotzkin who wrote of the need for an "Evolution of an agenda, from emphasis on reaching outward to a focus on strengthening and serving the core constituency."

12 For studies of the *kiruv* movement see: Janet Aviad, *Return to Judaism* (Chicago, 1983); M. Herbert Danziger, *Returning to Tradition: The Contemporary Revival of Orthodox Judaism* (New Haven, 1989); Richard H. Greenburg, *Pathways: Jews Who Return* (Northvale, N.J. and London, 1997).

13 See the detailed evaluation, from an Orthodox point of view, of the methodology and goals of *kiruv* work in Rabbi Moshe Weinberger, *Jewish*

even entail the detachment, or at least severe distancing, of an individual from their immediate family and social environment. Such policies are threatening, if not repulsive, to most American Jews. While they may be effective with a certain number of individuals, on a communal level concurrent with those who grow closer to Jewish tradition, an equal or even greater number of people might become more alienated by such efforts.

On a practical level as well, classical *kiruv* programs are limited in their potential for successfully changing the tide of assimilation. The *kiruv* movement generally achieves success when it takes its new adherents out of their natural environment and places them in intensive religious surroundings. This works well with college students on campus or on a trip to Israel when they are searching for answers. It does not, however, offer a window of hope for the vast majority of American Jews who are rooted in their home environments and social milieu. If Orthodox Jewry can, in fact, make a contribution towards strengthening the Jewish identity of greater American Jewry, then vehicles have to be found that are both non-threatening and localized within the various large and small population centers.

If the hard-core *kiruv* approach is inappropriate, what in particular does the Orthodox community offer to other American Jews? Some Orthodox figures and even some non-Orthodox academics would claim that Orthodoxy's greatest contribution to American Jewry is the strengthening of its own spiritual and material subsistence. They assume that since it is unlikely that a

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Outreach: Halakhic Perspectives (Hoboken N.J., 1990). This book was published under the auspices of the *Association of Jewish Outreach Professionals*.

significant non-observant Jewish population will survive through the next century, the most important goal is to help Orthodoxy, as the sole remnant of modern Jewry, to withstand the challenges of the 21st century. As an analysis by Ritterband portends, based on current assimilation and fertility rates, by the year 2110, there will still be over 3 million Jews in the United States, but almost all will be Ultra-Orthodox.[14] There is another vantage point, at a polar extreme from that just cited, from which it is implied that direct contact between the Orthodox and non-observant Jewry is not particularly beneficial for dealing with assimilation. A call has come from the Reform movement as well as from studies produced by task forces on the assimilation problem, for a different type of "outreach." Rather than fighting intermarriage, American Jews should recognize it as a reality of contemporary Jewish life. Instead of expending energies on futile preventative measures, they should seek to make "mixed families" feel more comfortable within the community and the synagogue setting. The assumption, then, is that if offered a positive experience, more of these families will maintain a Jewish connection. This would leave open greater possibilities for their children to choose to identify as Jews.[15] Opponents of this trend have highlighted the statistics discussed above regarding the religious inclinations of most intermarried couples as proof of the counterproductive nature of such

14 Ritterband, "Modern Times and Jewish Assimilation," 389.

15 For a recent articulation and analysis, see: Debra Dash Moore, "Intermarriage and the Politics of Identity," *The Reconstructionist* 66, 1 (Fall, 2001), 44–51; Among other expressions of support for this attitude, see Daniel M. Klein and Freke Vuijst, *The Half-Jewish Book: A Celebration* (New York, 2000). A website has also been established entitled www.interfaithfamily.com. This position has been outlined and critiqued by Wertheimer, in "Surrendering to Intermarriage."

approaches. Clearly such a direction leaves no room for Orthodoxy, which opposes any formal concessions to intermarriage, to be involved in such efforts.

A third option in considering the relationship between Orthodoxy and current trends in assimilation is to learn from the Orthodox recipe for survival without necessarily committing to Orthodox theology or observance. Some of the academics and spokesmen who have promoted this approach are themselves Orthodox, while others would not classify themselves as such, but are highly appreciative of the American Orthodox model.[16] Indeed, they share a consensus on four major points: 1) they reject intermarriage as a viable option for Jewish life, and accept the necessity of placing social boundaries between Jews and gentiles; 2) they find it unrealistic (some even find it morally abhorrent)[17] to expect a large percentage of American Jewry to become fully observant Jews; 3) they believe that rather than being totally accepting of almost any conduct on the part of Jews, the only way to insure Jewish identity is – like the Orthodox – to demand sacrifice and commitment to Jewish behavior and ethos; 4) they feel that in

16 Prominent examples of this approach can be found in: Steven Bayme, "Jewish Organizational Response to Intermarriage," in Roberta Rosenberg Farber and Chaim I. Waxman (eds.), *Jews in America* (Hanover and London, 1999), 151–162; Susser and Liebman, *Choosing Survival*. On page 88 they write of: "...the minimal requisites of a workable Jewish survival strategy: the justification of boundaries, the sanctioning of communal difference, and the vindication of specifically Jewish cultural content." In addition, on pages 136–137, they proclaim: "Jewishness must...involve life-informing commitments and affiliations"; Jack Wertheimer, Charles S. Liebman and Steven M. Cohen, "How to Save American Jews," *Commentary* 101, 1 (January, 1996), 47–51.

17 See Susser and Liebman, *Choosing Survival*, ch. 10.

addition to observance, it is commitment to Jewish learning that has been the key to Orthodox empowerment.

Assuming that this "placing demands" approach to ensuring Jewish survival is correct, the figures who may be most suited for leading an Orthodox initiative towards fighting assimilation are local Orthodox congregational rabbis. There are currently approximately 600 Orthodox congregations spread throughout the United States.[18] The majority of them are led by graduates of one of the American Orthodox rabbinical seminaries or right-wing *yeshivos*. More recently, a growing number have come from *yeshivot* and training programs set up in Israel. These individuals live within their communities and potentially have ample opportunity to gain exposure within the broader Jewish population. They offer services, particularly overseeing life cycle events, which are in demand even among some of the more loosely affiliated Jews. In addition, their bases of operation are the local synagogues. While synagogue attendance itself is declining, it is still an institution that has great potential for drawing Jews towards it. It does not demand a deep level of initial commitment and certainly synagogue affiliation does not necessarily have to lead to a detachment or distancing from relatives and friends. Moreover, already at mid-century the American synagogue championed the idea that it could be more than a house of prayer,[19] and social and intellectual activity are a staple of American synagogue life. The question remains, however, whether anyone other than fully

18 The figure was conveyed orally by a representative of the Orthodox Rabbinical Council of America.

19 On the development of the American "synagogue center," see David Kaufman, *A Shul with a Pool* (Hanover, N.H., 1998).

committed Orthodox Jews will be willing to make use of these facilities. Among the issues that will be raised within the context of the ensuing discussion is whether, indeed, the American Orthodox congregational framework is the most suitable environment for responding to the crisis of assimilation.

Regardless, however, of the formal context within which rabbis are active, their potential to promote greater commitment to Jewish learning and religious behavior in a non-threatening manner is a reflection of the abilities that these individuals bring with them to the job. Other than a limited number of unusually talented and self-taught figures, this depends on the training that is received before entering the rabbinate. The first step, then, towards promoting a new Orthodox initiative for dealing with assimilation is to learn how Orthodox rabbinical candidates are currently being trained. Do the Orthodox institutions that train congregational rabbis offer them the skills necessary to deal with contemporary assimilatory trends? Do most young Orthodox rabbis in training learn about the nature of the greater Jewish community? Do they gain abilities to communicate with non-observant Jews? Does their intensive study of classical Jewish texts enable them to locate suitable ones for exposing Jews who have become alienated from Judaism to the beauty of tradition? Based on the answers to these questions, a proposal can be put forward for how to focus future rabbinical training more directly on dealing with assimilation.

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II. American Orthodox Rabbinical Training: A Survey

At the end of his monumental study from 1969 entitled "The Training of American Rabbis,"[20] Charles Liebman offers a severe critique of the rabbinical training programs of all of the major Jewish denominations in America. He feels that, like their nineteenth century *yeshiva* and seminary predecessors, the American institutions focus primarily on scholarship rather than on cultivating practical rabbinical skills. While a newly-ordained rabbi may possess a high level of Jewish knowledge, he is unequipped to communicate it to his congregants. At best he will have taken a course in homiletics that teaches him public oratory skills.[21] He does not, however, know how to function as a religious

20 Charles S. Liebman, "The Training of American Rabbis," *American Jewish Year Book* 1968 (New York, 1969), 3–112.

21 On the history of the training of rabbis in the modern period, see, for example: David Ellenson, *Rabbi Esriel Hildesheimer and the Creation of Modern Jewish Orthodoxy* (Tuscaloosa and London, 1990), 115–170; Ismar Schorsch, "Emancipation and the Crisis of Religious Authority: The Emergence of the Modern Rabbinate," in W.E. Mosse (ed.) *Revolution and Evolution – 1848 in German-Jewish History* (Tübingen, 1981), 205–247; Simon Schwartzfuchs,

leader who can inspire his congregants to spirituality or be able to nurture within them a thirst for Jewish knowledge. In order to repair this situation, his main suggestion is to focus rabbinical training on practical aspects that can be put to use in the field. This "applied rabbinics" approach does not, he maintains, mean a change in the subject matter that is studied. Traditional Jewish texts must continue to form the basis of a rabbi's education. Instead of differentiating, however, between theoretical and practical courses, he proposes that Jewish tradition and its texts be taught in a manner that constantly highlights their practical application to the spiritual life of contemporary man.[22]

One can argue that within today's Orthodox milieu, Liebman's proposals are less appropriate than they might have once appeared. The Orthodox revival and the insularity that it has engendered have also spawned a new generation of highly educated Jews. On the whole, their knowledge of Jewish sources far exceeds that of their parents' generation. As such, the demand for an Orthodox rabbi to be a scholar is greater than ever before. In truth, however, increased Orthodox literacy does not diminish the importance of Liebman's demand for more practical abilities on the part of contemporary Orthodox rabbis. At best, it may suggest that the Orthodox rabbi of the 21st century must indeed be a superman or a specialist. Ideally, he must be capable of presenting a high level Talmudic discourse, while simultaneously being adept at relating to the many

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A Concise History of the Rabbinate (Oxford and Cambridge, Ma., 1993); For a recent analysis of the program at the leading institution for the training of Conservative rabbis, see David Ellenson and Lee Bycel, "A Seminary for Sacred Learning: The JTS Rabbinical Curriculum in Historical Perspective," in Jack Wertheimer (ed.), *The Seminary at 100* (New York, 1998), 527−591.

22 Liebman, "The Training of American Rabbis," 106−110.

Orthodox Jews who were never exposed to or have lost interest in traditional learning. Certainly, if American Orthodox rabbis can be counted upon to enter the fray against assimilation, it is incumbent upon them to gain the skills that Liebman highlighted.

The following discussion survey's the general contours and curricula of a broad range of institutions[23] dedicated to training Orthodox rabbis for America. The focus of the discussion is an examination of whether the education that is currently being offered gives those who are ordained tools to engage in the battle against assimilation. Throughout the investigation, however, Liebman's study will be raised as a baseline for the analysis of contemporary Orthodox rabbinical training. As stated, Liebman's thesis centers on the lack of correlation between the focus of rabbinical education

23 The paper is not meant as a listing of every institution for training Orthodox rabbis to serve United States Jewry. The intention is, rather, to highlight major training centers and those new initiatives or creative approaches that offer insight into the contours of contemporary Orthodox rabbinical education. There are no universally recognized uniform requirements for rabbinic ordination. Any rabbi who receives ordination from a recognized yeshiva or seminary or from the chief rabbinate of Israel is theoretically qualified to serve in an Orthodox synagogue. There are also scores of "private" Orthodox ordinations and guided study programs that are offered in the United States and in Israel that range from those given by hasidic rabbis to the Jerusalem rabbi who is currently training an Orthodox woman for the rabbinate. See the recent article regarding Haviva Ben-David, an Orthodox Jewish woman who is studying for rabbinic ordination under Rabbi Aryeh Strickovsky of Jerusalem, Uriya Shavit, "Torah Boring," *Ha'aretz English Edition – Friday Magazine* (Dec. 28, 2001). Today there is even a internet based rabbinical training program called *The Shema Yisrael Torah Network Smicha Program*. For details of this program see: www.shemayisrael.com/smicha/. It should be pointed out that the issue of the lack of generally accepted standards for rabbinical ordination pre-dates the emergence of the modern rabbinate. See the discussion of this issue in the chapter entitled "The Problem of Ordination," in Schwartzfuchs, 27–37.

and the vocational demands of the rabbis once they begin to practice their profession. It will become evident that particularly among some of the newer programs that stress the battle against assimilation, one can identify a new orientation to rabbinical training that highlights practical skills. An analysis of the programs that currently exist in light of Liebman's critique, then, not only illustrates the degree to which Orthodox rabbinical education has evolved over the past decades. It is also helpful in identifying more accurately the new direction in rabbinical training to which these programs point.

In order to facilitate a more effective analysis, the programs that will be examined are divided into three types of institutions: Modern (Centrist),[24] Right-wing (*Haredi*), and Specialized programs.

A. Modern (Centrist) Programs

1. *RIETS* – Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary, Yeshiva University, New York[25]

We begin our survey with RIETS, the largest institution for the training of Orthodox rabbis in America. Over the last century over 2400 rabbis have received RIETS ordination. It is, thus, not only a

24 On the term "Centrist Orthodoxy" and its implications regarding the "move to the right" of American Orthodoxy, see: Norman Lamm, "Centrist Orthodoxy: Judaism and Moderationism, definitions and desideratum," in Jonathan Sacks (ed.), *Orthodoxy Confronts Modernity* (Hoboken and London, 1991), 48–61; Walter S. Wurtzburger, "Centrist Orthodoxy: ideology or atmosphere?" in the *Rabbinical Council of America – Jubilee Issue* (Jerusalem, 1985), 67–75.

25 The information gathered is based on official RIETS publications, details provided by the rabbinical placement office and this writer's personal experience and familiarity with the institution.

key model to explore, but a fine example to use as a foil for comparison when examining other institutions.[26]

There are currently over 240 students enrolled in the RIETS four-year program. On average, forty new rabbis are ordained each year (some do not complete the program and move on instead to professional schools or the workplace), of which approximately ten enter the pulpit rabbinate. Others choose to work in Jewish education, communal organization, counseling, academics, or unrelated fields. The institution offers the following statement of its educational philosophy:

> Firmly set in the emphasis on Talmud, Codes and Halakhah, RIETS has developed programs to meet the communal and personal needs of our time and place – business ethics, bioethics and technology – with the unique ambiance of intellectual and spiritual exploration that has always characterized the great academies of Jewish learning in the past.[27]

This passage points to a number of important characteristics of the institution. First, as Liebman already pointed out, the historical model upon which RIETS is based is first and foremost the traditional European yeshiva.[28] The main disciplines of study are the Talmud and halakhic codes, with additional programs having

26 On the history of Yeshiva University and its RIETS affiliate, see: Jeffrey S. Gurock, *The Men and Women of Yeshiva* (New York, 1988); William B. Helmreich, *The World of the Yeshiva* (New York and London, 1982), 20–24; Gilbert Klapperman, *The Story of Yeshiva University* (London, 1969); Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff, *Bernard Revel: Builder of American Orthodoxy* (Philadelphia, 1972).

27 *A Legacy of Learning as Preparation for a Promising Future* (RIETS, New York, no date given), 1.

28 Liebman, "The Training of American Rabbis," 8–9.

been developed as supplements. Indeed, the subjects that are highlighted in the statement above offer more insight into the current focus of the institution. Business ethics, bioethics and technology are topics that should have importance for every modern Jew. Yet their prominent listing here may be a reflection, among other things, of the particular needs of an Orthodox constituency. That is, when dealing with congregants who are already halakhically observant and Jewishly knowledgeable, familiarity with these subjects offers the rabbi the opportunity to present a more sophisticated, culturally contoured side of Judaism. This enables him to better communicate with the many academically educated and highly accomplished modern Orthodox members of his congregation. These issues may also be utilized in public lectures aimed at a broader audience. This does not, however, seem to be a major impetus for focusing on them. As such, it would appear that RIETS is firmly ensconced within the modern world, yet primarily oriented towards guiding the paths of its Orthodox inhabitants.

This same emphasis on cultivating skills that are directed towards committed Jews living in the modern world is reflected in the RIETS rabbinical program course of study. In order to be accepted, a student has to have studied Talmud in a post-high school yeshiva environment for a significant period, and, of course, he has to demonstrate an appropriate level of piety and observance. In addition, he must be in possession of an undergraduate academic degree. During his four years at RIETS, he spends the majority of his day – generally from nine in the morning until three in the afternoon – studying Talmud. In preparation for the actual ordination exams, in the last two years more emphasis is placed on the codes of the *Shulhan Arukh* that deal with the dietary laws,

mourning, family purity, Sabbath, and additional topics in "practical and contemporary halakhah." Among the many topics listed in the "contemporary halakhah" course is found the ill-defined "response to societal changes."

RIETS also has a series of academic co-requisites. Students must spend their afternoon hours in one of three study environments. They may return to the *beit midrash* (religious study hall) for an additional four hours per day of Talmudic learning; they may work towards a Masters degree in Judaic studies, education or social work; or they may attend classes sponsored by RIETS in traditional Jewish thought. Rabbinical candidates must also pass a Hebrew language proficiency examination.

Beyond the textual studies, the RIETS rabbinical candidate must fulfill other requirements. All first year students attend a survey course that sets out for them the range of professional opportunities that are open to them. In the second year they choose one of three more specialized rabbinical training tracks: pulpit, education or chaplaincy. The second year pulpit candidates are required to take a full year course in homiletics. In the third year they participate in a fieldwork program in which they gain their first professional exposure to synagogue life. Finally, in the fourth year they are placed as rabbinical interns in Orthodox synagogues throughout the New York metropolitan area, where they work under the guidance of experienced pulpit rabbis.

The information that has been discussed until this point demonstrates that a RIETS student has the opportunity to gain a well-rounded rabbinical education. Not only should he graduate with textual abilities and proficiency in halakhah, if he wants to, he can attain an advanced academic degree and also hone important practical skills that he can put to use from the outset of his career.

While the institution has not adopted Charles Liebman's proposal for a fully integrated theoretical and practical course of study, it certainly has made strides towards offering more opportunities to nurture hands-on skills. Of course, if one chooses, one can also fulfill the bare minimum of supplementary rabbinic requirements and spend most of one's time purely focused on becoming a Torah scholar. To a great degree, then, the strength of the RIETS program is that it is somewhat flexible and encourages its students to concentrate on gaining the tools that will be of primary value for them in the rabbinical career path that they choose. The question for this study, however, is whether the program can produce synagogue rabbis who are capable not only of serving Orthodox congregants, but can also play a major role in strengthening the Jewish identity of less affiliated Jews who are most vulnerable to intermarriage and assimilation?

In addition to its primary function as an institute of higher Torah learning, through its Division of Communal Services, RIETS sponsors a wide range of activities dedicated towards offering Jewish enrichment to the greater Jewish population. Included among the programs that are run are the*: Torah Leadership Seminars* for Jewish students of secular high schools, *Family Shabbatonim* in various communities, and *KIRUV College Outreach* which runs seminars and *shabbatonim* for Jewish college students throughout North America. The main figures in running all of these events are RIETS students. They are encouraged by the Seminary to participate both for the immediate good that it may do, but also because,

> ...such programs as youth seminars, Shabbatonim, and retreats [are]...part of the process of molding an abiding sense of responsibility to the whole of the Jewish people.[29]

Can we say, then, that these experiences equip the RIETS graduate with the skills necessary to help raise the level of Jewish identity and commitment of the loosely affiliated American Jew? It would appear that while those who participate in such activities are certainly better capable of communicating with a more heterogeneous Jewish population, they are still insufficiently prepared to face the challenges of the fight against assimilation. This is a result, in our estimation, of the fact that the only time dedicated to cultivating these skills is during relatively unsupervised "fieldwork" situations. A future Talmud teacher or synagogue rabbi in the RIETS rabbinical training program will dedicate scores of hours towards acquiring a proper knowledge base of his subject and understanding the theoretics that lie behind various strategies. He will also receive guidance from an experienced professional for an extensive period. None of these study paths, however, exist in respect to the rabbi who wants to approach the Jewish community beyond his Orthodox affiliated circle. Other than a few isolated classes spread out over the course of four years, there are no formal components built into the program that satisfy these needs. This does not mean that it is impossible for talented individuals to gain important tools in RIETS that can be put to good use in working with the broader Jewish community. What it does imply, rather, is that under present conditions, RIETS cannot provide a large cadre of young rabbis who are capable of facing these challenges. Thus,

29 *A Legacy of Learning*, 8.

unless new elements are integrated into its rabbinical training offering, there is currently little promise that any major initiative aimed at stemming assimilation can emerge from the leading American Orthodox institution for rabbinical training.

2. *Hebrew Theological College* – Skokie (Illinois) Yeshiva[30]

From its inception in 1922, HTC was established as a rabbinical training seminary that, like Yeshiva University, offers both traditional yeshiva learning and academic courses.[31] Its main goal was to provide rabbinical leadership for the rapidly expanding Jewish population of Midwestern United States. Indeed, its current statement of purpose still emphasizes that in addition to the intensive three-year Talmud and halakhah study program,

> ...students are also involved in academic areas addressing the particular needs of the chosen specialized area of rabbinic activity, such as education, public speaking, homiletics and psychology.[32]

The official seminary literature goes into great detail regarding the course of Talmudic and halakhic learning. However, little information is provided as to other types of knowledge that the students are exposed to besides the mention of a yearly *semicha* (rabbinics) seminar. In addition, those planning to pursue a career as pulpit rabbis participate in both "short-term practica and

30 The information gathered is based on official publications of Hebrew Theological College, and on personal communications with an alumnus.
31 Helmreich, *The World of the Yeshiva*, 24.
32 See "Beis Midrash," *www.htcnet.edu/bet.html*.

long-term internships."[33] This lack of proportion or coordination between the traditional learning element and the supplementary subjects is highlighted in an article published in 1975 by the philosopher, the late Eliezer Berkovits. One of HTC's most renowned former faculty members and an alumnus of the famed *Berlin Rabbiner Seminar*, Berkovits proposes a totally new curriculum for training American Orthodox rabbis. While suggesting that new methods of Talmudic study should be utilized, he also laments the lack of an educational philosophy that connects traditional learning with the more secular component within the curriculum. This causes great handicaps for rabbis who are supposed to become trained in demonstrating the beauty of traditional values within the modern world.[34]

Berkovits' proposals for an expansive intellectual education for American rabbis are quite different from the emphasis on practice offered a few years earlier in Liebman's study.[35] They both, however, highlight the limited stature of subjects other than traditional textual studies in this institution. Based on discussions with alumni from recent years, it would appear that while receipt of a Bachelor's degree is still an entrance requirement, HTC is moving closer to right-wing Orthodoxy. Its more popular name, the "Skokie Yeshiva," seems an accurate reflection of its contemporary identity.[36]

33 Ibid., 2.

34 Eliezer Berkovits, "A Contemporary Rabbinical School for Orthodox Jewry," in Jacob Neusner (ed.), *Understanding Judaism* (New York, 1975), 285–298.

35 Liebman, "The Training of American Rabbis," 25–26, points out that the "secular" subjects are taught in HTC from a more traditionalist, less scientific, perspective than in Yeshiva University.

36 Despite his description of the secular studies program offered under HTC's auspices, Liebman, "The Training of American Rabbis," 23–24, already categorized it among the "sectarian yeshivot" in 1969.

It would appear, then, that to an even greater extent than RIETS, HTC's current rabbinical program offers little that suggests that it will produce a crop of young rabbis who are trained to communicate with broader American Jewry and to deal with contemporary assimilatory trends.

3. *Yeshivat Chovevei Torah*, New York[37]

New York based *Yeshivat Chovevei Torah* (henceforth YCT) is a new initiative led by prominent rabbi and activist, Avi Weiss. It is a liberal Orthodox response to the "insularity" and the move to the right that has characterized American Orthodoxy in the past few years. Specifically, it reflects a sense among R. Weiss and like-minded people that RIETS has succumbed to these forces and no longer represents a forthright philosophy of modern Orthodoxy.[38] YCT's outlook is reflected in its listing of "core values" that includes, among other points, the "respectful interaction with all Jewish movements," and "expanding the role of women in religious life and leadership."[39]

37 The information gathered is based on official publications of *Yeshivat Chovevei Torah*, as well a personal communication with the lead teacher of the institution.

38 Most of the YCT faculty members are RIETS *musmakhim*. Helmreich, *The World of the Yeshiva*, 233–234, discusses the pressure on RIETS to follow the right-leaning trend of the yeshiva world; Indeed, Charles Liebman already documented this burgeoning trend in his "Orthodoxy in American Jewish Life," 89–92; idem, "Left and Right in American Orthodoxy," *Judaism* 15:1 (Winter, 1966), 102–107; For an early manifestation of opposition to the growing move to the right, see the 1968 comments of the leading modern Orthodox rabbi, Joseph H. Lookstein, cited in Adam S. Ferziger, "The Lookstein Legacy: An American Orthodox Rabbinical Dynasty," *Jewish History* 13, 1 (Spring, 1999), 130–131.

39 *Yeshivat Chovevei Torah*, www.yeshivatct.org/mission.htm. In fact, YCT enrollment is open to both men and women. There is no discussion in the

The four-year program is in its third year and at present has an enrollment of thirty students. Within one year they hope to reach their full capacity of forty full-time students. Like at RIETS and HTC, intensive study of Talmud and halakhah are the predominant activities at YCT. Similarly, time is set aside to pursue a graduate academic degree parallel to one's rabbinic studies. Study of the Bible, Jewish thought, Kabbalah and history of halakhah, however, is also considered an integral part of the YCT "core" curriculum. Moreover, particular emphasis is placed not only on traditional Talmudic learning, but on methodology of halakhic adjudication (*psak*) and "tools of research and analysis." While it is hard to consider these curricular additions to be revolutionary, they do imply an effort to broaden the scope of the rabbi's expertise. Thus a more diversified graduate is produced who can present a wide range of types of Jewish knowledge, including the increasingly popular Jewish mysticism, to a variety of audiences. The highlighting

official literature, however, of giving women rabbinical ordination. Yet YCT openly publicizes the fact that R. Weiss promotes and trains women for the role of "*madrikhah ruhanit*" or religious mentor. These women already perform duties such as delivering sermons and organizing ritual events in a few liberal Orthodox synagogues in New York, including R. Weiss' own Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. See, for example, "First Woman Installed As Spiritual Leader of Orthodox Jewish Congregation," http://abclocal.go.com/wabc/news/WABC_052101_ Jewishwoman.html. An analysis of the great expansion in the numbers of Orthodox women studying Torah on an advanced level and whether it would ultimately lead to acceptance of women's ordination or the development of an alternative title is beyond the scope of this study. It should be pointed out, however, that women's learning is certainly one of the most dynamic and growing areas within contemporary modern Orthodox education. It is quite possible, then, that if large numbers of Orthodox women take on congregational leadership roles they will also have potential to develop approaches to dealing with assimilation that differ from those promoted by their male counterparts.

of methodology and tools of research, as well as the inclusion of history of halakhah, also suggests that there is willingness to integrate critical, scientific approaches to the study of sacred Jewish texts. Such an approach would be completely unacceptable within the confines of the RIETS division of Yeshiva University.[40] These last points are announced openly in the philosophical statement that appears in official publications of YCT:

> Our staff and atmosphere are open and welcoming, encouraging all types of questions. Our library covers the broad range of Jewish learning and scholarship. It is an environment and culture of spirituality, intellectual honesty and integrity.[41]

Consistent with its more brashly modern tenor, YCT promotes its identification as a religious-Zionist institution in a more unequivocal manner than RIETS: "Yeshivat Chovevei Torah emphasizes the value and religious significance of Tzion – the State of Israel."[42] In practice, while RIETS students are *encouraged* to spend a year of study at Yeshiva University's Gruss Institute in Jerusalem, YCT candidates *must* spend one of their four years in Israel.

As far as dealing with assimilation is concerned, however, the YCT program does not differ dramatically from RIETS. Little attention is devoted to this issue within the official study framework. The only exception to this point may be that as part of their training the YCT students gain exposure to the head of the institution,

40 Most of the leading rabbis in RIETS are highly critical of the scientific approach of Yeshiva University's Bernard Revel Graduate School for Judaic Studies.

41 *Yeshivat Chovevei Torah*, www.yeshivatct.org/mission.htm.

42 Ibid.

R. Avi Weiss. R. Weiss has created a synagogue community in Riverdale, New York that has been highly successful at opening its doors to the broader Jewish population of the area. It is an Orthodox synagogue known for its acceptance of all Jews into its midst and for its bold educational initiatives aimed at increasing the Jewish content within the lives of the unaffiliated. In fact, a number of rabbis who served as R. Weiss' assistants or as rabbinic interns have already established their own credentials as "open" Orthodox communal rabbis. They too are attracting members of the non-observant population in their locales into their congregations. Thus, this personal connection and the ability to participate in the activities of R. Weiss' synagogue do offer the opportunity for the YCT student to gain practical experience in the area of dealing with assimilation. Yet there is little within the formal program itself that complements these experiences. As such, it is difficult to gauge the degree to which the current exposure of YCT students to Rabbi Weiss and his synagogue community differs from that of the RIETS student, who for example, interns under a rabbi who serves a diversified Jewish community, or who participates in the activities of the Division of Communal Services.

It would appear then, that in order for YCT to produce rabbis who are qualitatively better equipped to deal with assimilation, it needs to develop a more synthetic approach that takes full advantage of the knowledge and experience of its most valuable and unusual resource, R. Avi Weiss. The first step in this direction would be to create an integrated curriculum and to recruit faculty who could work with R. Weiss at translating his practical ideas and vision into more well-defined and communicable formulas.

At present YCT innovativeness seems to be primarily a reflection of its self-appointed mission to reassert the spirit of

modern Orthodoxy within American Jewry. As such, the target audience for its graduates – mainstream Orthodox congregational life – is no different from that of RIETS. As a young institution, however, it has the potential and the flexibility to offer a new type of rabbinic training that can produce Orthodox rabbis who are better equipped to serve the needs of greater American Jewry.

4. *Joseph Strauss Rabbinical Seminary – Ohr Torah Stone*, Efrat, Israel[43]

Like R. Avi Weiss, R. Shlomo Riskin is a RIETS-educated, successful modern Orthodox rabbi who decided to found a new rabbinical seminary. His, however, is located in Israel. During his tenure at the Lincoln Square Synagogue in Manhattan, R. Riskin created a dynamic center of Jewish religious life that continues to attract both young observant Jews and less committed individuals. Today he is chief rabbi of the town of Efrat in Israel's Etzion Bloc and dean of the *Ohr Torah Stone* institutions. Together with R. Chaim Brovender, a pioneer in the field of post high-school Torah study programs in Israel for English speaking students, they have established the Joseph Strauss Rabbinical Seminary (henceforth JSRS) whose aim is to train,

> ...a new generation of rabbinic leaders who combine their halachic knowledge with an understanding of the particular needs of contemporary Jewish life.[44]

43 The information gathered is based on official publications of *Ohr-Torah Stone Institutions*, as well as personal communications with R. Eliyahu Birnbaum, the director of the *Amiel – Rabbi Emanuel Rackman Program for Practical Rabbinics*.

44 *Joseph Strauss Rabbinical Seminary*, www.ynoi.org.il/strauss.htm.

JSRS attracts students from all over the world who participate in a four-year course of study that culminates in rabbinic ordination. The graduates are then expected to serve as rabbis in Diaspora communities, including in the United States. The institution places particular emphasis on its vision of "Torah as a unifying force rather than a divider, attentive to the importance of tolerance and openness, without compromising religious commitment."[45] In keeping with this goal, study of Talmud and halakhah, as well as customs, holidays, Jewish life cycle, Bible and philosophy, are taught "...with an understanding of and sensitivity towards the situation of the Jews in the Diaspora..."[46] This last point suggests an awareness of the critique rendered by Liebman in his article from the 1960s regarding the thick divide between textual study and practical training that existed in all the major rabbinical seminaries. That is, beyond transmitting information, there is a directed effort being made in JSRS to cultivate an appreciation for how this knowledge can be used effectively in the field. When studying the laws of conversion, for example, considerable attention will be paid to approaches that offer solutions to the contemporary reality of intermarriage and assimilation. No less so, when studying the laws of the Sabbath, time will be dedicated to consideration of how to build a community that includes within it a majority of non-Sabbath observers.

The main framework, however, for preparing JSRS graduates for working within the realities of contemporary Jewish life is the *Amiel – Rabbi Emanuel Rackman Program for Practical Rabbinics*. The program, which is in its fourth year, is directed by R. Eliyahu

45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.

Birnbaum, the Israeli-educated former chief rabbi of Uruguay. It is structured as an intensive one-year immersion in supplementary rabbinics open to both JSRS students and qualified candidates completing their rabbinic studies at other Israeli yeshivot or seminaries. Twenty-five individuals are presently receiving generous stipends that allow them to devote themselves to preparing for a minimal two-year period of service to a Jewish community abroad.

The participants in *Amiel* meet for one full day per week during which they follow an intensive course of study oriented towards raising the level of Jewish identity and commitment of unaffiliated Jews. The list of subjects within the curriculum includes: philosophy, psychology, contemporary halakhic issues, community structure and development, communications and public relations, administration, rhetoric and public speaking, social work, family dynamics and counseling and practical rabbinics. A highlight of the sessions is a weekly class with R. Riskin on "Topics in Communal Leadership." In addition, rabbis visiting from abroad are invited on a regular basis to share their knowledge and experience with the *Amiel* trainees. Finally, the rabbi's wives are required to attend a series of sessions aimed at training them to work as their husband's partners when they go abroad.

Of the sixty *Amiel* graduates to date, twenty have been placed in American communities that requested the assistance of the program in finding an appropriate candidate. While all of the synagogues are officially Orthodox, *Amiel* seeks to ensure that its primary goal of working to stem assimilation is achieved by stipulating that its students serve in places where the vast majority of the congregants are non-observant.

It is clear that through its *Amiel* program, JSRS is a rabbinical

seminary that is focused on preparing Orthodox rabbis to deal with assimilation. Indeed, the educational and vocational training that it offers – while not quite as revolutionary as the fully integrated curriculum advocated by Liebman – seems to be geared more directly towards fighting assimilation than any of the other programs discussed above. There are, however, certain limitations that ought to be considered when comparing JSRS to other institutions. First, while the candidates have to be fully bilingual, many of them are Israeli-born or have lived in Israel for the last ten years of their lives. Surely Israelis offer Americans a certain type of idealism and pride that they lack – they will most likely encourage their congregants to consider settlement in Israel as the most effective way to prevent assimilation – but they are by definition less in touch with the pulse of American Jewry. Those in charge of the program are aware of this issue and are trying to overcome it by giving the candidates as much exposure to the realities of Diaspora Jewish life as is possible within the confines of a relatively cloistered yeshivah situated in the Judean hills. An additional limitation is the fact that while a large percentage of the graduates serve in the United States, the majority do not. Therefore, the program cannot concentrate as exclusively on the needs of American Jewry as American-based programs do.

A final cause for questioning the potential for success of JSRS/ *Amiel* is that it is likely that the Israel-based graduates will be reluctant to extend their stay in an American community far beyond the two year minimal requirement. This is especially so since most will be eager to afford their own children the opportunity of gaining most of their education within the Israeli system. True, many – if not most – of the young American-trained Orthodox rabbis who go to serve in outlying communities will not settle there

permanently, and will seek to return to more established centers of Jewish life. It is more likely, however, that an American will have to stay for a minimum of five to seven years before offered a position in a larger community. In addition, the initial period of adjustment of an Israeli to American life may take as long as a year. Thus, he may only have one year in which to optimize the skills that he has learned before he returns to Israel. The leaders of JSRS/*Amiel* hope to mitigate this problem by encouraging their graduates to commit to longer tenures abroad. Moreover, they intend to set into play a system whereby enough new candidates are always available so that those who finish their period of stay abroad will be immediately replaced by a fresh JSRS/*Amiel* alumnus. It is too early to tell whether this system will become sufficiently established to overcome this problem.

B. Right-wing (*Haredi*) Institutions

Most of the traditionalist *yeshivos* in the United States are modeled after the Lithuanian centers of learning that flourished from the nineteenth century until the Holocaust. While many rabbis spend their formative years in these institutions of higher learning, like their Lithuanian predecessors, the focus of most American *yeshivos* is not on training professional rabbis. They follow, rather, the ideal of *Torah li-Shmah* (Torah study for its own sake) initially articulated by the creator of the prototype Lithuanian yeshiva, R. Hayyim of Volozhin.[47] The main goal is to educate young Jewish men towards the highest level of Talmudic erudition and religious piety. As such, rather than being considered a sign of having achieved a particularly

47 On this approach, see: Immanuel Etkes, *Lita be-Yerushalayim* (Jerusalem, 1991); Norman Lamm, *Torah Lishmah* (New York, 1989).

impressive measure of Talmudic mastery, the veteran student who begins to study the legal codes that he must know in order to receive rabbinic ordination and become a "licensed" rabbi is often looked down upon. This course of study signals imminent departure from the holy sanctum of the yeshiva, and his efforts are seen as aimed at attaining a formal "professional" degree that will enable him to earn a living in the outside world.

Consistent with this negative perception of those who abandon the way of *Torah li-Shmah*, up until the last fifteen years of the twentieth century, products of the traditionalist *yeshivos* made up a small minority among the American Orthodox pulpit rabbinate. Serving the needs of the greater American Jewish community meant being willing to compromise on one's own religious values. As R. Emanuel Feldman, a graduate of the *Ner Israel* Yeshiva (Rabbinical College) in Baltimore and formerly a leading pulpit rabbi in Atlanta, Georgia, explained sympathetically in 1968:

> The unfortunate tendency among some of the students must be understood for what it is: an extension of their total commitment to *shlemut* (perfection) and study and service of God which views apparent professionalism and careerism with a jaundiced eye...as he grows and matures he will come to the understanding that the so-called career rabbi is no less concerned with God and Torah than he.[48]

There are additional factors that led to the limited numbers of traditionalist yeshiva graduates who entered the pulpit rabbinate. First, for most of the twentieth century, American right-wing

48 Emanuel Feldman, "Trends in the American Yeshivot," *Tradition* (Spring, 1968), 59 [cited in Helmreich, *The World of the Yeshiva*, 244].

Orthodoxy dedicated itself towards survival. The generation of Orthodox Jews that arrived in America immediately preceding and after the Holocaust still viewed their new home as the "*treyfe medinah*" (impure state) that endangered the survival of "Torah Jewry."[49] Therefore, their actions were directed inward, seeking preservation rather than expansion. Even after it was clear that these efforts had met with success, the insularity that they engendered remained deeply ingrained in the social ethos of right-wing Orthodoxy. While for some, the insularity is purely a practical result of historical circumstances, for others, it is also an ideological statement. Thus, some *haredi* ideologues continue to promote the notion that since only "Torah true" Orthodox Jews can be counted upon not to assimilate, all resources should be focused purely on strengthening this group.[50]

By the last two decades of the twentieth century, however, forces within the American *yeshivish* world that expressed different sentiments began to emerge. Right-wing Orthodoxy's newfound empowerment and self-confidence engendered a rising sentiment that they were strong enough to extend help to those American

49 On the development of American right-wing Orthodoxy in the mid to late twentieth century, see: Helmreich, *The World of the Yeshiva*, 39–46; Liebman, "Orthodoxy in American Jewish Life," 93–97; On the changes in the character of American Orthodoxy in the course of the twentieth century, see Jeffrey S. Gurock, "The Winnowing of American Orthodoxy," in Marc Lee Raphael (ed.), *Approaches to Modern Judaism* (Chico, Ca., 1983), 1–16 [re-published in Jeffrey S. Gurock (ed.), *American Jewish History: A Thirteen Volume Series* (New York and London, 1998), vol. 5 Section 3, 1147–1162]. Regarding the move to the right in the post-war period, see 9–12.

50 See note 11 above. One of the earliest articulators of this preservationist/separatist Orthodox approach is R. Samson Raphael Hirsch, the man considered the father of modern Orthodoxy. See, for example, his "The *Kehillah*," *The Collected Writings* VI (New York and Jerusalem, 1990), 76–81.

Jews who had become alienated from their roots. Some of the impetus for this fresh approach may have come from a hope that the *ba'alei teshuvah* (newly religious) whom they hoped to inspire would be attracted to their style of Judaism and would further strengthen their ranks. A growing number of leading right-wing Orthodox figures, however, began to realize that they simply had an obligation to try to stem the general trend of assimilation among American Jewry. Rabbi Moshe Sherer, the longtime President of American Agudath Israel, expressed this point in a 1978 appeal to yeshiva students to become practicing rabbis:

> Many [yeshiva students] don't want to go into public Jewish life because they want to spend more time studying Torah. But if we are really engaged in a struggle to survive, something has to give. The alternative is that millions of *neshamos* [souls] that heard the *Aseres ha-Dibros* [Ten Commandments]on *Har Sinai* [Mount Sinai] will enter churches. People have to go into the rabbinate to save them.[51]

By the turn of the 21st century, this appeal had been answered by many within the American *haredi* world. As opposed to the modern Orthodox, however, it has not led to a revamping of the traditional yeshiva's educational structure. Yeshiva heads have generally stood firm in their demand for "Torah for Torah's sake" to remain the guiding principle within the walls of the yeshiva. Yet recently they have shown greater openness to new supplementary initiatives expressly aimed at training rabbis who can help strengthen Jewish identity among the loosely affiliated.

51 Interview conducted by William Helmreich, December 14, 1978, *The World of the Yeshiva*, 243.

In the following pages two institutions are presented that express the dynamism and creativity that mark some of the more recent right-wing efforts to fight assimilation.

1. Rabbinical Seminary of America, *Chofetz Chaim* Yeshiva, Kew Gardens Hills, New York

Rabbinical Seminary of America, or *Chofetz Chaim*, as it is more popularly known, is not a new institution. It was established in 1933 by R. Dovid Leibowitz, a student of the famed Slobodka yeshiva[52] and of R. Yisrael Meir Kagan's (the "Chofetz Chaim") yeshiva in Radin.[53] The yeshiva is presently led by his son, R. Henoch Leibowitz and his younger partner, R. David Harris.[54]

Chofetz Chaim is ostensibly a traditional yeshiva in that the educational focus is on *Torah li-Shmah*. Following the Slobodka model of a *mussar* yeshiva, a great deal of emphasis is also placed on formal activities aimed to build proper religious and ethical character,[55] with the students dedicating time each day to the study of ethical literature. In addition, R. Leibowitz gives *mussar*

52 On the yeshiva in Slobodka, see: Ephraim Oshry, "Yeshivat Kenesset Yisrael de-Slobodkah," in Samuel K. Mirsky (ed.), *Mosdot Torah be-Eiropah be-Vinyanam u-ve-Hurbanam* (New York, 1956), 133–168; Shaul Stampfer, *Ha-Yeshivah ha-Lita'it be-Hithavutah* (Jerusalem, 1995), 221–251.

53 On the "Chofetz Chaim" and his yeshiva in Radin, see: Lester Eckman, *Revered By All* (New York, 1974); David Zariz, "Hafetz Hayyim de-Radin," in Mirsky, *Mosdot Torah be-Eiropah*, 189–216.

54 On the history of the *Chofetz Chaim* Yeshiva, see Helmreich, *The World of the Yeshiva*, 28–29. The following discussion has been greatly enriched by speaking to veteran students.

55 On the Mussar movement, see Immanuel Etkes, *Rabbi Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement* (Philadelphia, 1993); J.J. Weinberg, "The Mussar Movement and Lithuanian Jewry," in Leo Jung (ed.), *Men of the Spirit* (New York, 1964), 213–284; On the *mussar* yeshivot, see: Mirsky, *Mosdot Torah be-Eiropah*, 133–324; Stampfer, *Ha-Yeshivah ha-Lita'it*, 221–313.

schmoozim (lectures in ethical and religious behavior) twice a week, which are then reviewed by the younger students, with a more veteran student acting as a mentor or study partner. The importance of *mussar* study illustrates the degree to which *Chofetz Chaim* views guidance of character development as an integral part of the yeshiva experience.

Beyond its dedication to *mussar* study, there are three aspects of *Chofetz Chaim* that highlight its departure from many other right-wing institutions. First, at least in the eyes of other traditionalist institutions, it is considered to be more open to modern society and culture. This is reflected in the fact that it has received United States federal accreditation that allows it to grant its students bachelor degrees in Jewish studies. Moreover, it runs cooperative programs with secular universities that enable *Chofetz Chaim* students to work towards a master's degree in education or administration.[56] Another example of its relative modernity is the attire of the students. Like all right-wing *yeshivos*, the *Chofetz Chaim bokhrim* wear hats and jackets when they pray. However, they do not necessarily wear this *yeshivish* garb when walking on the street. There is also much less uniformity in clothing style – rather than being a conventional "blackhatter," the *Chofetz Chaim* student may be found wearing a straw hat or even a tweed one. While these external nuances may seem negligible in comparison to the high level of conformity that also comes across, within the yeshiva world these details have broad social meaning.

56 *Ner Israel Rabbinical College* of Baltimore also runs cooperative academic programs and allows its students to attain bachelors degrees at neighboring universities. It would appear, however, that as a general rule *Chofetz Chaim* is more forthcoming in allowing or even encouraging its students to pursue an undergraduate and even a graduate degree.

The most significant example of connection to modernity through which *Chofetz Chaim* distinguishes itself from other American right-wing Orthodox yeshiva programs, however, is in the area of public service. The Yeshiva, like RIETS, encourages its students to become involved in Jewish communal life. They take time out during the week from their Torah studies, for example, in order to run JEP – Jewish Educational Programs. The main activity of JEP is organizing Jewish culture hours in New York area public schools. A different type of activity for which *Chofetz Chaim* provides the main human resources is the Queens *HATZOLAH* emergency ambulance corps. Similarly, *Chofetz Chaim* students volunteer to perform *taharot* (pre-burial ritual purification) for the Queens *Hevrah Kadisha* (Jewish burial society). Indeed, *bokhrim* from other right-wing institutions also participate in these types of programs. In the case of *Chofetz Chaim*, however, the students are encouraged if not expected by the leaders of the yeshiva to participate.

Chofetz Chaim's unique place within the right-wing American yeshiva world is not, however, merely a reflection of its willingness to allow its students greater interaction with outside society. Its emphasis on formal character development is also only part of the process by which *Chofetz Chaim* sets out to nurture rabbis who embody the values of the yeshiva. The main vehicle for ensuring that its graduates will dedicate themselves to the religious and educational leadership of their fellow Jews is through the long and rigorous course of study that one must complete in order to receive rabbinical ordination. The process begins when the student is between eighteen and twenty years of age and usually lasts for twelve to fifteen years.[57] The average *Chofetz Chaim* graduate,

57 Even when dealing with an unusually gifted candidate, it is impossible to complete the program in less than eight years.

then, is likely to have spent eight to twelve years more in the same rabbinical seminary than his counterpart in the RIETS, HTC and YCT programs.[58]

The staff carefully monitors a student's development in *Chofetz Chaim*. He must pass through a series of internal study frameworks with the following minimal requirements: two years in the *beis midrash* basic study group, three years studying Talmud in the yeshiva head's class, three years in the advanced study *beis midrash* group and two years in the *kollel* fellowship program during which the required halakhic texts are learned in order to receive official rabbinical ordination. As pointed out above, the average tenure is far longer than the minimum.

The lengthiness of the program is partly due to the style of Talmudic study that *Chofetz Chaim* promulgates. Emphasis is placed on a slow, plodding method aimed at achieving mastery of every detail of a Talmudic discussion. This precludes covering significant amounts of material in a short period of time. It would appear, however, that there are additional goals that are meant to be achieved by requiring such an extended period of residence within the confines of the yeshiva. The intention is not merely to educate a rabbi who is both knowledgeable in Torah and dedicated to the Jewish people. The aim is to cultivate a *Chofetz Chaim* rabbinical emissary, that is, a person willing to occupy the type of rabbinical positions that the yeshiva deems most important for the perpetuation

58 RIETS and YCT are four-year programs, while HTC ordination is achieved in three. In the case of RIETS, however, most students have studied in the Yeshiva Program of Yeshiva College for two to three years before formally entering RIETS. Even taking this into account the average RIETS graduate has spent seven years there, five to eight years less than the *Chofetz Chaim* graduate.

of American Jewish life. Such a person will likely maintain at least a loose affiliation with the yeshiva throughout his career.

Particularly over the last twenty-four years, *Chofetz Chaim* has invested considerable effort in establishing schools and synagogues in communities where there is no Orthodox community or where the community has become severely weakened. Starting with the *Chofetz Chaim* center established in 1978 in Rochester, New York, successive models have been created in Milwaukee (Wisconsin), Cherry Hill (New Jersey), Los Angeles and most recently in San Diego. Synagogues have been established and schools built that cater to both observant and less affiliated Jewish youth. The rabbi and staff are *Chofetz Chaim* graduates who have essentially been sent to these communities. By going as a group, as opposed to an individual rabbi establishing a synagogue, they ensure the establishment of an infrastructure that will give the young rabbinical families a social and religious environment sustainable over a long period of time. Moreover, they bring together a core of highly motivated rabbis who, due to their long and intensive years of common training, share a basic ideological and religious mindset. The *Chofetz Chaim musmakh* (ordained rabbi) differs from the young RIETS graduate or the product of the *Amiel* program. His intention is not to spend five years at a first "out of town" pulpit before moving on to a more centrally located one. Nor is his goal to make a two year contribution to Diaspora Jewry before returning to his home in Israel. Rather, he hopes to establish a permanent base for himself, and together with a group of other like-minded *Chofetz Chaim* alumni, raise the level of religious consciousness of a locale whose Jewish population is highly prone to assimilation.

Despite its heavy demands, rabbinical training at *Chofetz Chaim* has become increasingly popular. Until recently, anywhere

between two and twelve new rabbis were ordained in a given year. The total yeshiva population has grown in the last few years, however, to over 300 full time students. Thus, it is likely that the next decade will see a sharp increase in *Chofetz Chaim musmakhim* who are prepared to bring the vision of Rabbi Leibowitz and his faculty to a broad range of American Jews.

The *Chofetz Chaim* approach to training of Orthodox rabbis is unique. It breeds perseverance, persistence in attaining a goal and loyalty. On the other hand, it assumes that supplementary rabbinical skills such as pedagogy, public speaking, communication and counseling should be learned primarily through experience – without the need for these subjects to be formally integrated into the study curriculum. The conformity to institutional principles may also stunt the creative and innovative potential of some of its graduates. On a practical level as well, the many years of study demanded before going out into the field could dissuade some individuals who possess great potential to inspire other Jews from choosing a career in the rabbinate. Finally, due to the "core" model, in which a group of families set up a *Chofetz Chaim* center in a community, the majority of graduates will become educators and few will seek to fill existing pulpit positions. Surely, however, it is a rabbinical-training approach that needs to be studied carefully when considering new modes of training or seeking to encourage adjustments to existing programs.

2. *Maor* Program, Silver Spring, Maryland[59]

Twelve years ago, a graduate of the *Ner Israel Rabbinical College*

59 The information gathered here is based on personal communications with people connected with the MAOR program, as well as with a student at the *Ner Israel Rabbinical College* in Baltimore.

of Baltimore by the name of R. Shaya Milikowsky founded a rabbinical training program for students of right-wing *yeshivos*. He called it *Maor*, which means light, based on the midrashic passage that speaks of the Torah as "the light through which they are brought back to the proper path" ("המאור שבה מחזירן למוטב").[60] Unlike most of the programs discussed above, *Maor* does not offer a full-time rabbinical studies curriculum. It is, indeed, more similar to the *Amiel* program sponsored by the *Ohr Torah* institutions in Israel. As opposed to *Amiel*, however, it does not ask the participants to dedicate one day a week to the program over the course of a full year. Rather, students participate in intensive three-week sessions that meet over the course of two successive summers. The reason for this concentrated study schedule is that *Maor* seeks to train rabbis whose formal studies and ultimate ordination take place in one of the traditional right-wing *yeshivos* such as *Ner Israel*, *Beth Midrash ha-Gavohah* in Lakewood and its subsidiary in Philadelphia. The heads of these institutions have, in fact, given their blessings to this initiative, but only if it does not interfere with the main goal of *Torah li-Shmah*. This is accomplished by running the study sessions during the traditional yeshiva three-week summer break that extends from the ninth of the Hebrew month of *Av* until the first day of *Elul* (and falls in July-August).

More than any other program discussed in this paper, the existence of *Maor* evinces the change in attitude of the right-wing yeshiva world that has taken place over the last two decades towards the professional rabbinate, and towards its obligation to stem the tide of assimilation. It demonstrates that the leading figures in these institutions recognize their responsibility not only to strengthen

60 See *Eikhah Rabba*, *Petihtot*, s.v. "*Amar Rava*."

the commitment of those who are already observant, but also to serve the needs of the broader Jewish population. For unlike the classical *ba'al teshuvah* approach discussed in the first section of this paper, the goal of the *Maor* graduate is not necessarily to turn all unaffiliated Jews into observant ones. The central message that *Maor* seeks to communicate is that the way to counter assimilation is by making Judaism meaningful for all Jews. For some, this may ultimately lead to full observance, but *Maor* emphasizes that any movement towards greater involvement and commitment is a success. Moreover, the skills that are cultivated by the program reflect an acknowledgment that a successful American rabbi must be equipped with more than a sharp Talmudic mind and a willingness to leave the warm confines of the yeshiva.

During the three-week summer sessions, the twenty enrollees meet for eight hours per day, five days per week. Their curriculum includes the following subjects: public speaking, social sciences such as history, psychology, sociology and American popular culture, pedagogy, public relations, advertising and fundraising. In order to fully comprehend the role that the study of these subjects will play in shaping the future career of the rabbi, however, it is necessary first to gain an appreciation for the approach to the communal rabbinate that stands at the foundation of *Maor*. *Maor* does not train its graduates to fill available rabbinical positions in established Orthodox synagogues. In fact, the *Maor* position is that a rabbi who is hired by an existing Orthodox community will never be successful at attracting large numbers of unaffiliated Jews towards greater Jewish involvement. The reason is that the main task of such a figure is to serve the needs of the veteran congregants who hired him and who expect to gain from his teaching and guidance. Even if such a person is totally committed to boosting

the Jewish identity of his non-affiliated neighbors, his hands are tied. He can never be what *Maor* seeks to create – an "outreach rabbi." At best he would be a rabbi who occasionally reaches out beyond his natural constituency.

Maor trains its graduates to establish new synagogues in areas with large Jewish populations in which no Orthodox community exists. In such a situation a rabbi can propagate an environment geared towards serving the needs of Jews who run a high risk of succumbing to intermarriage. In order to create such an institution, however, pedagogical, homiletical and intellectual abilities are insufficient. An enterprise of this nature must be led by an individual who has a keen awareness of what will appeal to highly acculturated American Jews. He needs to know how to use the tools of modern mass media to communicate his message. He needs, as well, to be able to find the resources needed to fund such an endeavor.

The founder of *Maor* himself, R. Milikowsky, has hands-on experience at creating the type of community that *Maor* promotes. Some five years ago he established such a synagogue in a suburb of Washington D.C. that has a considerable population of Jews, of whom almost all were non-observant. Today his community comprises over 100 families, and an increasingly large percentage of the families are beginning to send their children to Jewish day schools.

Maor's staff believes that there are good reasons for optimism if their approach is adopted and supported. The confluence of the growing strength of the Orthodox community – as expressed in the sharp increase in the number of full-time students in post-high school *yeshivos* – along with the newfound willingness of the right-wing community to become involved with the greater Jewish population, offers the opportunity to train a new cadre of rabbis

who have the skills and outlook that can make a difference. What they are lacking to date, they claim, is simply the financial and human resources to expand their program beyond its current group of twenty graduates every two years. The issue of *Maor*'s basic premise that the established congregations cannot play a meaningful role in dealing with assimilation will be left for the conclusions of this paper. At this point, however, another more specific issue deserves to be raised. A second assumption of *Maor* is that there is no problem in taking a young man who has been cloistered in a yeshiva for at least ten to twelve years and to give him the intensive training needed to communicate with Jews who are ensconced in American culture. While the majority of these young men have a high school diploma, their high schools taught the bare minimum of secular studies demanded by law in order to receive state funding. Indeed most are American born and cannot be completely immune to cultural influence. Yet the education that they have received has focused on the ills of contemporary society and on ways to counteract its effect. As opposed to the modern Orthodox or centrist institutions where an undergraduate degree is a requirement and graduate studies are recommended, the institutions that *Maor* serves look askance at students who seek academic degrees, if they do not forbid it completely.[61] Even *Chofetz Chaim* takes a more

61 See Helmreich's discussion, *The World of the Yeshiva*, 220–222, regarding the attitudes of right-wing *yeshivos* to college education. Although many yeshiva students eventually gain some college education, this is often after they have left the yeshiva or at the end, when they have decided to embark on a secular career. The Lakewood and Telshe of Cleveland *yeshivos* forbid their students from attending college while they are enrolled in the yeshiva. Ner Israel's policy is to allow a limited number of hours of college attendance per week for students who have already devoted at least one post-high school year to full-time learning in the yeshiva.

positive approach to secular education and also does not encourage its students to completely cut themselves off from outside society. Most of the *Amiel* graduates as well, despite the aforesaid limitation of being foreign to American culture, are more comfortable in the secular world. Many of them are university graduates and all have served in the Israeli army. Can *Maor*'s program truly transform large numbers of young men with *yeshivish* backgrounds into effective agents for raising the level of Jewish identity among the weakly affiliated majority of American Jewry?

It would appear that the "cultural handicaps" that *Maor*'s potential students have to overcome will not prevent the program from producing a small core group of highly talented and committed young rabbis. For despite their built-in limitations, among them there are certainly exceptional individuals who are either naturally conversant with norms of general society or quick learners. Unless, however, the *yeshivos* encourage the development of the tools needed to work with weakly affiliated Jews at earlier stages in the education of their students, *Maor* will not provide enough supplementary training to prepare most for dealing with assimilation. To put it in more stark terms, yeshiva alumni who decide to become accountants or computer engineers invest much more in their "secular" education than a six-week intensive course. Surely teaching Judaism to other Jews is less foreign to a yeshiva student than accounting, but it still demands a process of education and re-orientation that *Maor* does not provide.

C. Specialized Programs

The two programs, ROLP (*Aish Hatorah*) and Chabad,[62] that are described in this section have been placed in a separate category for a number of reasons. First, while on many issues they fit into or are deeply influenced by the right-wing Orthodoxy, other characteristics of their approaches or ideologies put them far outside the norm of the traditional yeshiva world. Second, both of these ordination programs are focused almost exclusively on training rabbis to do "outreach" work. While this may be the case regarding *Maor* as well, it is a supplementary program that is aligned with traditional *yeshivos.* Moreover, while some of the graduates of the specialized programs may end up serving in independent congregations, the main goal is to train rabbis who will remain part of the specific "systems" or "networks" that have been spawned by their mother institutions. Thus, these programs cannot be considered training centers for the American Orthodox rabbinate in general, but rather in-house breeding grounds for supplying manpower for the needs of the larger organizations. That being said, they focus on teaching their students how to deal with assimilation, and therefore, it is worthwhile to consider the model of education and of the rabbinate that they espouse.

1. *ROLP* – Rabbinical Ordination/Leadership Program, *Aish Hatorah*, Jerusalem[63]

Based in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem, *Aish*

62 The word *Chabad* is a Hebrew acronym for the three intellectual faculties of *chochmah* (wisdom), *binah* (comprehension) and *da'at* (knowledge).

63 Much of the information regarding the ROLP program presented here is based on an interview conducted with R. Yaakov Blackman, Director of ROLP, that took place in Jerusalem in the early afternoon of September 11, 2001.

Hatorah is one of the leading *kiruv* institutions in the world.[64] It is best known for its representatives who approach students and travelers who have come to the Wailing Wall and invite them to visit the adjacent yeshiva, as well as for its intensive "Discovery" seminars aimed at proving God's existence and the divine authorship of the Torah. *Aish Hatorah*, however, does not limit its activities to those who visit Israel. In fact, communities have been established throughout the English-speaking world where the methods and beliefs studied at the mother institution are being utilized in order to attract as many Jews as possible to traditional religious observance.

The institution was established in 1975 after its founder, Rabbi Noah Weinberg, broke away from the *Ohr Somayach* yeshiva.[65] According to his followers, the split came about due to differences regarding the goals of the yeshiva. Ohr Somayach felt that success was determined by whether a newly-observant student dedicated himself to a life of learning. R. Weinberg, by contrast, hoped that once a student had adjusted to religious life, he would either become a *kiruv* worker or join the secular work force. Through his interaction with other Jews, he would have the ability to help the weakly affiliated become observant.

Aish Hatorah has developed an entire ideology and system of outreach. In order to make sure that its approach is properly implemented, its leaders foster an "Aish culture" among their students, who are viewed as the future of the institution. Inculcation

64 On Aish Hatorah, and the approach of its founder, R. Noah Weinberg, see: Aviad, *Return to Judaism*, 28–29, 38–41.

65 On Ohr Samayach see Aviad, *Return to Judaism*, 23–28; For an "in-house" description of its history and activities, see *The Ohr Somayach Story* (Jerusalem and New York, 1982).

of other approaches to Jewish education are generally considered counter-effective towards *Aish Hatorah*'s goal of bringing as many Jews as possible closer to Jewish observance. It is, indeed, this "Aish culture" that is the most distinctive characteristic of *Aish Hatorah*'s ROLP – Rabbinical Ordination/Leadership Program. Even the more traditional classes on subjects such as Talmud and Jewish legal codes focus on that which one needs to know in order to become an effective outreach rabbi.

It takes a student 1.5 to two years to complete ROLP. Graduation is contingent upon passing a halakhah examination administered by two rabbis appointed by *Aish Hatorah* as well as receiving a positive evaluation of the accomplishments of the student by the yeshiva administration. The curriculum is divided into three parts: traditional rabbinic learning, practical rabbinics and vocational training. The traditional learning portion focuses on sharpening the study skills and increasing the halakhic knowledge of the students. The idea is to familiarize the students with the texts and to provide them with the necessary tools to decide halakhic matters on their own. In addition, a major focus is placed on the study of Bible. This emphasis is based on the premise that the ability to prepare a Bible class that highlights the Torah's relevancy to modern life is crucial for recruiting Jews to the Aish world as well as for cultivating financial supporters.

The practical rabbinics portion consists of students leading various programs offered by *Aish Hatorah* in Israel. This is, essentially, the same kind of work that they will be doing in America.

The vocational training section is the most extensive part of the program and amounts to 40% of curriculum. There are classes dedicated to the daily responsibilities of being a rabbi. Courses are

also offered in pedagogy, public speaking, counseling, writing and dealing with contemporary issues. In addition, students participate in workshops that teach them how to establish *Aish Hatorah* communities of their own in America. Subjects such as demographics are taught in order to enable graduates to best determine what their target audience is for a city where a new Aish community is underway. In addition, the rabbis-in-training learn fundraising skills, such as finding potential individual donors and dealing with local Federations of Jewish Philanthropy. In the context of the development of the proper skills for leading a viable and successful Aish community, the ROLP students are also required to take classes in computers and business management. Finally, each newly ordained rabbi is given an "Aish bag" which consists of: numerous lectures on the weekly Torah portions, ideas for activities, literature on an array of topics and many other Aish-approved supplies to help him in the field.

A particularly unique aspect of ROLP is the significant amount of time spent training the students to deal with questions that they will be asked when they are out in the field. The students practice simulation games in which they debate their position against rabbis who assume the roles of non-affiliated Jews, reform rabbis, potential donors, etc. Major emphasis is also placed on sharpening their intellectual skills and their own belief in Judaism. This is done through intense learning of *mussar* texts (Jewish ethical/religious literature). The assumption is that if a rabbi understands intellectually why he is Jewish, then not only will he be able to stand up against those questioning his beliefs and motives along the way, but he will also be able to explain to others why they should share his beliefs.

ROLP is an "in-house" program. Its goal is not to create rabbis

who will go on to have congregational pulpits; the yeshiva rather views its program as the most effective way to supply manpower for its centers in the Diaspora. Although almost all of the students are *Aish Hatorah* products, recently students from some of the traditional *haredi yeshivos* have been accepted too. These "outside recruits" have generally failed to complete the program. This is due to the fact, according to the director R. Yaakov Blackman, that too much work needs to be done to teach them the Aish system. Virtually all of the graduates will go on to work for *Aish Hatorah*, which is constantly looking to establish their network in cities across the globe. Therefore, graduates will either join pre-existing Aish centers or travel to other cities to launch new programs. Due to the immense emphasis on doing things the "Aish way," existing organizations such as college Hillel groups or local Orthodox synagogues are rarely targeted as appropriate venues for ROLP graduates.

The description of ROLP above certainly strengthens the impression that this is not a classic rabbinical seminary or yeshiva. Its emphasis on "recruitment," on the "Aish approach" and the "Aish system," and in particular on the development of debating and rhetorical skills, make it quite difficult to refrain from drawing parallels to "cult" movements. Moreover, as stated already in the first section of this paper, while *Aish Hatorah* and similar institutions may begin by offering positive Jewish experiences to a broad spectrum of Jews,[66] its main goal is to identify those who will become "Aish" Jews. Despite these points, in exploring how

66 See, for example, its highly entertaining and sophisticated website that features www.kotelcam.com, which enables the viewer to see the Western Wall twenty-four hour per day.

Orthodox rabbis can deal with assimilation, ROLP cannot be ignored. On one level, both in Israel and in the United States, *Aish Hatorah* rabbis are connecting with the non-observant community and providing attractive Jewish content that is gaining them increasing exposure. Moreover, in the context of the models discussed up to this point in this study, *Aish Hatorah* reinforces the approach that claims that assimilation can only be dealt with if new, independent institutions are established within communities that cater solely to the needs of the non-observant and weakly affiliated Jewish population. In addition, from a pedagogic perspective, the ROLP model seems to most carefully heed the words of Charles Liebman. That is, of all the programs discussed, it is the one that does the most to integrate practical rabbinics into the study of traditional rabbinical texts.

2. Chabad – The World Lubavitch Movement, New York[67]

Like *Aish Hatorah*, the Lubavitch hasidic movement, generally known as Chabad, exhibits certain extreme sectarian traits.[68] It

67 Much of the information regarding the Chabad approach to rabbinical training is based on an extensive interview with R. Eli Hecht, a veteran Chabad rabbi in Southern California. Thirty years ago, R. Hecht established a community in Lomita, California. To date, his is still the only Orthodox synagogue in the area. In addition to holding weekly synagogue services with attendance of over 150 non-observant Jews, R. Hecht has built a Jewish day school and a mikveh (ritual bath). He is also a prolific author and publicist whose articles appear regularly in the nationally syndicated secular press. Finally, he has two grown sons who themselves, have recently completed the Chabad rabbinical training program.

68 On the history of Chabad, see, most recently, Avrum M. Ehrlich, *Leadership in the Chabad Movement* (Northvale, N.J. and Jerusalem, 2000). Also see: Shaul Shimon Deutch, *Larger Than Life* (New York, 1995); Laura Alter Klapman, *Sectarian Strategies for Stability and Solidarity: A Theory for the Remarkable Durability of the Lubavitch Movement*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Northwestern University (Chicago, 1991).

looks to recruit new members to its approach to Judaism and it almost always shuns cooperation with any other local groups – regardless of whether they are Orthodox or not. More significantly, very serious claims have arisen regarding the "personality cult" that has developed surrounding the late spiritual leader of the movement, R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994). Particularly scathing have been the attacks on the many members of the movement who continue, despite his death, to claim that the "Rebbe" is the Messiah or even a personification of the divine.[69]

Despite these considerations, it is impossible to consider the issue of the training of Orthodox rabbis to deal with assimilation without presenting the Chabad approach. Chabad is undoubtedly the most active group in the world in seeking to heighten Jewish identity. Its emissaries can be found not only in every large and small Jewish community, but even in areas such as Indonesia and Thailand, where few if any Jews live on a permanent basis. If young Jews go there to "look for" themselves, then Chabad will be there to help them. Unlike *Aish Hatorah*, while Chabad representatives certainly seek to bring Jews as close to their brand of Judaism as possible, this is not their only goal. Like the approach of the *Maor* program, they consider any expression of connection to Jewish tradition and culture to be valuable in and of itself. As R. Eli Hecht, the Chabad rabbi of Lomita, California put it, he is pleased if he can help Jews become more "sensitive to *yiddishkeit*." He pointed

69 Professor David Berger, a renowned Jewish historian and a strictly observant Orthodox Jew, has championed the task of calling this issue to the attention of the Jewish world. See his recently published book, *The Rebbe, the Messiah, and the Scandal of Orthodox Indifference* (London, 2001). For a condensed version of his thesis, see David Berger, "The Rebbe, the Jews, and the Messiah," *Commentary* 112, 2 (September, 2001), 23–30.

out, in fact, that it is primarily younger emissaries – and particularly those who themselves are newly-observant – who feel a strong desire to turn their target population into *Chabadnikim*. The more veteran ones are more focused on doing anything that will prevent a Jew from being completely lost to the fold. Another aspect of Chabad that necessitates an exploration of its approach to rabbinical training is that Chabad emissaries not only go to the heart of assimilated American Jewry, they stay there. Unlike the aspiring RIETS rabbi or the short-term *shaliah* (emissary) of the *Amiel* program, when a Chabad rabbi is sent out to a community, he is assumed to be a permanent placement. Personal considerations or organizational ones may occasionally lead to a change in venue, but this is generally not the initial intention. Finally, unlike *Maor* and ROLP, Chabad rabbis are not opposed to accepting congregational pulpits in mainstream Orthodox pulpits. While their intention may be to use them as a springboard for spreading the particular Chabad approach, this demonstrates that there is still an appreciation within Chabad for the value of traditional synagogue life in disseminating Judaism to American Jewry.[70]

A candidate for Chabad ordination has to complete three years of full-time post-high school Torah study in a Chabad yeshiva. Assuming that he has demonstrated the proper intellectual and religious qualities, at the age of 20 or 21 he is permitted to study the Jewish legal codes that he will be tested on in order to receive ordination. In addition to the sections on the dietary laws, the four

70 Interestingly, it is specifically the degree to which Chabad is integrated into mainstream Orthodoxy that has led people like Professor David Berger to declare the need to clarify which aspects of its ideology are beyond the limits of Orthodoxy. He feels that if nothing is done then these "heretical" ideas will continue to make inroads into normative Judaism.

tests that he must pass include the laws of Sabbath and prayer. It should be made clear that not all Chabad emissaries are ordained rabbis. Some have been trained in basic Jewish law and in the Chabad approach to outreach, but they are by no means qualified to make even relatively basic halakhic decisions.

Officially, there are no other "supplementary" courses of study in the Chabad rabbinical training program. How then do Chabad rabbis often display such a unique talent for communicating with non-observant Jews and for bringing their message to a wide public? The answer, according to R. Hecht, is that the training of a Chabad rabbi/emissary begins years before he actually studies the material required for ordination. From the age of fourteen, male Chabad high school students throughout the world are given what is known as a "route." Every Friday they finish school early, but instead of going home or relaxing, they are assigned to a local area – a few streets, a town square, a group of stores, a meeting place of Jews – where they are expected to help non-observant Jews perform *mitzvos* (commandments). Generally this means offering Sabbath candlesticks to women, enabling men to don *Tephillin* (ritual phylacteries) or offering the opportunity to Jews to perform the blessing on the four species on *Sukkot*. They return every week for long periods of time and develop a relationship with the local Jewish population. Moreover, they learn to rid themselves of adolescent shyness and to cultivate communication skills and to become more comfortable with the colloquial language of the public. By the time they receive ordination, they have been working as *shelihim* (emissaries) for as long as eight years. They are then, not only intellectually and religiously equipped, they have also devoted more time – albeit with little accompanying theoretics – to learning how to approach a Jewish public that is prone to assimilation than the

average graduate of any other rabbinical program. Indeed, they also share experiences with their friends and their teachers and receive advice on how to deal with the various situations that they encounter. Clearly when they become emissaries they will move to new locales and face new challenges, but they will bring with them a wealth of hands-on experience.

Chabad training cannot be duplicated within other sectors of the American Orthodox population. It is predicated on the cultivation of certain personality traits and skills from an age at which few young men have thought seriously about going into the rabbinate, let alone championing the cause of outreach. There are, however, important lessons that can be gained from the Chabad model. The first is in regard to commitment. Chabad has succeeded in instilling within its rabbis and emissaries a sense of mission that allows them to forego social and material benefits in return for helping the Jewish people. Indeed, the messianic tension that engulfs the movement certainly plays a role in nurturing this commitment. Yet it would seem that no new major initiative in training rabbis to deal with assimilation can be successful without putting serious thought into the issue of motivation. A second point highlighted in the Chabad training approach is the need for rabbis working with weakly affiliated Jews to gain specific hands-on experience in this type of work. A few *shabbatonim* or seminars per year simply are not enough to enable the young rabbi to develop a style and a language of discourse that is appropriate for dealing with most American Jews. It is necessary to create internships or other frameworks where the necessary skills can be honed over an extended period of time. Finally, once again, Chabad raises the issue of whether the most effective way to cause change in communal life is through reinvigorating the existing synagogues

or creating alternative institutions. While it has been pointed out here that Chabad rabbis are willing to enter the mainstream pulpit rabbinate, most of them do not. Rather, like *Chofetz Chaim*, *Maor*, and *Aish Hatorah*, they generally create independent Chabad houses from which their activities are launched.

III. Conclusions

The first lesson that this exploration of the training of American Orthodox rabbis has taught is that Orthodox rabbinical training is far more diverse and dynamic than in 1969, when Charles Liebman presented his original findings. While RIETS remains the largest institution for the training of Orthodox rabbis in America, it is being challenged both from the right and from the left. The right wing, in particular, has moved in new directions in the last decade. Not only is there far greater interest in becoming involved in issues that relate to all Jews, but the expectations have changed. For most of the right-wing groups discussed, it is clear that making everyone observant is an untenable aspiration. Rather, giving Jews more positive Jewish experiences or encouraging them to become more "sensitive to *yiddishkeit*" are considered legitimate goals. Greater emphasis has been placed in these programs upon nurturing the necessary skills for implementing the new approaches.

In general terms it may be said that there are two types of rabbinical training programs whose approaches are relevant to this study. There are modern Orthodox or centrist institutions whose goals are to train rabbis who are conversant with modern culture.

This will allow them to serve both their modern Orthodox constituencies more effectively and give them skills that will make them accessible or even attractive to non-affiliated Jews as well. The other approach, which is championed by the programs emanating from the right-wing Orthodox and Hassidic camp, is to train young men as "outreach rabbis." These individuals are not expected to cater to the religious needs of observant Jews. Rather, they must hone skills that give them the best chance to communicate their Jewish messages to those who have become distanced from Jewish life.

It is worthwhile to note that the issue of choosing one's constituency is a problem that is *sui generis* to the modern Orthodox rabbinate. In pre-modern times, rabbis were expected to cater to the religious needs of all of the Jews in their vicinity. In the modern period, however, different answers to the question of who remained the "natural constituency" of the Orthodox rabbi arose. The attitudes that emerged ranged from the insular approach discussed in the introduction,[71] to others that continued to maintain that an Orthodox rabbi had to find a way to balance his obligation to those who share his religious commitment on the one hand, with those who have become alienated to tradition on the other.[72] The current study has demonstrated that there is a new twist to this question of choosing constituencies. Today there is a growing sentiment that some Orthodox rabbis should not only extend their services beyond those with whom they share a common lifestyle, but that they should rather focus their attention almost exclusively on those who have

71 See notes 8 and 11.

72 See Adam S. Ferziger, "The Orthodox Rabbinate in Central Europe and the Struggle to Define a Constituency," in Jack Wertheimer (ed.), *Jewish Religious Leadership: Image and Reality* vol. 2 (forthcoming).

strayed from the traditional path. As *Maor*'s leadership maintains, acting as a classic Orthodox congregational rabbi will only hinder one's ability to serve the non-observant community.

The key questions that must be raised, then, in designing a new initiative for training Orthodox rabbis to deal with assimilation are: What is the most effective way for Orthodox rabbis to deal with the frightening rates of assimilation of American Jewry? Is working through established synagogues more effective, or is it preferable to sponsor fresh, independent bodies whose sole *raison d'être* is to heighten the level of Jewish identity of the Jews of its region?

One can argue that despite the indications of impressive results on the part of the specialist approach, there are several compelling reasons for continuing to support the more balanced, dual one. First, from a practical perspective, it is difficult to justify creating completely new institutions without first initiating a full-fledged initiative to change the existing ones. *Aish Hatorah*, *Maor*, Chabad or *Chofetz Chaim* can build centers in many areas, but can they replace all that is currently provided by the 600 mainstream local Orthodox synagogues that already exist? Do the human and financial resources exist in order to create two completely separate Orthodox rabbinates and synagogues, one for the observant and one for the weakly affiliated? On a practical level as well, the approach of building independent institutions has proven its effectiveness in drawing people closer to Judaism, but its leading proponents will admit that their followers generally split into three groups. A small minority is completely enthralled with "Aish" or Chabad, for example, and become devotees. Those who seek a more observant life but are not interested in the sectarian characteristics of these movements generally look for a more

mainstream community to join and a local day school where they can educate their children. Those who remain peripheral may continue to participate in activities, but it is unlikely that their children will acculturate into such an existence. As such, the sign of success of these types of independent communities is often when a family leaves and joins a more mainstream synagogue. The result, one may advance, is that these institutions may serve as conduits or vehicles for bolstering Jewish identity and commitment but they cannot be looked to to sustain American Jewish life. Accordingly, it is necessary to educate leadership that can transform more stabile communities into environments that demonstrate greater openness to Jews of all levels of observance and commitment, but that also encourage these individuals to make the synagogue a part of their lives and the lives of their families.

If, indeed, the "dual" approach to synagogue life is maintained, then there are two individuals who figure prominently in this paper who provide models that ought to be explored in greater detail in the context of this question of the direction of rabbinical training. Both R. Avi Weiss and R. Shlomo Riskin are considered groundbreakers in the raising of the level of Jewish identity and commitment of weakly affiliated Jews. It is noteworthy that neither founded a new synagogue. They were, rather, appointed by existing ones whose memberships were waning or at the least, stagnant. Instead of merely using these initial experiences as stepping stones, they transformed these institutions into vibrant "open-Orthodox" synagogues that cultivated an active core-observant community while simultaneously providing Jewish content to many others.

Yet such figures might be characterized as rabbinic "supermen." In the course of their careers as pulpit rabbis they succeeded in combining the skills that allowed them to

simultaneously serve more than one constituency. Effective rabbinical training, however, cannot be aimed purely at those few uniquely talented individuals who are capable of achieving this difficult balance. It would appear, then, that in order to equip rabbis with the skills necessary to deal with assimilation, the "specialist" approach must be at least partially adopted. While defining whole synagogues as so-called "outreach" or "mainstream" congregations may not necessarily be effective or practical, training rabbis to serve distinct constituencies may offer the best opportunity for Orthodox rabbis to address the issues that are relevant to greater American Jewry.

The position supported by this paper, then, is that at least two clear-cut tracks should be defined within the framework of the training of Orthodox synagogue rabbis: one geared towards serving the growing and increasingly committed mainstream Orthodox population and one dedicated to strengthening the Jewish connection of unaffiliated Jews. Surely there will be congre-gations whose population is more appropriate for one type of candidate or the other. Ideally, however, a so-called "mainstream" synagogue should hire an assistant rabbi or an educational director to compliment the "mainstream" rabbi by focusing his efforts purely on addressing the needs of the non-observant or weakly affiliated local Jewish population. Alternatively, in a community with a number of Orthodox synagogues a "specialist" rabbi could work together with all of them to provide Jewish content for the broader community. This approach responds to the need to establish a type of rabbinate that can concentrate exclusively on dealing with assimilation. It simultaneously takes advantage of the existing network of Orthodox synagogues rather than creating duplicate institutions.

The above discussion has demonstrated that the distinction between so-called "mainstream" and "outreach" rabbinical training programs can already be discerned within the current constellation of institutions. This divide is not merely tactical, however, and in fact generally parallels ideological differences. The modern or centrist Orthodox institutions focus more on training "mainstreamers," while the "right wing" oriented programs direct their efforts towards creating outreach rabbis. There are, however, compelling reasons for the modern or centrist Orthodox rabbinical seminaries to create an additional track within their programs that concentrates on training rabbis to address the needs of the broader Jewish public.

First, the rabbinical seminary that still clearly supplies more Orthodox rabbis to American Jewry than any of the others is RIETS, the leading modern or centrist Orthodox rabbinical seminary. Thus, if the intention is to increase the number of rabbis dealing with assimilation, then RIETS must be counted on for a considerable number of them. Beyond the numerical perspective, however, modern Orthodox rabbis also possess, as pointed out above, a type of background that could potentially make them more suited to deal with non-Orthodox Jews than their right-wing colleagues. The products of modern Orthodox institutions at present lack certain practical skills for dealing with unaffiliated Jews that the "specialist" programs of the right-wing world have succeeded in cultivating. They have, however, been nurtured in institutions that respect and value aspects of modern life and they are the recipients of an advanced secular education. In short, their natural language of discourse is not as far from that of other Jews as is that of a right-wing yeshiva product. Therefore, if an institution like RIETS, YCT and even HTC were to sponsor an additional training track

focused on dealing with assimilation, a particularly well-suited Orthodox rabbi might be produced.

This proposal does not demand that these institutions create a radically different training track that follows the model of *Aish Hatorah*, for example. It does, however, challenge these institutions to direct some of its rabbinical candidates towards an educational program in which, particularly in the later years of study, less time is devoted to textual study. A considerable number of formal hours of instruction would be dedicated, rather, to learning the skills necessary to become a specialist at dealing with assimilation.

An alternative to the above suggestion is to create a "post-ordination" degree in "outreach" parallel to the *kollel* program that already exists in RIETS. Currently, aspiring Talmud scholars at RIETS are encouraged and given the financial resources to dedicate additional years after receipt of ordination to honing their intellectual skills before taking a full-time position. Similarly, those who are motivated and show talent in dealing with non-observant Jews would focus on these skills for a year or two after ordination. They too would receive generous stipends that would be contingent upon their working as rabbis with non-observant Jews for a certain number of years after completion of the program.

Few Orthodox rabbis today are capable of properly addressing the needs of the highly heterogeneous American Jewish community. This reality calls for a re-orientation of rabbinical training so that candidates dedicate themselves to becoming specialists capable of contributing towards the strengthening of Jewish identity and commitment among the 5.2 to 6 million members of American Jewry. Under present conditions, the majority seems destined to assimilate into non-Jewish American society.